

Hanna-Mari Novosad Mæhlum

When Two Become One

The Unorthodox Pairing of Realism and Romance in
Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

June 2022

NTNU

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

Bachelor's thesis

2022



Hanna-Mari Novosad Mæhlum

When Two Become One

The Unorthodox Pairing of Realism and Romance in
Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

Bachelor's thesis
June 2022

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Abstract

Do romance and realism go together? The Victorian poet-turned-novelist Thomas Hardy experiments with this relationship in a range of his literary compositions, not least in one of his earlier works: *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Some critics believe the novel displays his ability to “juxtapose deliberately mismatched elements in remarkably artful ways” (Schweik 87), whereas others maintain it has a “patchwork quality” (Taylor 34) as the ambiguous nature of the novel—whether it is romantic or realistic—acts as a limitation rather than a strength. The story is indeed built on unorthodox pairings: we follow a love story featuring the heroine and her two suitors which does not end happily-ever-after, but rather with her demise; the characters are also consistently placed in circumstances that foreshadow their futures, which some readers may interpret as Hardy’s take on life’s little ironies, but many will consider to be an unrealistic portrayal of it. After contextualizing the meaning of romance and realism, this thesis will consider Hardy’s juxtaposition of opposites in terms of characters and coincidences, and argue that it is only by mixing both genres that human experience can be depicted at its realest.

Sammendrag

Hører romantikk og realisme sammen? Den viktorianske romanforfatteren og lyrikeren Thomas Hardy utforsker dette i flere av sine litterære verk, blant annet i en av sine første romaner: *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Noen kritikere mener at romanen fremstiller forfatterens evne til å sammenstille motstridende elementer på en bemerkelsesverdig artistisk måte (Schweik 87), mens andre hevder at romanens tvetydige natur i form av disse motstridende elementene er en svakhet (Taylor 34). Fortellingen er en blanding av det realistiske og det romantiske. Leseren følger en kjærlighetshistorie om hovedpersonen og hennes to kavalere som ender med hennes død. Karakterene befinner seg også ofte i omstendigheter som fungerer som frempek på skjebnene deres. Formålet med denne oppgaven er å vurdere Hardys sammenstilling av motsetninger i form av karakterer og tilfeldigheter, samt argumentere for at det er kun ved å blande disse sjangrene at skildringen av menneskeliv blir mest realistisk.

When Two Become One:

The Unorthodox Pairing of Realism and Romance in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

The old saying ‘opposites attract’ is no less applicable to literature than it is to people: just like a couple will ideally complete each other’s shortcomings, the finest pieces of fiction will build upon “the balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality” (Hardy, *Life and Work* 154). Such was the view of Thomas Hardy who, although known for being a realist, often incorporated elements of romance into his writing. He believed that ‘ordinary’ life consists of extraordinary circumstances—and since life itself is filled with contradictions, a fictional yet authentic portrayal of it must be as well. His merging of the two genres becomes particularly evident in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, where the reader follows the love triangle between the vicar’s daughter, Elfride Swancourt, the young and aspiring architect, Stephen Smith, and his mentor, Henry Knight, who also happens to be Mrs. Swancourt’s cousin as well as the reviewer of Elfride’s romance novel. Even though the author includes the story in his collection of “Romances and Fantasies”—which suggests that he intended for it to be a romantic and not a realistic novel—the task of classifying it is not at all straightforward. In one way, the storyline strikes the reader as one that is typical for a romance: love and courtship is, after all, at the center of the narrative. On the other hand, the plot adheres to “the agenda of Victorian social realism” (Farrell 711) by representing the contemporary marriage market. The most notable noncompliance with the romance genre, however, is the absence of a typical romantic ending: there is no happily-ever-after scenario in which the heroine and her beloved walk into a future of bliss and stability; instead, Elfride dies, and neither of the gentlemen who fought for her heart end up with her hand in marriage.¹ Ultimately, Hardy demonstrates that only by juxtaposing opposites—whether it be life and death, commitment and betrayal, or, more generally, realism and romance—will human experience be depicted at its realest.²

¹ In his text about realism in fiction, the acclaimed Edwardian essayist Arthur C. Benson considers the differences between the aforementioned genres, underlining the novel’s breach with the romance genre in its dénouement: “The romancer writes that the happy pair lived happily ever afterward, and signs his name with a flourish; but the realist looks past the marriage procession, and hears sounds behind the clash of bells” (832).

² In the scope of this essay, the adjective ‘realist’ will refer to the mode of writing, whereas ‘realistic’ will denote that which is within the bounds of possibility.

Like a fugue, the story is composed in multiple dimensions. It begins with a single voice in the exposition: a melody in the tonic key of realist writing. The voice gradually modulates into a pattern of romantic notes in the middle part, albeit without producing a dissonance between the sections, as the latter melody complements the preceding one. Lastly, the coda in Hardy's piece is transposed back into its original key, in which the romantic overtones die together with Elfride. The novel's twofold nature necessitates a multidimensional analysis of it, requiring the reader to look both *at* the narrative as well as *into* it. As a matter of fact, the narrator himself encourages us to do so in his depiction of the protagonist. Like Elfride, the story is multilayered; yet the reader does not see this initially, in the same way as "the form and substance" (Hardy, *PBE* 8) of the character's features are not observed during a commonplace conversation with her. In fact, the narrator remarks that she comes across as nothing special—that is, until one notices her eyes: "In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look farther: there she lived" (Hardy, *PBE* 8). Looking *at* her one sees a young girl who, like other girls her age in her society, is in search of a husband: a girl who rejects one of her suitors because he is socially and intellectually inferior to herself and his competition, and is rejected by another because he refuses to be with a woman whom he believes has been with another man. But, when looking *into* her eyes, one sees a girl who daydreams, writes romances, and secretly desires to live in one. In the same way, the novel comes across as a realist piece of fiction at first glance: only by looking *into* the text does one recognize the romantic aspect of the narrative as well.

Bearing in mind that the incorporation of multiple genres in a literary text did not occur infrequently in the Victorian age, Hardy's way of pairing realism with romance in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is still somewhat unorthodox. The literary scholar Robert Schweik explains that even though the use of incongruence in contemporary literature was not unprecedented, the considerable structural role it has in the novel was ahead of its time (98-99). Moreover, the common view of the period was that a romance was merely a fabricated reality (Farrell 713), and that a novel is weakened by consisting of incongruities—a view which even the most lenient of Hardy's critics ascribe to (Schweik 87). Indeed, these thoughts have been translated into a general perception in which realism and romance are often set up against each other. After all, one often thinks of realism as something that is opposed to an ideal or that which is unattainable. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes a realistic person as someone who is "concerned with, or characterized by, a practical view of life; having or showing a sensible and practical idea of what can be achieved or expected" (*adj.*, 3.). On the other hand, a person who romanticizes life, whether by having extravagant expectations or by seeing reality through a

lens of limitlessness, tends to be labeled as dreamy or quixotic—both of which usually bear negative connotations. According to this train of thought, a person cannot both be a realist and a visionary; the former will view ‘life as it really is’ while the latter will see an imagined reality.

In the same way, realism is often perceived as the counterpart of romance in fiction, as conveyed by M. H. Abrams’s definition of the concept in his glossary of literary terms: “Realist fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The romance is said to present life as we would have it be—more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality; realism, on the other hand, is said to present life as it really is” (174). The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the analogue of Abrams’s explanation, describing a romance as “[a] fictitious narrative, usually in prose, in which the settings or the events depicted are remote from everyday life, or in which sensational or exciting events or adventures form the central theme” (n, 3.a.). Moreover, the term can be used in contexts which denote a highly exaggerated fabrication (n, 4.a), or as something that has the quality of producing a “remoteness from everyday life” because it appeals “to the imagination, and sets it apart from the mundane” (n, 5.a.). Thus, there seems to be a custom of setting up one genre against the other, which is just as common in more general sources as in more subject-specific ones.

The complexity of the genres goes beyond the scope of the provided definitions. After all, an academic’s understanding of these concepts will be more refined and elaborate than the interpretation of a common reader. The genres can be further contextualized in terms of literary time periods as well as culture (that is to say British realism will differ from American realism, and nineteenth-century realism is not the same as twentieth-century realism); granting the likeness of certain genres to one another (such as romance and sentimentalism, both of which share many similar features), one also has to distinguish between them. Simply put, the usage of these terms is not at all straightforward.

As a matter of fact, realism assumes multiple meanings even when it is limited to the later years of the Victorian period (O’Gorman 113). It does have a standard, however, which is based on the work of the reigning realist of Hardy’s time, George Eliot (114). Her understanding of realism, and subsequently the Victorians’ perception of it, was to capture everyday life in a way that would reflect the reader’s own reality. The writer’s aim, then, was to produce a transcript so close to the real world that the reader would mistake it for the truth (Barrish 42). Nonetheless, the Victorian idea of realism was pliable and adjustable to the author’s pen. Eliot’s realism, for example, included literary devices like symbolism and instances of sensation—neither of which were conventionally permitted in the genre (O’Gorman 114). Still, realism was set apart from romance, and it was viewed as the superior genre. Indeed, some writers chose to

compose realistic texts on the premise of their ingrained belief that only a skilled author could write within realism whereas anyone could write a romance (Farrell 717).³ An instance of this is included in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*: Elfride writes a book which evokes an unfavorable response from Knight, who believes her work is ““bad enough to provoke criticism”” and concludes that it is by ““some girl in her teens”” (Hardy, *PBE* 134). It is only ““those portions which have nothing whatever to do with the story”” (150) that save her ‘little’ work from being considered a complete disgrace. Knight’s review exemplifies the way in which a realist author may have viewed the work of a romancer: with little respect and minimal praise. But even though this stereotype played a major role in popularizing realism in the nineteenth century, a writer for the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* proposes an alternative reason for the downfall of romance in Victorian popular culture, by considering what really made realism so attractive to the contemporary reader:

What is the cause of the decadence of romance? It is unnecessary to repeat truisms about our introspective, scientific, analytic age. Science, analysis, introspection—these are our malady. There is another cause of the decline of stories of adventure. We have become very provincial, and are interested beyond all reason in the petty details of our own modern existence (“The Decay of Romance,” 450).

Hardy views romanticism as an everlasting theme in literature—one that cannot be replaced by realism because it will always be an essential part of human nature (*Life and Works* 151). His realism is therefore a mixture of verisimilitude and chance, perhaps even more so than the writing of his peers. Although he is faithful to including the same peculiarities in his descriptions, he maintains that even “the most devoted apostle of realism” (Hardy, *Public Voice* 107) cannot deny himself the joy that comes with incorporating creativity and imagination, or what Hardy refers to as ‘Art,’ in writing a story. Notwithstanding the fact that O’Gorman points out that “realism never refused the shaping hand of the [nineteenth-century] artist” (114), Hardy still differentiates his fiction from that of his contemporaries, which he believes was largely based on a ‘copyism’ style:

³ Farrell writes that “[t]he basis of Hardy’s aesthetics is his reiterated conviction that realist writing is no less an artifice than romantic writing” (717), suggesting that his stance does not coincide with the prevalent view of the period.

Creativeness in its full and ancient sense—the making a thing or situation out of nothing that ever was before—is apparently ceasing to satisfy a world which no longer believes in the abnormal—ceasing at least to satisfy the van-couriers of taste; and creative fancy has accordingly to give more and more place to realism, that is, to an artificiality distilled from the fruits of closest observation (Hardy, *Public Voice* 108).

Due to the ambiguity surrounding Hardy's take on realism, it is not surprising that it has been extensively discussed by contemporary and modern critics alike (Hyde 7). In a chapter devoted to Hardy's usage of the genre, O'Gorman explains the difficulty in placing the author's realism. He even believes that in the most extreme cases, his descriptions come across as unlikelike (O'Gorman 117). Other scholars take precaution in calling him a realist, speaking instead of how he is authentic to life in some ways, and idealistic in others (Trent 7). Essentially, realism and romance is to Hardy what night and day is to us: a natural part of the phenomenon we know as life.

Looking at the novel, let us first consider how realistic the plot is in terms of nineteenth-century England. In being true to life and Victorian values, Mr. Swancourt, like most parents in his position, believes in marrying for wealth and power instead of love (Perkin 52). He applauds Stephen for his "blue blood" which he considers to be a very "desirable colour" (Hardy, *PBE* 20) for a man who is a potential match for his daughter. He also advises Elfride to play her cards right so that she can marry any well-established man she likes, which he believes she can given her looks and his own political marriage alliance to the wealthy widow, Mrs. Troyton (121-122). Like in real life, Elfride's courtship is supervised by her father, and a veto is imposed by him upon finding out Stephen's family is not well-endowed (Perkin 52; Hardy, *PBE* 84-87). Moreover, the narrative does not depreciate the complexity of Elfride and Stephen's plan to elope. Although this did not happen frequently, Victorian couples who wished to marry against their parents' wishes had the option of eloping. But this was not a straightforward process, chiefly because a youth under the age of twenty-one, regardless of gender, would need permission from his or her parents to marry (Perkin 52). There was hope, however, for those who could not satisfy this requirement: banns and licenses could be issued. Both of these options required an extensive waiting period, during which either both persons or only one of them would have to reside in a parish for several weeks or longer (Nelson 90). At the point of their planned wedding day, Elfride has not yet reached a legal age, and it is unclear whether Stephen has. Nonetheless, the groom-to-be obtains a marriage license during his

fifteen-day absence, which Hardy himself comments is the standard waiting time according to English law (*PBE*, 104). The less realistic part of their elopement is that their wedding day happens to fall on the same day as Mr. Swancourt leaves town to settle his affairs; such coincidences, and to what extent they breach with realism, will be further explored later in the thesis.

Like George Eliot who believes characterization is key to realism, Hardy maintains that a text keeps its realistic nature as long as improbable descriptions exist in terms of plot and not people (Mullan; Hardy, *Life and Work* 154; 183). After all, life itself is unpredictable; a perfect portrayal of people, on the other hand, will have been unrealistic. The writer's portrait of Elfride is authentic: she is girlish and naïve, guided by emotions rather than tact, and her reactions are often selfish and unreasonable. She is appropriately mistaken for being younger than she is on multiple occasions, perhaps most notably by Knight, who presumes she is seventeen because "[a]ll girls are" (Hardy, *PBE* 177).⁴ Elfride, however, takes offence from his observations, as she believes he has a faulty perception of her: she feels as if everyone sees her as a child, which she cannot understand as she views herself as "quite the woman" (177). On the contrary, Stephen's perception of her is more like her own—or, at least, it represents what she wishes her life was like. Because of his own youthfulness, he romanticizes who she is in reality:

'You don't think my life here so very tame and dull, I know.'

'I do not, indeed,' he said with fervour. 'It must be delightfully poetical, and sparkling, and fresh, and——'

'There you go, Mr. Smith! Well, men of another kind, when I get them to be honest enough to own the truth, think just the reverse: that my life must be a dreadful bore in its normal state, though pleasant for the exceptional few days they pass here.'
(Hardy, *PBE* 23-24).

While Stephen views Elfride's juvenility positively, as 'poetical, and sparkling, and fresh,' Knight sees it as a nuisance. The latter even admits his conclusions to Elfride who, upon asking him whether he prefers women who seem younger than they are to women who come across as older than they are, learns that he prefers the second category. In response, the narrator

⁴ In a private memo, Knight writes about how girls in their teens are "[s]imple, young, and inexperienced" (Hardy, *PBE* 176). His thoughts are based on an encounter he has with Elfride, during which she displays what he perceives as her childishness.

somewhat ironically points out: “So it was not Elfride’s class” (Hardy, *PBE* 177). Nevertheless, it is Knight’s convictions regarding Elfride that are closest to the truth. In a conversation with his adviser about his wedding plans, Stephen reveals that he thinks Elfride is more mature than she really is. The conversation reflects his role as a romantic, and Knight’s position as a realist:

‘Taking her merits on trust from you,’ said Knight, ‘as we do those of the Roman poets of whom we know nothing but that they have lived, I still think she will not stick to you through, say, three years of absence in India.’

‘But she will!’ cried Stephen desperately. ‘She is a girl all delicacy and honour. And no woman of that kind, who has committed herself so into a man’s hands as she has into mine, could possibly marry another’ (Hardy, *PBE* 132).

With this, Hardy shows that every person has their own reality, which, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Nevertheless, Elfride matures over time, which Benazon believes is mainly a result of her relationship with Stephen (118). After all, his presence in her life has helped her see beyond her feelings, and she consistently uses him as a sort of framework which she compares to Henry. The scholar also conveys that her sentiment towards each of her lovers is different (Benazon 118). Her love for Stephen is similar to his love for her: it is founded on emotional escapades and physical attraction. For Knight, however, she experiences a deeper attraction, based on respect, intellect, and profound admiration. Her relationships are indeed a reflection of the genres: “To the romantic we look for broad and striking effects, for stirring scenes, for hurrying, pell-mell action; under the guidance of the realist we enter a serener atmosphere, a world in which the lights are lowered and the colours are toned down” (MacArthur 4-5). Likewise, Elfride and Stephen’s union involves dramatic scenes in which they impulsively run off to London to elope, and Stephen moves to the other side of the world for the sake of making his marriage to Elfride more socially acceptable. With Knight, however, she has stability: their relationship unfolds at a slower pace, and the formation of their feelings for each other takes place more gradually, for Elfride as for Knight. Interestingly enough, neither of the engagements work out: the first one because it is based on feelings, and thus fleeting, and the second one because Knight’s logic outwits his emotions, as he falls for something he believes to be the truth based on reason, but turns out not to be true at all:

‘Did you return home [from your trip to London] the same day on which you left it?’

‘No.’

The word fell like a fatal bolt, and the very land and sky seemed to suffer ... [Elfride was desperate] to explain matters so that they would seem no more than they really were (Hardy, *PBE* 335).⁵

In the same way, Hardy illustrates that what makes a story work is balancing the realistic with the romantic, and that one cannot rely on the former alone.

The romantic voice is further strengthened by symbolism, which plays an integral role in Hardy’s realism. Farrell argues that “the same crucial connection” (722) between chess and courtship that features in countless medieval romances is also present in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Thus, the games of chess that are played in the novel have a meaning beyond being a social activity for Elfride and her suitors: “The game had its value in helping on the developments of [her] future [with each of them]” (Hardy, *PBE* 51). Firstly, the activity highlights the social inequality between the original pair of lovers. Stephen is unable to convincingly mirror the language of his opponent namely because it is foreign to him—which is something that Elfride cannot help but notice, pay attention to, and explicate.⁶ In other words, it seems to be of greater importance to her than she cares to admit to herself and to him. Although she displays a dislike towards what she believes is Stephen’s implication that she is like Keats’s *La belle dame sans merci* (Hardy, *PBE* 57), it is exactly who she ends up becoming: once again illustrating the faulty perception she has of herself and the world around her. Moreover, the game reveals the power struggle between the two characters: she is a queen in his world; he is a pawn in hers. Besides the narrator who explains that Stephen’s heart is at the mercy of Elfride’s rulership, the boy himself also admits to this by explicitly calling her his queen and professing his willingness to put his life on the line for her (Hardy, *PBE* 57). Nonetheless, upon learning about the origin of his family name, Elfride responds by telling him “[h]ow plain everything about [him] seems after this explanation!” (75). This utterance has a twofold meaning: in addition to signifying the clarity produced in how all of his peculiarities (such as his chess playing) have come about, it also indicates that he has become plain in her eyes—as insignificant as a pawn on a

⁵ His decision to break off his engagement with Elfride is clearly the result of an emotional state. Nonetheless, it is his incorrect assumption that she is no longer a virgin because she spent the night away from home in the company of another man that provokes this response.

⁶ “This impression of indescribable oddness in Stephen’s touch culminated in speech when she saw him, at the taking of one of her bishops, push it aside with the taking man instead of lifting it as a preliminary to the move” (Hardy, *PBE* 51).

chessboard. Despite being Elfride's inferior in rank, he also possesses the ability to obtain a higher status by his work in architecture, similarly to how a pawn, upon reaching the other side of the board, can be promoted to another piece. This is exactly what he attempts to do: his admiration for Knight turns into a desire to be like him, which Elfride praises him for by saying she "[sees] that [he is] all the worthier for having pushed on in the world in such a way" (Hardy, *PBE* 75). But to this he replies that it is Knight's effort, not his own—unknowingly, pushing her into the arms of another man.

Ironically, during Stephen's conquest of becoming a knight like Henry, his idol beats him to it by jumping over him and reaching the Queen before he gets the chance. After all, in Stephen's attempt to win the game and win her over, he only succeeds because she *lets* him succeed. Knight accomplishes his victory by force: he does not have to attempt to impress her because his position in society has already given him the upper hand. In playing chess with Knight, Elfride attempts to win him over but has to settle with him winning her over: "She had, indeed, given up her position as queen of the less to be vassal of the greater" (Hardy, *PBE* 308). Whilst Elfride orchestrates Stephen's victory up until the point where she grows tired of it and takes the lead herself, her matches against Henry are prolonged out of a reluctance towards giving up her romantic dream of having a man who worships her in favor of a man who knows his own worth. Their contest reaches a climax when Knight captures Elfride's queen with his rook. Up until this point, he permits her to re-do her careless moves, encouraged by her insistence that such mistakes should not be taken advantage of. But, after she demonstrates her willingness to benefit from his blunders, he refrains from allowing her to correct her own missteps, by which he forces her to confront true life instead—one in which sins are neither forgiven through compassion nor infatuation. This foreshadows the outcome of their union: after a certain point in their relationship, because Knight starts viewing Elfride as an intellectual creature, he can no longer consider her involvement with Stephen as a mistake that is to be blamed on "an innocent vanity" (Hardy, *PBE* 176). Just like he notices and consequently discontinues the pattern of being persuaded into giving her the chance to retrace her steps in chess, he realizes that she is fully aware of her actions and the consequences that they have in real life, which is why he shows no mercy in letting her escape from the bitter repercussions of her romantic past.

After the knight, queen, and pawn, the rook is the most important piece in the novel's chess tournaments, as its shape is reminiscent of another symbol in the story: the Endelstow tower. Broadly speaking, the tower can be interpreted as a representation of the heroine and her love life. A typical image in romance tradition is one where a princess is stuck in a tower and

her knight in shining armor comes along to help her escape: in Elfride's case, she is looking to be rescued from her boring life as a maiden. Primarily, the tower is what brings Stephen to the village and kindles his romance with Elfride. His job as an architect allows him to access a tower that his position otherwise keeps him from entering, just like it gives him the chance to interact with Elfride publicly. Because of his surname and status, Knight is born with these privileges. Therefore, while Stephen has to work to gain access to the tower, and thus to Elfride, Henry already possesses this opportunity because of who he is. Hence, the tower, as part of the village church, symbolizes a social construct where marriage is politically determined and cannot be genuinely declared.

In the story, the tower is also a site where several important events take place. It is where Elfride longs to see Stephen's "figure against the sky" (Hardy, *PBE* 33-34): his triumph in earning her, his Queen, by climbing up the social ladder. Nevertheless, instead of fulfilling his promise of waving to her with a handkerchief—an item which, in romances, is used as a token of winning a lady's favor—he is prevented from doing so by his father physically as well as culturally. Consequently, the next time Elfride visits the tower, she ascends it in the company of Knight; it is the place where she, literally as well as figuratively, falls into his arms. By using his handkerchief as a bandage while tending to the wounds she obtains during her fall, he simultaneously seals her devotion to him. Nevertheless, the construction of their relationship eventually collapses as well. Just like the physical tower is dismantled stone by stone, their future together deteriorates for every piece of information that does not hold true to Knight's foundation of their relationship, which is built on his desire to be the only man to ever have lived in her heart and his requirement to be the only man who has become one with her sexually. It is only after reading Mrs. Jethway's letter about Elfride's past, as well as her own confession of hiding a secret that would "ruin [her] with [him]" (Hardy, *PBE* 331), that his arrangements of a future with her, like the tower, topple over. The old widow's role in the matter is dramatized by her presence at the tower at the moment of its fall: she is the one who causes Elfride's impending marriage to crumble, and she is the one who ends up being buried in the ruins—a sign of her accomplishing the mission in her life, which is ruining Elfride's.

Furthermore, in mythical legends, "towers are archetypally the point of communion between the world of spirit and the world of men" (Carpenter 66). Elfride is repeatedly associated with this image in the narrative: she alludes to Keats's ballad which tells the story of a fairy and a knight and, more significantly, the root word of her name is that of a mythical creature: *elf*. Elves are special in the sense that they have an ambivalent attitude towards people, as they are capable of both helping them and hindering them. As Carpenter points out, Elfride's

nature is also complex: she is “a true bundle of paradoxes, puzzling to herself and an enigma to her lovers” (51). At first, she helps Stephen establish a name for himself; his love for her and dedication towards pursuing a future with her is what drives him to pursue his career in India. The spell of love that she has cast over him, however, also has a major flaw: being free-spirited, she moves on to another man in his absence—but all the same keeps him entangled in a web of affection for her. Likewise, she benefits Knight by helping him get in touch with his feelings. Nonetheless, his vulnerability only leads to an emotional crash when his image of her purity is transformed into one which contaminates his mind. The magical being is also associated with beauty and seduction, as is Elfride. When asking Stephen about why he loves her, he first comments on her features—whether it be her lips, eyes, hair, or neck—before concluding that he fell in love with her when he *saw* her (Hardy, *PBE* 63-64). Furthermore, the narrator remarks that while “Stephen fell in love with Elfride by looking at her: Knight [did] by ceasing to do so. When or how *the spirit* entered into him he knew not” (188, my emphasis). Knight himself believes to have fallen in love with her soul, which “had temporarily assumed its disembodiment to accompany him on his way” (189). In other words, he falls in love with the impression that she has left on him, and not with her person. The enchantment element is further intensified when “[s]he [begins] to rule him” (189) and the roles in their game of chess are reversed once again.

The premise of Knight’s love for Elfride is further questioned by his object of affection as well as the narrator. Notwithstanding that there are numerous postulations, there seems to be an underlying reason for his tender feelings: “‘Elfride,’ he said, ‘had hardly looked upon a man till she saw me’” (Hardy, *PBE* 90). She makes him feel like a knight because he is intellectually and socially superior to her, and it pleases him to be at the receiving end of such admiration. Interestingly, it is only after receiving praise from her that he finds he cannot help but look at her and notice her beauty (Hardy, *PBE* 161). But the hierarchy in their budding romance is put to the test during a dramatic scene in which Knight hangs from a cliff and Elfride saves him. The rescue begins with him telling her what to do, and her carrying out his orders. Nevertheless, she is the one who ultimately figures out a plan for how to rescue him, by which she performs her ‘unwomanly’ duties of both becoming his hero and being more resourceful than him. At the same time, his sense of reality is obscured under the weight of uncertainty. He overestimates his physical strength, adopts a misconstrued perception of time (he feels like Elfride has been gone for ten minutes when, in fact, only three minutes have passed), and the rain seems to him heavier than ever before (which, according to the narrator, is not the case). This is a moment in the narrative where he, in contrast to his usual self, does not see things for what they truly are

due to the threat of death lingering over him. Likewise, when facing the threat of a dead relationship, he obtains a faulty perception of his bride-to-be. This stands in contrast to his realistic view of her on the tower, when he anticipates the consequences of her not “reflecting in the least upon what she was doing” (Hardy, *PBE* 163).

Another symbol of Elfride’s freedom is her love for riding. Even Mr. Swancourt cannot restrain her from “scampering over the hills like a farmer’s daughter” (Hardy, *PBE* 103)—although he wishes to do so. Indeed, freedom is so highly treasured by her that no one is in the position to limit her but herself. After all, Mr. Swancourt’s renouncement of her union with Stephen does not stop her from traveling to London to elope with him. It is Elfride who seems to be struck by the recognition of what such a union means in practice, and that it is not something she wishes for herself. Stephen cannot take her anywhere, as he does not know how to mount a horse, let alone ride one (Hardy, *PBE* 56-57). In other words, by not being in the position to enjoy the luxuries of life himself, he is in no position to help Elfride climb up the social ladder either. His recognition of his inferiority culminates when he catches sight of his old fiancée with her new love-interest on a romantic walk in the countryside:

Stephen could tell by her manner, brief as had been his observation of it, and by her words, few as they were, that her position was far different with Knight. That she looked up at and adored her new lover from below his pedestal, was even more perceptible than that she had smiled down upon Stephen from a height above him (Hardy, *PBE* 243).

At that point Elfride is still able to enjoy the breeze in the air, the sound of the rustling trees, and the freedom that comes with it, because she is unaware of the disrupted mood; unbeknownst to the couple, Stephen, Mrs. Jethway, and with them, the uncovering of Elfride’s past, are all lurking in the woods alongside them. During Stephen’s next encounter with the couple, this changes for Elfride. On their way home on horseback they pass the churchyard where they spot Stephen’s father. In inquiring about his friend, Knight learns that he is in the vault and decides to go down and meet him. This comes across as a spectacular coincidence to Knight, who believes he is still in Bombay; it is less surprising for Elfride (although more impactful) as she already knows he is back in England; it is no surprise to Stephen. Their encounter is very atmospheric: Elfride no longer feels the freedom she felt when galloping on the fields with the wind in her hair. She is confined to the underground—where her secret past with Stephen lies—with no place to escape. The image of death and its connection to Elfride is further strengthened by the coffins of her grandparents. Her grandmother, Lady Elfride Kingsmore, shares not only

her name but also a similar past, as she too runs off with a man who does not belong to her class and marries him against her parents' wishes. In the vault, Stephen faces the death of a similar future with Elfride while she is confronted by the death of her future with Knight: only the third party among them remains free, but solely because he remains unaware of the heavy tone in their correspondence. Even though he looks *at* instead of *into* their exchange, he still manages to shed some light on the matter, embodying the role of a dreamer: "Such occasions as these seem to compel us to roam outside ourselves, far away from the fragile frame we live in, and to expand till our perception grows so vast that our physical reality bears no sort of proportion to it" (Hardy, *PBE* 262). Thus, at the climax of the novel Knight reveals a new side to his character, which has largely been brought forth by his attachment to Elfride: the biggest difference between them is no longer a superiority based on his stature or his experience in life; it is a superiority based on his innocence and inexperience in a world that resembles William Blake's *Songs of Experience*:

His obtuseness to the cause of her indisposition, by evidencing his entire freedom from the suspicion of anything behind the scenes, showed how incapable Knight was of deception himself, rather than any inherent dullness in him regarding human nature. This, clearly perceived by Elfride, added poignancy to her self-reproach, and she idolized him the more because of their difference. Even the recent sight of Stephen's face and the sound of his voice, which for a moment had stirred a chord or two of ancient kindness, were unable to keep down the adoration reëxistent now that he was again out of view (Hardy, *PBE* 265-266).

Hardy's narrative is saturated with coincidences, incongruities, and juxtapositions—whether it be the unlikelihood of a partnership like Elfride and Stephen's, or the irony that the person who ends up stealing Elfride away from him is his closest friend—now engaged to the girl whom he once prophesied would not remain faithful in Stephen's absence. Such coincidences do not fit into the frame of Victorian realism, which attempts to produce a faithful rendition of a common person's life. But Hardy challenges this notion by supposing a life in which the most improbable circumstances do in fact occur. It might not be familiar or representative of a typical Victorian life story, but does that make it any less realistic? That is what Laura Faulkner questions in her article on Hardy's use of coincidences in the novel. On the one hand, she maintains it is important to recognize that, if overused, the device "draws attention to the construction of plot and disrupts our sense of the realist frame" (Faulkner 92).

On the other, she believes that Hardy sees life as “full of inconsistencies, hiccups, and variances in mood that break the frame of any scene” (99).

The coincidences in the novel can be classified into numerous categories. The main distinction between them, however, is that while some are important in determining how the plot develops, others are not—although these serve a purpose of their own. Some of these coincidences are symbolic. For example, Knight’s appearance when Elfride is on her way to the cliff from which she can see the boat that Stephen is on-board carries a meaning beyond the literal one. Henry comes in the way of their relationship, as Elfride changes her focus from Stephen to him. With Knight present, she is no longer able to watch her husband-to-be: after resting her telescope on Henry’s shoulder and placing it under his arm, her view remains distorted and she is unable to see anything. She finally asks Knight to look on her behalf, and by doing so she sees her lover through Knight’s description of him, as she begins viewing him realistically rather than viewing him through the lens of her own romantic feelings for him. Another example, which ties back to the imagery of death, is when Elfride and Stephen happen to sit on the tomb of Elfride’s first admirer: Felix Jethway. In addition to the fact that she was the love of Felix’s life, she herself, as well as the relationship she has with Stephen, all share the same fate as him. Other coincidences also foreshadow the outcomes of episodes in the narrative. Stephen is often juxtaposed with events that hint at him hiding a secret from Elfride: she happens to see him the moment he presumably kisses a woman whom she fears is his lover but turns out to be his mother, and the master-mason assisting him in his architectural projects, whom he spends a questionable amount of time with, is his father. Moreover, Stephen is not the only one with secrets: Elfride coincidentally finds out that her father also receives private letters like herself. But the effect of this revelation is little, and does nothing besides upsetting her while also making her feel better about hiding her engagement to Stephen. According to Faulkner, such coincidences are employed as an atmospheric device, in order to build suspense in the story (95). Nonetheless, she also notes that their resolutions are anti-climactic (Faulkner 97) and thus of little importance to the narrative as a whole.

The most notable coincidence in the story is arguably Mrs. Jethway’s presence at the railway station when Elfride and Stephen disembark the carriage from London together without being husband and wife—although, bearing in mind that her life is devoted to making Elfride’s life a misery, it might not be a coincidence at all. In any case, it is an event that sets the tone for the remainder of the story: as Benazon suggests, the realistic mode comes to an end as the widow, like a ghost in a gothic romance, haunts Elfride for the remainder of her existence (108). At first it is not certain whether she has recognized her. Elfride is, after all, covered by a “thick

veil” (Hardy, *PBE* 115). Nevertheless, like a snake whose vision is heightened in low light conditions, Mrs. Jethway’s “red and scaly eyelids and glistening eyes” (115) pierce straight through Elfride’s disguise upon her arrival at daybreak. Moreover, unlike Knight, the widow is well aware of what deception looks like, and swiftly recognizes the secrecy in their behavior: “She seemed to read a sinister story in the scene” (115). However, she chooses not to confront her enemy there and then. Her expression remains ambivalent, in an attempt to deceive the young couple into believing that their secret is safely kept. It is only later in the narrative that the widow reveals to Elfride that she had seen her that day, and that she knows all about her secret past. Her strategic move ties back to the snake-metaphor: like a serpent slithering in tall grass, she wishes to pounce upon her prey at the perfect moment—just when everything seems to be falling into place for Elfride Swancourt and her beloved.

The final coincidence—and the most ironic of them all—takes place at the story’s closing. After some time has passed, Stephen discovers that Knight remains unmarried while his friend learns the details of Elfride’s mysterious romance. Both men decide to return to Endelstow and ask her for her hand in marriage once again. Nevertheless, their plans are disrupted, as travelling on the train with them is the coffin carrying Elfride’s lifeless body, which is being transported from London for her funeral. After the procession, they return to the same vault in which all three of them had once met for the first time—only this time they are joined by a third contender, namely Lord Luxellian, the man who ends up marrying Elfride in their absence. Unlike his predecessors, he knew her well, and “[t]’was her nature to win people more when they knew her well” (Hardy, *PBE* 379). His love for her was not based on lust or arrogance, neither was it cultivated on the premise of a romance, but rather a “genuine look of admiration” which evolved from “[looking] long at Elfride”—a look that did not “encroach in the slightest degree upon his emotional obligations as a husband [to his first wife] and head of a family” (145). In his mind, she is juxtaposed with children—but not because he thinks she is irresponsibly childish, like Knight does, or because he associates her with being a mother-figure for his children, as Stephen would: while they view her in the role of a lover, he sees her as the friend of a child; whereas they construct their image of her based on their observations—some of which are wrong and others which are right—he bases it on instinct, like a child would (Hardy, *PBE* 41). Therefore, it is on his property, in his woods and parks that Elfride yearns to spend her late summers. Whether it be through the fertile land he owns, or the “musical laugh” (143) he is remembered by, Lord Luxellian, like his name suggests, lights up Elfride’s world—while Stephen and Knight, no longer wishing to disturb that which is dead, “[retrace] their steps

down the grey still valley” (380) while their imagined lives with the girl of their dreams returns to dust.

A Pair of Blue Eyes is a story abounding with connections. In spite of the distance created by social class, the lives of the characters are intrinsically linked to each other: Elfride almost becomes the daughter-in-law of her future husband’s master-mason, who also knows her second fiancé, whose cousin is married to Elfride’s father, and so on and so forth. These juxtapositions often arise as opposing pairs: the protagonist is a damsel in distress at one point, but a hero at another; Stephen and Knight are victims of Elfride’s deception, but also manipulators of her vulnerability: there is no sense of black and white in the story of Elfride’s life—we only see the colors in-between. In the same way, Hardy demonstrates that there is no division of reality and romance in a life that so naturally consists of both. The only difference lies in perspective—which pair of eyes looks upon and looks beyond the written words—as, similarly to how the theme in a fugue is repeated at a different pitch, a romancer will merely repeat the same melody as a realist, only from a different outlook and in a different key. Yet, like both voices must exist for a composition to count as a fugue, a realistic and romantic voice must exist in tandem for us to be able to see a story as true to life: ultimately, the two must become one.

Works cited:

Abrams, Meyer H. “Realism and Naturalism.” *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, edited by Ted Buchholz, ed. 6, Heinle & Heinle, 1993, pp. 174-175.

Barrish, Phillip J. *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. *EBSCOhost*,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=408840&site=ehost-live.

Benazon, Michael. *Romance and Romanticism in the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*. 1975. McMaster University, PhD dissertation.

Benson, Arthur C. “Realism in Fiction.” *The North American Review*, vol. 195, no. 679, University of Northern Iowa, 1912, pp. 820-832. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25119777.

Carpenter, Richard C. *Thomas Hardy*, edited by Sylvia E. Bowman, Twayne's English Author Series, 1916. [Digitized by archive.org](#). Web.

Farrell, John P. "Romance Narrative in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 42, no. 4, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 709-731.

doi:10.1017/S1060150314000266

Faulkner, Laura. "'That's convenient, not to say odd': Coincidence, Causality, and Hardy's Inconsistent Inconsistency." *Victorian Review*, vol. 37, no. 1, John Hopkins University Press, 2011, pp. 92-107. doi:10.1353/vcr.2011.0028

Hardy, Thomas. *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Penguin Classics, 1998.

---. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Michael Millgate, The University of Georgia Press, 1985. [Digitized by archive.org](#). Web.

---. *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, edited by Michael Millgate, Oxford University Press, 2001. [Digitized by archive.org](#). Web.

Hyde, William J. "Hardy's View of Realism: A Key to the Rustic Characters." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 2., no. 1, Indiana University Press, 1958, pp. 45-59. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3825777.

MacArthur, Henry. *Realism And Romance and Other Essays*. Edinburgh, 1897. [Digitized by archive.org](#). Web.

Mullan, John. "Realism." *British Library*, 15 May 2014, bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism. Accessed 26 April 2022.

Nelson, Heather L. *The Law and the Lady: Consent and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. 2015. Purdue University, PhD dissertation.

O'Gorman, Francis. "Thomas Hardy and Realism." *Thomas Hardy in Context*, edited by Phillip Mallett, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 113-121. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=508335&site=ehost-live.

Perkin, Joan. *Victorian women*. John Murray Ltd., 1993. [Digitized by archive.org](#). Web.

“Realistic.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2022,
www.oed.com/view/Entry/158933?redirectedFrom=realistic#eid
Accessed 3 May 2022.

“Romance.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2022,
www.oed.com/view/Entry/167065?rskey=vtvbWI&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid165168521. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Schweik, Robert. “‘Life and Death are neighbours nigh’: Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and the Uses of Incongruity.” *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1997, pp. 87-100. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/docview/1290778152?accountid=12870&imgSeq=8.

Taylor, Richard H. *The Neglected Hardy: Thomas Hardy’s Lesser Novels*. St. Martin’s Press, 1982.

“The Decay of Romance.” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, vol. 50, no. 1302, 1880, pp. 450-451. *ProQuest*, www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/decay-romance/docview/9651761/se-2?accountid=12870.

Trent, William P. “The Novels of Thomas Hardy.” *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, The John Hopkins University Press, 1892, pp. 1-25. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27527721.