

**BURSTING OUT OF THE CORSET:
PHYSICAL MOBILITY AS SOCIAL TRANSGRESSION AND
SUBVERSION IN THOMAS HARDY'S
*TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES***

by

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SUMMARY

The dissertation is based on Hardy's representation of Victorian working-class women's experience, exemplified by the heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), in the radically gendered nineteenth-century society. Physical mobility as metaphor and metonymy in the novel stands for the transgression and subversion of patriarchal influence and is revealed as having a complex significance in relation to gender distinction. Hardy subverts Victorian norms of femininity through Tess's movements from one physical space to another in her struggle for freedom and autonomy. However, Hardy's inability to transcend completely the conventions of his society is apparent in the way Tess is literally destroyed in her quest for autonomy, respect and contentment. A study of the novel reveals Tess as a victim of the wearing and destructive impact of social and economic realities that Hardy does not adequately questioned. Finally, the novel follows the conventional realist pattern where the transgressive heroine is punished in the end.

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“I declare that ‘Bursting out of the Corset: Physical Mobility as Social Transgression and Subversion in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*’ is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.”

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INTRODUCTION

(i)

Although Thomas Hardy started writing *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in the autumn of 1888, it took him three years to find a publisher. Originally intended for Tillotson and Son, a Lancashire newspaper syndicate with vehement Christian partners, part of the manuscript, whose title was then 'Too Late, Beloved!', which Hardy sent to the company was received with outrage and dismay. Hardy refused to give in to their suggestion of omitting such scenes as the seduction of Tess and the improvised baptism of her dying baby. The novel, still incomplete, was then presented to *Murray's Magazine* and then to *Macmillan's Magazine*. It was again received with hostility. Thereupon, Hardy decided to make some alterations to the novel to reduce its offensiveness to the eyes of potential publishers. It was eventually accepted by *The Graphic* and weekly serialization began on 4 July 1891 and continued until 26 December. Two passages were cut out altogether and were published as separate episodes in other periodicals: "Saturday Night in Arcady," dealing with the seduction of Tess, and "The Midnight's Baptism, A Study in Christianity". Hardy even wrote in a mock marriage of Tess and her seducer to omit the illegitimate baby. However, for volume publication in November 1891, Hardy carefully restored his original text, leaving out the interpolations and restoring most of the omissions.

The publication of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) sparked much controversy. Contrary to Hardy's earlier works, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was the target of strong and unrelenting prejudices. *The Saturday Review* (16 January 1892) wrote about 'the terrible dreariness of this tale' and *The Quarterly Review* (April 1892) declared that 'Mr Hardy has told an extremely disagreeable story in an extremely disagreeable manner'.¹ Yet, this novel was sold better than any of Hardy's previous writings:

It comes as a surprise to find that, when Hardy's novels appeared in volume form, usually only 1,000 copies of the first edition were printed; but it is important to remember that the three-volume novel was an expensive luxury. In the case of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the 1,000 copies were soon sold, another 1,000 were printed within a few months; when a cheap reprint in one volume appeared in September 1892, it quickly ran into five impressions and sold 17,000 copies. The novel was also widely translated.²

For many Victorian readers, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was Hardy's greatest novel. *The Athenaeum* (9 January 1892) speaks of the book as being 'not only good, but great'; *The Academy* (6 February 1892) calls it 'a tragic masterpiece'; and in America *The Atlantic Monthly* 'gave it a long review, praising it as Hardy's greatest achievement'.³

The social background of the novel appealed to most Victorians: the nineteenth-century rural landscape, the archetypal situation of old ballads and songs about the ruined maid who murders her seducer, and the effects of the Industrial Revolution depicted by the steamdriven harvester according to whose mechanical rhythms Tess works at Flintcomb-Ash were all familiar to them.⁴ A large portion of the Victorian reading public also commended the novel as it perpetuates male supremacy by depicting through plot and characterization the 'well-deserved' fate of a woman who bypasses the norms of femininity established by the contemporary society. Selfless and self-sacrificing creatures were not supposed to defy and deviate from the established norms of their society and those who dared do so needed to be punished in one way or another just like Tess in the end of the novel. There were those as well, however few in number, who realized that in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy deliberately attempts to challenge the conventions of his society. Such Victorians acclaimed the novel for its denunciation of the various double standards women in the nineteenth century were victims of:

There is one thing which not the dullest reader can fail to recognize – the persistency with which there alternately smoulders and flames through the book Mr. Hardy's passionate protest against the unequal justice meted by society to the man and woman associated in an identical breach of the moral law.⁵

But numerous Victorians vehemently opposed the novel. For them, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* represented a disruption of the moral structure of nineteenth-century

society which might prove harmful to the female population of the period. The novel was deemed improper for the Victorian woman, the innocent virgin and respectable wife. There were even nineteenth-century women like Mrs. Oliphant, for example, who maintained a consistently conservative attitude towards stereotypes of feminine character or behaviour. Upon the publication of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Mrs. Oliphant reacted strongly to the words 'a pure woman faithfully presented' which follow the heroine's name on the title page. She considered this as a hinted defence of an imperfect and immoral woman:

[A pure woman] is not betrayed into fine living and fine clothes as the mistress of her seducer by any stress of poverty or misery We do not believe for one moment that Tess would have done it We do not believe him Whoever that person was who went straight from the endearments of Alec d'Urberville to those of Angel Clare Mr.Hardy must excuse us for saying pointedly and firmly that she was not Tess, neither was she a pure woman.⁶

A primary focus of this dissertation will be to use *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as an index of Victorian women's reactions to the authoritarian and patriarchal society in which they lived. Besides thoroughly examining the text of the novel, some contextual information together with a thorough understanding of the zeitgeist of the Victorian period, the structure of the society, its practices, laws, social, moral and ethical codes is necessary to provide a clear understanding of the predicament of women in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, in my study I will attempt to establish a dialogue between the signifying potentials of the text and the 'realities' of context.

(ii)

Throughout the nineteenth century, women were victims of rigid patriarchal laws, which resulted in oppression, exploitation and restriction to particular domestic roles and spaces. Victorian society was governed by specific codes of behaviour for women that limited their mobility and confined them in many instances to the private sphere of the house. Middle-class and women of the higher gentry can be seen as trapped in the ideals of domesticity. The lives of such women were guided by social decorum that

perpetually policed their behaviour and restricted their role to decorative child-bearers. Richard Altick, in *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973), suggests that:

She may or may not have wished to occupy her time so flabbily, but the Victorian woman had no choice. Paterfamilias, when he came back from the office after a hard day competing in the business jungle, reigned as lord and master at table and fireside. His wife, though supreme arbiter of household affairs, was subservient to him, a devoted (and submissive) wife and mother of often all too many children (52-3).⁷

The position of working-class women was even more dire. With the Industrial Revolution of the late-eighteen and early nineteenth-centuries, many agricultural working-class Victorian women were thrown on to the labour market in the new industrial centres, working in dehumanizing conditions and burdened with both domestic and factory labour. Others who were forced off the soil and deprived of land for the growing of vegetables and raising of livestock for sale and their own consumption, entered the labour force as agricultural wage workers and became totally dependent on wages for their survival. Life in this sector was precarious; physically challenging and personally dehumanizing:

Some desperate for any work they could get, joined agricultural 'gangs', a form of labor subcontracted for farmers by a gang master. Gangs employed unskilled women and children in heavy field work – planting, hoeing and harvesting. Such women, used to laboring on their own plots at their own pace, now found themselves driven by the gang master and obliged to work from sunrise to sunset in pouring rain or biting frost for less wages than men earned for the same work. Many women experienced sexual harassment and brutality from the gang leaders.⁸

The social and cultural oppression of Victorian women has been documented extensively. But aside from laws, prejudices and conventions, restrictive practices permeated all aspects of the female condition. Metonymically, the suppression and repression of Victorian women is exemplified by the wearing of the corset which literally and symbolically restricted her mobility in both private and public spheres. The wearing of the corset strengthened the domestication of women. It restricted their movements. Once considered as an instrument of torture and death, and later on in the sixteenth century used as an orthopedic device,⁹ the corset in the Victorian era was a hallmark of fashion for women of nearly all classes.¹⁰ Fashion demanded the slenderest

possible waist through the wearing of a waist-cinching undergarment. Consequently, figure-shaping garments became essential elements in women's wardrobes. But by following the fashionable trends of their society the Victorian female population became recipients of the social norms often interiorised in them. When behaviour is guided by whatever the fashion of the time dictates, this constitutes a passive acceptance of the status quo.

But this practice of moulding the body into the fashionable silhouette, though an alluring one, demanded much stamina on the part of the wearer who had to endure the physical inconveniences arising from such a constricting outfit. Tight-lacing was extremely confining and the physical grievances caused vary from heightened hysteria and melancholy to other ailments such as:

... shallow breathing, shortness of breath, atrophied back muscles, and potential difficulty in labor. Victorian heroines heaving bosoms and fainting tendencies were more likely induced by insufficient oxygen and upper-diaphragmic breathing than by arousal in the embraces of mustachioed lovers.¹¹

At the same time, this fashion hall-mark constitutes a double standard according to which women are turned into objects of desire for men no matter the cost, while 'as a general rule' they are denied sexual desire or gratification. The orthodox view was that a respectable woman in the Victorian society hardly desired any sexual gratification for herself. She only submitted to her husband to please him and for the purpose of maternity.

The wearing of the corset is another aspect of the psycho-political manoeuvre that operated in the nineteenth century against the female population. According to Christina Larson in her review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* (2002) it was 'an ominous conspiracy to trick women into pursuing an impossible beauty ideal rather than real social progress'.¹² Victorian women were valued for their beauty, especially a shapely waist and pro-corset argumentation emphasized youthful standards of beauty. To accept being corseted meant to guard oneself against premature aging and a

thickened waistline. Women of the period became overwhelmingly preoccupied with their appearance and as a result they were deviated from the more pressing social issues of the epoch. Significantly, the wasp-waist mania was not only a tactic to steer women away from the public sphere, but it also

facilitated a pernicious association between physical beauty and virtue, as upright posture and a slender waist came to be regarded as evidence of discipline, modesty, rigor and refinement. Ladies who abandoned their stays were scorned as both lazy and immoral.¹³

With the corset as representative of moral turpitude and respectability, it was difficult for women to abandon it, even if they wanted to. Trapped in the set of ideals prescribed for the female population as a whole, women had to accept the burden of the physical and ‘psychological’ corset as part of their culture and were denied freedom of movement and an autonomous existence.

In this dissertation, I will use the corset as a symbol of oppression and an indication of how oppressive practices are embedded – unconsciously – in the very notion of ‘feminine behaviour’. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, written in the last decades of the nineteenth century – a period of intense debates about gender arrangements – is a deliberate attempt at redefining women’s conventional images so that the old ideal of the Victorian woman as a passive, dependent and a-sexual being was replaced by what came to be known as ‘the new woman’ – a more independent, sensuous and assertive being. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* the heroine works outside the home, travels unaccompanied beyond the neighbourhood and struggles to shape her life in a world whose moral order is rooted in sexual discrimination and whose social structure refuses to acknowledge women as complete human beings. At the same time, I will demonstrate that despite the challenges to conventions posed by Hardy’s apparent departure from the narrowing interpretation of women’s experience, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* appears to be self-censored. From a feminist perspective, Hardy’s depiction of Tess is equivocal. Although Tess attempts to maintain her freedom and autonomy, her passivity and selflessness suggest that she is not truly emancipated. She is subject to the conventions of her time. My discussion will show that although the

reader's sympathy for the heroine is engaged, the novel ultimately follows the conventional realist pattern where the transgressive heroine – like Rebecca Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (1847) and other fictional 'fallen woman' like Esther in *Mary Barton* (1848) – are treated as objects of guilt and disgrace and are punished in one way or another. The punitive endings that typically regulate

Victorian fiction underline the maintenance of the status quo.

Generally no matter what place the individual woman is shown to occupy in the novels of the time, traditional images of women focus on their domestic and sexual roles. Victorian novels are closely bound up with hegemonic perspectives of women. They confine women to the private domestic world where emotions and personal relationships are the basis of morality and the very core of their experience. Women in the typical Victorian novel are mere captives of feeling and private life and their roles are limited to a narrow range of 'types' like the virgin heroine or the innocent maiden, the devoted and selfless wife/mother, the lonely and self-effacing spinster and the redundant and gossipy middle-aged woman. These over-simplified ideas of women served to limit women's notions of themselves and their possibilities.

The last decades of the Victorian period witnessed intensifying debates about gender arrangements and issues such as 'women's emancipation'. Many women, in those centuries became more conscious of their rights, set up various feminist movements and transgressed and subverted existing laws:

The epitome of such a feminist activism blossomed in England: a concerted movement for women's suffrage side by side with organized campaigns to reform the laws that governed married women's property, to eradicate legalized prostitution, and to achieve the admittance of women to British universities and medical schools.¹⁴

Women with the required qualifications won local franchise in 1882 and movements like the Married Women's Property Committee which led to the passage of a Married Women's Property Law in 1882, the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women

(1859) and various others militant movements were set up.¹⁵ Shifts in literary representation reflect changes in social discourse. In fact, as the century drew towards its end, writers like George Moore, George Meredith, Oscar Wilde, H.G Wells and Thomas Hardy tapped into the debate concerning what the nineteenth century called ‘the woman question’. In their works these writers seem to be aware of the distortion and limitation of women’s experience as they attempt to combat cultural stereotypes of female experience by creating new and alternative images for women in their works. But in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* we soon realise that the novelist is unable to transcend completely the mores and values of his society in his portrayal of Tess.

(iii)

This dissertation combines two important aspects of literary-academic practice – feminist criticism and historical and ideological information – to help examine representations of women in the late nineteenth century and to deconstruct the opposition man/ woman in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. The link between text and its ‘background’ contributes much to a proper and thorough understanding of any work of literature. Similarly, feminism as the examination of power relations in texts, with a view of breaking them up to uncover the extent of patriarchy, has proven to be an important way of proceeding. It is often through literary works that the dominant representations of women and their experience have been widely and, until recently, most easily disseminated. Feminism is a loose category, a non-univocal body. In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) Toril Moi considers Anglo-American feminist theory as a challenge to the form of male domination in the institutions of literature and literary study, particularly in the literary canon.¹⁶ But to reduce the term ‘feminism’ to this classification implies a failure to recognize its other strands. Feminist theorists like Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers have done much to establish an alternative tradition of women writers by recovering works by women novelists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin.¹⁷ French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, on the other hand, have raised the question of

whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology or because they are socially constructed as different. They have also explored the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.¹⁸ Other scholars notably Jacqueline Rose, Mary Jacobus and Kaja Silverman advocate psychoanalysis with its understanding of the complications of internalizing norms as one way to comprehend and reconceive the predicament of women.¹⁹

My approach in the dissertation will be to outline 'feminist' impulses and contradictions, gaps, silences, omissions in Hardy's novel to reveal specific aspects of gender politics. Physical mobility as metaphor and metonymy emerges as very significant to gender distinction in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. According to twentieth century Russian theorist Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are two fundamental structures of language: the metaphor links by means of similarity and the metonymy links by means of contiguity. The dissertation will be a study of metaphors and metonymies (in the Jakobson sense) and these are in turn linked to the issue of gender difference.²⁰ Mobility from one physical space to another can be traced throughout the novel and almost all of the characters are involved in this process of mobility at one point or another.

This approach has something in common with William Morgan's stand in 'Gender and Silences in Thomas Hardy's Texts' in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art* (1992).²¹ Morgan is critical of other branches of criticisms whose extremism concerning gender distinction prevents them from seeing the more dominant and more subtle aspects of gender difference in Hardy's texts. He introduces what he calls 'gendered silences' (178) in Hardy's works. According to Morgan, true and real sexism usually underlies the obvious. Contrary to other 'dominant epistemological position[s]' (172) that pass the silence into silence, Morgan outlines the gaps both in Hardy's poems and novels to reveal the importance of the unsaid in them. He shows these to be essential in a nuanced criticism of Hardy's treatment of gender issues.

My dissertation rejects the author-centred approach according to which the meaning of a work is determined solely by the intention of its author. In this way, the dissertation does not go with the thrust or current of the novel. It refuses to read and to analyse the novel on its own terms. Instead, the dissertation rewrites Hardy's plot by focusing on 'hidden' aspects of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. This stand is neither an attack against Hardy as a compassionate defender of women's position in a male-dominated society, nor is it a defence of Hardy as an advocate of male social privilege. It is simply an attempt to open up a wider range of possibilities in the interpretation of gender politics in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and to provide a more objective and less biased view of sexism – an approach propounded by Roland Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' (1972):

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.²²

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* I will equate physical mobility to social transgression. The mobility of the heroine from one space to another, and the physical space surrounding her, will be interpreted as refusal to be subdued and as a struggle for the heroine to be her 'self'. Spatial and psychological movements will be explored as a means (consciously or unconsciously) of breaking away from 'the corset of society'. They will be equated to a departure from the restrictions imposed on women by male domination. Physical mobility in the novel, I will argue, represents a quest for freedom and autonomy. Tess's departure from the home of the Paterfamilias to Thalbothays and later on to Flintcomb-Ash exemplifies these aspects of physical mobility. There are also various occasions where Tess unflinchingly resists the patriarchal hold of the relentless Alec d'Urberville. Physical mobility as representative of freedom and autonomy is mostly relevant in the last part of the novel entitled 'Fulfilment' where Tess's subversion and transgression of moral codes, religious principles, social and legal codes are apparent in her breaking away from all restrictions by murdering the man who tirelessly tracks and pressurizes her. By contrast, for the male characters

involved in this process of mobility, physical mobility does not imply transgression and subversion. Instead, it is a means of tightening the powerful hold of patriarchy by policing and directing the female population. This is particularly evident in Alec d'Urberville's movements from one space to another which serve to pressurize Tess and bring her into subjugation.

Paradoxically, my discussion will reveal that Tess's mobility also indicates an acceptance of the status quo. It can be interpreted as a social imperative for survival and is a passive response to the effect of patriarchy on the psychology of women. Due to the limited options available to them (idealization of their domestic role, lack of a substantial formal education, inequality of wages, amongst others), many Victorian women had no choice but to accept things that were detrimental to them and which prevented them from asserting their autonomy. Even in the 1880'-s and 90'-s, many women were more likely to be conformist than transgressive and settled in their world of low expectations. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* there are occasions where the heroine lacks the necessary willpower to react to instances of dominance due to the reiteration of her inferiority which she accepts as a fact. Social convention also intrudes on Tess's various attempts to assert her individuality, and she is shown to be overcome by circumstances. This points to the absence of volition women have in determining their lives.

As this study will show, physical mobility in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has a complex significance. It is a sign with many signifieds. Mobility in the novel transgresses social norms. It encompasses a quest for freedom and autonomy, but is also a social imperative for survival and, a consequence of an unequalitarian social order based on double moral standards. At the same time, it is a result of the forced acceptance of the status quo, both through the interiorisation of patriarchal laws, and the tightening grip of men's desire to possess and control.

NOTES

- ¹ Ira B. Nadel & William E. Fredeman, Victorian Novelists After 1885, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 18.
- ² Ira B. Nadel & William E. Fredeman, Victorian Novelists After 1885, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 18.
- ³ Ira B. Nadel & William E. Fredeman, Victorian Novelists After 1885, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 18.
- ⁴ See Ira B. Nadel & William E. Fredeman, Victorian Novelists After 1885, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 18 for more details about the novel's appeal to the Victorian reading public.
- ⁵ William Watson, Mr. Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", *Excursions in Criticism: Being Some Prose Recreation of a Rhymers*. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literature Criticism*, Vol.18.
- ⁶ M.E.Oliphant, The Anti-Marriage League, *Blackwood's Magazine*, Vol.159 (January 1896), p.138.
- ⁷ See pp.50-6 in Richard, D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas* (New York and London, 1973) for more details about the life of lower and upper middle-class women in the Victorian era.
- ⁸ Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard (eds), Women in the Industrial Capitalist Economy, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1987) p.314.
- ⁹ According to Jackie White in *The Kansas City Star* (Feb 2002), "Early in the 16th century, corsets in cloth or lace with rigid whalebone were fashioned by tailors mostly for aristocratic women. Some made of metal and hinged at the side, were apparently used by surgeons as orthopedic instruments to straighten the body".
- ¹⁰ Though commonly associated with Victorian upper-class women "corsets were also adopted by working women who aspired toward similar ideals of fashion...One popular line of mass-produced corsets in the 1880's was the "Pretty Housemaid" model. See Christina Larson, Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele *Washington Monthly* (Jan/ Feb 2002).
- ¹¹ Christina Larson, Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele *Washington Monthly* (Jan/ Feb 2002).
- ¹² See Christina Larson's reference to Naomi Wolf's 'The Beauty Myth', Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele *Washington Monthly* (Jan/ Feb 2002).
- ¹³ Christina Larson, Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele *Washington Monthly* (Jan/ Feb 2002).
- ¹⁴ Christina Larson, Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History* by Valerie Steele *Washington Monthly* (Jan/ Feb 2002).
- ¹⁵ See Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London,1981), p.54-54 for more details about the changes in the position of women in the 80's and 90's.
- ¹⁶ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985).
- ¹⁷ For further discussion of these theorists' works see Toril Moi, *Feminist Literary Criticism, Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (London, 1986).
- ¹⁸ See Toril Moi, *Feminist Literary Criticism, Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (London, 1986).
- ¹⁹ See Toril Moi, *Feminist Literary Criticism, Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* (London, 1986).
- ²⁰ See Jakobson's explanation and clarification of the terms 'metaphor' and 'metonymy' on pp.43-7 in Roger Webster's *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London and New York, 1996). Metonymy is defined as a 'term which strictly means to substitute the name of an attribute for the thing meant'(43); in the dissertation 'physical mobility' for transgression and subversion of patriarchal laws. Metaphor on the other hand 'is the application of a name or term to an object to which it is not literally applicable'(43); in the dissertation 'bursting out of the corset' applies to the determination to defy and rebel against the patriarchal state of affairs of the time.
- ²¹ See William Morgan, 'Gender and Silence in Thomas Hardy's Texts' in Harrison, Anthony H. and Taylor, Beverly (eds.) *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art* (Illinois: 1992) pp.161-84.
- ²² Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author, *Reading Popular Narrative: A Source Book*, ed. by Bob Ashley, (London: 1997) pp132-4.

CHAPTER ONE

Tess: The Fictional Heroine as Representative of Lived Reality.

My concern in this chapter is the relationship between Tess as a fictional construct and the actual circumstances of Victorian life. Rather than documenting exact equivalences, it is my intention to show that the heroine broadly represents the plight and predicament of a wide social segment, predominantly (but not exclusively) working class and female. Although it is dangerous to make generalizations about experience across the period and places that are today popularly regarded as Victorian, it is my contention that Tess's life may be seen as typical inasmuch as it engages with attitudes and issues that extend beyond the specific into what may be seen as the prevailing condition of women.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is the story of a working-class woman in the nineteenth century. Contrary to the literary tendency of earlier novels like Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Shirley* (1849), William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) in which the heroines are mostly from middle-class families, Hardy's portrayal of Tess as a working-class labourer reveals the novelist's subversion of literary convention. Just like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) in which the heroine is from the lowest stratum of the society, Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* attempts to depict the life and experience of the working-class woman as being humanly significant. After all, the exhilarating balls, parties and visits that feature in the life of the heroines of many Victorian novels were not common to all nineteenth-century women. Working-class women not only had to struggle to survive, but were often victims, to a larger extent, of the dire effects of particular social practices. Hardy's representation of working-class women in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, exemplified by the heroine herself,

gives meaning to the life of such women by focusing on the problems and inequalities they confronted in their everyday life and their reactions to them. The novel is also a subtle exploration of Victorian society's double standards in the way the novelist denounces the privileges of the male sex and the prejudices that disadvantaged women.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the notion of status and class position and women's disempowerment *vis-à-vis* such social constructs occupy an important place. From the day that John Durbeyfield learns about his noble parentage, his mind is filled with a kind of intoxication and, forgetting his straitened circumstances, he puts on airs of importance. But it is Joan Durbeyfield who is the prime mover. Alive to the economic and status possibilities of the situation, she decides to send Tess to seek the patronage of Mrs d'Urberville, Alec's mother. Hardy emphasizes the economic dependence of the Victorian woman by making Joan literally hand over Tess to the rich Alec d'Urberville for economic gains and upward mobility:

She remained upstairs packing till breakfast-time, and then came down in her ordinary week-day clothes, her Sunday apparel being carefully folded in her box.

Her mother expostulated. "You will never set out to see your folks without dressing up more the dand than that?"

"But I am going to work!" said Tess.

"Well, yes," said Mrs. Durbeyfield; and in a private tone, "at first there mid be a little pretence o't But I think it will be wiser of 'ee to put your best side outward," she added.

"Very well; I suppose you know best," replied Tess with calm abandonment.

And to please her parent the girl put herself quite in Joan's hands, saying serenely, "Do what you like with me, mother." (1983: 52)

Tess's innocence, her mother's calculation (without fully considering the 'payment' to be exacted from her daughter), Hardy's use of words like 'abandonment' and 'serenely', all show the ironic emphasis behind the exchange. In a way, Joan Durbeyfield turns her daughter into a commodity and object to incite male desire and possibly to make a good marriage with someone of a higher social status. 'Sir' John's comment "'Well, I hope my young friend will like such a comely sample of his own blood. And tell'n, Tess, that being sunk, quite, from our former grandeur, I'll sell him the title – yes, sell it – and at no onreasonable figure'" (1983: 53) reinforces this link

between Tess's beauty, physical desirability and upward social mobility. At the same time, we here have a subtle presentation of the Victorian society as one which denies female sexuality but in which, rather contradictorily, female sexuality is a means for survival.

Tess's journey to Tantridge and her eventual sexual abuse by Alec typifies the fate of many working-class women who, owing to economic necessity, had no safety net against sexual harassment and who were compelled to suffer degradation at the hands of rich men. This is what Susan Mumm refers to in her article "Not worse than other girls": the convent-based rehabilitation of fallen women in Victorian Britain' (1996) when she mentions the 'occupational hazard of service'. According to the article,

Rape, judging from penitentiary records, seems to have been an occupational hazard of service That many young domestic servants were raped by their employers or by fellow servants cannot be doubted – the records at Clewer and other Houses of Mercy run by sisterhoods hold the proof. It is true that the word rape was never used at the time – the records tell us that this girl "was wronged", or that girl was "led astray", or another "was deceived".¹

In the novel, Tess's 'fall' from grace originates precisely from her employment on the estate of Alec d'Urberville's mother. From this point onwards she is trapped in the crass and vulgar atmosphere of Alec's unrelenting harassment until, at the end of the novel, she finally knifes the heart that persistently tracks her. But Hardy takes much pain to underline Tess's innocence. Nowhere does the novelist portray Tess as being free and familiar with Alec. She remains reticent and reserved. The liberties which Alec takes annoy rather than please her. When Tess returns home from Tantridge she is upbraided by her mother for being selfish and Joan tells her,

"I did hope for something to come out o' this See what he has given us – all, as we thought, because we were his kin. But if he's not, it must have been done because of his love for 'ee. And yet you've not got him to marry!" (1983: 87)

But Tess reprimands the feckless Joan, only too late, with "I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk?"

(1983: 87). We sympathize with Tess at the way she has been used and abused. She has been turned into a 'commodity' and has been both consciously and unconsciously 'prostituted' by her mother. As for John Durbeyfield, he is more aware of what he considers to be the shame that Tess has brought on the family, so much so that he refuses to let the parson visit the house when Tess needs him.

The economic dependence of Victorian working-class women is also apparent in the way they had to fend for their bread and were exploited at work. The working-class family economy required that all members of the household contribute wages. Women from such families had to work as agricultural workers and later on in the century, with industrialization, as factory labourers to supplement the meager family income. But though they worked at the same jobs as men, women earned between one-third and one-half of men's wages in virtually every area in which they worked, just as they had prior to industrialization.² Women 'could also be more easily exploited in labour or more easily fired, laid off, or pushed out when it was convenient not to permit them to work'.³ This is probably what Altick has in mind when he describes the condition of working-class women in *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973):

Life was very different in the working-class. Here women, far from living under a glass dome, were part of the labor force, as they always had been in order to help their husbands squeeze out a living. The conditions under which they labored changed as the factory system replaced cottage industry; the necessity that drove them to work was more bitter than it had ever been. Their availability in large numbers enabled employers to pay the low wages which, in a vicious circle, required all able-bodied members of a family to work, irrespective of sex or (apart from exceedingly young children) age. Women toiled long hours on the land in season; they worked by their husbands' side in the handicraft shops and in the mills and factories; until public outcry more or less put an end to it, they slaved in the mines. (56-7)

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there are three scenes describing women at work: the harvesting scene in the Marlott village, the dairy work at Thalbothays and the labouring work at Flintcomb-Ash. Tess joins the agricultural world in her home village as 'nothing that she [can] do within the house [is] so remunerative ... as harvesting in the fields' (1983: 94). Here Hardy not only stresses on the economic dependence of Marlott women, but he also attempts to depict their efficiency in their works through

comments like ‘a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself within it’ (1983: 93) and ‘the movements of the other women were more or less similar to Tess’s, the whole bevy of them drawing together like dancers in a quadrille ... till a shock, or “stitch” as it was here called, often or a dozen was formed’ (1983: 94).

Thalbothays stands for a rural idyll that forms a contrast to the stark reality of the condition of working-class women. At Thalbothays, the dairy work appears as no hard labour for the girls and their tasks are carried out in a light and cheerful atmosphere under the supervision of a kind and jovial master, Mr. Crick. By contrast, the life of the field-women at Flintcomb-Ash is pictured as one of endurance and suffering:

Amid this scene Tess slaved in the morning frosts and in the afternoon rains. When it was not swede-grubbing it was swede-trimming, in which process they sliced off the earth and fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use. At this occupation they could shelter themselves by a thatched hurdle if it rained; but if it was frosty even their thick leather gloves could not prevent the frozen masses they handled from biting their fingers. (1983: 279)

The powerful threshing scene of Chapter XLVII describes the ravages of industrialism as seen in the brutal exploitation of human labour. The scene acts as a symbol of the dehumanized relationships of the new capitalistic form. The threshing machine is described as the ‘red tyrant’ (1983: 315), and the women working as bonded slaves. The machine is a symbol of the cash-nexus which has destroyed community life and fellow-feeling. The working women are important to their employer, not as individual human beings, but as factors in the process of production. They are just cogs in the infernal machine of exploitation, useful in so far as they help in its efficient working, otherwise non-entities, irrelevant and unwanted as revealed by the casual labour offered to women on farmer Groby’s farm. Besides, at Flintcomb-Ash women are employed because they can be paid less than men:

The farmer himself, it appeared, was not at home, but his wife who represented him this evening, made no objection to hiring Tess, on her agreeing to remain till Old Lady-Day. Female field-labour was seldom offered now, and its cheapness made it profitable for tasks which women could perform as readily as men. (1983: 276)

In the novel prejudice against women of the lower classes surfaces in many instances. Such prejudice can be viewed as accurately representing prevailing popular opinion. The Clares, for example, are representatives of such mid- to late-nineteenth-century class prejudice. Mr and Mrs Clare blame themselves for what has happened to Angel – that by encouraging him to become a farmer they have put him in the way of ‘agricultural girls’ (1983: 328). Moreover, Mrs Clare’s notion of the perfect wife is evidence enough of the unrelenting prejudice against women of the labouring classes:

“Is she of a family such as you would care to marry into – a lady, in short?” asked his startled mother, who had come softly in to the study during the conversation.

“She is not what in common parlance is called a lady,” said Angel unflinchingly; “for she is a cottager’s daughter, as I am proud to say. But she is a lady, nevertheless – in feeling and in nature.”

“Mercy Chant is of a very good family.”

“Pooh – what’s the advantage of that, mother!” said Angel quickly. “How is family to avail the wife of a man who has to rough it as I have and shall have to do?”

“Mercy is accomplished. And accomplishments have their charm,” returned his mother looking at him through her silver spectacles. (1983: 166)

At the beginning of the novel, as the Clare brothers watch the country girls dancing, Felix’s worry about being seen in the company of these girls is again revealing about class prejudice against working-class women:

“Dancing in public with a troop of country hoydens – suppose we should be seen! ...” (1983: 22)

This overt respectability that fears contamination is reinforced much later in the novel when Tess overhears these words from Cuthbert’s and Felix’s discussion of Angel’s marriage with a girl of lower social status:

“Ah, poor Angel, poor Angel! I never see that nice girl without more and more regretting his precipitancy in throwing himself away upon a dairymaid, or whatever she may be.” (1983: 290)

Neither Cuthbert nor Felix can empathize with the forces that regulate the lives of working-class girls like Tess – forces that drive these people to take any occupation as

a means for survival. They assume that Angel's association with Tess only degrades him.

Tess is aware of class differences that exist between herself and Angel. When she receives Angel's proposal, she promptly evokes these social differences:

“Your father is a parson, and your mother wouldn't like you to marry such as me. She will want you to marry a lady.”

“Nonsense – I have spoken to them both. That was partly why I went home.” (1983: 173)

But Tess is deceived by a man who thinks he has freed himself from class prejudice by marrying a peasant. In fact, Angel is unable to rid himself of his middle-class sensibilities. He cannot help rejoicing about Tess's noble parentage:

“A d'Urberville Indeed! And is that all the trouble, dear Tess?”

“Yes,” she answered faintly.

“Well – why should I love you less after knowing this?”

“I was told by the dairyman that you hated old families.”

He laughed. “Well, it is true, in one sense. I do hate the aristocratic principle of blood before everything, and do think that as reasoners the only pedigrees we ought to respect are those spiritual ones of the wise and virtuous, without regard to corporeal paternity. But I am extremely interested in this news – you can have no idea how interested I am. Are you not interested yourself in being one of that well-known line?” (1983: 189)

Ironically enough, Angel's subsequent behaviour towards Tess after he learns about her past belies such notions of wisdom and virtue. Angel loves Tess because she represents an ideal for him, ‘the unsullied innocent maiden’ with ‘pink cheeks’:

“My position – is this,” he said abruptly. “I thought – any man would have thought – that by giving up all ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence, as surely as I should secure pink cheeks; but – However, I am no man to reproach you, and I will not.” (1983: 234)

As Patricia Stubbs rightly puts it in *Women & Fiction: Feminism & the Novel 1880-1920* (1981), ‘in Clare's case, the rejection of a bourgeois life-style has taken the form of opting instead for an ideal of bucolic innocence as a sort of compensation prize for giving up a promising career in the Church’ (1981: 70). It is because Angel is always engrossed in visions and stereotypes about Tess that he has nothing to hold on

to when Tess's confession reveals the past of the real woman. At Thelbothays in the early morning hours, Tess seems to acquire special qualities in Angel's eyes. She is then no longer the milkmaid, 'but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form' (1983: 134-5). Angel also glorifies Tess's beauty by calling her 'Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names' (1983: 135). It is such idealization of his beloved that explains his immediate reaction to Tess's confession: "you were one person: now you are another" (1983: 226) and "the woman I have been loving is not you" (1983: 226). Angel rejects Tess just like his brothers, except that it takes Tess's confession to prove to him that she embodies the lowness of her class. He fears that the supposedly typical impurity of a working-class girl might debase him and in this he resembles his brothers whose 'mental limitations' he had previously condemned. Angel cannot get over the wide gulf between the expectation and the achievement, the dream and the reality, the purity he had expected and the taint that Tess has told him about. His reaction is no more than the consequence of the conventional morality which still holds him in its tight grip. In his conscious mind he has always subverted conventions, but unconsciously he here acts as the very embodiment of those conventions.

Tess pays beyond suffering for her confession about her past on her wedding night. Feeling reassured that her offence is 'just the same' (1983: 221-2) as that of Angel, a phrase not included in the *Graphic*, and that Angel is but 'her double' (1983: 220), Tess reveals her secret to the latter. But Tess's relief is delusory. The man confesses, he is exonerated; the woman confesses, she is damned. Hardy's depiction of Angel's inability to understand his wife or to forgive and accept her, as she has so readily done in his case, is a severe condemnation of that wider prejudice and fixed judgement that characterizes nineteenth-century society. Tess is left with no alternative, but to accept her punishment as society wants it to be: the woman pays for her sexual transgression, but the man does not. As Jeanette Shumaker, in her article 'Breaking with the Conventions: Victorian Confession Novels and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*' (1994), highlights:

[Tess] endorses the ideology of male mastery that allows Angel more sexual freedom than she has By showing that Angel is not the conventional forgiving confessor since he espouses a more genteel form of sexism and class prejudice that encourage Alec to rape peasant girls, the novel indicts the Victorian ideology of male mastery as warped.⁴

Such a sexual double standard impinged on Victorian women of almost all classes:

... the now infamous double standard of sexual morality, which punished with social ostracism any woman who breached the sexual taboos, but which blandly ignored male offences. This was an effective way of policing, women, of penalizing any who demonstrated that they were not the a-sexual beings of popular mythology and so inadvertently reminding the community of the hidden, unacknowledged, and possibly disturbing existence of female desire.⁵

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy is also at pains to portray women's disempowerment *vis-à-vis* social practices rooted in gender discrimination. The cult of the innocent young English maiden, affectionate, but not passionate, encapsulates the ideal of Victorian womanhood. In general, Victorian women were supposed to have warm affections and feelings of care, concern and devotion, but never sexual passion or desire. Those who through their acts dared to disprove this ideology were subjected to heavy penalties. They were treated as objects of guilt and disgrace. They became the notorious 'fallen women' whose sexuality was thought to corrupt the social order of the time to the extent that they could be sent to specific penitentiaries for so-called rehabilitation:

Who were these 'low and repulsive' women? Candidacy for a penitentiary was simple: to have fallen was to have had sexual intercourse with a man to whom one was not married. Some of the penitents were former street prostitutes, others had been kept mistresses, others had lived with men to whom they were not married. The unsuspecting dupes of bigamists also sought refuge in the penitentiary. At times, the category of penitent encompassed the victims of sexual violence and incest as well.⁶

'Fallen women' were thus oppressed by the fierce prejudices incumbent on them. They were regarded as outsiders who refused to abide by the rules of society. The reasons underlying women's breaches of societal laws were overlooked. These women were considered as having 'different psychological and physiological needs'⁷ and there seems to have been no attempt to come to terms with the realities that drove them to transgress established norms and laws. Economic pressures and sexual discrimination,

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among others, which were the main factors contributing to deviancy on the part of many Victorian women were not tended to. In a discussion of women as victims of societal laws, Susan Mumm notes:

The sisters who worked with prostitutes [in penitentiaries] gradually came to recognize that their perception of these women as being utterly distinct from themselves reflected differences of social class and upbringing more than it did the difference between purity and sexual experience Sisters perceived fallenness as a misfortune for the woman and as a crime, either of economics or violence, against the woman.⁸

Of course, some women – like Tess – were also victims of male predation and sexual violence. However, by showing that Tess ‘had been made to break an accepted social law’ and not a law known to nature and by stressing Tess’s agony and social victimization, the novelist denounces the contemporary view of such women as the lowest beings and as objects of disgrace and disgust.

The punishment of Tess as the typical ‘fallen woman’ that Angel sets in motion when he rejects her is further carried out by the less educated members of his class who share similar Puritanical thoughts. Echoing Angel’s view of ‘fallen women’ as criminals and inhuman, the better-off people of Marlott scold Joan Durbeyfield for ‘harbouring’ (1983: 340) Tess and the death of Durbeyfield merely provides an opportunity for these people to evict the family. There is an interesting perspective on social and moral judgement which contrasts with this middle and upper class mentality when Tess returns from Tantridge and goes to work in the fields, supposedly the cynosure of local gossip. Tess is ‘the same, but not the same; at the present stage of her existence living as a stranger and an alien here, though it was no strange land that she was in’ (1983: 94). This comment is hardly borne out by the little acts of sympathetic acceptance which suggest a community of spirit, a warm concern from the agricultural workers responding to the fact that one of them has been used and abused. Thus when Tess sits with ‘her face turned somewhat away from her companions’ a man ‘held the cup of ale over the top of the shock for her to drink’ (1983: 95). This simple gesture is supplemented by the reactions of the men when she begins to feed her baby. Those

‘who sat nearest considerately turned their faces towards the other end of the field, some of them beginning to smoke; one, with absent-minded fondness, regretfully stroking the jar that would no longer yield a stream’ (1983: 95). This description is characterized by sympathy, tolerance and identification with the fondling of the jar symbolizing a reflex loving gesture, as if holding a baby. It is exempt from hypocrisy and stands in sharp contrast to the double standards of higher society.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy also shows a certain readiness to recognize and incorporate sexuality into fiction. He seems to see the necessity of freeing women from the tyranny of the madonna/doll image that dominated English fiction of earlier decades. In the novel he creates a physically and sexually attractive heroine so as to denounce the popular Victorian belief that a physically attractive woman is morally ‘loose’ or diseased in body and mind. In other words, Hardy breaks away from the pervading Victorian sexual double standard that would not deny to male sexuality the moral integrity and self-responsibility that is often denied to female sexuality. Tess’s misery is nothing more than the novelist’s denunciation of the arbitrary laws of society which governed the life of Victorian women: ‘she had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself an anomaly’ (1983: 91). It has nothing to do with moral purity or enfeebled powers of will or reason. In his creation of Tess, the novelist highlights these misconceptions about female sexuality. In fact, Tess has committed no sin in the eyes of Nature and instead of being a woman of amoral attitudes, Tess possesses a defying and unyielding spirit against all forms of sexual overtures.

Tess unflinchingly abides by her high moral standards despite her social class and brief schooling. Hardy’s portrayal of the fullness of her character and her outward social personality seems to counter the Victorian belief that all uneducated girls lack moral integrity and refinement and are coarse and lustful. In the novel, Tess is depicted as being incapable of using her sexuality to her own advantage, even as a means of securing Angel:

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“You once said that I was apt to win men against their better judgement: and if I am constantly before your eyes I may cause you to change your plans in opposition to your reason and wish; and afterwards your repentance and my sorrow will be terrible.”

“And you would like to go home?” he asked.

“I want to leave you, and go home.” (1983: 240)

Tess’s scrupulous conscience makes it impossible for her to use her exceptional physical charm on others for her own benefit. Had she been the debauched working-class woman she is considered to be, she would have seduced Clare and made it impossible for him to abandon her or she would have readily accepted Alec’s proposals. But Hardy underlines his heroine’s moral integrity. Though at one time Tess realizes that she might free herself from the actual economic oppression she is facing from farmer Groby at Flintcomb-Ash by giving in to Alec’s proposal, she does not easily yield to the temptation:

Knowing very well that he did not harass the other women of the farm as he harassed her out of spite for the flooring he had once received she did for one moment picture what might have been the result if she had been free to accept the offer just made her of being the monied Alec’s wife. It would have lifted her completely out of subjection, not only to her present oppressive employer, but to a whole world who seemed to despise her. “But no, no!” she said breathlessly. “I could not have married him now. He is so unpleasant to me.” (1983:309-10)

In Tess’s encounter with men – Alec and Angel – Hardy shows them to be morally weak. Whether it is Angel Clare who has one standard of moral conduct for men and another for women, or the lustful and selfish Alec, they both lack the moral integrity of the heroine. However, when Tess finally accepts to be Alec’s mistress and goes to live in Sandbourne, she does so as the last option left to her and also because of the financial difficulties of her family. Like many Victorian working-class women who had no means to escape economic oppression apart from sacrificing their autonomy and free will, Tess’s decision too is revealed as a sacrifice on her part:

“My little sisters and brother, and my mother’s needs ... they were the things you moved me by ... and you said my husband would never come back – never; and you taunted me, and said what a simpleton I was to expect him And at last I believed you and gave way!” (1983: 368)

Hardy does not conform to the conventions of his age in his presentation of Tess. Tess is far removed from the typically passive, submissive and selfless fictional women of the earlier decades of the nineteenth-century in many ways. Not only does she struggle to maintain her independence and autonomy, thereby defying the codes of behaviour prescribed for the nineteenth-century female population as a whole, but Tess also deviates from established religious codes of conduct. The baptism scene is a clear example of such a transgression on the heroine's part. According to Christian orthodoxy, in usurping the male minister's role and formulating her own form of baptism for her illegitimate child, Tess is committing a sacrilege. Seen from a different perspective, this defiant act can be interpreted as a fierce determination to control her existence and assert her identity. But Tess's defying spirit culminates in the final part of the novel, entitled 'Fulfilment', when she subverts and transgresses both social and legal codes by murdering the man who tirelessly tracks and pressurizes her.

NOTES

¹ Susan Mumm, 'Not Worse Than Other Girls': The Convent-based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain, *Journal of Social History*, 29 (3), Spring 96.

² Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (London: Virago, 1981).

³ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago, 2000) p.86.

⁴ Jeanette Shumaker, 'Breaking with the Conventions: Victorian Confession Novels and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*', *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 37(4), 1994.

⁵ Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the novel 1880-1920* (London, 1981), p.10.

⁶ See Susan Mumm, 'Not Worse Than Other Girls': The Convent-based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain, *Journal of Social History*, 29(3), Spring 96.

⁷ Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the novel 1880-1920* (London, 1981), p.10.

⁸ Susan Mumm, 'Not Worse Than Other Girls': The Convent-based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain, *Journal of Social History*, 29 (3), Spring 96.

CHAPTER TWO

Physical Mobility, Transgression and Subversion in
Tess Of the D'Urbervilles

In this chapter I will show that physical mobility as metaphor and metonymy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is closely linked to gender issues. The gaps, silences, contradictions and ambiguities underlying the theme of mobility in the novel are indicative of nineteenth-century gender distinctions. My intention is to allow the reader to stand at a distance from both the ideology and the fictional text to achieve a more objective view of 'reality'. This is probably what David Forgacs is referring to when he expounds on Louis Althusser's theory of literary work and reality in his article on 'Marxist Literary Theories':

Put simply, Althusser's idea is as follows: when we write, we do not just record what we see and fail to record what lies outside our field of vision; rather, we see all the elements of reality about which we write, but our written text cannot always make the right connections between them. A text tends to present reality partially or incoherently, leaving gaps. Through these gaps, however, an informed reader can see what the text was hiding from itself.¹

Tess's short life journey involves a series of movements from one physical space to another. She travels from Marlott to Tantridge in Phase The First and from Tantridge back to Marlott in Phase The Second. Tess then leaves Marlott for Thalbothays in Phase the Third and from there she moves to Wellbridge in Phase The Fourth. In Phase The Fifth, Tess moves from Wellbridge back to Marlott and from there to Port-Bredy and to Chalk-Newton before going to Flintcomb-Ash. In Phase The Sixth, Tess leaves for Marlott once more and from there to Kingsbere until she moves to Sandbourne in Phase The Seventh. Her movements in this last Phase from The Herons lodging-house to the inland part of the country to Bramshurst Court culminates in her arrival at Stonehenge where she is finally arrested before her

execution in the City of Wintoncester. All these instances of the heroine's mobility will be treated as representative of female experience in the patriarchal Victorian society. They will stand for Victorian women's quest for freedom and autonomy and their reactions to the inegalitarian social order based on a double moral standard. In the chapter, the various instances of the heroine's mobility will help to reveal Hardy's attempts at challenging contemporary social conventions.

In Phase The First, when Tess is on her way to Tantridge for the second time Hardy tries to reveal her resistance to the tightening hold of patriarchy, represented by Alec d'Urberville's physical mobility. Alec's mobility which enables him to meet Tess on her way to Tantridge stands for the reinforcement of existing patriarchal laws. Throughout the episode there is a binary at play: Alec's desire to control and dominate and Tess's desire to break free. Alec is insistent in his desire to bring Tess into subjugation. He urges her to mount beside him on the cart and compels her to accept his advances. Tess tries hard to break free from his hold upon her. In this episode physical mobility in the form of the rapid movements of the cart provides Alec with the means to intimidate and pressurize Tess, thus tightening his grip on her:

Down, down they sped, the wheels humming like a top, the dog-cart rocking right and left, its axis acquiring a slight oblique set in relation to the line of progress; the figure of the horse rising and falling in undulations before them. Sometimes a wheel was off the ground, it seemed for many yards: sometimes a stone was sent spinning over the hedge, and flinty sparks from the horse's hoofs outshone the daylight. The aspect of the straight road enlarged with their advance, the two banks dividing like a splitting stick; one rushing past at each shoulder.

The wind blew through Tess's white muslin to her very skin, and her washed hair flew out behind. She was determined to show no open fear, but she clutched d'Urberville's rein-arm.

"Don't touch my arm! We shall be thrown out if you do! Hold on round my waist!"

She grasped his waist; and so they reached the bottom. "Safe thank God, in spite of your fooling!" said she, her face on fire.

.... He loosened rein, and away they went a second time. D'Urberville turned his face to her as they rocked, and said in playful raillery: "Now then: put your arms round my waist again as you did before, my beauty." (1983: 57)

Alec is confident of his ability to dominate and control:

"If any man can manage this horse I can – I won't say any living man can do it – but if such has the power, I am he." (1983: 56)

His reference to his 'power' to 'manage' the mare can be interpreted as an assertion of his dominance. As the episode unfolds Alec indeed reveals his desire to master and control in the way he forces Tess to kiss him. He is relentless in his claim for Tess's docility and leaves no alternative to her:

“Let me put one little kiss on those holmberry lips, Tess; or even on that warmed cheek, and I'll stop – on my honour, I will!”

Tess, surprised beyond measure, slid further back still on her seat, at which he urged the horse anew, and rocked her the more.

“Will nothing else do?” she cried at length, in desperation, her large eyes staring at him like those of a wild animal. This dressing her up so prettily by her mother had apparently been to lamentable purpose.

“Nothing, dear Tess,” he replied. (1983: 57)

However, there are several attempts on the part of Tess to assert her autonomy, thereby challenging notions of male superiority. The narrator reveals that 'she was determined to show no open fear', tried to hold on 'as well as she could without touching him' and 'wiped the spot on her cheek that had been touched by his lips' (1983: 57-8). But these attempts lack the necessary vigour and determination when compared to the pressing advances of Alec, the embodiment of the unbending patriarch. Hardy's comment: 'She had, in fact undone the kiss, as far as such a thing was physically possible' (1983: 58) echoes Tess's other futile attempts in the novel to 'undo' what has passed, namely her movement to *Thalbothays* where she can work and get away from her past and later on her confession to Angel on her wedding night.

In the episode dealing with the heroine's second journey to *Tantridge*, she remained in Alec's grip until presented with an opportunity:

At the moment of speaking her hat had blown off into the road, their present speed on the upland being by no means slow. D'Urberville pulled up, and said he would get it for her; but Tess was down on the other side. (1983: 58)

But her 'victory' provides her with a temporary escape as Alec kept 'his gig alongside her; and in this manner, at a slow pace they advanced towards the village of *Tantridge*' (1983: 59). Tess continues to have Alec within the circumference of her movements

and is thus elusively deprived of freedom and autonomy. This instance of male dominance culminates in 'The Chase' episode where Alec 'appropriates' Tess's body:

Why was it that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (1983:77)

The narrator's use of the word 'appropriates' stresses Tess's innocence and vulnerability due to her movement away from the protection of her family. The act is revealed as an act of theft, a dishonest appropriation of another's property. The term 'appropriates' denotes the moral nature of the act. It is not merely sexual assault, but the violation of rightful ownership, and this is a very apt emphasis in a novel that confronts sexual double standards that deny a woman the right to control not only her mode of living and behaviour, but also her own body.

Alec may have appropriated Tess's body, but the novelist's emphasis on her self-governing and unyielding spirit subverts the Victorian society's definition of the so-called 'fallen woman' as being morally loose. Tess's mobility from Tantridge back to Marlott in Phase The Second reveals her 'bursting out' from the patriarchal hold upon her, while Alec's mobility in the episode reinforces the male determination to tighten this hold. But contrary to the above episode, here Tess reacts with more vigour and fierceness in her fight for freedom and autonomy. Tess persistently and actively resists as Alec renews his attempt to appropriate her 'self' and this is mostly due to her sudden awareness of the oppression she is victim of:

"I didn't understand your meaning till it was too late."

"That's what every woman says."

"How can you dare to use such words!" she cried, turning impetuously upon him, her eyes flashing as the latent spirit (of which he was to see more some day) awoke in her. "My God, I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?" (1983: 83)

Words like 'dare', 'flashing', 'knock out' and 'strike' reveal the heroine's determination to have recourse to active, physical impulses in resisting possession of

her person. These words also tellingly depict her raging defiance against Alec's attempt to have an upper hand over her by undermining her utterances and reducing them to 'Everywoman' trivialities.

Tess is determined to escape from Alec's grip and throughout the episode she asserts her desire to be her 'self'. When she finally gets into the dog-cart and sits next to Alec it is not because she has passively submitted to his will, but because nothing is being forced on her and 'she had no fear of him now' (1983: 82). She is simply acting upon her own free will, using her own natural right to decide. Likewise, when Alec kisses her this time, Tess insults him by being totally indifferent to it, turning her head 'in the same passive way, as one might turn at the request of a sketcher or hairdresser' (1983: 84). Alec is left frustrated at her mockery of his needs:

"You don't give me your mouth and kiss me back. You never willingly do that – you'll never love me, I fear." (1983: 84)

Tess rejects the father of her child because she does not love him and will not submit to a conventional solution to her plight: "I have never really and truly loved you, and I think I never can" (1983: 84). She then added rather mournfully,

"Perhaps of all things a lie on this thing would do the most good to me now; but I have honour enough left, little as 'tis, not to tell that lie. If I did love you I may have the best o' causes for letting you know it. But I don't." (1983: 84)

Tess's wants to be free, independent and live an autonomous existence. She does not falter and succumb to Alec's persuasive arguments to hold her back. She simply remains assertive and unyielding as in the following:

"I am ready to pay to the uttermost farthing. You know you need not work in the fields or dairies again. You know you may clothe yourself with the best, instead of in the bald plain way you have lately, as if you couldn't get a ribbon more than you earn."

Her lip lifted slightly, though there was little scorn as a rule in her large and impulsive nature. "I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not – I cannot! I should be your creature to go on doing that; and I won't!" (1983: 83)

At the end of the episode, Tess is able to subvert male authority and continues her way all by herself: 'Tess did not look after him, but slowly wound along the crooked lane' (1983: 84). Regardless of the powerful grip of socially-sanctioned patriarchal influence, Tess has successfully fought for her liberation from Alec.

Tess moves from one physical space to another in search of freedom and independence. In the early chapters of the novel Hardy presents Tess as a stranger to the outer world, as one who has always existed within the boundaries of the limited space allotted to her, Marlott, but who has a strong fascination and attraction for the outer world:

The Vale of Blackmoor was to her the world, and its inhabitants the races thereof. From the gates and stiles of Marlott she had looked down its length in the wondering days of infancy, and what had been a mystery to her then was not much less than mystery to her now. She had seen daily from her chamber-window towers, villages, faint white mansions; above all the town of Shaston standing majestically on its height; its windows shining like the lamps in the evening sun. She had hardly ever visited the place, only a small tract even of the Vale and its environs being known to her by close inspection. Much less had she been far outside the valley. (1983: 40)

But this fascination and attraction did not trigger the need to overstep the limited space of her existence. When Tess first moved away from her repressive limits to go to Tantridge, her movement from 'the green valley of her birth [to] a grey country of which she knew nothing' (1983: 56) was a mere obligation on her part. It had nothing to do with her needs and desires. However, the desire to break away from her restricted world becomes a pressing issue when Tess starts to feel suffocated and oppressed in Marlott where she is a victim of prejudices from her parents and the entire community as the 'spouseless mother...of a nameless child' (1983: 96).

In Phase The Third Tess again embarks on a journey when she decides to go to Talbothays to reconstruct her life. Tess realizes that it is impossible to continue her existence, 'as a stranger and an alien' (1983: 94) in Marlott 'without aid and with little sympathy' (1983: 90), always shunning mankind. It is this awareness of her oppressive and restricted existence that contributes to her decision to break away from the fetters

of her limited space. No matter the distance the place she is going to, Tess only feels the need 'to get away' (1983: 103), to start her life afresh, to breathe and live freely without having to conform to the patterns of behaviour prescribed for her by her parents and the Marlott community:

It was not quite so far as could have been wished; but it was probably far enough, her radius of movement and repute having been so small. To persons of limited spheres miles are as geographical degrees, parishes as counties, counties as provinces and kingdoms.

On one point she was resolved: there should be no more d'Urberville air-castles in the dreams and deeds of her new life. She would be the dairymaid Tess, and nothing more. (1983: 103)

Tess is highly motivated by the prospect of independent living, working as a dairymaid in Thalbothays and enjoying an autonomous existence. Her movement represents a transition from familial dependency to independence. From the enclosed, familiar world of her family and the Marlott community, she moves out into a new and strange place where the 'curve of the hill' (1983: 107) over Marlott's 'interior tract of land' (1983: 107) 'engirdled' (1983: 107) by railways is replaced by a 'world ... drawn to a larger pattern' (1983: 108). The voyage from the Vale of Little Dairies or Blackmoor Vale to the Valley of Great Dairies that she undertakes on her own, unaccompanied, emphasizes her serene and joyful state of mind. The air is bracing and ethereal; the water from the From river is clear and pure. This new environment considerably raises her spirits:

Either the change in the quality of the air from heavy to light or the sense of being amid new scenes where there were no invidious eyes upon her, sent up her spirits wonderfully. Her hopes mingled with the sunshine in an ideal photosphere which surrounded her as she bounded along against the soft south wind. She heard a pleasant voice in every breeze, and in every bird's note seemed to lurk a joy And thus her spirits, and her thankfulness, and her hopes, rose higher and higher. (1983: 109)

When Tess goes to Thalbothays she negotiates the Vale of Blackmoor after descending 'the Egdon slopes lower and lower towards the dairy of her pilgrimage' (1983: 110). The word 'pilgrimage' gives Tess's journey a spiritual and moral dimension and endows the heroine with moral purity and vigour, and this is true in terms of atmosphere and mood in her movement to Thalbothays. Tess's destination is

characterized by lushness and exuberance. She has moved to a place where ‘milk and butter grew to rankness, and were produced more profusely...[with] the verdant plain so well-watered by the river Var or Froom’ (1983: 108). The vitality of the valley is indicative of its reinvigorating power. After all, at Thalbothays there is hope and companionship for Tess and the ‘Rally’ is characterized by love.

But though the environment is fertile and fecund at Thalbothays, Tess is depicted as reserved, modest and moral in her relationship with Angel. The place’s seasonal lushness has no affinity with the heroine’s behaviour and morality. At this point in the novel, Tess’s fullness of character complements her physical appeal. Tess is presented as far from the immoral woman she has been accused of by the Marlott community. At Thalbothays, Tess develops and is revealed as creative in feeling and remarkable in imagination. She shows intuitive perception in seeing Angel as ‘educated, reserved, subtle, sad, differing’ (1983: 116) and she is vibrant in her fancies: “‘The trees have inquisitive eyes, haven’t they?’” (1983: 128). Even Angel registers her mystical predilections: “‘I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive’” (1983: 124). It is also in this generative environment that Tess shows her capacity – though occasionally – to enter into an exalted mood:

Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star, came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. (1983: 127)

Tess’s next journey – her mobility to Wellbridge – emphasizes her moral strength *vis-à-vis* Angel. Tess recounts the story of her past life on her wedding night with rebounding courage, ‘without flinching’ (1983: 222) and without shame. We are told that ‘no exculpatory phrase of any kind’ (1983: 225) enters her account and she does not even weep. In contrast to such moral vigour, the episode vividly dramatizes Angel’s moral weakness and his fall from being the caring lover he had sworn to be. Tess may be abject in self-denial and prostration in this episode, yet Hardy is at pains to depict the nobility of her spirit in the inequality of feeling between herself and Angel:

“having begun to love you, I love you for ever – in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more” (1983: 226). Tess speaks with truthful clarity and her reasoning is again a contrast with Angel’s, “I have not told of anything that interferes with or belies my love for you” (1983: 229). She reiterates that she was only a child at the time, and asserts her natural dignity: “I am only a peasant by position, not by nature!” (1983: 229). While Angel’s response is based on the law: “You don’t understand the law – you don’t understand!” (1983: 235), Tess’s thoughts and feelings are built on her own conception of natural justice. What Tess understands is beyond the law’s and beyond Alec’s comprehension. Tess’s ability to think beyond convention is an example of intellectual ‘mobility’. She believes in her innocence and Hardy in turn makes us believe so. Hardy’s denunciation of the mythology that prescribed the ‘fallen woman’ as morally weak and corrupt is treated with a bitter, satiric twist with the legitimate marriage partner becoming the myth-maker’s agent.

After eight months or so in Port Bredy Tess sets out for Chalk-Newton. This journey is as fraught as the others and Hardy lifts Tess by showing her remarkable resilience and humanity when she kills the wounded birds in the woods to end their sufferings. The passages describing Tess’s mobility expound on the difficulties she encounters: financial problems, ‘the attention she excited by her appearance’ (1983: 269), the ‘uneven way [and] ... irregular chalk table land or plateau’ (1983: 272-3) she has to ascend and the harsh weather conditions she has to endure. The way she adjusts to all these difficulties reveals her courage and stoicism – qualities that are often overlooked in women. Tess remains unflinching to the extent of disfiguring herself to discourage men from harassing her:

She ... took a handkerchief from her bundle, and tied it round her face under her bonnet, covering her chin, and half her cheeks, and temples, as if she were suffering from toothache. Then with her little scissors, by the aid of a pocket looking-glass, she mercilessly snipped her eyebrows off; and thus insured against aggressive admiration she went on her uneven way. (1983: 272)

Tess’s journey to Flintcomb-Ash establishes the heroine’s willpower and determination to be her ‘self’. The Flintcomb-Ash episode represents the taxing rigour

of life, but at the same time it stands for the heroine's will to persevere as she continues to toil in the austere conditions. At this point, Hardy depicts how the social and economic subordination of women matches the sexual one. Tess obtains work, though it is hard labour, for she will not cost as much to employ as a man would. Hardy's social concerns is evident in his description of the work experience of the women at Flintcomb-Ash:

They did all kinds of men's work by preference, including well-sinking, hedging, ditching, and excavating, without any sense of fatigue. Noted reed-drawers were they too (1983: 281-2)

At the same time, the fact that the women 'did all kinds of men's work' is a subtle indication that there is an ideological transgression, namely that of considering women as inferior to men. These are heavy tasks, but even heavier is the burden that falls upon Tess, allegedly selected by Groby for her strength and quickness in feeding the threshing machine. But Tess stands unflinching to the task assigned to her and although farmer Groby exploits her, she prefers a job that guarantees her independence to yielding to Alec's proposals.

When Tess unexpectedly comes across Alec in Phase The Sixth, she remains adamant in her decision to subvert the latter's hold upon her. She may have allowed Alec to appropriate her body in the seduction scene, "my eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all" (1983: 83), but as far as her spirit is concerned, Tess remains self-governing and unyielding. She persistently resists Alec's renewed attempts to appropriate her 'self' through every possible method of persuasion, pressure, or coercion. Tracking Tess to the arid chalklands of Flintcomb-Ash, Alec first gibes and taunts her to rouse her, but then resorts to a more subtle manoeuvre through his sympathetic persuasive argument:

"Tess ... I don't like you to be working like this, and I have come on purpose for you. You say you have a husband who is not I. Well, perhaps you have; but I've never seen him, and you've not told me his name; and altogether he seems rather a mythological personage. However, even if you have one, I think I am nearer to you than he is. I, at any rate, try to help you out of your trouble, but he does not, bless his invisible face! Tess, my trap is waiting just under the hill, and darling mine, not his! – you know the rest." (1983: 320)

This is certainly a melting speech, but to Alec's alarm Tess rises to a 'dull crimson fire' (1983: 320). He hastily tries a different approach, a little moral coercion:

"You have been the cause of my backsliding," he continued stretching his arm towards her waist; "you should be willing to share it, and leave that mule you call husband for ever." (1983: 320)

Intensely firm as always, Tess now confronts Alec more violently. Her throwing down of the gauntlet to Alec is an open challenge to a battle of wills:

One of her leather gloves, which she had taken off to eat her skimmer cake, lay in her lap, and without the slightest warning she passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face. It was heavy and thick as a warrior's, and it struck him flat on the mouth A scarlet oozing appeared where her blow had alighted, and in a moment the blood began drooping from his mouth upon the straw. (1983: 321)

However, Tess's journey back to Marlott again shows her strong-willed nature. Working the allotment becomes her first resource as she is aware of the economic pressures on her family: 'Since returning home her soul had gone out to those children with an affection that was passionate' (1983: 337). But after her father's death, economic deprivation and family displacement because he held the tenure of the cottage for his lifetime, combine to place Tess within the orbit of Alec's emotional blackmail with greater risk. Once more Tess blames herself, as she did over Prince's death, for her family's plight: if she had not come, her family might have survived within the community sympathy. But the Marlott community considers her an ostentatious sinner and through comments like, 'By some means the village had to be kept pure', (1983: 340) Hardy's social and moral criticism is revealed to us.

Tess's surrender to Alec and her movement to Sandbourne is not a willing surrender. Hardy clearly establishes Tess's disadvantaged situation during the 'house-riding' journey: 'They were only women ... hence they had to hire a wagon at their own expense, and got nothing sent gratuitously' (1983: 346). The meeting with Izz and Marian; the sheltering in the d'Urberville vault at Kingsbere; and her mother's plaintive recrimination "O Tess, what's the use of your playing at marrying gentlemen, if it

leaves us like this!” (1983: 349-50) are all contributory factors in her reduction. If Tess’s mind was ‘dazed’ (1983: 83) at the time of her first seduction by Alec, her mind is again ‘dazed’ when he tries to capture her for the second time and she surrenders to him in an apathetic, almost unconscious way. Tess’s movement from strident rejection in the beginning to apathetic compliance now, emphatically and emotively suggests the destructive and wearing impact of social and economic realities on the heroine’s life. She is literally destroyed in her quest to achieve some autonomy and respect. At the same time, Joan’s above accusation hints at the Victorian society as one which denies female sexuality but in which, rather contra-dictorily, female sexuality is a means for survival. Tess’s fatalism is revealed as a personal, moral, social and economic fact. Consistent and complex, Hardy shows her to have been born to suffer as any member of the contemporary agricultural class, but while suffering from social and moral double standards, the novelist irradiates and elevates her spirit so that both Alec and Angel appear as morally inferior to her.

Tess’s last act of defiance – her murder of Alec – remarkably illustrates her quest for freedom and autonomy. As implied by the title of the last phase, ‘Fulfilment’, Tess fulfils her ‘bursting out’ process with this murderous act which releases her from Alec’s grip and reunites her with Angel, though temporarily. This act of defiance reveals a fierce determination on Tess’s part to control her existence:

“I have done it – I don’t know how,” she continued He has come between us and ruined us, and now he can never do it any more It came to me as a shining light that I should get you back that way. I could not bear the loss of you any longer – you don’t know how entirely I was unable to bear your not loving me. Say you do now, dear dear husband: say you do, now I have killed him!” (1983: 372)

After having knifed the heart that persistently pursues her, Tess is at last free to ‘walk for ever and ever’ (1983: 373), relishing the taste of this new feeling: liberation. Her vitality is restored and she feels strong enough to walk ‘for ever and ever’ (1983: 373) now that she has achieved freedom and liberation. Tess joins Angel and together they roam about the countryside. Tess is relieved and content; Angel is shocked and worried. They wander into the forests, and find lodging in a vacant furnished mansion

before again setting out to no fixed destination. Physical mobility as metaphor in this case is indicative of such freedom. All of Tess's movements in this last phase – from The Herons lodging-house to the inland part of the country to Bramshurst Court – without any fixed dwelling, metaphorically represent such an autonomous existence. In liberating herself from the patriarchal grip of Alec d'Urberville, Tess has also deviated from social and legal codes. She has rid herself of all the fetters that bound her to the society and that restricted her autonomy. Tess's strong desire to maintain her independence and autonomy and her struggle throughout the novel to resist Alec's patriarchal hold make her one of the strongest women of nineteenth-century fiction.

NOTE

¹ David Forgacs, 'Marxist Literary theories' in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction* by A. Jefferson and D. Robey (eds.) (London, 1986) p.180-1.

CHAPTER THREE

The Interiorisation of Convention in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Although Hardy attempts to provide the reader with an account of Victorian women's predicament in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by overstepping the moral and social conventions of his age and recognizing the vast discrepancies between acceptable cultural images of women and what women actually experience, the novel operates within clearly defined limits. It soon becomes apparent that Hardy's feminist consciousness is limited. He often focuses powerfully on what he recognizes as the rigid gender system of his society and the social and moral double standards it entails, but the systems themselves are not adequately criticized. There is no profound questioning of the systems which lead to the frustrations and oppression of women in nineteenth-century England.

Tess is certainly presented as a victim of specific social practices like gender inequality and class prejudice, but contrapuntally the heroine is also shown as a victim of fate. The story of Tess's life can be described as a journey attended by a series of misfortunes and coincidences engineered by fate. This idea of fate as the moving factor conceals or elides the determining role of society in the oppression of women. Tess's tragedy is presented as brought about by wrong things happening unexpectedly at the wrong moment and what Hardy says about Tess's first meeting with Alec discloses the novelist's belief in fate as directing and determining the course of events in his heroine's life:

In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. Nature does not often say "See!" to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply "Here!" to a body's cry of "Where?" till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game. (1983: 46)

This idea of the heroine being compelled more by fate than by specific social laws is established almost from the beginning of the novel. Tringham's meeting with Tess's father sets off Joan's opportunism and the spiking of Prince, Durbeyfield's horse, obliges Tess to move to Tantridge for financial support as this accident has suddenly disorganized the family business. The 'might-have-been stress' is therefore a major factor in the omnipresence of fate and Abraham acts as a chorus to this idea when he tells Tess that, "'Tis because we are on a blighted star, and not a sound one, isn't it, Tess?'" (1983: 37). Tess blames herself for Prince's death and this self-accusation drives the heroine to accept her mother's proposal:

"... as I killed the horse, mother," she said mournfully, "I suppose I ought to do something. I don't mind going and seeing her." (1983: 40)

But this decision subsequently leads to more disastrous consequences in her meeting with Alec in Tantridge. Alec's seduction of Tess is thus a direct, though not immediate, result of the death of Prince. But it is all the same triggered by other fateful instances like the coincidence of fair and market and Alec's being in the right place at the right time when he rescues Tess from his cast-off mistress and takes advantage of Tess's utter physical and mental exhaustion. However, instead of denouncing the unequal sexual relations at play in the novel in terms of male predation, Hardy simply refers to Alec's action of robbing Tess of her chastity as part of the inevitable consequence of fate. Similarly, the novelist does not adequately criticise John and Joan Durbeyfield who nurture unrealistic class and monetary expectations respectively through their awareness that an attractive girl may reap benefits from a wealthy 'relation'.

The inexorable nature of fate (or Hardy's own plotting) continues to affect Tess's life throughout the novel. When Tess moves on to Talbothays, which is outwardly fair and companionable, the fateful pressures soon began to accumulate within: the meeting with Angel means the tightening of her secret and the Jack Dollop stories reflect her own fears. To some extent, Tess is also shown to be responsible for

what happens to her. She is fearful of speaking out and perhaps bringing a worse fate upon herself. However, in a burst of courage after a chance meeting with a Tantridge man at a town inn not far from Thalbothays, Tess attempts to take a decisive stand contrary to the vagaries of chance. She decides to write a letter of confession to Angel, but it fatefully goes under the carpet. Tess is doomed:

With a feeling of faintness she withdrew the letter. There it was – sealed up, just as it had left her hands. The mountain had not yet been removed. (1983: 209)

She tries to climb ‘the mountain’ before they marry, fails and leaves it too late. This ‘might-have-been’ is part of Tess’s fate. If Angel had received this statement of the facts in time (that is before the marriage), he would have either forgiven her or refused to marry her. In either case, the tragedy of Tess might have been averted. In fact, in Chapter 40, after separating from Tess, when Angel goes to Wellbridge to wind up certain affairs, he kneels by the bedside and says: “‘Oh, Tess! If you had only told me sooner, I would have forgiven you’” (1983: 261). A minor mischance thus has grave consequences for the heroine. But Angel’s narrow moral codes induce us to consider his words here as a mere convenient hypocritical response. Tess as a victim of fate is helpless to determine her position or role. This might be an adequate reflection of what women were reduced to in Victorian society: passive recipients of events, rather than active shapers of life.

From a feminist viewpoint, Hardy’s novel has other gaps and silences. The depiction of mobility also reveals, unwittingly, embedded notions of male superiority. Wellbridge, which is Tess’s next destination, is more than a register of location. It has much more to do with mood since it is packed with the incidents of Tess’s emotional disintegration. Mobility in this episode, ‘walking very slowly ... one behind the other’ (1983: 230), highlights the male superiority over the female and the latter’s interiorized subordination. Tess’s movements denote her acceptance of her inferior position and Hardy stresses the pathos of her situation by using an animal image in referring to her

‘dumb and vacant fidelity’ as ‘she followed Angel without any attempt to come up with him or to attract him’ (1983: 228). Her obedience and docility are remarkable:

“Please oblige me by returning to the house and going to bed.”
“I will,” she said dutifully. (1983: 230)

The confession scene is very revealing about Tess’s interiorized sense of disesteem. At first Tess feels that her ‘sin’ is not greater than that of Angel and she pleads her case:

“I have forgiven you for the same.” And as he did not answer she said again; “forgive me, as you are forgiven. I forgive *you*, Angel.” (1983: 226)

Then she offers various explanations about her innocence:

“What have I done, what *have* I done? I have not told of anything that interferes with or belies my love for you I am not that deceitful woman you think me!”
“H’m – well. Not deceitful, my wife; but not the same. No: not the same. But do not make me reproach you: I have sworn that I will not; and I will do everything to avoid it.”
But she went on pleading in her distraction; and perhaps said things that would have been better left to silence. “Angel, Angel: I was a child – a child when it happened! I knew nothing of men.” (1983: 229)

Although Tess realises that her offence is not greater than that of Angel, Hardy shows her as being unable to stand up for long to the unflinching and unmoved Angel. She finally blames and considers herself as inferior and unworthy of Angel. Tess even thinks of committing suicide by drowning and by strangling herself ‘with the cord of [her] box’ (1983: 235). Tess is depicted as being far from the strong-minded woman with defying spirit described in the episodes analysed in the previous chapter. Here, she is presented according to the contemporary society’s definition of women as selfless and self-effacing creatures. Later on, when Angel carries her to the stone coffin the death-wish again predominates – ‘He might drown her if he would: it would be better than parting to-morrow, to lead severed lives’ (1983: 244). This idea of self-sacrifice and selflessness is further extended in the way it pleases Tess to deliver ‘her whole being up to him ... [and] think he was regarding her as his absolute possession, to

dispose of as he should choose' (1983: 243) and the way she ministers to Angel in his sleeping state, her own feet hurt and chilled.

There is also a contradiction that lies at the heart of the novel and of women's predicament in Hardy's society, for the very 'qualities' which in contemporary belief made women morally superior, once internalized, as they are in Tess, become the principal cause of their destruction. Tess's story suggests that Hardy understands the crippling effect of such 'qualities', but he never really rejects or condemns them. In fact, he appears to believe in Tess's virtues of self-effacement, passivity and susceptibility through self-blame and self-accusation and even asks us to admire these virtues. After all it is these characteristics which set her above her more mundane friends, Marian, Izz and Retty, and make her worthy of the love of a gentleman. Her fatal decision to 'confess' to Angel is determined by her moral conscience which tells her that she is cheating her friends – who also love Angel – by remaining silent about her past.

They were simple and innocent girls on whom the unhappiness of unrequited love had fallen: they had deserved better at the hands of fate. She had deserved worse; yet she was the chosen one. It was wicked of her to take all without paying. She would pay to the uttermost farthing: she would tell (1983: 220)

It is such inner moral compulsion on the part of Tess as mentioned above that ruins her. Paradoxically, Hardy seems to depict such characteristics in Tess as good and admirable. He implicitly endorses a moral pattern of womanhood that the story reveals as damaging and repressive. Through Tess's lack of will power for assertion and her desire to annihilate and sacrifice the self, Hardy is here condoning the Victorian assumption that women, as John Stuart Mill puts it,

Are brought up from their earliest years in the belief that the ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and self-government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others.¹

Tess's journey to Emminster is loaded with fateful incidents – the changing of the boots for the 'pretty thin ones of patent leather' (1983: 288), the ringing of the doorbell without response, the movement away from the house and the emotional index which charts her fear, 'a feeling haunted her that she might have been recognized (though how she could not tell), and orders been given not to admit her' (1983: 289). In this episode Tess's susceptibility, passivity and self-effacement contribute to her fate. When she overhears Angel's brothers discussing her and Angel, she resigns herself to her fate and sets off to Flintcomb-Ash without trying to see Mr. And Mrs. Clare. Hardy's suggestion is that the latter would have welcomed and comforted her at that very moment, 'her present condition was precisely one which would have enlisted the sympathies of old Mr. and Mrs. Clare' (1983: 291). Some hours later – as fate decrees – Tess is face to face with the agent of her destruction, that is, the 'converted' Alec. The unexpected meeting with Alec awakens the latter's dormant lust once again; he renounces his missionary's role, and pursues Tess with a doggedness that surprises her. From then on, fate takes the form of blackmail, with Angel's silence and Alec's coercion.

Other minor occurrences qualify Tess's physical mobility from one space to another. When Tess's mother falls seriously ill, and her father becomes unwell too, Tess gives up her job at Flintcomb-Ash and rushes to Marlott. As chance or rather Hardy's own plotting would have it, it is her father who dies while her mother recovers – contrary to expectations. The death of her father means the eviction of the family from their cottage at Marlott and their becoming homeless. The house-owner, at Kingsbere by another mischance, hands over the possession of his house to another tenant, after having promised it to Tess's mother. This misfortune is an ideal opportunity for Alec to put further pressure upon Tess who sees no way out of the predicament but to yield. Society does not provide her with any option or alternative. At the same time Tess's capacity for self-blame, the feeling that she deserves the punishment, drives her to surrender to Alec.

The overall effect of the story is that of a malign Fate stalking its victim. Everything is shown as coming too late: Tess's retreat from Tantridge, Joan's failure to warn her daughter about men and Joan's booking of the rooms at Kingsbere. Even Angel's realization of how he has treated Tess and his decision to return is retarded due to his obstinacy and illness. It seems that Hardy's original title 'Too Late Beloved' would have been an adequate title as in fact a large part of the plot derives from Fate. The Sandbourne lodging-house scene also exemplifies this. Tess's extreme suffering on seeing Angel makes her utter the words 'too late' four times in agonized response to tenderness. Even at this moment of crisis, Hardy remains consistent in his presentation of Tess as victim of her destiny. As she speaks, we are told that 'she seemed to feel like a fugitive in a dream, who tries to move away but cannot' (1983: 365). Tess's frank acknowledgement that she is now d'Urberville's mistress was not in the *Graphic* version, for its readership was not prepared to accept such phrases as "He is upstairs" (1983: 366) and "I didn't care what he did wi' me!" (1983: 366). Completely shattered by the emaciated Angel she has just seen, Tess is moved to impetuous murder.

The fact that Tess is presented as a victim of fate and circumstances seems important in contradicting Tess as feminist icon. This points to the absence of control or volition women have in determining their destiny. At the same time, this uneasiness in Hardy's story – the conflicting aspects of Tess as person and Tess as experience – shows Hardy's own inability to transcend completely the mores and values of his society.

The subtle way in which Hardy presents Tess as Alec's murderess is also remarkable. The presence of women with destructive impulses in Victorian society disproved men's attempts at defining them as docile, passive and self-sacrificing creatures. Of particular concern were those women who directed their violent impulses towards men. Hardy, mindful of this particular social concern, instills in Tess signs of mental and emotional instability so that Alec's murder is not revealed as an act of

defiance against male tyranny. This series of questions from Tess after the murder, for instance, are very revealing:

“Why did you go away – why did you – when I loved you so? I can’t think why you did it Angel, will you forgive me my sin against you, now I have killed him?” (1983: 372)

Tess is not depicted as rational here and the questions clearly show her state of mind. To the first question, in her sane state, Tess knows the answer. To the second she does not, and for the simple reason that the sane Tess knows the difference between right and wrong. When Angel questions her about the killing of Alec, her response is “‘I mean that I have,’” she murmured *in a reverie*’ (italics mine) (1983:3 72). This is the symptom of her abstraction, a sign of her withdrawal from reality. Further evidence of Tess’s unbalanced state of mind is that once she is reunited with Angel he appears to her unchanged – ‘To her he was, as of old, all that was perfection, personally and mentally....for was it not the face of the one man on earth who had loved her purely, and who had believed in her as pure?’ (1983: 373). Through this subtle presentation of Tess as ‘irrational’ the novelist seems to suggest that in her right mind no woman would act against a man who has ruined and stalked her. There might also be the suggestion that women are incapable of decisive, if illegal, action to free themselves from oppression. From both perspectives, it is obvious that a woman who kills an emotionally and physically abusive partner is regarded unsympathetically.

In the Stonehenge sequence Tess is presented as a symbol: a victim, a sacrifice. In this episode, Tess places herself on the ‘oblong slab’ (1983: 379) in the isolated plain, a symbolical representation of the sacrificial altar. Through this symbolism, Hardy appears to condone the Victorian belief that a woman is supposed to be self-sacrificing and selfless.

Tess’s self-sacrifice in this last journey of hers embraces Liza-Lu and Angel. She urges Angel to marry Liza-Lu after her death, telling him that marrying sister-in-laws is a common practice in Marlott and adding,

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“If you would train her and teach her, Angel, and bring her up for your own self!” (1983: 380)

There is a deep pathos here, a sense of pathetically ensuring that Angel gets what he wants from life. Liza-Lu will subserve him as Tess has and would have continued to do in life. Liza-Lu would be economically saved, educationally lifted and domestically moulded. The woman, that is, Tess, has paid, but the man will still rule. Now that Tess’s journeying is almost over, her experience has taught her nothing beyond the misplaced dependence that has contributed to a large part to her tragedy. Even after she has committed the remarkable act of defiance by knifing the heart of the man that tirelessly tracks her, thereby subverting and transgressing both social and legal codes, Tess retreats and becomes self-condemnatory and apprehensive:

“I fear that what you think of me now may not last. I do not wish to outlive your present feeling for me. I would rather not. I would rather be dead and buried when the time comes for you to despise me, so that it may never be known to me that you despised me”

“I cannot ever despise you!”

“I also hope that. But considering what my life has been I cannot see why any man should, sooner or later, be able to help despising me How wickedly mad I was! Yet formerly I never could bear to hurt a fly or worm, and the sight of a bird in a cage used often to make me cry.” (1983: 377)

The domestication of women in nineteenth-century England made it difficult for people to believe that women would harbour, let alone indulge in murderous impulses. Gentle, delicate, passive, submissive and self-sacrificing creatures were not supposed to possess such destructive impulses and those who transgressed such Victorian norms of femininity were regarded as traitors to their own sex and were treated with contempt and disgust. Women as perpetrators of crime were looked upon as abnormal and subhuman creatures. However, while deviant behaviour in women was unacceptable, deviant behaviour in men was simply deplorable. Victorian women were thus victims of a legal double standard which refused to consider men’s and women’s offences from the same perspective:

... while male villainy was dismissed as an unfortunate regression, the same sort of behaviour in females particularly when it was directed at males, was condemned as a hideous perversion.²

Murderesses were regarded as fiends or monsters, who could not be allowed to remain alive. Though in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* there are many instances where the status quo is challenged, the novel's form echoes that of conventional realism. Closure must be achieved, society's justice must be upheld. Tess's 'fulfilment', illustrated by the open space at Stonehenge, proves to be short-lived. She is soon trapped by the powerful grip of patriarchy represented by the sixteen guards who have encircled her:

The figure came straight towards the circle of pillars in which they were Turning, he saw over the prostate columns another figure; then, before he was aware, another was at hand on the right, under a trilithon, and another on the left They all closed in, with evident purpose. Her story, then, was true! Springing to his feet he looked around for a weapon, loose stone, means of escape, anything. By this time the nearest man was upon him.

"It is no use, sir," he said. There are sixteen of us on the Plain; and the whole country is reared."

"Let her finish her sleep!" he implored in a whisper of the men, as they gathered round.

When they saw where she lay, which they had not done till then, they showed no objection; and stood watching her, as still as the pillars around. (1983: 381)

The circular position of the guards is highly significant. It suggests the idea of confinement and limitation. Contrary to Stonehenge – a symbol of freedom and liberation – the position of the guards who have come to arrest Tess implies a restriction of mobility. Tess is confined to a limited space and her movements are under control. Her transgression and subversion of the laws and norms of the society for a life of independence and autonomy have proved futile. She is instead revealed as living in a world where men are the law-makers and there is no atonement for women's offences. Tess seems to be aware of this state of affairs and is resigned to her fate:

"What is it, Angel?" she said starting up. "Have they come for me?"

"Yes, dearest," he said. "They have come."

"It is as it should be!" she murmured. "Angel – I am almost glad – yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted – it was too much – I have had enough; and now I shall not live for you to despise me."

She stood up, shook herself, and went forward, neither of the men having moved. "I am ready," she said quietly. (1983: 382-1)

Furthermore, Tess's stay in the 'large red-brick building, with level grey roofs, and rows of short barred windows bespeaking captivity ...' (1983: 384) before her

execution, represents a culmination of the numerous ways in which her movements are closely and vigilantly supervised. The imprints of society's moral and social conventions on Hardy are especially apparent in the ending, where the heroine is punished by being hanged for having transgressed established social codes of conduct.

A significant characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist novel is precisely this sense of closure that the reader experiences. The story is tailored according to the conventions of the epoch and it is this tailoring process that depicts the writer's interiorisation of the Victorian ideology. The typical ending of nineteenth-century novels is either a punitive one for the transgressive heroine, as in the case of Tess, or the well-known 'marry and be happy' one – a championing of the Victorian ideology of the home and family. Hardy's failure to adequately challenge notions of male superiority is also apparent through Tess's various payments throughout her short life journey. According to Victorian orthodoxy, the so-called 'fallen woman' cannot go unpunished. In the novel, from the moment Tess is seduced she pays a terrible price for her supposed 'fall'. She pays in toil and tribulation at Flintcomb-Ash, with humility and pride when she visits Angel's parents and fails to see them. She pays by 'selling' herself for her family. Tess repays when she kills Alec and then man exacts the ultimate payment by taking her life.

In his preface to the fifth edition of this novel, Hardy quotes the following lines from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605):

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport (IV, i, 36-37).

Hardy certainly produces some such impressions on our minds throughout *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but they concern mostly the powerlessness of women to steer their lives against current circumstances which they do not understand and which are far stronger than they. However, Hardy lends an air of universality to the story by stating at the end of Tess's life that, "Justice" was done and the President of the Immortals has ended his

sport with Tess' (1983: 384). The reference to 'Justice' here is divine justice and 'The President of the Immortals' is a personification of the vicissitudes and the great unpredictability of life. Hence, the quotation suggests that Tess's misfortunes are the result of the malevolent play of supernatural powers. She is weighed down to the point of despair by what seems to her an inescapable fate. This is deeply ironical. Tess is in fact a victim of human justice in the form of human folly and unrealistic class and monetary aspirations characterized by her parents; male predation as embodied by Alec d'Urberville; double standards and class consciousness as represented by Angel Clare and his parents respectively. In this way, the novelist does not adequately challenge the social mores of his epoch. The abuses of certain social practices and the unjustness of conventional morality that lead to the misery of Tess are simply elided.

NOTES

¹ This passage from J.S.Mill is quoted by Richard Evans in his book *The Feminists* (London, 1977) p.20.

² Judith Knelman, 'Women Murderers in Victorian Britain' in *History Today*, 48(8), Aug 98.

CONCLUSION

The 1880s and 90s saw the beginning of a major revision in thinking about women and about sex, a process in which literature played an important part. Novelists in particular were moving towards new and radical images of women. It is tempting to believe that these changes came directly out of the various feminist movements which were firmly established by the end of the century. In 1870, women won the right to vote in local elections and The Married Women's Property Law was passed in 1882. These gave to many women their first taste of social and economic independence. Besides the 1890s included an increasing number of highly educated, self-assured and politically radical women who set about organizing internationally and working on behalf of their sex for the many still unanswered claims.¹ Such campaigns tended to erode the absurd conventions about women's purity and sexual ignorance, which in any event had been under question for some time. They also undermined the rigid separation of women into categories of good and bad, prostitutes and ladies, which had been such an effective means of dividing and ruling. With agitation on so many issues it is hardly surprising to find that even established writers like Hardy, George Moore and George Meredith show an interest in or an awareness of contemporary women's issues.

This raises an important question about the link between literature and social change. Can we, for instance, reasonably interpret *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as a simple reflection of, or response to, specific social pressures or feminist demands? This question is easier to answer if it is asked about explicitly feminist writers like Olive Schreiner or George Egerton whose works are largely conditioned by their conscious experience as women. But when it comes to male writers like Hardy it becomes quite confusing to look for any direct link between their novels and feminism. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* shows that the novelist was undoubtedly sympathetic to at least some of the dilemmas and demands faced by Victorian women, but this

sympathy is embedded in, and often limited by his own private constructions of reality or by difficulties in the reception of the novel.

The works of most major Victorian novelists (and Hardy is no exception) are characterized by realism – a device that binds the novels of the time with socio-political and socio-ideological phenomena, making them appear as close as possible to real life. According to Bakhtin in ‘Discourse in the Novel’ the novel is uniquely adapted to represent contemporary reality by allowing multiple voices to speak.² But how successful are Victorian novelists in their portrayal of aspects of real life? Do they represent reality as it is or rather as they think it should be? It could be argued that the dissident voices are elided in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and that the conventional voices of male patriarchy break through despite Hardy’s ‘best intentions’. On the other hand, the novel could be interpreted as a peculiarly sensitive, realistic representation of actual social circumstances – a work which embraces, but cannot resolve, the contradictions and hypocrisies of its time.

Born in 1840, Hardy lived in and was formed by mid and late nineteenth-century England, a period of intense debates about gender arrangements about which he must have been aware. At the same time, Hardy shared in a culture which, although changing under pressure from an increasingly articulate women’s movement, was essentially patriarchal. Writers, like everyone else, live in history, and like everyone else their thought is shaped by the zeitgeist of the age in which they live. Their vision is also conditioned, and often sharply limited by available forms. It should not be surprising, then, that Hardy’s work reflects the ambiguities and uncertainties of late nineteenth-century English society. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is ambivalent in its portrayal of women’s issues because the society in which it was written and which it depicts was riven by competing senses of, and claims for gender and gender relations. Moreover, writing within the realist mode (rather than embracing the challenges, controversies and idealism of Aestheticism) – with its demands for logical time sequences, the gradual development of character, the social manners of the day and

closure – imposed, consciously or not, limits on the extent to which Hardy’s text was able to subvert the dominant ideas and expectations of his era. Realism implies fidelity to lived experience: a measure of authenticity and accuracy. Under realism, art imitates life and to this extent is not utopian.

Hardy and other Victorian writers also had to abide by the demands of publishers. It was thought that one way to regulate the behaviour of the Victorian woman, the innocent virgin and the respectable wife was by maintaining a tight control over the literature of the period. Reviewers strive to protect ‘women’ from what was to them ‘improper’ literature. As such, the writers of the century had to adhere to the strict conventions of their society. They had to conform particularly to the Victorian norms of femininity. Patricia Stubbs in *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (1981) correctly portrays this obsessive concern of the Victorian society for cleansing their literature from ‘improper’ materials:

If a novel violated social and sexual conventions it was not just frowned upon or ignored. Society operated an extensive apparatus for banning as well as bowdlerizing and it did not hesitate to use it. This meant that if they wanted to be published at all, writers had to accept severe restrictions on the scope and treatment of their material. Most stayed well within the moral conventions, but if a novelist did step out of line he or she was likely to be silenced by publishers editors or librarians. There was also the possibility of prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act (1857), but as a general rule unofficial, private censorship worked efficiently enough to enforce ‘public morality’.³

Many of Hardy’s works had to undergo a bowdlerized process before they were considered inoffensive enough and accepted by publishers. That process was very limiting in itself. No matter how persistent Hardy was in his overstepping of Victorian conventions, we do have many instances where he had to abide by the demands of the publishers to please the perceived sensibilities of the reading public above all, regardless of his convictions. There were many alterations which Hardy had to make in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* before it was accepted to be serialized. In the book version Tess has no illusions about her situation as is demonstrated by what follows:

Get Alec d’Urberville to marry her! He marry *her*! On matrimony he had never said one word. (1983: 87)

But in *The Graphic* version Hardy writes in the following mock marriage for the sake of convention:

“He made love to me, as you said he would do, and he asked me to marry him, also just as you declared he should He said it must be private even from you I drove with him to Melchester, and there in a private room I went through the form of marriage with him as before a registrar.”⁴

Another example that shows how ridiculous and limiting bowdlerization could be is the sensuous episode where Angel Clare carries the milkmaids over a large pool of water. In *The Graphic* version Clare prudishly goes to fetch a wheelbarrow, and so the girls are carried across without any physical contact.⁵ Such modifications provide a clear indication to the modern reader of how any author’s attempts to break away from the fetters of Victorian ideologies could be frustrated.

Clearly, Hardy was limited by the pervading Victorian ideologies and by his own conditioned vision. He was unable to get rid completely of the psychological conditioning of the social and moral conventions of the Victorian society or even of the pressures of the censorship body. Despite this, there are various instances in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* where Hardy does overstep the conventions of his epoch. He sets out to make us sympathise with Tess and we do perceive her tragedy. More importantly, we are led to question the circumstances which have inexorably led to her sad fate. Tess is not (and cannot be) the emancipated feminist heroine nor a mere object of man’s manipulation. Her position is somewhere in between. Rather than an ideological tool, Hardy emphasises her humanity and it is on a human level that the reader responds to her plight. But, her experience embodies the complex position of women in a changing and uncertain social context. Tess’s story serves as a medium through which Victorian commonsense notions of superiority and morality are challenged and found wanting. Thus, by considering the importance of the unsaid over the said, the reader is able to deal, directly and indirectly, with the burning issues of Hardy’s day, especially patriarchy, proto-feminism and social, political and moral challenges to male

superiority. After all, the most elusive aspect of patriarchy is that it occasionally gives an illusion of freedom. It maintains its tenacious hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as the status quo.

NOTES

¹ See Karen Offen, *The Theory and Practice of Feminism in Nineteenth – Century Europe*, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1987) pp.339-60.

² See M.M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas, 1981), pp.259-422.

³ Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London, 1981), p.19.

⁴ M.E.Chase, *Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel* (Minnesota, 1927), p.79 in the Russell and Russel reprint, 1964. In this book Chase has traced the various alterations Hardy had to make before the novel was inoffensive enough for the editor.

⁵ See M.E.Chase, *Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel* (Minnesota, 1927), p.79 in the Russell and Russel reprint, 1964

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