

Female Insanity: The Victorian Distinction

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In the nineteenth century, new expansions in technology and production, along with shifting social and political constructs, caused the Victorian public to experience confusion and discomfort. Much of their cultural anxieties emerged from “the effects of the increasing pace and industry of society” (Malane 46) and resulted in “worries about losing control over intellect... [and] social and political order based on principles of reason” (Malane 46). One main part of the social and political system which existed were rigid gender ideals for both the female and male sex, with a particular focus on Victorian femininity and the ideal woman. Though men were to be leaders of the public sector, the Victorian woman had a more complicated expectation to uphold; she was to be chaste, accomplished in written and performing arts, demure, and a respectable family name. The rhetoric regarding Victorian femininity became a conduit for perpetuating currently upheld gender role beliefs even as new discoveries about gender surfaced.

The developing scientific ideas about gender provided reason to these gender roles, while also complicating the way female characters were represented in literature. In Beth Newman’s book, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, she dissects the role of femininity in regards to a woman’s visual role in society. She considers two distinct molds for the Victorian woman: one definition claims that the ideal woman “attracts the gaze [of male acquaintances by fulfilling] her role...[and] disappearing into the woodwork to watch over the household” (7), while the other is “imagined as characterized by ‘depths’--such as moral uprightness, thrift, heightened sensibility, and emotional intensity--rather than ‘surface’” (7). In both of these interpretations of the model Victorian woman, one consistency remains: the

strict mold to which these women had to adhere, and the emphasis of fulfilling a specific sensibility within the household and the public sector. These women needed to maintain a softer countenance and virtuous nature to complement the stronger, male decorum within nineteenth century domesticity. These expectations cultivated the canon for Victorian femininity, shaping the way that women were assessed and perceived in society. As a result, many individuals sought out ideas that supported these previously implemented beliefs; one means of confirming proposed notions about gender came from medical and psychological discoveries during this era. As Victorian femininity transcended the domestic sphere, anatomical scientific findings allowed Victorians to feel secure in one part of their life. A sense of control only led to more conviction about the “truth” surrounding gender and biological sex.

Many doctors, psychologists, and scientists researched brain functioning, later explaining how the properties of anatomy informed mental behavior and served as the sole factor in cerebral and emotional functioning for each sex. These specialists also reasoned that “healthy mental functioning was equivalent to ‘natural’ and ‘normal,’ and deviation from standards—either in thoughts or conduct—was cause for alarm” (Malane 46). A clear distinction must be noted within this examination; the Victorian definition of “natural” and “normal” is one from which the modern rationale now diverges. Focusing primarily on the subject of gender and sex, the Victorian’s had a more stringent viewpoint of these organic constitutions. In contrast, modern science has developed more extensive research toward homosexual, transgender, and gender queer studies, despite the existing level of stigma attached to diversions from heterosexual interactions and binary definitions of gender. Therefore, modern definitions of “natural” and “normal” are more inclusive of a range of lifestyles, and the Victorian perception of this lexicon

suggests a more singular, exclusive definition. Thus, the Victorian specialists were likely only accepting of binary conditions. Newman discussed how the definition of the female sex, or rather the one that could be respected, fit into a very specific design. In conjunction with these assessments, the medical community zeroed in on one type of alarm, which was insanity. While healthcare professionals studied insanity in an attempt to understand its effect on both sexes, female insanity became a primary topic of discussion that assured researchers of a logical explanation of why women were more susceptible to this illness. They manipulated their findings to prove a gendered mind, keep established gender roles in place, and reconcile the differences between the sexes. Ergo, the context of psychopathology shaped the way Victorians continued to view gender, allowing them a seemingly more sophisticated way to resolve cultural anxieties and engage with sensational topics.

One particular subject of distress was murder, which captivated Victorians as it elicited skepticism over the “principles of reason” (Malane) and morality to which they so consistently adhered. While medical professionals used research to make inferences about murders and perpetrators, many novelists experimented with this cultural obsession as a way to create discourse about current social norms. Literature, as a whole, “tell[s] us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things...[It tells us about] the role of a text...in a social context...[and] the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it” (Eagleton 9). One author, Thomas Hardy, executes this sentiment in his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy manipulates the nineteenth century fascination with murder, along with the strict ideal of femininity and the prevailing psychological practices of the time, to argue that society condemns women and sets forth unattainable ideals for them. In this paper, I will deconstruct Hardy's

insertion of these social and medical beliefs in the case of three significant murders that shape the argument around Tess's innocence: Tess's accidental murder of the family horse, Tess's killing of Alec, her attacker and manipulator, and the law's killing of Tess with the death penalty.

In Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he assesses literature's role in society and touches upon a few key elements which manifest in Hardy's novel and eventual argument. Eagleton suggests that the literature of a century reflects much of what is professed in current conversation, while also pinpointing the complexity of narrative in its ability to offer a new viewpoint concerning a sustained cultural opinion. Hardy, in particular, recognizes the delicacies of social beliefs and "the human practices" surrounding them; so, he appeals to those that upheld gender norms through applying the traits and psychological theories attached to that of an ideal woman to Tess. Hardy culminates the novel with a murder trial to serve as a critical lens through which the reader can experience the unfairness of the societal rules imposed upon women. Murder questioned morality and the epitome of the moral and pure woman; Tess's character offers a complex image of womanhood within this context and challenges social constructs.

The Victorian court system's understanding of insanity provides insight into how Hardy effectively combines these many critical lenses. The Victorians clung to their image of the ideal feminine character, which was soft, and nurturing, and above the baser nature of men. An insanity plea in the case of a woman murderer gave people a way to establish order. Insanity, as a whole, gave people a reason to believe that supposed criminals could be unaware of the moral codes they were breaking and, thus, could not be held morally accountable. The distinction

between conscious choice and unconscious deviation provided one source of comfort to the public. Even before insanity related to murder trials, this diagnosis consumed the medical community, and consequently, the public.

Much of the psychological knowledge during the nineteenth century which led to discussions of insanity--also stated as mania, madness, or hysteria throughout this century's discourse and within this paper--stemmed from Victorian gender studies. Widely known medical sciences, such as phrenology, began in the early nineteenth century and influenced many doctors and scientists in their interpretations of brain functioning well into the latter half of the century. Phrenology made notable headway in the 1840s and introduced the idea of a gendered mind, which, in other words, professed that men and women had vastly different brain functioning due solely to his or her biological sex. This scientific theory is characterized by inferences about the brain through studies of the indentations and sizes of skulls. Medical scientists claimed that the size of the brain and its organ parts could affect intellectual ability through a direct correlation. These experts argued that "the more evolved minds were likewise more extensive and complex structures" (Malane 3), and research made by numerous Victorian doctors found that men had larger brains and larger frontal lobes than women. Thus, phrenology indicated that men had greater intelligence, while deeming women less astute since they possessed a "naturally childlike female forehead" (Malane 7), which was recorded to be between the skull sizes of children and men. Although phrenology received some critiques and was largely discredited as a pseudoscience, it had a significant impact on the medical theories of the time and informed medical studies in subsequent decades. The practice perpetuated the gender ideals within

Victorian society and confirmed the established role of the Victorian woman, one with ardent sensibility and a less mature, logical disposition than a man.

As the nineteenth century progressed, scientists developed more hypotheses about the brain which further upheld the Victorian belief of a female's intellectual inferiority. In 1871, Charles Darwin published the *Descent of Man*, which proceeded to support the established prior belief of separate psychological spheres for men and women. Rachel Malane, who holds a Ph.D. in English Literature with a focus on Victorian novels, gender studies, and science and literature, provides an in depth analysis of Darwinian influence over gender norms during the nineteenth century in her book *Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences*. She asserts that Darwin described how "human skeletons demonstrated female cerebral inferiority in the exaggerated tiny skulls and ample pelvises of female skeletons, which accentuated women's weak intellect and their primary purpose as reproductive beings" (13). Malane interpretation suggests how Darwin reasoned that women were denied the chance to excel both physically and mentally since their social suppression in intellectual matters prevented them from achieving any growth in this matter. Men, on the other hand, were far more intellectually distinguished because they were constantly confronted with tasks that required greater thought processing along with their already larger cranium.

Darwin's claims had a striking similarity to the declarations phrenology made between male and female cerebration a few decades earlier, securing a new gender theory that became more refined in its focus on female psychology. These data produced ideas that "psychology grouped mental processes into two main categories—intelligence and feeling... [which was] also called reason and emotion" (Malane 22). Victorians distinguished men as intellectual beings

powered by reason and women as individuals stimulated by emotions. Their society's acceptance of women as intellectually weaker and more emotionally-driven than men led people to infer that women were more unstable and susceptible to psychological disorders. "Sickness was seen as feminine" (Ehrenreich 95), and "even when both men and women had similar symptoms of mental disorder, psychiatry differentiated between an English malady, associated with the intellectual and economic pressures on highly civilized men, and a female malady, associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women" (Showalter 7). Men were conditioned not to feel emotional responses when confronted with high-stress moments; this reaction would be seen as feminine. However, if a woman fell into these bouts of emotional outbursts, it was not just unsurprising, it was expected. Doctors continued to reinforce these assertions through new evidences, symptoms, and examples of insanity specific to women; in turn, questions regarding this apparent mental predisposition and its relation to morality, goodness, and virtue surfaced.

One of the primary ways that doctors reconciled this correlation was through increased evidence of a woman's vulnerability to madness related to physical and mental irregularity caused by the female reproductive cycle. As expressed in Darwin's conclusions, Victorians believed that a woman's primary purpose was reproduction. The reproduction cycle also became grounds for physicians to link these organs and their processes to insanity. The science that dictated a difference between reason and emotion added that the physical body reflected the mental body. Drawing from these conclusions, women were more susceptible to hysteria because females had an "inability to regulate their bodies," (Marland 20) and therefore had an "inability to regulate their minds" (Marland 20). Meanwhile, men did not suffer from a biological irregularity and were deemed masters of their own intellectual and psychological functioning.

Moreover, both a woman's menstrual and full reproductive cycle caused much concern in the Victorian age since these biological processes created irregularities in a woman's disposition. Doctors stated that during these cycles women were more akin to experiencing mental breakdowns and bouts of insanity and should be carefully monitored. Victorians found that anything different from cultural norms was sufficient reason to worry, so these fluctuations could possibly mean a woman was going mad. Therefore, the Victorian lack of understanding for biological processes partially defined this society's interpretation of insanity, which ultimately skewed how they handled the usage of insanity in the courtroom.

One important factor to note is that a doctor's diagnosis for insanity in a woman ranged over many different categories. The vocabulary surrounding the female malady is vast and showcases the extent to which medical professionals were preoccupied with this topic. Women could be diagnosed with "nervous exhaustion, overwrought sensibility, hysteria, melancholia, mania, or the more somatic but vague 'gynaecological disturbance'" (Small 14). One extension of this diagnosis, puerperal insanity, stemmed from the previously held belief of how menstruation connects with a female's predisposition for insanity and was identified as a mental disturbance resulting from childbirth. Doctors separated puerperal insanity into two main categories: mania, characterized by "great excitement and furious delirium," (Marland 35) and melancholy, characterized by a subdued and despairing demeanor. In one scene of *Tess*, Hardy includes the "mania" category of puerperal insanity when Tess's child begins to die and has not yet been baptised. He emphasizes "her high enthusiasm" (94) and explains how "the ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her; it set upon her face a glowing irradiation, and brought a red spot into the middle of each cheek" (95). Hardy professes Tess's highly agitated state, which aligns

with the “excitement” describes in the maniacal distinction. However, rather than subject Tess to the singular expected image of female insanity, he describes her as being “almost apotheosized,” or in other words godlike. He suggests that faith, as in the guise of a male priest, can also proclaim a state of high excitement. Still, Hardy does not completely discard the feminine depiction of Tess in this moment as she is only “almost” godlike. He in part adheres to the postpartum assessment of her emotions, even while emphasizing her moral inner strength. A Victorian audience may still view this moment with Tess as one led by puerperal insanity, one that makes her believe that her attempts can match that of a priests, which addresses how hysteria was also defined by delirium. This delirium further distinguished female insanity from general insanity.

Postpartum insanity gave way to a focus on more animated symptoms and definitions of madness, such as hysteria, within the discussion of mental disturbances in women. A primary focus within this subcategory was its result after the loss of a loved one. Women were expected to experience bouts of hysteria due to their fragile mental state and inability to logically process the event. Helen Small, an English Literature interpreter, lists many physical symptoms that were assigned to extreme cases of female insanity: “full-scale paroxysm, temporary convulsions, palsies, motor and sensory impairments, respiratory obstructions, and speech disorders” (15). Alternatively, any woman deemed insane would typically fulfill less extreme symptoms, such as the tendency to “abstain from food, suffer sudden fits of weeping and experience chronic lassitude,” (Small 15)....which “was indistinguishable from profound melancholy” (Small 15). As Marland states, “the suggested likelihood of mental collapse among childbearing women...fit in with deeper fears about their general vulnerability at this time” (16). Marland proposes a

crucial analysis about the interconnectivity between Victorian femininity, psychological theory, and the shifting industry. While each changing sphere had its own complexities, the ability to add reason to one of them, the state of female anatomy and psyche, provided some resolution. And, despite the differences between hysteria and postpartum insanity, the two forms collectively supported the assertion that the female mind was less developed and lacked control by reason, so they were all grouped together under one umbrella term: the female malady.

As the Victorian population became more engrossed with the concept of mental illness, judges and jurors began to use these diagnoses as a way to discern morality within English courtrooms. The plea of insanity typically meant that a person was not consciously aware of committing an immoral deed and therefore could not be held accountable. The jargon related to these proposals play an integral role in the narrative of *Tess*. Hardy suggests that Tess is innocent despite killing Alec through the rhetoric used within the current English courtroom. Insanity provided a way for people to reason why others would commit heinous acts, such as murder. Joel Peter Eigen, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology, explains how “moral guilt was a necessary element for the attribution of culpability,” (35) and that “for criminal culpability to be imputed, the act must be accompanied by intent” (35). Therefore, with the insanity plea, perpetrators could maintain their moral sense of being and reject the notion of inherent evil; madness could be equated with a lack of mental control and an inability to establish right from wrong. In this way, the application of insanity within a courtroom fit the mold of the Victorian public’s need to establish a sense of ease in the midst of dissecting a murder trial.

Soon after the fruition of the insanity plea, success of these pleas for acquittal significantly increased. Eigen speculates on the application of the insanity plea in English

courtrooms and concludes that these courts had a “willingness to entertain the possibility of a range of mentally distracted states—specifically, the status of ‘partial insanity’ as sufficiently debilitating to merit a finding of blamelessness” (32). He further asserts that “60 percent [of defendants] were acquitted ‘by reason of insanity,’ and 10 percent were found unfit to plead” (Eigen 35). These statistics support the notion that jurors in the English courtrooms were quick to accept the reasoning of insanity, thus engendering more interpretations of this affliction to use as a defense in court.

A prime focus was ‘moral insanity,’ which emerged in the English court system and which further defended the claim of a predominance of insanity in women. Doctors distinguished moral insanity as a separate sect of the mental disorder, specifically governed by a lack of reason and an outburst of emotion: “Reason is... ‘dethroned,’ [and] the will is no longer retrained by judgment, and the sufferer is driven made by his or her passions” (Eigen 77). Jurors used moral insanity as a specific application of the insanity plea to confirm the belief that a person was still inherently good even after committing a crime. To be sure, Victorians did associate this type of madness with both sexes for many types of trials. However, considering the perceived intensity of connection between a woman and her emotions, the female sex would be more likely to undergo this mental disturbance.

The accepted belief that women were more susceptible to emotional outbursts and mental instability, along with the varying definitions that existed under the female malady, provided a means for acquittals to be more readily dispersed to them. Since a woman was expected to be overcome by her passions, her actions would be seen as less criminal or preplanned than those executed by a man. One example of how women differed from men in murder cases was

infanticide. This offense was “unique to women...[and supported] conceptions of organic disturbance following childbirth" (Eigen 20). Puerperal insanity played an exceedingly large role in explaining the actions of new mothers in the English courts during the nineteenth century and it proved to be an extension of other categories. While men and women were often on trial for personal and economic crimes, women were put in a category all their own due to the scientifically proven belief about the combination of their mental capacities, their emotion-driven selves, and the effects of their reproductive cycle. Moral insanity, merged with puerperal insanity and hysteria, produced clear reasoning for a woman who acted in contrast to the norm or the good moral order. This plea was perfect for Victorians, who possessed that inner turmoil when confronted with deviations from the norm. In addition, research became more specific and singular to women and created an almost synonymous relationship between “insanity” and “women” that inspired a unique discussion with the era’s preoccupation with murder.

Hardy responded to these interwoven themes through his construction of his female heroine, whereupon he exploited perceptions in his attempt to rebuke the double standards of society. The multifaceted decisions within the courtroom stem from the starting point of Victorian femininity, as does Hardy’s text. In the first phase of the book, “The Maiden,” Hardy introduces Tess with the use of metaphor and foreshadowing to establish her purity and moral uprightness. As Tess travels to the market on behalf of her parents, she falls asleep, leading to a horrible accident in which her family’s only horse is killed. As Tess waits for assistance, Hardy describes how “the atmosphere turned pale...the lane showed all its white features, and Tess showed hers, still whiter. The huge pool of blood in front of her was already assuming the

iridescence of coagulation” (33). Through color imagery, Hardy establishes Tess’s level of pureness as he compares Tess to the atmosphere, whereupon they are a reflection of each other.

Hardy then contrasts these depictions with the concept of murder. He states that Tess is even more white, “still whiter,” than this natural element, aligning her with the feminine ideal. This description follows directly after the family horse has been killed on her account. Despite her actions, Hardy displays her in a positive light. Next, Hardy illustrates how below her is the shining imagery of blood, a noticeably red color. Red, which is associated with seduction, satanic imagery, and death, both contrasts Tess’s current state and invokes a sense of foreshadowing to Alec’s murder. Hardy specifies how the blood is “iridescent,” mirroring her image and showing an alternate reflection of her purity in the crimson folds. However, he does distinguish that Tess later on was “dry and pale, as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess” (35) to stress that Tess’s moral compass is true and that she maintains a strong sense of proper social code. From this moment, death and murder become markers in Tess’s life, and these themes serve as plot-devices that lure the Victorian reader into the narrative.

After this initial “murder,” Hardy establishes sympathy toward Tess to increase the reader’s support of her as heroine and to begin his criticism of social constructs. In the section “Maiden No More,” Hardy details Tess’s loss of virginity when she is raped by Alec. This loss is a death in and of itself. It is the death of innocence, which she continues to lament and use as a reason for self-deprecation. In the following section, Hardy critiques social and religious beliefs to argue Tess’s innocence in the loss of her physical purity:

Why is it that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed

to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may, indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess D'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same wrong even more ruthlessly upon peasant girls of their time. But thought to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter. (74)

Hardy begins this scene with a question, serving as a mechanism to actively engage the reader and encourage them to think upon the hypocrisy of certain doctrines of belief. To further accent his point, Hardy provides a simile in the description of Tess that highlights her tremendous level of purity and her lack of agency in the action. He compares her skin to that of white, fresh snow, explaining that she was untouched and morally good. He then calls into question predestination, offering a strong critique of the world order professed by those that believe in religious doctrine; he uses this critique as a way to persuade the reader of Tess's innocence and bring forth the idea that this situation cannot be marked as the same as one including conscious choice. If it were predestined, then Tess could not have been to blame. He then appeals to the audience with the lines "average human nature" and "our sense of order," highlighting the solidarity of the mortal man and touching upon the Victorian focus of the time, that need to establish order.

As Hardy solidifies Tess's characterization as an embodiment of Victorian femininity, he also aligns her with the preconceived notions regarding the female psyche in the Victorian era. His adherence to these widely held beliefs creates a heroine more people can relate to and recognize to be realistic and true. Hardy specifically implements these concepts in scenes

between Tess and Angel, the suitor she truly loves. Initially, when Angel courts Tess, she rejects his many proposals, expressing that she is “not good enough - not worthy enough” (174). Tess, being the upstanding moral feminine hero, recognizes that her worth has now declined due to the loss of her virginity outside of marriage. She rejects Angel on account of principle because she is now impure, despite the fact that she had no choice in the matter of becoming impure. However, at Angel’s request, she does not express her secret and they become married. During the whole courting experience, Hardy includes scenes where Angel continually ignores her worries and professes that they should be married, ultimately setting the stage for a harsh critique on the double standards of society.

After Angel and Tess are married, Angel reveals that he has had sexual relations with another woman outside of wedlock, which prompts Tess to reveal the events of her rape. When Angel learns the truth about her past, his reaction is much less accepting, and he reverts to more rigid social beliefs which he had previously professed were unimportant. Hardy shows how Angel himself makes this assertion, alluding to the conclusions drawn from phrenology and Darwinian discourse: ““Don’t, Tess; don’t argue. Different societies, different manners. You are an unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things. You don’t know what to say.”” (232). Not only does Angel bring up the class distinction, he also acknowledges his greater mental superiority and denounces her attempts at logic when comparing their two blunders. Hardy also explains how Tess is not cognizant of Angel’s intellectual superiority: “To fling elaborate sarcasms at Tess, however, was much like flinging them at a dog or cat. The charms of their subtlety passed by her unappreciated...” (230). Despite the impure action that befell her before this moment, Tess is still a Victorian heroine who

embodies the qualities associated with the feminine ideal. Hardy's inclusion of these attributes create more complications as the reader struggles to decipher who to side with: Angel or Tess.

Applying the context of the aforementioned characterization of Tess reveals Hardy's critique on societal double standards. Hardy specifically chooses Angel's mistake to be one that mirrors Tess's; the comparison shows how women, uniquely, were largely tied in with their physical body. Angel berates her for not telling him before, though many times she tried, and he reasons that "forgiveness does not apply to the case" (228) and that she was "one person; now...another" (228). Hardy illustrates how Angel "looked upon her as a species of imposter; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent" (229) to present the stark contrast between loss of virginity in men and women. He presents how the sheer morality of a female is decided upon by her virginity, whereas a man's is a slight indiscretion. Men did not need to be virtuous, so that fact did not apply. However, given Hardy's previous description of Tess, both pure in form when the horse dies and when she lies on the ground in the hands of her attacker, he suggests that Tess is not to blame. Angel, on the other hand, made a conscious choice and represents the sole hypocrisy in his higher society. Therefore, Angel's reaction is more immoral than her actions. He later explains that Tess was "throbbing alive as she was still, under the stress of her mental grief, the life beat so brokenly that a little further pull upon it would cause real illness" (237). The interconnectivity of the female system, both in body and mind, remains evident in Hardy's text as he aligns her with the expected norms of the society to express the unfair discrimination.

In an unexpected shift, Hardy also suggests the complicated mental state of Angel after Tess's reveal to comment on the superfluous nature of these ideals set forth by society. Angel experiences a moment of mental burden that flirts with hysterical unrest. Hardy describes how

Angel “was meditating, verily. His thought had been unsuspected; he was becoming ill with thinking; eaten out with thinking, withered by thinking; scourged out of all his former pulsating flexuous domesticity” (242). Through the use of epiphora, Hardy puts the emphasis on “thinking,” which as we learn from the psychological distinctions of the time, is a highly masculine quality. Angel is overcome with complex thought. However, the key description in this section is “ill with thinking.” While Angel does indeed fulfill the expected male ability of a mind controlled by complex and logical thought, Hardy suggests that Angel, too, suffers physically for a moment. He has a female reaction here, where grief threatened to manifest negatively in both a physical and mental reaction. Though, Hardy does not allow Angel to fully dive into the full mania that woman would experience. He merely suggests a connection to showcase the arbitrary nature of all of these constraints to which both Tess and Angel feel they must uphold. In these expressions, Hardy’s opinion of the conflict between these two is more discernable; Angel is not pure in form, just as Tess is not. Angel experiences mental and emotional grief, just as Tess does. Yet, through society’s interpretations of their physical and mental reactions, their responses, actions, and perceived value of the self is vastly different.

While Hardy provides undulating descriptions of Angel, a man constrained by the social norms of his time though pure in heart, he provides a steadfast, negative description of Alec. Leading up to his murder, Hardy consistently describes this man as one aligned with danger. At the top of the narrative, Alec is described as “swarthy” (40), emphasising a darker color, one in stark contrast to Tess’s whiteness and one that is associated with immorality. Furthermore, Hardy immediately characterizes Tess’s association with Alec as one which foreshadows an unfavorable outcome, stating that the day they met, “she was doomed to be seen and marked and

coveted that day by the wrong man” (43). He specifically names Alec as the “wrong” man. Each encounter progresses with Alec as one of villainous qualities. In the events leading up to the murder, Hardy engages allusion and symbolism to compare Alec to the devil:

By and by he dug so close to her that the fire-beams were reflected as distinctly from the steel prongs of his fork as from her own. On going up to the fire to throw a pitch of dead weeds upon it, she found that he did the same on the other side. The fire flared up, and she beheld the face of D’Urberville. The unexpectedness of his presence, the grotesqueness of his appearance in a gather smothfrock...had a ghastly comicality that chilled her as to its bearing. D’Urberville emitted a low long laugh. (348)

Hardy likens the reflection of Alec in the fire with satanic imagery, the devil revealing itself behind the flames. The three prong fork, though used by all of the labourers in this scene, becomes a connection to the three pronged pitchfork of the devil and is reflected from Tess’s fork. This imagery echoes the first iridescent description of blood on the ground when Tess kills the horse, a bad omen that leads to her future encounter with Alec. Moreover, Alec relates his own being to that of the devil, professing to Tess, “You are Eve, and I am the old Other One come to tempt you in the disguise of an inferior animal” (349). The ominous tone of the previous description, contrasted with the dark humor in Alec’s own description not only stresses this awful premonition for Tess, but also professes his lack of religious morality and good intent. For a Victorian audience who highly valued moral goodness and strong religious devotion, Alec would be the ideal representation of a villain.

Once Tess murders Alec, Hardy invokes a passage that touches upon the notion of moral insanity and the female malady to justify Tess’s action and excuse her from the act of murder.

Tess experiences a bout of insanity due to her female, emotion-driven mind, while Angel describes the moment through his own interpretation. Angel notes that Tess's "affection for himself...had apparently extinguished her moral sense altogether" (385) and "that in the moment of mad grief...her mind had lost its balance" (385). Since the observation is through Angel's eyes, a man characterized as logical and bound by typical social constructs--as well as one who previously disapproved of her actions--the assessment is more reputable than if Tess judged her own actions. Hardy specifically uses the word "mad" to describe Tess's actions and alludes to the scientific finding that women are more susceptible to madness after the loss of a loved one due to their emotional tendencies and lack of mental control. Then, when Hardy includes a depiction of Tess being "in some [state] of delirium," (Hardy 384), he once again solidifies the general interpretation of insanity in the nineteenth century, as it fulfills yet another symptom of the affliction. After the first two murders, Hardy still represents Tess as the typical Victorian woman.

Although Hardy continually includes figurative language that inclines the reader to support Tess despite all of her actions, Hardy ends the novel with the law punishing Tess. The state incurs the death penalty and murders her in return. This final murder professes the greatest critique of social constraints and prejudices in the nineteenth century. Hardy presents Tess as an exemplary Victorian woman, suffering from the effects of the gendered mind only to ignore the evidence that would deem her eligible for an insanity plea. Instead, the course of the narrative outright punishes her. Based on previous findings, a murderer committing an action with intent and mental awareness would be convicted. Insanity would likely allow a defendant, especially one that is female, to be pardoned as a byproduct of a lack of mental awareness. However, as

Hardy compares her murderous act to that of a woman experiencing great grief, and therefore madness, Tess could have pleaded momentary or moral insanity and been acquitted in a court trial. By Victorian standards, the court would have seen that she had simply lost control of her moral judgment and was strictly governed by passionate emotion after losing Angel, her loved one. Hardy creates controversy by immediately subjecting Tess to the death penalty, without a trial, and represents how society condemns women who should not always receive this reaction. Therefore, this final murder strengthens Hardy's establishment of Tess's role as heroine; she is an admirable woman and someone with whom the reader can relate. He carefully constructs his novel to build empathy for Tess and elicit moral outrage at her death, as well as a way to reflect on why society criticizes women so fiercely in the private and public sphere.

In the framework of Hardy's text, the reigning anxieties of the Victorian culture were ever present. His treatment of these complex moving parts in the social consciousness of the era provide a basis for discerning how literature and history informs modern principles. Hardy, along with many other Victorian writers, established these important contexts which now allow current society to begin to understand prevailing viewpoints about gender, social roles, psychology, and more. While modern society has come a long way, remnants of Victorian thinking still persists. As an example, examine the science surrounding female insanity. While psychological theories have become more extensive and have disproved much of the rhetoric around a gendered mind and how it related to feminine values, the effects of these findings still reveal themselves in areas such as social media, movies, and politics. Women are still judged for being too forthright and strong, as these attributes go against the deep-rooted belief that they should have a softer sensibility. They are judged for going back to work too soon after birth, and doctors often

dismiss their complaints as “hysterical.” The social and political fight for women’s issues is still evident. Hardy’s critique continues to inform feminist theory in modern culture, and Tess is not just an everywoman for the Victorian age but also a symbol for the modern woman and her trials.

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