Inviting but frustrating
over-simplification: (re)reading *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

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INVITING BUT FRUSTRATING OVER-SIMPLIFICATION:

(Re)Reading Tess of the D’Urbervilles

By Kathryn M. Smith

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

with a Concentration in English Literature

Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College

Florida Atlantic University

Jupiter, Florida

May 2007
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Hilary Edwards, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences with a concentration in English Literature.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Upon completing this thesis, I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Edwards, who tirelessly worked with me in order to ensure that my thesis exhibited my best efforts. I cannot adequately express my gratitude to her for the many revisions she offered me, and the countless nights that she stayed up until 4 a.m. giving feedback to not only me, but to all of her other students as well. Dr. Edwards truly cares for her students and their work; she embodies the ideal of an Honors College professor. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my second reader, Dr. Harrawood, who read through several long drafts of my thesis and put forth invaluable suggestions. Thirdly, I have one more important professor to thank: Dr. Njambi, the women’s studies professor who first opened my eyes to the gender issues surrounding us every day. I attribute much of my critical thinking and awareness of gender to Dr. Njambi and her courses, for she gave me the tools to critique literature in a more encompassing way. Finally, I cannot conclude this section without paying tribute to all of my friends and family who supported me through the entire thesis-writing process. I know that they would be happy to never hear the words “I have to work on my thesis” ever again (although I cannot guarantee this to be the case, given my plans to write a graduate thesis and a doctoral dissertation in the future). In conclusion, I cannot emphasize enough my appreciation for the encouragement, understanding, and inspiration that all of the above people have given me. I extend my sincere thanks to all of you.
ABSTRACT

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Title: Inviting but Frustrating Over-Simplification: (Re)Reading *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

Institution: Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College
Florida Atlantic University

Degree: Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

Concentration: English Literature

Year: 2007

Many critics and readers assume that *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is simply the tragedy of a ruined country maiden and that the sexually-driven scenes are the most important aspects of the novel. In my thesis, however, I argue that Thomas Hardy created a novel centered on his complex heroine, Tess, not on simplistic notions of sexual ruination and sensational plot developments. In other words, Tess is an autonomous, detailed character who cannot be relegated to the usual stereotypes of Virgin, Whore, Mother, etc. Through my reading, we gain a greater understanding of the novel as a whole, instead of as a fractured, deterministic, and plot-driven tragedy. I begin my argument by examining Hardy’s subtitle, “A Pure Woman,” asserting that our focus should be on the word “Woman” and Tess’s subjectivity, not reductive concepts of “purity” or chastity. In Chapter Two, I examine two significant scenes that occur in Alec’s carriage, showing how many critics’ readings underestimate Tess as helpless, and arguing that she fights against her oppressor in covert ways. My third chapter continues this defense of Tess by critiquing the critical debate surrounding the sexual encounter in “The Chase”. I posit that the entire debate is flawed and that Tess should be defined based upon her actions and not simply her sexuality. Lastly, in my conclusion I present a broader defense of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, in which I assert that the ambiguous plot scenes in *Tess* are conscious attempts by Hardy to subvert traditional assumptions about what is important in a novel. My goal in this thesis is to critique popular but simplistic interpretations of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* which diminish Tess’s role; instead, I emphasize the way her character, in the words of critic Kathleen Blake, “invites but frustrates oversimplification.”
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Introduction: (Re)Reading and (Re)Claiming *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

This senior thesis project, not surprisingly, originally grew from a genuine love of Thomas Hardy’s novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Upon reading the book for the first time, I was intrigued by the title character and heroine of the book, Tess. She seemed, to me, to be one of the more complex female characters that I had come across in my literary studies. Imagine my surprise, then, when I began research on the literary criticism for *Tess* and found that the title character was not the autonomous heroine that I had perceived, but a passive, weak, and utterly pathetic victim. Surely there had to be some misunderstanding, or some disconnection, between these critical articles and the primary text? Or, had I somehow managed to read a novel that did not actually exist?

I reread the novel with this new critical perspective, however, and discovered various passages—the most notable being the one in which Tess slaps Alec across the face and then sits down, exclaiming, “Now punish me! [...] Once victim, always victim: that’s the law” (Hardy 261)—in which it seemed that Hardy undermined Tess’s agency in order to make her innocent of her “crimes”. After all, in the above quote, Tess rises up to rebel against Alec but ends up proclaiming herself a victim. I decided that the critics were right: Hardy had deliberately written Tess without any agency, and situated her within a deterministic and indifferent world not unlike the one depicted in his poem, “Hap”. In response to this insight, I then wrote an essay (“Tess as a Flawed Heroine: The Necessity of Moral Responsibility in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*”) in which I argued that we should read Tess as an independent heroine who directs her own life, despite the passivity that Hardy wrote into the text. I presented and defended this
paper at two conferences, and yet I was not satisfied. I felt like I had not gotten to the bottom of some kind of literary mystery that needed to be solved.

When the time came to choose senior thesis topics, therefore, I decided that I would write again on *Tess*. I had a suspicion that Hardy was not the misogynist that he sometimes seemed, and that, despite my earlier assessment, he might nevertheless have written *Tess* as a strong and self-directed character after all. I found a friend in Rosemarie Morgan, who notes in her book, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* that “[m]uch is made by critics of the passive Tess who yields to circumstance and fate” and that “from Havelock Ellis to Roman Polanski it is the dumb, gentle, unthinking, passive Tess who too often survives in interpretation” (Morgan 120). After continued research and extensive re-readings of the primary text, I had to agree with Morgan that this kind of fatalistic, deterministic interpretation of *Tess* “defeats Hardy’s purposes entirely” (Morgan 120). Reversing my original argument about the novel, in this thesis I argue that we should read *Tess* as an independent heroine, not despite, but *because of* Hardy’s depiction of her.

The second part of my thesis’s title, “(Re)Reading *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*”, thus not only refers to the evolution of my own interpretation but also urges other readers to reconsider their first notions of *Tess* and its heroine. It is easy to be frustrated by the many tragic circumstances that befall *Tess* and to blame Hardy for her apparent passivity, but we should consider the text in greater detail before we write it off (no pun intended) as merely a perverse tragedy. Hence, the first half of my title, “Inviting but Frustrating Over-Simplification”, highlights the way in which *Tess* seems to be a simple and perverse tragedy, but is actually a multi-faceted novel with complicated narrative
devices and methods of resistance. I borrow from Kathleen Blake’s phrase “Tess invites but frustrates over-simplification” (Blake 705), which she uses to describe how Hardy’s novel ultimately defies simplistic readings.¹ I apply Blake’s reasoning not only to the novel as a whole, but more specifically to Tess’s character, for as I argue below, she is the focus and driving force of Tess of the d’Urbervilles.

The emphasis I place on my own thesis’s title also extends to a general interest in the titling and naming of works of literature. The title of Tess of the d’Urbervilles is particularly contentious because of its subtitle, “A Pure Woman”. Therefore, Chapter One of my thesis, “‘A Pure Woman’ Deciphered”, treats the critical discussion of Hardy’s subtitle and relates it to the novel’s broader schema. I give a brief overview of the critical debate, starting with critics like Ellen Rooney, who posit that Hardy apologizes for Tess’s sexual mistakes and in this way proclaims her innocent. I also discuss critics on the other side of the debate, such as Penny Boumelha, who argue that Hardy uses the word “Pure” here to connote the opposite of chastity, and that he is therefore claiming Tess’s sexuality as “Pure”. Because neither of these positions is quite satisfactory, I then suggest that we shift our focus from the word “Pure” to the word “Woman”, and in so doing, I imply a move away from a static entity toward a more complex concept. I implement a diagram of female stereotypes by Jean-Jacques Lecercle to illustrate my claim that Tess, as a fully-developed and multi-faceted heroine, defies these stereotypes. Further, I argue that the critics who center on the word “Pure” are relegating Tess to the same stereotypes from which Hardy attempts to

¹ See Blake’s essay, “Pure Tess: Hardy On Knowing a Woman”.

3
free her. For this reason, I call these critics “purity-focused” or “purity-obsessed” throughout my thesis.

In the next two chapters, I shift my own focus from Hardy’s title to a specific and in-depth reading of Tess. Chapter Two, “Carriages, Confrontation, and Covert Resistance”, explores the ways in which Tess subtly fights back against her oppressor, Alec. I examine two scenes that take place in Alec’s carriage, first reading them in the context of Tess as a victim and, secondly, reading Tess as empowered. The latter interpretation of Tess, as I maintain, is both truer to the text and more meaningful to us, the readers. Rosemarie Morgan’s insight on passive resistance is particularly relevant to my case, for as she asserts, “[t]here is, in passive resistance of [Tess’s] kind, deliberate, conscious rebellion and considerable self-control” (Morgan 95). Tess therefore does not suffer hopelessly, but employs clever and covert counter-attacks.

I continue my defense of Tess’s volition in Chapter Three, “Looking Into and Beyond ‘The Chase’”. This chapter originated from a class discussion on Tess, in which my colleagues insisted on turning our discussion of the text as a whole into a narrow debate on whether Tess was raped, seduced, or complicit in the sexual encounter at “The Chase”. I found myself frustrated by what seemed to me to be an unnecessary emphasis on this one, barely-elaborated scene in the novel; there was much more to Tess that we were ignoring due to our misguided emphasis. Soon afterward, I discovered that it was not just my colleagues, but also countless critics, who mistook The Chase to be the crux of Hardy’s novel. I therefore set out to defend my sense that

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2 As I briefly explain in my essay, “The Chase” is the way other critics and I refer to the sexual encounter that occurs between Alec and Tess at the end of Phase 1 in Tess of the d’Urbervilles. “The Chase” is technically the name of the forest in which the encounter takes place, but in critical works, it becomes the shorthand name for the scene itself.
Tess is more than a novel about a ruined country maiden, and I present this argument in Chapter Three. As in my first two chapters, I again treat both sides of the critical debate, from Albert J. LaValley’s assertion that Hardy created Tess as an innocent rape victim to Morgan’s reading of Tess as a sexually-empowered heroine. Ultimately, I maintain that the debate about Tess’s sexuality, just like the one about the meaning of the word “pure”, is inherently flawed, for both sides mistakenly define her entire character based on sex.

As an alternative to this emphasis on sexuality, I posit that Hardy tempts us with this one-sided reading while at the same time subverting over-simplification through complicated narrative techniques. I argue that both Alec and the narrator are deliberately constructed by Hardy to exhibit points of view against which the readers are supposed to object. At one point in The Chase, Alec’s point of view seems to take over the narration, in a technique that Dorrit Cohn terms “narrated monologue”. It is not, then, Hardy describing Tess as a “white muslin figure,” but Alec. Similarly, it is easy to conflate Hardy with his narrator, but to do so is to ignore the irony Hardy puts into the narration. I assert that we should read lines such as “Where was Tess’s guardian angel?” with the same type of caution with which we read “The President of the Immortals” at the finale of the novel.

Finally, in my conclusion, I build on my claim that Tess of the d’Urbervilles “invites but frustrates over-simplification” and argue that Hardy purposefully makes scenes such as The Chase ambiguous in order to force the readers to see Tess as the driving force of the novel. In the end, Tess’s actions and reactions and how they shape

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3 “Narrated monologue” is a subset of “free and indirect discourse,” elaborated upon in Cohn’s book, Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction.
her character are what matter most about Hardy’s novel. I concur with Albert J. LaValley when he states: “the source of the novel’s unity and strength lies in Tess’s superbly whole responses to her experience and suffering” (LaValley 9). Furthermore, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is not only about Tess’s suffering; Hardy simply uses the plot of the novel as a foundation upon which to ground Tess as a truly complex heroine. Instead of remaining the passive victim that she sometimes seems, then, Tess rises above the usual stereotypes to claim her place as one of the most riveting heroines in fiction.
Chapter One: “A Pure Woman” Deciphered

Given the brevity of Thomas Hardy’s subtitle to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the amount of critical debate surrounding it may seem disproportionate. Only three words, “A Pure Woman,” follow the title, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, yet these three words have sparked great controversy and passionate opinions in the literary world. More importantly, these three words also precede and influence our reading of the novel. In this chapter, I will argue that a misreading of Hardy’s subtitle can generate a misreading of *Tess* in its entirety, causing us to focus on Tess’s purity (or lack thereof) instead of on the depth of her character and on Hardy’s pointed rejection of traditional female stereotypes. I will examine and critique the critical debate which centers on the word “Pure”, as well as offer my own interpretation of the subtitle based on the word “Woman”.

Penny Boumelha, a feminist and literary critic, situates the phrase “A Pure Woman” within what she thinks are Hardy’s larger goals for *Tess*. In her book, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, she describes the ways in which Hardy challenged the Victorian social climate by writing a novel with aberrant sexual politics. Describing the social context for the novel’s reception, Boumelha writes:

> There was, first, the context of an increasing questioning, both in fiction and in public discussion, of sex roles and the double standard. [...] But above all, there was the sense

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4 Some may argue that the full subtitle reads, “A Pure Woman, Faithfully Presented by Thomas Hardy.” Admittedly, and interestingly, the second half of the subtitle introduces yet another controversy: whether or not Hardy is proposing to condescendingly speak for Tess. I will not be discussing this second half, however, because it is a consideration apart from the first half of the subtitle. My paper, and this chapter specifically, treats the discussion of Hardy’s definitions of purity and womanhood, and therefore directly correlates to the phrase “A Pure Woman.”
Boumelha’s claim prompts several key questions, and I will attempt to answer these critical questions in the following pages: What “moral argument” might Hardy be offering, and does he actually seek to offer a “structured defence” of Tess? If Hardy is making this argument, how does it fit into the broader scheme of “an increased questioning […] of sex roles and the double standard”? Further, does Hardy’s defense of Tess revolve around sex roles or is he striving for another claim altogether? (More specifically, is he apologizing for Tess’s sexuality, arguing for a different, ‘liberated’ view of sexuality, or positing a different and deeper moral argument?) By answering these questions and surveying the critical debate surrounding Hardy’s subtitle, we will see that what Boumelha somewhat dismissively calls an “afterthought” is powerful enough to affect and color our perception of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as a whole.⁵

Boumelha’s idea of Hardy’s argument for *Tess* is that it “seeks, contradictorily, both to exonerate Tess and to secure forgiveness for her” and, because of this faulty foundation, “Tess is rendered innocent in a revealingly double sense: that is, lacking in knowledge and lacking in guilt” (Boumelha 129). In other words, she and other critics of *Tess* see “A Pure Woman” as a kind of confused addendum that defends Tess at the expense of any agency or awareness to which she might have been able to lay claim. In this sense, the subtitle is less of a defense and more of an apology. As Ellen Rooney

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⁵ Boumelha’s complete phrase about the subtitle is “aggressive afterthought,” which implies that Hardy added the subtitle “A Pure Woman” in anticipation of the controversy that would arise concerning Tess’s “purity.” This is a valid claim to make, especially considering that *Tess* was originally published as a syndication which received comments and criticism every week of its publication.
states, in agreement with Boumelha: “Hardy asks his reader not to blame Tess too much and to believe in her innocence, but all of his arguments bend toward a single theme: Tess is a pure woman” (Rooney 464). It becomes clear that, according to Boumelha and Rooney, “A Pure Woman” is a limited and condescending justification for Tess’s actions which should not be applied to Tess.

In order to fully understand the implications of Hardy’s subtitle, however, we need to consider what the word “pure” means for Hardy in Tess. Albert J. LaValley offers a commonly accepted interpretation of Hardy’s use of purity in the introduction to his book, Twenty-first-Century Interpretations of Tess of the d’Urbervilles. LaValley states, “[t]he subtitle, A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented, tells us that Tess points beyond herself to a definite Victorian archetype, the innocent woman seduced and socially ruined” (LaValley 6). The key thing to notice about LaValley’s claim is that he definitively equates purity with chastity. He argues that “A Pure Woman” is necessarily pointing to “the innocent woman seduced and socially ruined.” This assumption leads to a dichotomy in which many Tess critics can be categorized: one in which Hardy is either protecting Tess from the indictment of society by naming her “A Pure Woman”, or making “pure” an ironic term which actually defends her sexuality.

The problem with this critical debate is that both sides limit the depth of Tess’s character and seek to exonerate her past. If, on the one hand, Hardy is defending Tess as sexually pure despite her experiences with Alec, then he has to strip her of any

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6 The fact that LaValley thinks Hardy is pushing us to look past this archetype is irrelevant for now, as it is something I will discuss in Chapter Three.

7 See discussion of Rosemarie Morgan in pp. 23-4 below.
volition or responsibility for her past actions. As I suggested in an earlier essay on *Tess*:  

We must wonder, then, if Hardy lessens his heroine’s power by ignoring her shortcomings. If Hardy proclaims Tess to be chaste [in his subtitle], he is effectively erasing her past with Alec, and in so doing, obliterating an entire segment of her life. While Tess may have at one time acted irrationally or with naïveté, her decisions have made a significant impact on her character. In taking away this “life” experience, Hardy is removing Tess’s well-rounded identity and recreating her into a saint whom she may not be. (Smith 4)

It is hardly desirable that Hardy would “recreate” Tess “into a saint” in his subtitle, because in this way he would be making allowances to a Victorian audience and apologizing for Tess. Along these lines, Tess would also not be allowed a voice, for according to Rooney, “to preserve Tess’s purity, [Hardy] must insist on her passivity […] a ‘subject’ who does not speak, her silence guarantees our sympathy” (Rooney 466).  

Rooney is right to assert that Hardy “must insist on her passivity,” but this is the case only if Hardy wishes to preserve Tess’s purity/chastity at all.

The other side of the critical duality is one that revives Tess’s agency, but at the cost of complexity in the novel and in Tess’s character. Critics such as Penny Boumelha and Rosemarie Morgan often defend Tess against accusations of passivity,

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8 The essay is entitled, “Tess as a Flawed Heroine: The Necessity of Moral Responsibility in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.” I wrote it before completing my research for this thesis, and consequently, I interpreted Hardy’s subtitle as a paternalistic attempt to erase Tess’s “wrongs.” In this paper, however, I seek to look past my previous perspective on “A Pure Woman”, as well as an overly emphasized sexuality, to discover Hardy’s defense of Tess as a well-rounded character and not a stereotype.

9 My and Rooney’s use of the word “voice” here is more metaphorical than literal, and we refer to definitions of “voice” which pertain to the right to express one’s own opinions and views. Obviously, Tess has a physical voice in the text, for she converses with the other characters, but if Hardy were to make her into a passive victim, her own voice would become worthless, hence the discussion of her loss of voice.

10 I conflate these two terms to represent the position of the critics of whom I am writing. My position, however, is that purity does not equal chastity according to Hardy, as I will discuss later in this chapter.
citing what they see as her strong sexual nature. Boumelha claims that the power in Tess’s sexuality comes from the fact that it “remains unknowable and unrepresentable” (Boumelha 121). Consequently, neither the narrator nor the male characters can appropriate Tess’s body or mind, and sexuality becomes her power, even her weapon, in the novel. This view of the novel is empowering to Tess, and is certainly a welcome counterpoint to the more popular interpretation of her passivity, and yet it is still lacking. If Hardy meant to create a heroine only empowered by sexuality, and if “pure” simply means “unchaste”, then he was only rebelling against Victorian sexual norms by completely reversing them. While this may have been effective in the short term because of sheer controversy, it is not enough to justify the staying power that Tess still possesses, especially given the changing and evolving opinions of women’s sexuality in the last two centuries. Moreover, great novels do more than advocate the opposite of societal norms; they encourage us, the readers, to challenge those norms by offering both critique and alternative perspectives. Hardy’s novel, then, must exhibit more than an inverted Victorian sexuality, and his subtitle must mean more than simply “chaste” or “unchaste”.

Since neither explanation of Tess’s supposed purity – as her recreated innocence or her ironic sexuality – allows for a satisfying explanation of the novel’s power, I suggest that we shift our focus from the word “Pure” to the word “Woman”. If we concentrate only on the word “Pure”, we are essentially defining Tess by her purity and consequently making her into a stereotype, a “Virgin”. If, however, we give attention to a word which more fully defines her, “Woman”, we are acknowledging an identity that
allows for more variations and detail in characterization.\textsuperscript{11} Jean-Jacques Lecercle discusses the shortcomings of defining fictional women by stereotypes (such as “Virgin”) in his essay, “Violence of Style in \textit{Tess}.” Lecercle argues that many women in fiction are portrayed as four binary and exaggerated types, as illustrated in the following diagram:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node (m) {Mother};
\node (s) [below of=m] {Spinster (woman as subject)};
\node (w) [below of=s] {Whore};
\node (v) [below of=s] {Virgin};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Lecercle explains his diagram as follows:

\begin{quote}
The path of moral (and social) success goes from virgin to mother: the heroine is rewarded with it in the happy ending. Two cul-de-sacs branch off: respectable failure (becoming a spinster) or disreputable and temporary success, followed by retribution [becoming a whore…]. \textit{And of course the system is organized around its absent centre […] that of a woman who is subject in her own right, mistress of her words, her body, and therefore her fate.} (Lecercle 8, emphasis mine)
\end{quote}

In other words, fictional women may achieve success through becoming sainted mothers, but even then their “happy ending” is restricting. The other options for female characters are just as unappealing (not to mention less socially acceptable) and in none of these scenarios are the women treated as individuals. Lecercle specifically emphasizes what he calls the “absent centre” of the diagram, or the “woman as subject” in parentheses, because it demonstrates the lack of well-embodied female characters in much of fiction. While the \textit{stereotypes} of women are well-represented, hence the

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} In making this statement, I in no way mean to assert that there is a static entity of womanhood to which Hardy adheres. I am merely suggesting that Hardy shows the possibilities and complexities of a female character through his depiction of Tess, a multi-faceted and empowered heroine.
\end{itemize}
bolded type, the “woman as subject” is still an elusive “absent centre” from which the stereotypes are crudely derived. Lecercle, through his diagram, is ultimately criticizing the lack of fully-developed female characters in fiction, while advocating an acknowledgement of the “woman as subject.”

In relation to *Tess*, we could construct a similar diagram, based on Lecercle’s example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mother of Sorrow</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Angel’s Estranged Wife</strong>  (Tess as subject)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Pure Woman</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above labels are the various ways in which Tess could be categorized according to popular interpretation: Her sexual past with Alec, and her stint as his kept woman, would imply that she is a Whore; Angel’s abandonment would relegate her to an ambiguous, unmarried, Spinster position; her role as Mother to her illegitimate baby, Sorrow, would incompletely fulfill the Virgin to Mother ascendency (incomplete because of Sorrow’s untimely death); and, as some critics believe, Hardy’s subtitle of “A Pure Woman” would be a desperate attempt to recreate Tess as a Virgin.

As we can see, these typical roles are not satisfactory in describing Tess, for not one of them adequately captures her character. Tess is not one type, but all of them at one point or other. Further, the fact that Tess is not just a “Virgin” or a “Whore” is evidence that the word “Pure” in Hardy’s subtitle cannot simply mean chaste or

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12 It is important to note that, while Lecercle wishes to bring the “woman as subject” to light, he does not propose a *revealing* of the “absent centre.” See pp. 12-3 below.
unchaste, and suggests that purity should not even be our focus. Hardy, in essence, creates a subtitle that both tempts us to fall into Victorian social norms and prejudices and challenges us to see Tess’s complexities as a “Woman”. His inclusion of the word “Woman” in the subtitle, then, is crucial to the book because it acknowledges Tess as a realistic, detailed character while critiquing the notable absence of the “woman as subject” that Lecercle so poignantly reveals. If we were to construct a version of Lecercle’s diagram which most resembles the implications of Hardy’s subtitle for the novel as whole it might look like the following:

(Mother)

(Spinster)  

**Tess: woman as subject**  

(Whore)

(Virgin)

In this diagram, the stereotypes often assigned to Tess and other fictional women are demoted to inferior and absent positions. Tess, instead, emerges as the literal and metaphorical centerpiece. Her title of “woman as subject” is not a restrictive entity, like Whore or Virgin, but a means to explore the many ways that female characters can be subjective actors in works of literature.

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13 As Lecercle states, we cannot (and should not) ever fully reveal the “absent centre,” for it is exactly this unknowable quality that makes the “woman as subject” so encompassing and intriguing. Here, I point out that Hardy is not attempting to reveal the “woman as subject”, but is reacting against the *invisibility* of women as individuals. In this way, he seems to be highlighting the fact that subjective women are suspiciously and unnecessarily absent in most literature.

14 My use of the word “subjective” does not invoke the typical definition of “biased.” I mean to juxtapose the objectification of women with the dynamic actions, or subjectivity, of Tess and other female characters. In the sense that Tess is an actor in her life, she is a subject rather than an object.
Hardy, in creating a character as multi-faceted as Tess, knows that to stamp one definition of “Woman” onto her would be to destroy the significance of her subjectivity. Lecercle’s “woman who is subject in her own right” allows for many interpretations of such a subjective woman, and Tess is merely one well-crafted example of a heroine who breaks free of traditional roles. A deeper look into *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, provided in the following chapters, demonstrates Hardy’s utter rejection of the idea that women are symbols and not real people. In fact, if we decide to view Tess as a (complex) woman, and not as a symbol of purity, then we have already made a step toward discovering the depth of her character.
Chapter Two: Carriages, Confrontation, and Covert Resistance

Despite all of the varying locations throughout *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, much of the notable action of the novel takes place, interestingly enough, in Alec’s carriage. It is the locale where he feels as if he has control over Tess, and in it, he often succeeds in gaining her kisses through coercion. If we only read these carriage scenes for plot – Alec manipulates Tess into letting him kiss her – then Tess is simply a rag doll, a victim in the hands of her determined oppressor, Alec. Upon closer examination of the following two passages, however, I find much evidence to support a reading of an empowered, though subtle, Tess. In this chapter, I will examine two key passages from the novel through two different critical lenses: one focusing on purity/impurity (the critics’ point of view) and the other emphasizing Tess as a complex woman. From this analysis, we will be able to see both the limitations and the depth that can be gleaned from *Tess*. Further, this analysis will demonstrate Tess’s passive resistance and the way in which her covert actions imply, but then refute, readings of her as a victim.

In a scene from earlier in the novel, Alec is driving Tess to live at Tantridge, the d’Urberville estate. On a whim, he spurs the carriage recklessly down a hill, refusing to slow his horse unless Tess allows him to kiss her. She struggles against his advances at first, even promising him a kiss and then dodging him, but finally she gives in because she realizes that he will not slow the carriage until she succumbs:

He was inexorable, and she sat still, and d’Urberville gave her the kiss of mastery. No sooner had he done so than she flushed with shame, took out her handkerchief, and wiped the spot on her cheek that had been touched by his lips. His ardour was nettled at the sight, for the act on her part had been unconsciously done. [...] She had, in fact, undone the
kiss, as far as such a thing was physically possible. (Hardy 40-1)

The fact that Tess sits still and endures “the kiss of mastery” is evidence, to some critics, that she is under Alec’s control. T.R. Wright calls her “more the object than the subject of desire, a victim, of male visions” (Wright 129). Indeed, Tess allows Alec to kiss her, despite her feelings of reluctance; she does not physically stop him from kissing her, nor from seeing her as a seductive country girl. Perhaps this is what Wright means when he calls Tess a victim of men’s projected fantasies. As we can see, Wright is fixated on the physical act of a kiss – and later, on the sexual encounter – as the key moment in Tess of the d’Urbervilles. If Tess does resist after the kiss, it is only a futile attempt to undo the doom which has already been set in place.

Reading the above passage and only noticing that Alec kisses Tess is like scanning a plot summary of Tess of the d’Urbervilles without actually engaging with Hardy’s novel. Critics like Wright often assume, because of scenes like the one above, that when Tess outwardly submits to Alec’s desires, she submits emotionally as well, and that her seeming lack of resistance denotes passivity in her character. Wright goes on to say that in each scene in a carriage, “it is made even clearer that [Alec] is attempting to stamp her with his own desire” (Wright 132). Wright seems to presume that because Alec is trying to assert his dominance over Tess, he succeeds, despite evidence to the contrary found in the text. The operative word in Wright’s statement is, in fact, “attempting,” for that is exactly what Alec does: he attempts to control Tess through force, and while he may achieve temporary “mastery” over her by gaining a kiss, he does not control her whole self. It is true that Alec wishes to “stamp her with his own desire,” to literally imprint his dominance on her white, virginal cheek, but we
have to consider Tess’s reactions to these attempts. Tess may be an object of desire to the men in the novel, but Hardy writes her as someone who acts assertively and makes her own decisions.

If we look at what occurs after Alec’s kiss—the kiss which many critics and readers accept as proof of his mastery over her—we can gain a deeper understanding of Tess’s character and modes of action. Immediately after Alec bestows his kiss, Tess literally undoes both his kiss and his mastery with one swipe of her handkerchief; the text reads, “[n]o sooner had he […bestowed his kiss] than she flushed with shame, took out her handkerchief, and wiped the spot on her cheek that had been touched by his lips” (Hardy 40-1). Tess has a choice in her exchange with Alec, and she does not accept his power over her. Hardy goes on to write that “she had, in fact, undone the kiss, as far as such a thing was physically possible” (Hardy 41, emphasis mine). Hardy acknowledges that Tess can never fully undo Alec’s physical mastery; she allows him to kiss her, and that much she cannot take back. Any dominance that Alec assumes he has over her emotions or her mind, however, is swiftly repudiated by her subsequent act of subversion: wiping the spot on her cheek that he kissed. Simply the fact that “the act on her part had been unconsciously done” is only more evidence of Tess’s strength (Hardy 41). Her instinct to resist people like Alec is an engrained part of her personality, and suggests an innate sense of worth that foils Alec’s “male visions” of her character.15

15 Wright uses the phrase “male visions” to define the ways in which Alec and Angel form their own perceptions of Tess: Alec thinks that she is a seductive country girl, whereas Angel sees her as an innocent, virginal maiden. Both of these perceptions are too simplistic to truly capture Tess, yet Alec and Angel both aggressively reinforce their own visions through their interactions with her. This theory explains instances such as when Angel discovers Tess’s past with Alec; Angel is no longer able to accept Tess because this news has shattered his previous conceptions of her.
In another, later scene, Tess refutes Alec’s advances in a subtle, yet powerful way. She is walking away from Tantridge (Alec’s estate), laden with heavy baggage, when Alec drives up in his carriage. Although she is leaving him at this time, she agrees to accept a ride home from him. Some critics would argue that her acceptance of Alec’s help implies that she either welcomes his sexual attentions, or that she is too naïve to realize Alec’s dangerous, lascivious nature. I contend that, while Tess was not always wary of Alec, she certainly would be in the following scene, for it takes place after her rape/seduction. I would also contend that this is an example of Hardy’s narrator leaving Tess’s motives absent. This narrative technique shifts our focus away from the action itself to the consequences of it.

There are, of course, a lot of possible reasons for why Tess might have wanted a ride, from no longer fearing Alec to wanting a reprieve from the heavy bags she was carrying. Regardless of Tess’s reasoning, however, the real importance of the scene lies in her interactions with Alec, and her reactions to his commands. When the two reach Tess’s destination, Alec implores her to kiss him goodbye, and the following dialogue ensues:

“If you wish,” she answered indifferently. “See how you’ve mastered me!” She thereupon turned round and lifted her face to his, and remained like a marble term while he imprinted a kiss upon her cheek—half-perfunctorily, half as if the zest has not yet quite died out. Her eyes vaguely rested upon the remotest trees in the lane while the kiss was given, as though she were nearly unconscious of what he did.

“Now the other side—for old acquaintance’ sake.”

She turned her head in the same passive way, as one might turn at the request of a sketcher or hairdresser, and he kissed the other side, his lips touching cheeks that were damp and smoothly chill as the skin of the mushrooms in the fields around.

“You don’t give me your mouth and kiss me back. You never willingly do that—you’ll never love me, I fear.”
“I have said so, often. It is true. I have never really and truly loved you, and I think I never can.” (Hardy 60-1)

Given the above passage, it may seem like a safe assumption to make that Tess has been ruined by Alec, and now she is indifferent and depressed (not to mention pregnant). Additionally, to the purity/impurity-obsessed critics, her passive gestures connote true passivity in her character. The word “mastered” is again present and conspicuous, which leads many critics and readers to think that Tess is mastered by Alec. For example, Hardy interestingly describes Tess as “a marble term,” an object on which Alec imprints a kiss. The word “marble” signifies coolness and lifelessness, and invokes the marble d’Urberville tombs that Tess and Alec will encounter later.

Additionally, a marble term is, by definition, a pillar with a figure atop: half lifeless stone and half representation of a human being. By describing Tess as a marble term, Hardy seems to suggest that she is only half-alive. Indeed, Tess is essentially dead (emotionally and mentally) as Alec kisses her, hence the way her “eyes vaguely rested upon the remotest trees in the lane while the kiss was given.”

Her body sits with Alec in his carriage, but her mind is clearly elsewhere.

If we are to adhere to a reading of the text which focuses on Tess’s (loss of) chastity, it is unclear what we should make of her listless state. The above scene in the carriage seems to have no relevance to the overall narrative of the ruined country girl, except that it establishes her depression and reiterates Alec’s dominance over her. The major action, the seduction, has already occurred, and now it seems as if we must watch

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16 Tess is in fact a part of nature (if a dead part) at this point, her cheek “chill as the skin of the mushrooms in the fields around.” The imagery of a mushroom, with its connotation of decay, sharply contrasts with Tess’s earlier associations with fresh strawberries, which is evidence to some critics that she is ruined at this point. I, however, argue that she puts on this “dead” persona as a means to deter Alec, as is discussed in the pages to come.
Tess’s long, drawn-out, and largely redundant downfall. The simple fact that Tess would have to remain a downtrodden victim for the rest of *Tess* leads me to believe that the purity/impurity-obsessed critics are missing a crucial aspect in their reading of Hardy’s novel. Tess has no will in the above passage, none of the energy that she possessed in the first carriage scene. Her current lifelessness in fact gives another meaning to “unconsciousness”, for here Hardy reverses his earlier usage. Before, Tess was “nearly unconscious of what *she* did”; now she is nearly unconscious of *Alec’s* actions. She used to react vehemently out of instinct; now she seems passive, and listlessly accepts Alec’s “mastery”. The above reading is unsatisfactory, mainly because if we believe that Alec has mastered Tess, the plot has nowhere to go—except downward—for the rest of the novel.

A dialogue that, fortunately, complicates this dismal assessment occurs at the end of the passage. Alec complains, “You don’t give me your mouth and kiss me back.” He continues, “You never willingly do that—you’ll never love me, I fear.” Tess agrees, replying, “I have never really and truly loved you, and I think I never can.” Here is (finally) a reaction from Tess, and here is where we can see another, more interesting motive for her silence and passivity. Perhaps she is lifeless not just because she is depressed, but because she is covertly resisting Alec. Looked at in this way, Tess is cleverly fighting back against Alec, once again letting him kiss her but ultimately subverting his attempts at domination.

The key word for this reading of the passage is, oddly enough, “indifferent.” If we take it to connote not passivity, but passive *resistance*, then Tess’s remark, “See how you’ve mastered me!” is revealed as tongue-in-cheek. She obviously undermines
Alec’s “mastery” by “remain[ing] like a marble term” and not kissing him back. While Alec gives his kiss “half-perfunctorily, half as if the zest had not yet quite died out” (emphasis mine), Tess stares, unmoved, at “the remotest trees in the lane […] as though she were nearly unconscious of what he did.” Clearly, Alec wants Tess to return his “zest”, but instead she turns her head “in the same passive way, as one might turn at the request of a sketcher or a hairdresser.” In this way, Tess is both complying with and frustrating Alec’s desires.

Tess’s passive resistance is further evidenced a few pages before this scene, when Alec asks, “Tess, why do you always dislike me kissing you?” (Hardy 54). Tess answers:

“I suppose—because I don’t love you.”
“You are quite sure?”
“I am angry with you sometimes.”

“Ah, I half feared as much.” Nevertheless Alec did not object to that confession. *He knew that anything was better than frigidity […]* (Hardy 54, emphasis mine).

Alec admits to himself that “anything [i]s better than frigidity” but then, soon afterwards, he is confronted with just that. Tess’s measured reactions to Alec’s kisses are ultimately frigid; she does not heartily accept his advances, nor angrily reject them, but sits silently and endures his kisses. She is guarded in a way that Rosemarie Morgan elaborates upon in her book, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy.* Morgan suggests that:

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17 The fact that Tess does not directly answer Alec’s question of whether she loves him is evidence, to some, that she does love Alec. When we look back to page 61, however, we see Tess saying, “I have never really and truly loved you, and I think I never can.” This strong statement evidences Tess’s ultimate rejection of Alec.
As [Alec] knows only too well, Tess’s mannered sufferance of his kiss tells of a strongly repressed antagonism, a refusal to yield to his desire. […] Repression is not submission. […] Tess’s subtly expressive gestures and posture describe this psychological condition exactly! Distancing unwanted sexual advances she is simultaneously fully aware of how best she may repel them. There is, in passive resistance of this kind, deliberate, conscious rebellion and considerable self-control. Authentic passivity yields no such controls. (Morgan 95, emphases mine)

According to Morgan’s reading, and mine, Tess is practicing passive resistance toward Alec: a “deliberate, conscious rebellion” against his attempted mastery. This kind of “strongly repressed antagonism” is a highly developed reaction, a sophisticated defense that shows far more intelligence and autonomy than the nearly catatonic state that emerges from the other critics’ reading. Furthermore, in reading the above passages as passive resistance, not passivity, we get a novel that is not redundant and deterministic, but complicated and riveting. It is therefore Tess’s complexities – such as the covert way she undermines Alec – that make the novel interesting. The next chapter addresses perhaps the most contested scene in Tess and reveals not just Tess’s, but Hardy’s subtle assertions of Tess as a subjective woman.
Chapter Three: Looking Into and Beyond The Chase

It seems that one cannot discuss *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* without ultimately returning to the ambiguous sexual incident in “The Chase”, a place described by Alec as “the oldest wood in England” (Hardy 55). Hardy implies that a sexual encounter takes place in The Chase, and after this scene comes Phase Two: “Maiden No More”. It is therefore clear that Tess becomes pregnant in The Chase, but whether the encounter is of her own volition—manipulated or otherwise—or whether Alec rapes her are major sources of critical contention. Literary critics have dedicated entire essays and critical works to this one barely-elaborated scene, and the exact actions of Tess and Alec are still debated to this day. 18 Despite the apparent intrigue of this debate, however, I am not interested in taking a position on whether Tess was seduced or raped. In the scheme of the entire novel, The Chase is an important scene but not the most important one by far. 19 Further, there is more to be gleaned from The Chase than simply the sexual downfall of a country maiden. In this chapter, I will explore the limitations of reading The Chase as the focal point of the novel, analyzing the crucial elements of the scene, as well as examining and critiquing the literature that has been written about the sexual incident. Moreover, I will cite complex narration devices such as free and indirect discourse (specifically, narrated monologue) and narrative irony to prove that Hardy complicates the seeming simplicity of The Chase in covert ways.

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18 On one side of the debate are the critics, including see Gillian Beer, Irving Howe, Lionel Johnson, William A. Davis, Jr., and Ellen Rooney, who think Tess is a sexual victim. On the other side are critics like Albert J. LaValley, Penny Boumelha, and Rosemarie Morgan, who accredit Tess with agency and argue that she is complicit in her sexual interactions with Alec.

19 The phrase “The Chase” will from this point on refer to the scene of the sexual encounter between Tess and Alec; I follow other literary critics in using this shorthand label.
Let us begin surveying the critical discussion of The Chase by analyzing William A. Davis, Jr., a literary critic who takes a particular interest in The Chase and its implications of rape or seduction. In his article, “The Rape of Tess: Hardy, English Law, and the Case for Sexual Assault”, Davis argues that Hardy intended The Chase as a rape scene, followed by seduction. Davis bases his assertions upon an investigation of Victorian rape laws at Hardy’s time, and upon interesting alterations that Hardy himself made to the manuscript of *Tess*. Where Davis falls short, however is in his argument’s lack of connection to the novel itself. He writes:

> Seduction has mainly moral implications, while rape has mainly legal ones. Hardy, I believe, wanted Tess’s sexuality and the matter of her purity to be considered in the minds of his readers rather than argued (with perhaps predictable results) in a fictional court of law. To have Tess’s status as ‘pure’ victim following the rape amplified in a court scene would perhaps settle the question of her purity too easily, and Hardy does not want that. (Davis 228)

Basically, Davis believes that Hardy constructed The Chase as a rape scene in order to prove Tess’s purity. If Tess is not a willing participant in the sexual encounter, then she cannot be held accountable for her sexual deviance, and therefore can be pronounced innocent. Hardy obscures the issue, however, by adding elements of seduction so that Tess’s purity is not so obvious. As Davis states, Hardy wants Tess’s purity to be decided “in the minds of his readers,” not “in a court scene [which] would perhaps settle the question of her purity too easily.”

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20 Davis points out that Hardy changes Tess’s behavior from complicit to passive through several important alterations to the manuscript. One example is the exclusion of a scene in which Tess drinks alcohol offered by Alec. This evolution of Tess’s characterization would in itself be an interesting argument, except that Davis relates all of his findings back to The Chase, and so limits his discussion to that one sexual encounter.
Davis is right in asserting that Hardy did not want Tess’s purity to be a straightforward matter, which actually leads to a crucial flaw in Davis’s argument. Davis seems to conflate the idea of purity with chastity, assuming that to be pure means to be either virginal or victimized. In order to keep her “status as ‘pure’ victim”, then, Tess has to be raped. It is problematic for Davis to suggest that Hardy “wanted” his heroine to be pure through passivity and victimization. If Tess can only be pure through her naïveté and her helplessness, then Hardy has constructed an insipid and uninteresting heroine.

On the other side of the ceaseless Chase debate are critics like Rosemarie Morgan, who argue that Tess was sexually complicit in The Chase, and therefore empowered through her sexuality. Morgan renounces the views of literary critics such as Davis, asserting:

> Much is made by critics of the passive Tess who yields to circumstance and fate. They were and are voicing the nineteenth-century liberal point of view that exonerated the fallen woman on the grounds that she was one of nature’s unfortunates. Innately mute and trusting, passive and yielding, she suffered a weakness of will and reason and was not, therefore, responsible for her actions. (Morgan 84)

Morgan is unimpressed with the idea that Tess can be “exonerated […] on the grounds that she was one of nature’s unfortunates.” She sees an inherent problem with the fact that, in order for Tess to be innocent, she must be passive. Indeed, Morgan is justified and correct in pointing out that the critics defending Tess’s purity are doing so at the cost of her volition. A heroine who is simply “innately mute and trusting, passive and yielding” is certainly not a complex character with whom many readers can relate.
While Davis pities Tess for her vulnerability, Morgan at least credits her with the ability to direct her own life.

Nevertheless, in advocating for Tess, Morgan reverts to another sexual extreme, proposing that Tess is a “voluptuous woman, a sexy woman” (Morgan 85). She insists that Hardy created Tess to be a renunciation of the sexual double standard, and of the idea that attractive, sensual women are unintellectual. While this reasoning may be partly true, and while Tess’s sexuality may be a part of her character, equating her power with sex is just as wrong as claiming she is a victim because of sex. Perhaps Davis is like the narrator, in that he sees Tess as a poor hapless girl who needs redemption, and Morgan is not far from Alec and Angel, emphasizing and focusing on Tess’s sexual characteristics. In the end, both of these views define Tess solely by her sexuality, and we find ourselves once again trapped within Lecercle’s diagram of Mother, Virgin, Spinster, and Whore.21

Furthermore, both sides of the critical debate do not adequately justify the staying power of Tess as a complex work of art for, if we look at The Chase simply based on purity/chastity, then Tess is “ruined,” her downfall follows, and there is not much else to gain from the scene or the novel as a whole. In other words, if Tess of the d’Urbervilles is centered on whether or not Tess is “pure” as in chaste, then she has already failed from the beginning. We can see a sample of this type of reading in Wright’s essay, “Tess is a Victim of Men.” He pessimistically summarizes:

21 There is actually a third position in this debate as well. Critics such as Wright hover between a rape/seduction account and one relying on Tess’s complicit sexuality, and hesitate to choose a side when it comes to The Chase. For example, Wright admits that there was “at least some willingness and responsibility” on Tess’s part, and yet he holds to the idea that she was at least seduced. Wright, like Davis, is unwilling to let go of the idea that Tess is pure through her vulnerability.
Tess dies, at the end of the novel, a victim of fate, of civilization, and above all of male desire, having learnt ‘the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love.’ She never fully succeeds in becoming a subject rather than an object. (Wright 140)

This utterly unsatisfying conclusion comes from an emphasis on purity, and furthermore, on plot.

It may seem like a plot-driven reading is just another way to view the novel, but in actuality it severely limits the meaning that we can derive from Tess. The storyline of Hardy’s novel has a relatively simple pattern: negative things continuously happen to Tess, especially when it seems like her life is going to improve. Without a deeper look into the details of Tess, it appears to be a simplistic, perverse tragedy in which the heroine is repeatedly battered by circumstance. In fact, Tess of the d’Urbervilles is the story of how Tess survives and overcomes her many negative experiences, as well as an account of how she fights against her oppressors (Alec, Angel, society) in covert yet effective ways. Unfortunately for critics like Davis and Wright, their emphasis on plot leads them to obsess over the vague details of The Chase in order to form their speculations about the scene, and oftentimes, the subtle subversions of Tess escape them. Instead of seeing how Tess triumphs, they see how she falls.

Let us now look to the situation in The Chase through the likely outlook of one of these types of critics, in order to more fully understand this pure/impure lens and the limits it imposes on critics’ readings of this scene. To set the scene: Tess has just accepted a ride with Alec on horseback after a party amongst the townspeople turns

22 By “effective,” I mean that Tess both complies with and frustrates her oppressors. In this way, she is self-preserving but not subservient. Additionally, though some may cite the end of the novel as Tess’s ultimate failure and passivity, I see her murder of Alec as a conscious move from passive resistance to aggressive action, the consequences of which she is aware.
into a dispute. She rides with him in order to escape the women who are angry with her, which at first seems like the typical situation in which the man “rescues” a woman from the jealous claws of her catty fellows. In this case, though, there is a more ominous tinge to the scene. One of these village women foreshadows the events to come with the comment, “[o]ut of the frying pan and into the fire!” (Hardy 53). The woman is implying that, even though Tess would have faced conflict among the villagers, she is worse off with an upper-class man with lascivious intentions. Surely, then, Hardy is setting up a dramatic rape scene which will be the catalyst of his heroine’s tragedy—or so the plot-driven reader would think. Soon, the pair become lost in the fog of Chaseborough country, and Alec leaves Tess resting on a pile of leaves in order to climb a hill and get his bearings. When he returns, the fog has thickened, and he calls out to Tess, but “[t]here was no answer” (Hardy 57). The description continues: “The obscurity was now so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves” (Hardy 57).

To a critic focusing on purity, this is the perfect quote (and scene). Hardy is describing Tess as a “pale nebulousness” which represents a “white muslin figure”: she, in essence, becomes the personified symbol of chastity. Alec and the narrator both seem to view the whiteness in this scenario as a typical signifier of purity. Additionally, the gauzy material of Tess’s dress combined with the fog’s dimming effect creates the illusion of her as a symbol of purity, not an autonomous person.

23 Many readers would argue that Alec is not in fact lost, but pretending to be, in order to spend more time with Tess. The narrator, however, later tells us that Alec was indeed lost, though the reason was that he took “any turning that came to hand in order to prolong companionship with her” (Hardy 56).
narrator is obviously disconcerted by Tess’s vulnerable state, lamenting, “where was Tess’s guardian angel? where was the Providence of her simple faith?” which implies that Tess is helpless without some sort of force protecting her, be it men or spirit (Angel or angels).

The narrator continues, posing the question of why “upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive” (Hardy 57). Here again we see overt instances of white imagery – Tess is “practically blank as snow as yet” and is ostensibly a blank slate as well. Instead of analyzing whether Hardy agrees with his narrator’s point of view, however, the purity-focused critics take this passage literally: Tess is a sensitive, white tissue and Alec’s rape/seduction is the “coarse pattern it was doomed to receive” (emphasis mine). There is no irony here, no critique of the narrator’s representation of Tess as a helpless sexual victim; there is only the implication that Alec takes advantage of Tess.

The main problem with the above reading is that in it, Tess becomes a peripheral character, essentially invisible, and it is Alec who decides the action. At one point in Tess, right before the sexual encounter, Hardy writes, “[w]ith the setting of the moon the pale light lessened, and Tess became invisible as she fell into a reverie upon the leaves where he had left her” (Hardy 56). As critics such as Davis discuss Tess’s ruin, they relegate her to the same position: Tess herself becomes unimportant. Similarly, these critics fail to fully analyze the objectification Tess undergoes. They may acknowledge that Tess becomes an object, a tissue for Alec’s inscription, but they do not look further into this theme to explore whether this is Hardy’s view, his narrator’s,
or Alec’s. Instead, these critics view Tess’s objectification merely as further support for the tragedy of the defenseless Tess about to be cruelly written upon by Alec. What if, on the other hand, Hardy wrote Tess as “invisible” and as a “pale nebulousness” in order to incite the audience to react against such an unfair dehumanization?

It is the latter view that seems to be a more useful and meaningful interpretation as we take a closer look at the details of The Chase. Tess becoming invisible, blending into the leaves—significantly “where he left her”—mirrors her later invisibility when Alec returns from his searching. In trying to interpret this invisibility, we may conclude that Hardy is admitting the inevitability of his heroine’s objectification. There is reason to believe, however, that this scene is narrated based on Alec’s characteristics and perception: a technique called “narrated monologue,” which is elaborated upon by Dorrit Cohn in her book *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Cohn explains narrated monologue as “the technique for rendering a character’s thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration” (Cohn 100). In other words, narrated monologue allows the action of the novel to be viewed through the eyes of a character, but in the mode of a third-person narrator. In the case of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, narrated monologue would allow Hardy to critique the views of his narrator and of Alec at the same time. By using this technique, as I will argue below, Hardy is both

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24 The concept of narrated monologue is actually a subset of Cohn’s discussion of “free and indirect discourse”.
25 Boumelha also notes the conflation of character and narration, pointing out “the periodic dissolution of the boundaries between author and character” (66). Boumelha is correct to highlight the fact that the narration oftentimes channels specific characters, such as Alec, but she falls into the trap of equating the narrator with the author. I will argue in the following pages that there is not a “dissolution of the boundaries” between author and character but between narrator and character.
describing Tess as Alec would see her—“a pale nebulosity”—and critiquing this outlook, without compromising the novel’s cohesion.

The first indication of narrated monologue occurs when Alec has left Tess to climb a hill and discern his location in Chaseborough. We learn that Alec

[…] had, in fact, ridden quite at random for over an hour, taking any turning that came to hand in order to prolong companionship with her, and giving far more attention to Tess’s moonlit person than to any wayside object. (Hardy 56)

The fact that Alec had been riding “quite at random” is something that any narrator might remark upon, and admittedly, the narrator in Tess is third-person omniscient and could know the characters’ thoughts. Even so, “Tess’s moonlit person” is something upon which Alec in particular would focus. He, as Wright would argue, is one of the people who subjects Tess to “male visions”. From the moment Alec meets Tess, he looks at her “in a way that ma[kes] her blush a little” (Hardy 29). While she is talking during their introduction, all Alec focuses on is the way her “swarthy lips curved towards a smile” (Hardy 28), shifting the reader’s attention from Tess’s words to her outward appearance.

Additionally, when Tess and Alec meet again later in the novel, Alec blames her looks for his reversion to his former lascivious ways and for the renunciation of his newly found religious faith. He exclaims,

“And why then have you tempted me? I was firm as a man could be till I saw those eyes and that mouth again—surely there never was such a maddening mouth since Eve’s.” His voice sank, and a hot archness shot from his own black eyes.
“You temptress, Tess; you dear damned witch of Babylon— I could not resist you as soon as I met you!” (Hardy 254)
Alec calls Tess many unflattering epithets in this passage, all of which are similar to the “Whore” stereotype. More importantly, though, we see the same focus on Tess’s mouth as when Alec first encounters Tess (another scene in which the narration seems to be channeling Alec’s “thought in his own idiom”). Alec’s continued emphasis on Tess’s appearance lends credence to the suspicion that it is not the regular narrator, but Alec, who describes Tess’s “moonlit form” during the ride through Chaseborough.

The third-person omniscient narrator, however, is no more an objective bystander than Alec, and is often complicit in Alec’s gazing and “male visions”. In fact, the narrator seems to be not Hardy’s own voice, but a means through which Hardy can exhibit irony, or demonstrate a point of view against which the readers should react. This distance between the third-person narrator and Hardy as an author distinguishes Hardy’s opinions from the flawed perspectives of Alec and the narrator, and disproves any claims that Hardy himself was a misogynist. Directly after the instance of narrated monologue, explicated above, we see a significant instance of Hardy’s use of narrative irony. The narrator states that “[a] little rest for the jaded animal being desirable [Alec] did not hasten his search for landmarks” (Hardy 56-7).

Upon first glance, it may seem like the narrator is referring to Alec’s horse, which is tired from the long ride. Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that Tess, too, is fatigued and is resting on the leaves at this very moment. Which “animal” the statement alludes to is thus unclear, but the narrator’s later references to Tess as a sort

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26 Boumelha, in the first page of her book, *Thomas Hardy and Women*, claims that “[f]rom the early stages of his career, Hardy was associated with the portrayal of female characters.” She is surprised, however, by the fact that “it was as a misogynist – or, in the latter stages of his career, at least as an anti-feminist – that he was often perceived and enlisted by one party or another” (1).
of animal seeking refuge leads me to believe that the present description of Tess as a "jaded animal" is not unthinkable.\textsuperscript{27} Hardy continues to use the narrator throughout \textit{Tess} to posit opinions with which Hardy himself does not agree. In the narrator’s depiction of Tess and her fellow female workers at Talbothay’s Dairy, for instance, the women are lumped together as one irrational and flirtatious entity; the details of the scene, however, describe these women as distinct individuals (Hardy’s underlying statement).\textsuperscript{28} Basically, while Tess is at Talbothay’s Dairy, she and her friends fall in love with Angel Clare. The narrator suggests the reason: that “[t]here is a contagion in this sentiment, especially among women” (Hardy 114). In other words, a woman will love a man merely because he is loved by other women. This stereotype is continued as the narrator claims that the women lose their individual identities through their common love; he states, “[t]he differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but one portion of an organism called sex” (Hardy 115).

It may seem like the narrator’s comments are Hardy’s opinions, until we notice that the actual text tells a different story. Throughout Hardy’s description of Tess’s time at Talbothay’s, he portrays the women as separate characters: Izz Huett as strong-willed and sarcastic, Rhetty as shy and nervous, and Tess as wanting happiness but fearing that she does not deserve it. Each of these women has her own personality, and

\textsuperscript{27} When Tess has been rejected by Angel due to her past with Alec, she takes to wandering and becomes more or less a Hobbesian human animal. The text reads, “With the shortening of the days all hope of obtaining her husband’s forgiveness began to leave her; and there was something of the habitude of a wild animal in the unreflecting instinct with which she rambled on” (Hardy 295). Tess’s degradation into an animal-like state is both an insult by the narrator and a statement by Hardy. Her lowered status (and humanity) results from her rejection by Angel and by society, and is therefore a critique of the judgment she has undergone.

\textsuperscript{28} Hardy’s portrayal of Tess, Izz, and Rhetty is another example of how Hardy fills out the traditional stereotypes of fictional women, a concept I discussed in Chapter One using Lecercle’s diagram.
her own reasons for being attracted to Angel Clare; therefore, we cannot conflate the narrator with Hardy when it comes to grouping the women as one “organism called sex.” This subtle yet important distinction is one of the more elusive aspects of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and yet it is vital to an understanding of Hardy and his female characters. In mingling an ironic narrator with his own authorial depictions, Hardy is once again inviting us to over-simplify the passage while frustrating such over-simplifications.

In the end, both of the above narrative techniques – narrated monologue and irony – create distance between Hardy and the misogynistic viewpoints of both Alec and the narrator. Without these distancing devices, we could easily accuse Hardy himself of writing *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in a sexist manner, describing Tess as a “pale nebulousness” and a passive “feminine tissue,” vulnerable to the advances of Alec, Angel, and others. Hardy’s complex narration techniques, however, provide a basis for the possibility that he is instead doing something rather different and more complicated: exposing the wrong way to view Tess in order to criticize it.
Conclusion: Redeeming *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

How to read *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is a major concern for readers and critics, for as we saw in Chapters Two and Three, it can be easy to misunderstand Hardy. In a novel that toys with deterministic elements and tempts us to base our interpretations on plot, it may seem like Tess is – and has to be – a passive victim. Furthermore, if we focus on plot only, the book seems like a disjointed and perverse tragedy in which the heroine is continually degraded. Penny Boumelha points out Hardy’s unconventional plotline when she states, “[t]he text is divided not into a series of chapters adding up to a more or less continuous narrative, but into discontinuous Phases which repeatedly edit out the most crucial episodes of the plot” (Boumelha 126). A more charitable way to read *Tess*, and what I will advocate, on the other hand, is to look at Hardy’s apparently disorderly plot sequence as a deliberate attempt to subvert convention.

One of the more elusive, and yet significant, elements of Hardy’s writing is the way in which he ambiguously depicts, or completely excludes, “crucial” plot developments. As we saw in Chapter Three, scenes such as The Chase are unclear or omitted and cause much critical debate about the cohesion and purpose of *Tess*. In this way, Hardy is overturning the over-simplification with which he tempts us throughout the novel. By making Tess’s character the center of importance, instead of sensational plot developments, Hardy reverses the traditional emphasis on “a more or less continuous narrative”. His multi-faceted and complex heroine in effect overtakes *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. In my conclusion, I defend Hardy against those critics who would
claim that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is simplistic and/or perverse.\(^{29}\) I argue that the novel is instead a deliberate reversal of Lecercle’s “absent centre”; Hardy, in effect, makes “important” events such as The Chase obscure or invisible, and in turn makes visible his supposedly absent heroine, Tess.\(^{30}\)

The problem Boumelha has with Hardy’s writing stems from his treatment of several “crucial narrative moments – Tess’s account of her past on her wedding night, her return to Alec, and her murder of him” (Boumelha 126). Also included in this generally agreed-upon list is The Chase, for it is one of the most ambiguously depicted scenes in the novel, and has aroused much critical debate, as was evident in Chapter Three. For the purposes of this conclusion, I will not be treating each of the ambiguous scenes individually but instead analyzing the reason why Hardy might dismiss the importance of such scenarios. After all, it could be argued that they are crucial to the development of his storyline; nonetheless, we should ask ourselves whether or not Hardy meant his storyline to be the highlight of *Tess*.

What is interesting about Boumelha’s critique of Hardy’s novel – that it fails to be a “more or less a continuous narrative” – is the fact that, in the same chapter, she claims that Hardy is offering “a structured defence of his central character” because of a “passionate commitment to Tess herself” (Boumelha 120). How does the same critic, in the same chapter of the same critical text, assert that *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is both a “discontinuous” narrative and a “structured defense”? The explanation can be found in the separation of Tess from the rest of the novel. Critics like Boumelha, Morgan, Morgan,

\(^{29}\) See Lionel Johnson’s “The Argument.”

\(^{30}\) By “visible” I do not mean “revealed.” Tess is visible in that she counteracts many stereotypes that can make female characters invisible (i.e. the “absent centre” of fiction). She is not, however, a static manifestation of what it “truly” means to be a subjective woman; she is only one example.
and Blake insist that, while Hardy may have had a “passionate commitment to Tess herself”, he still created a flawed novel with essential pieces missing. Tess may be an autonomous character, but she is trapped inside an incomplete novel which refuses to conform to a particular sequential mold. I posit, conversely, that Hardy purposefully wrote disconnects into his plot so that Tess’s character could be the focal point of the novel. In this interpretation, Tess and the rest of the novel are not at odds, but combine to emphasize the progressiveness of Hardy’s novel. Tess could just be the story of an unfortunate country girl who evolves from the status of Virgin to that of Whore; the plot could, conceivably, be (mis)understood as the driving force of the novel. Instead, because of Hardy’s discontinuous storyline, we are forced to read for something else – to see a complex development of character amidst a seemingly simple, and often negative, plot progression.

John Paul Riquelme stresses the novel’s character-centric nature, situating *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* within the expectations of its time:

This novel being one wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated as fatal to her part of the protagonist, or at least the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes, it was quite contrary to avowed conventions that the public should welcome the book, and agree with me in holding that there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe. (Riquelme 25)

The “well-known catastrophe” to which Riquelme refers is Tess’s sexual encounter with Alec and her consequent pregnancy. Riquelme asserts that, in most fiction, such an event would doom the protagonist to either death or a life void of “enterprises and hopes,” a sort of death in itself. In Riquelme’s argument we see echoes of Lecercle’s
criticism of the reduction of women to stereotypes in much of fiction. The acceptable route for fictional women, as we recall from Chapter One, is, usually, “[t]he path of moral (and social) success [which] goes from virgin to mother”, and “the heroine is rewarded with it in the happy ending” (Lecercle 8). Tess obviously does not achieve this “happy ending” (which is not in fact happy at all, but rather a shallow transition from one stereotypical role to another); in lieu of this “happy” ending, however, she further establishes her character by willing her own ending.

Even the conclusion of the novel, which is so often read as passive martyrdom, shows Tess’s independent resolve. She knows that, after killing Alec, she will ultimately be sentenced to death, but she still strikes back against her original oppressor and then calmly accepts the consequences. When armed guards came to seize her, in fact, she “stood up, shook herself, and went forward, neither of the men having moved. ‘I am ready,’ she said quietly” (Hardy 313). 31 Tess’s last moments demonstrate the evolution of her character from a mildly naïve girl to a knowing, mature woman. Albert J. LaValley writes that “[t]he plot of Tess is direct and simple” but that it “[n]evertheless […] provides a basis for the manifestation of Tess’s character and her steady growth, which are the real life of the novel” (LaValley 5, emphasis mine). I maintain that it is exactly Tess’s “character” and “steady growth” that Hardy means to accentuate by diminishing the importance of plot through his deliberate and conspicuous exclusion of key scenes and moments.

31 According to Morgan, ”Tess’s last hour [does not] find her bereft of will, self-determination and courage. In knifing the heart of the man who so remorselessly hunts her down, she turns her own life around yet again; but this time with readiness, she says, to face her executioner” (Morgan 109).
As LaValley states, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* “gains its power through [Hardy’s] concentration of her actions, her direct responses, and her refusal to be divided by the conflicting forces that beset her” (LaValley 6). According to this reading, it makes sense that “crucial narrative moments” such as Tess’s rape/seduction, her account of her past, and her murder of Alec would be devalued in comparison to her “superbly whole responses to her experience and suffering” (LaValley 9). In this assessment, Hardy has created a heroine who embodies a critique of the fictional stereotypes of Lecercle’s diagram and who shows the possibilities of the complex female character, or “woman as subject”. Perhaps, then, Hardy has not failed to create a cohesive plotline, but has alternatively succeeded in diminishing his plot in order to highlight his heroine, Tess.
WORKS CITED


The parson rode a step or two nearer. Yes, that’s the d’Urberville nose and chin—a little debased. Your ancestor was one of the twelve knights who assisted the Lord of Estremavilla in Normandy in his conquest of Glamorgan-shire. Branches of your family held manors over all this part of England; their names appear in the Pipe Rolls in the time of King Stephen. In the reign of King John one of them was rich enough to give a manor to the Knights Hospitallers; and in Edward the Second’s time your forefather Brian was summoned to Westminster to attend the great Council there. You declined a little in Oliver Cromwell’s time, but to no Because Tess had allowed Prince to wander into the oncoming lane and had inadvertently caused the accident between the mail cart and the Durbeyfield wagon, she feels it is her responsibility to make matters right. It is at this point that Joan Durbeyfield introduces the plan for Tess to visit their d’Urberville relations. Tess initially objects to the plan, but with the family horse now dead, she relents and goes to the d’Urberville family to seek money or work. Analysis. Several themes appear early on in the novel. Tess of the D’Urbervilles study guide contains a biography of Thomas Hardy, literature essays, a complete e-text, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. The young daughter of a rural working class family at the start of the novel, Tess Durbeyfield is sent to claim kinship with the wealthier side of her family, the d’Urbervilles, when her family faces imminent poverty. After being seduced by Alec d’Urberville, she bears his child, which dies in infancy, and must leave her home to start a new life elsewhere. Although Tess is dutiful and obedient as the novel begins, she gains great strength and fortitude through her suffering, but remains unwavering in her love for Angel Clare and is prepared to do anything that Angel might wish. Angel Thomas Hardy: Tess of the d’Urbervilles A Pure Woman. Table of Contents. Tess of the d’Urbervilles (Fiction, 1891, 441 pages). All rights reserved. For information about public domain texts appearing here, read the copyright information and disclaimer.