

**NEAR EAST UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

**THE SEMIOTICS OF THE GAZE, POWER, AND GENDER IN THOMAS  
HARDY'S "TESS'S LAMENT",  
"THE RUINED MAID", AND "NEUTRAL TONES"**

**MA THESIS**

**Shajwan FATAH**

**Nicosia  
June, 2021**

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## Approval

We certify that we have read the thesis submitted by Shajwan Fatah titled **“The Semiotics of the Gaze, Power, and Gender in Thomas Hardy’s “Tess’s Lament”, “The Ruined Maid”, and “Neutral Tones”**, and that in our combined opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that all information, documents, analysis and results in this thesis have been collected and presented according to the academic rules and ethical guidelines of Institute of Graduate Studies, Near East University. I also declare that as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced information and data that are not original to this study.



Shajwan Fatah

21 /6 /2010

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Katana, who makes me smile in the darkest times.

This thesis is also dedicated to every persevering, strong, independent, and tenacious woman who has sacrificed her life to achieve her goals.

**Abstract****THE SEMIOTICS OF THE GAZE, POWER, AND GENDER IN THOMAS  
HARDY'S "TESS'S LAMENT", "THE RUINED MAID", AND "NEUTRAL  
TONES"****Shajwan Fatah****MA, Department of English Language and Literature****Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Johann Pillai****June 2021, 73 Pages**

The poetry of Thomas Hardy has been of interest to many critics for the last century, because it is traditionally understood to reflect subjects such as a critique of the Victorian age, the role of women in the nineteenth century, and local aspects of dialect. This thesis focuses on three poems – “Tess’s Lament” (1901), “The Ruined Maid” (1866), and “Neutral Tones” (1876) – but rather than look at them in these perspectives, it explores the language of each poem in terms of how it deals with the gaze, women considered as signs, time, memory, etc. It does this by analyzing them semiotically and in terms of significations (Saussure, Barthes), metaphor (Nietzsche, Derrida), the gaze (Foucault, Mulvey), and gender issues (Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler).

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy, gaze, semiotics, metaphor, social conventions, gender Issues.

## Özet

### THOMAS HARDY'NİN "TESS'S LAMENT", "THE RUINED MAID" VE "NEUTRAL TONES" ŞİİRLERİNDE BAKIŞ, GÜÇ VE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYETİN GÖSTERGEBİLİM

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Thomas Hardy'nin şiirleri, geleneksel olarak Viktorya dönemi eleştirisi, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda kadının rolü ve kullandığı diyalektin yerel yönleri gibi konularla uğraştığı için son yüzyılda pek çok eleştirmenin ilgisini çekmiştir. Bu tez üç şiire odaklanmaktadır – "Tess's Lament" (1901), "The Ruined Maid" (1866) ve "Neutral Tones" (1876) – ama belirtilen şiirlere yukarıda bahsedilen perspektiflerden bakmak yerine, her şiirin dilini; bakışla nasıl başa çıktığını, kadınların kültürel imgeler olarak kabul edilmesini, zamanı ve hafızayı inceler. Bunu, onları göstergebilimsel ve anlamlandırmalar (Saussure, Barthes), metafor (Nietzsche, Derrida), bakış (Foucault, Mulvey) açısından çözümleyerek ve toplumsal cinsiyet sorunları (Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler) ele alarak yapar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Thomas Hardy, bakış, göstergebilim, metafor, sosyal gelenekler, toplumsal cinsiyet sorunları.



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Figure 1. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon diagram. Photograph: The Guardian. 17

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The focus of this thesis is three poems by Thomas Hardy written during 1866, 1876, and 1901. They can be thought of in terms of the period in which they were composed or the author's life, but can also be considered on their own as linguistic events.

#### **The Historical Context**

The time in which Thomas Hardy produced his works was during the end of the Victorian era (1837–1901) and the birth of the twentieth century in the Edwardian period (1901–1910). He began his writings in the Victorian era – the period of the industrial revolution, often known as the time of Charles Dickens and Charles Darwin. It was a time of social reforms, and the era of the first inventions of ‘telephones’ and ‘telegraphs’. However, there were also many social problems, such as the phenomenon of ‘prostitution’ (Renner, 1992, p. 10). The difference between social classes was one of the factors leading to the increasing number of prostitutes. Other reasons were the oppression of women, who were deprived of essential rights and equalities, the domestic roles of women, and the limited positions available to them; they were also required to have ‘feminine qualities’ and good manners for the household, and this was another factor that caused social problems. Women from the working class were forced to work on farms and in factories where they faced various problems, but primarily, sexual harassment (Hughes, 2014).

The huge shift began with the later era – the time of philosophical, scientific, technological, and artistic turning points. Although the twentieth century is commonly called the ‘modern’ age, actually the root of modernity within literature began in the late of nineteenth-century with a new movement – “the aesthetic movement” with the slogan “art for art’s sake.” This and other modern notions and ideas of the artists and poets were a reaction against Victorian ideology, and the reaction was made clear in Samuel Butler’s *The Way of all Flesh* (1903). The representative works of the modern age began with James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). Education in England began to grow and evolve as a result of the “Education Act of 1870”, and then learning in elementary schools became compulsory – which led to a huge

increase in literacy. Eventually, the number of readers and writers increased, and the ‘avant-garde’ emerged as a series of new movements questioning literature, the visual arts, and music. Philosophically, Nietzsche’s ideas – for instance, his argument for the “death of God” and his books about ultimate truth – were a huge shock for the audience, and introduced revolutionary ideas. And in the sciences, Albert Einstein’s Theory of “relativity” (1905) and Max Planck’s “quantum theory” (1900) are turning points in the century (Greenblatt, 2012, pp. 1887-1890). In short, the context in which Hardy’s poems were written presents broader philosophical issues beyond the problems of Victorian daily life.

### **The Literary Context**

Women’s issues in Victorian society have been depicted by other poets of the era. For instance, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) wrote poems to question women’s conditions in terms of education, rights, freedom, and all other essential needs that women were starving for. *Aurora Leigh* (1856) was one of her major works that focused on women’s rights in various aspects, such as education, sexuality, work, family, and love relations (Avery, 2014). Tennyson’s “The Princess” (1847) has led to huge arguments among scholars: it has been attacked by many critics, especially feminists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for its depictions of women with anxiety and violence; some readers think of it as a ‘reactionary’ poem about women’s positions in the nineteenth century, while others have interpreted it as an ‘anti-feminist’ piece of work (Hall, 1991, p. 49). The subject of the ‘feminine’ in the Victorian era is the focus of many literary works; and it can be shown that this subject is generally constructed in some way by the male gaze, which builds up men’s power over women. Tennyson’s *Tiresias* (1883), for example, depicts the male gaze as that ‘look’ which is the point that all other incidents flow from (Christ, 1987, pp. 385-386). And other poets have presented different depictions of both genders, particularly of women, who are the major subject of literature in the Victorian era.

### The Biographical Context

The British novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (b. 1840, Higher Bockhampton, Dorset; d. 1928, Dorchester, Dorset) is often known as the figure of two ages; the Victorian era and the beginning of the twentieth century. His works are known for their reflection on social issues: marriage, love, women, family, and betrayal; and they also focus on their philosophical aspects. Hardy wrote his main literary works in the days of W.B. Yeats, George Meredith, and T.S. Eliot, but his career as a novelist and poet took about six decades; and besides poems and novels, he wrote several short stories, which he published in *Wessex Tales* (1888).

Hardy is known as a novelist, but he is also a poet; in the beginning, he failed with poetry so he launched into novels, starting with the publication of his *Desperate Remedies* (1871). After that, he made a huge shift in his life and his career, became a novelist, and continued with producing other novels such as *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1871), *The Return of the Native* (1878), and *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876). His major novels, *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) are considered revolutionary texts that broke traditions, and they were a reaction to the ideologies of that era (Patil, 1997, pp. 1-5).

Hardy had studied Romantic and Victorian poets such as Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning, and Swinburne, and in 1862 he began studying poetry and became highly fond of composing poems. Patil (1997) states that the reason behind Hardy's love for poetry is his perspective that poetry proposes wisdom and delight. Many critics see his "Wessex Poems" as somehow resembling William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) in terms of their modern perceptions; the time of the *Wessex Poems* publication in (1898) – precisely a century after Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) – is a period considered as the beginning of modern poetry and the end of the Victorian one (pp. 12-14). Hardy wrote various types of poetry, including sonnets, war poems, ballads, nature poems, elegies, love, and philosophical poems. One of the critical concerns in the poems is 'time': he successfully depicts the existence of time, and through a thread, he brings out the characters' experiences between past and present. In addition to time, narrative voices and the interior monologues play the role of reflection, and in this way he masters 'self-moments' (Miller, 1970).

### **The Critical Literature**

The three poems by Hardy discussed in this thesis – “Tess’s Lament” (1901), “The Ruined Maid” (1866), and “Neutral Tones” (1876) – were composed approximately in the period between the two different ages, and one of the reasons for considering these verses is their references to language and time. They have traditionally been read in terms of biography, history, and local accents of language, and as sketches of women victimized sexually, financially, and socially. “Tess’s Lament”, for example, has been considered a reference to Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*: the character “Tess” is seen to be the same woman in both literary texts who narrates the incidents in her life and depicts the hard conditions of working-class women. (e.g. Knoepflmacher 1990, Irwin 2000). Readers of “The Ruined Maid” have examined the verse in terms of its linguistic reference – the character Melia uses the Dorset dialect to indicate that she belongs to the working class, and this use of local dialect is interpreted to somehow show the biographical aspect of Hardy himself (e.g. Minogue 2007, Loriaux 2016). Other critics have read the poem through social lenses and what they see in it is the subject of ‘prostitution,’ which was one of the social problems in the Victorian era (e.g. Renner 1992, Inniss 1972). Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” has been read in terms of gender reference; the narrative voice is viewed as a male speaker who remembers the moment of departure and love failure on a winter-day, with some possible biographical references (e.g. Senior 2006, Hazen 1971).

This study shows other sides of these perspectives: for instance, arguing that the character ‘Tess’ presents her intended actions and confesses that she has wronged the male character – which shows the reverse of the novel. Similarly, Melia reveals her freedom of being ‘ruined’ rather than being victimized sexually. In “Neutral tones”, gender reference is not presented, but power relations shift between the characters; so this poem can be seen as focusing on the language regardless of all the biographical and historical contexts. In other words, Hardy presents his female characters with radical and sensible aspects, breaking away from the stereotyped views which generalize the idea that working-class women have been wronged by men or society; and his female characters present the other side of the picture.

## CHAPTER II

### Theoretical Concepts and Frames of Analysis

In contrast to the usual approaches to interpreting Hardy's poems in terms of biography, historical, and gender references, my analysis considers them in terms of social conventions, language, the distribution of power, and gender issues.

#### Semiotics

Through close readings of the expressions and terminology in the verses, I explore the meanings and the philosophical concepts, but not the biography of the author; because the focus is on the text and not the conditions in which it was produced, the analysis is based on both Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and Roland Barthes's semiotics.

Barthes writes:

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, Saussure postulated the existence of a general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Barthes, 1967, p. 9)

In other words, Barthes' semiotics is based on Saussure's explanation that language is a pure sign system which consists of both signifiers and signified – words and their meanings (Marklemon, 2015); for Saussure, language is made up of signs, which integrate their signifiers (the image, the word, or the sound) through an arbitrary association to their meanings or the concepts.

Barthes' "Death of the Author" explains that the unknown voice in a literary works causes the loss of every origin – so it is unclear who is speaking in a text. The narrative voice in a poem therefore cannot be identified: it is confusing to know whether is it the poet himself speaking or multiple characters in the text (Barthes, 1977, p. 142). According to Barthes, at the moment of producing a literary text, the author finds his death and the reader is born: the 'death of the author' is a metaphor



to show that there is no reference to biography in the literary text and there is no need to put some ‘blood’ in it to understand the meanings of the words.

Barthes goes deeper as he investigates the meanings of words and the semiotic system, and in his book *Elements of Semiology* (1967), he explains “denotation” and “connotation,” referring to the literal meanings and the deeper level of the significations of the signifiers. In a semiotic analysis, it is understood that language is made of a “system of significations” which consists of three elements — “words are the expressions (E) and they are related (R) to the content (C),” (1967, p. 89). This relation seems to be the same arbitrary system that has been coined by de Saussure – relying on social conventions. A connotation is a system of signifier and signified, where each time a new sign is added to the system, a new concept or content is made (1967, p. 91). Therefore, the signifiers offer more than one signified, and that depends on the context provided by the surrounding signified.

Hardy’s verses present codes, metaphors, tones, and hidden meanings, and the only way to understand them is to open up the expressions and seek their etymological meanings and also the relations between the signifiers. For example, in “Tess’s Lament” – which the critics have related to the novel, seeing ‘Tess’ as a victimized woman – the signifiers in the lines “t’was I who made the blow to fall/ on him who thought no guile” show another layer of signification: that ‘Tess’ has ‘wronged’ the ‘male character. The expressions connote the words’ arbitrary relation to the content:

$$\frac{\text{“t’was I who made the blow to fall” – E1}}{\text{Tess has done something -C1}} = \text{signification of the system 1}$$

$$\frac{\text{“on him who thought no guile” – E2}}{\text{The man is innocent - C2}} = \text{signification of the system 2}$$

From both systems, the signification indicates that Tess is guilty and has wronged the man; the bar between the signifier and signified shows the relation (R) that is constructed by social norms. Similarly, the levels of the meanings and how

they shift in a different context can be shown in the other verses as well. For instance, critics see “The Ruined Maid,” as a conversation between two maids in town, but actually, the conversation is recited from a previous dialogue. The signifiers in the lines “and whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?/ O didn't you know I'd been ruined? said she” show different significations:

$$\frac{\text{“didn't you know I'd been ruined?” – E1}}{\text{Melia is speaking – C1}} = \text{signification of the system 1}$$

$$\frac{\text{“said she” – E2}}{\text{Melia is absent – C2}} = \text{signification of the system 2}$$

The signifiers (expressions) from the second system add another signification to the first system, so the close reading shows that actually ‘Melia’ is away and her speech has been recounted by the narrative voice.

In my reading of Hardy’s verses, the semiotic analysis brings out relations to the following concepts and theories:

### **Social Conventions**

One of the main concepts depicted and rooted in Hardy’s poems is ‘social conventions’. The characters in “Tess’s Lament”, “The Ruined Maid” and “Neutral Tones” are somehow pictured in the frame of social norms and traditions; their appearance and thoughts are presented under the decorum that is shaped by the cultural traditions. And these conventions are derived from language; that is to say, all the habitual aspects in social life are constructed by a semiotic system. In this sense, social conventions are a collection of concepts controlled by the signs – which I would call ‘dictatorial conventions’ because subconsciously everyone has agreed on and follows them. For instance, Tess’s character is depicted on the path of her life through the social traditions; her wedding day and the days when she used to live happily on the farm indicate the construction of her identity and her emotions by society. Similarly, in “The Ruined Maid” the speaker describes Melia with her fair garments showing her social rank. Melia calls herself “ruined” – where the term socially means a woman who has been in sexual relations before marriage. Social conventions are also depicted in “Neutral Tones,” where the love story between the

narrative voice and the lover ends with the words moved back and forth between them: through language, the characters in each poem show the frame of their life. These rules and norms are reinforced in different ways through the gaze.

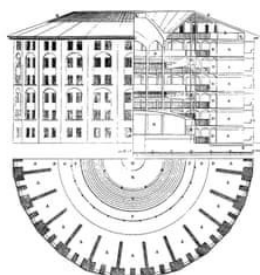
### **The Gaze (Power Relations)**

Another concept that features in Hardy's poems is the gaze – the way characters look at themselves and others, and how they see themselves in terms of how others see them. The term 'gaze' literally means to stare at something or someone, and it also connotes a broader issue related to social conventions.

In Michel Foucault's discussion of power relations, developed in the "Panopticism" section of his book, *Discipline and Punish*, the concept of 'gaze' indicates the meaning of (observation) or (watching). In short, the observer imposes power over the one who is being watched. The term 'panopticism' or – 'panopticon' is derived from the English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (1748 -1832), who explains the panopticon as a prison in a circular building in which a tower is centered; the prisoners are around the tower. The striking point is that they cannot see inside the tower, thus they must have constantly been cautious in their behaviors.

Foucault explains that the panopticon is not necessarily limited to a prison, a school, or a hospital, but in fact, it can be in the entire society, which controls people by reinforcing certain ideologies that have been constructed by social conventions (Foucault, 1977, pp. 195-206).

Figure 1. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon diagram. Photograph: (the Guardian website).



That is to say, through being known and observed, the individual is imprisoned in the abstract jail of social rules, and each individual is under the control of the eyes that are watching him or her. In Hardy's poems, I show how the idea of

the panopticon can be seen expressed in terms of the power of the gaze, which creates and sustains social power.

Foucault explains that power is not a thing that we can possess, it is merely a relation between the individuals, it is a discipline that seems to form the society with the absence of violence or force (Foucault, 1977, p. 220). Like Foucault, Mulvey considers the gaze as an essential concept involved in constructing power relations, with the difference that she focuses on the relationship between genders, male and female. In her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, she illustrates how women are seen as the object of the male gaze in cinema and photography, and she investigates the issues from both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical perspectives (Mulvey, 1975, ps. 14-16). For instance, Freud's theory of "penis envy" claims that there is a sense of "jealousy" within females: through their psychosexual development they realize that they do not have a penis, and feeling this loss leads to envy. Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" examines the first steps of 'self-recognition in children of early ages, and describes this recognition as being constructed as children *stare* at themselves for the first time and recognize their own image. This is also a linguistic moment because, during this stage, children for the first time learn how to distinguish between the signs for subject and object, and establish their identities (1975, p. 17).

Mulvey explains that the problem this raises is "how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy" (p. 15). She relates the relation between the sexes to language and how everyone uses the same patriarchal language; from this point of view, language reinforces the 'power relation' between (male and female).

This problem is found in literature, where female authors and readers impose patriarchal reading on literary texts because of the impact of the social conventions they themselves have absorbed, in which their eyes and their own gaze are controlled by the patriarchal language. The social conventions that manufacture 'power relations' and also their results, are constructed in language by metaphors which are considered as real, and are hidden behind what appears to be the reality. Through semiotic analysis, the vision and seeing that takes place between Hardy's characters can be seen to show the construction of power relations among them. For instance, in "Tess's lament" the expression "he watched me" indicates the male gaze that shapes Tess's identity and her emotions, and leads her to find her life with the male

character as an abstract prison that she cannot escape from. And the signifiers “how gay we looked” show the audience’s observation of her and how their eyes construct the social convention that Tess is supposed to be happy on her wedding day.

Similarly, Melia is seen by the narrative voice who wishes to have the same ‘prosperity’: the female gaze follows the social convention that women are supposed to have all the feminine features. And in “Neutral Tones” besides both male and female gazes, a third gaze is offered, in which the reader visualizes the colors and tones of the location: the speaker describes the lover’s eyes through the expressions: “your eyes on me were as eyes that rove/ over tedious riddles of years ago”; this shows the power of the ‘look’ that is transferred back and forth between the speaker and the receiver.

### **Metaphor**

Hardy’s characters express their personal experiences through metaphors, which can be read to show their literal meaning – that is, as figures of speech that create a resemblance between two objects or concepts in terms of their appearance or certain characteristics and qualifications. However, as Nietzsche argues, metaphors are the basic language that all our social conventions, ideologies, and “truths” rely on: What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins ((Kaufmann, 1980, pp. 46-47).

Nietzsche’s metaphor for truth in language is the image of coins that lose their pictures or “literal” meanings after everyone has used them for a long time. In the same way, the language used by everyone has lost its meaning, and there is no true meaning, only “arbitrary” relations, as Saussure calls them, between signs – words offering meanings: there are no ultimate truths, but only metaphors – the elements of language which build all the cultural rules and norms. Nietzsche further argues that all deceptions and lies are formed through language; societies present and interact through metaphors for the sake of surviving and enduring life (pp. 44-45).

In his essay *White Mythology*, Jacques Derrida examines ‘metaphors’ and asks a similar question:

What is metaphysics? A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his *logos* – that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason. It's not so easy to get away with this. (Derrida, 1974, p11).

Derrida explains that western philosophers have sought to find the meaning behind ‘truth’ and this seems to be impossible because there is no truth to be found – it is mythological– and he uses the phrase “wear and tear” to describe words which are worn out and torn up because they have been used and turned into series of metaphors without consideration to the meanings behind them. Derrida asserts that language is absolutely metaphorical: words are spoken and written, and the fact that there is nothing behind them is habitually ignored. And there is no concrete truth: Derrida comments on philosophical texts and calls them ‘white mythology’ because the western scholars have attempted to provide “reason” and “truth”, but they all seem to be based on metaphors of metaphysics (Derrida, 1974, pp. 6-12).

Throughout the poems, Hardy’s characters spill out metaphors indicating their social conventions. For instance, the signifiers: “and where we had our supper-fire/ may now grow nettle, dock, and briar” are used by Tess to signify that the place has turned into a dark and rotten place, which on another level of metaphor seems to refer to the ‘grave’ – although strikingly, there is no grave in the poem. Hardy’s words, therefore, offer the possibility of endless meanings, because they are simply collections of metaphors. To take another example, Melia is described with “gay bracelets and bright feathers three!” – these signifiers remarkably do not denote simple materials that women wear, but actually connote the richness of Victorian women and ‘feminine’ features. In the same way, the narrative voice of “Neutral Tones” describes the place with black and white colors because they signify not simply real ‘white sun’ or ‘black leaves’, but connote deeper meanings.

### **Gender Issues**

Another feature in Hardy’s verses is a gender problem, which some critics have investigated. The gender issues are represented in various ways in theories of

‘feminism’. The term does not refer only to the equalities between men and women, but actually, it presents broader issues such as political and economic rights, the identity of women, and feminist questions in psychoanalysis, history, and literature. Feminism as a movement has been expanding and developing for centuries.

Systematically its growth began through three waves: in the first wave, feminists strove for the primary rights, such as the right to vote and also all other legal rights that go back to the late eighteenth century and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which is often considered one of the leading works on feminism. Later, the writings of Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Gilman, and George Eliot reflected gender issues in society in various ways. The beginning of the second wave of feminism goes back to the period of World War II, and it lasted in the 1970s. The works of Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, and Simone de Beauvoir shed light on the construction of the female gender in literary texts, considering both genders both as authors and readers; they examined how women were depicted in literary works and to what extent male and female authors have represented female identities and their roles in society. For example, Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is a satirical work that comments on how American women are depicted in other texts. De Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* explains the issues between both sexes; she claims in her book that a female is being called a ‘woman’ under the influence of social conventions, and she argues that women are forced to have all the ‘feminine’ characteristics and they are taught to love the opposite sex because culturally, they are instructed to be ‘women’. In addition, other critics such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have investigated and questioned the stereotyped images of women in literary texts, studying those issues culturally, politically, intellectually, and psychologically (Guerin et al., 2011, pp. 254-255). Third-wave feminism goes further and deeper, under the influences of ‘post structuralism’.

Feminists have broadened their movement to study all other aspects related to women, such as the issues of women from different social classes, lesbians, “Third World’ women, and transgendered women. The goal is to find the identity of women and how it has been constructed under the impact of all other factors of the social conventions: for instance, Judith Butler, in “Gender Problems,” asserts that ‘gender’ is not intrinsic, but rather it is a ‘performative act’ – the features of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ have been taught to children from early ages, and through certain

ideologies, they learn to perform them in their behaviors and appearance (Butler, 2006, pp. 29-30).

Hardy's poems plainly represent these issues. 'Tess', for instance, presents the image of a woman whose identity is controlled by the opposite sex – his absence creates the illusion in which she is lost between the past and future. 'Melia' is seen as a 'fallen' woman, who is somehow dismissed by society because she has chosen her freedom to be 'ruined'. And "Neutral Tones" represents gender issues through the depiction of two lovers whose eyes and lips show the construction of 'love' that has lost its meaning and has become a pure metaphor.

This thesis accordingly analyzes the language of each poem semiotically, exploring how its significations change when it is considered in terms of metaphor, the gaze, and gender issues; these concepts and frames provide an alternative, modern perspective on Hardy's poetry.

### **Organization of the Argument**

This thesis is structured as three individual readings of poems by Thomas Hardy. In my third chapter, I shed light on "Tess's Lament" (1901) which explores the concepts of memory and forgetting by the speaker – Tess – who sees the reflection of her inner self after she is alienated from others and wishes to disappear. Critics have read this poem as describing a typical victimized woman during the Victorian age; however, I will argue for the reverse of this interpretation, and also bring out other essential aspects of the text through the semiotic analysis.

The fourth chapter deals with "The Ruined Maid" (1866), a poem which narrates the transition of a maid – Melia – who used to be a farm girl; after she has been ruined, her appearance and attitude have changed. Readers have related this poem to the problems of 'prostitution during the Victorian era and have considered Melia as a victim; however, my analysis suggests this text takes an existentialist view – Melia has chosen this pattern – and explores feminist issues and how they are constructed. The fifth chapter focuses on "Neutral Tones" (1876). In this poem, I investigate the concepts of color, sound, and time, which are related in different ways to the power of three types of gazes. Critics have asserted that the voice in this poem is a male speaker, but I argue that no evidence supports this, and discuss the possibility that the speaker is female, and the gender issues that arise from this.



The images, metaphors, tones, etymological meanings, and the significations in these poems reveal they are dealing with concepts such as social conventions, the gaze, power relations, gender issues, and existentialism, that have not been considered in previous studies. Although Hardy's verses were composed between the end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosophical ideas they contain and the association between social issues and contemporary theories have been neglected by other critics. This thesis, therefore, sheds light on those aspects that have been invisible from the perspectives of previous readers, and presents a modern perspective for future readers.

## CHAPTER III

### Forgetting and Memory in “Tess’s Lament”

This chapter includes three sections: introduction, reading the text, and the comments. I focus on the previous studies of the text, then the second part presents the analysis of the text, and finally I give my last comments on the verse as the conclusion of the chapter.

#### **Introduction**

Hardy’s poem “Tess’s Lament” (PoemHunter Website) was composed for the collection *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901). The verse was published after his novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. The six five-lines stanzas of the poem are recounted by the narrative voice – Tess – who seems to depict an overflow of thoughts. In the first lines of the poem, a sense of melancholy and a desire for her own disappearance is expressed by the speaker, whose memories take her thoughts back to the cheerful moment in the past – back when she used to live on the ‘farm’ with the male character (a husband or a lover). The moments of courtship are portrayed in the second stanza of the verse.

Eventually, the language of the third and fourth stanzas shows the departure of the male character, and his absence appears to be caused by the speaker wronging him or betraying him. Later and in the last stanzas, Tess expresses her envy towards the ‘dairymaid’ who has taken her place on the farm. And once more she expresses her wish that her life would come to an end. On a general level, the verse presents the concepts of memory, time, life, and death, which are entangled with problems of love, home, marriage, family, and betrayal – that is, shifting external and internal conflicts.

The speaker appears to be drowning in her recollections and wishes they could all be forgotten. The verse opens with a general expression of these sentiments, which are followed by a flashback of a cheerful time and a relation that is embraced by love and passion. Tess’s thoughts eventually take her back to a series of images between past and present times. The language within the text presents a shift from back in time to a moment between her recollections and reality. As the narrative voice moves with the flashback she goes through a stream of happiness and love to regret, guilt, loneliness, and sadness.

These emotions shape Tess's thoughts, which take the form of a "lament" with all its immediate connotations of sorrow, grief, mourning. The lament presents several entangled concepts – memory and forgetting in particular – through which it questions social conventions. These concepts are intertwined through the narrative voice of Tess, which recalls past days, expressing regret for things she has done and despair for her current situation. Therefore, she wishes her life would come to an end, and she could disappear from sight: "I would that folk forgot me quite, forgot me quite!".

Critics who have considered this poem have usually made a connection between its title character and the main character of Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was published in (1891), approximately a decade before the poem appeared. Hardy's tragic novel tells the story of a country girl, Tess, whose misfortune leads to her downfall. Tess appears to be an innocent rural girl from a poor family, her father sends her to their relatives' to work there. Eventually, the relatives' son, Alec, after many temptations, finally rapes her; and later she gives birth to a boy, who dies very young. After a long time of hardship, she leaves the place and turns to work somewhere else. However, she meets the one whom she worships, Angel Clare. At first, Tess seems to be unable to tell him about the tragic story of her life, but very soon after their wedding day, she declares everything. Clare does not forgive her and leaves her, and Tess then spends a long time working on the farms. Most obviously, misery and poverty are depicted in the novel, which ends with the death of Tess, after she is charged with murdering Clare. The language of the work also brings out several other themes, such as social class distinctions, love, and social traditions (Rao & Yuan-yuan, 2018, p. 71).

Because the name of the character "Tess" is repeated in the verse, many critics have read the poem through these lenses, and given the same interpretation to both the novel and the verse. Several critics find a direct relationship between the poem and the novel. Knoepfmacher (1990), for example, claims that the character of Tess in the poem is taken from the novel. In brief, the poem and novel complete each other in terms of having the same story of the same character – Tess – who seems to be a 'farm girl' and the representative female voice whom Hardy has presented in his works to portray gender issues and problems during the nineteenth century (Knoepfmacher, 1990, p. 1058). Paulin (1975) also suggests that the verse completes the novel, in the way Tess's memories with Angel are depicted in the lines "he

watched me to the clock's slow beat -/ loved me, and learnt to call me Sweet” (pp.155- 156). Paulin argues that Hardy’s novels and poems are annotations to each other. And Irwin (2000) goes even further, claiming that the verses are basically the same stories and are parallel to the works of fiction (p. 24). Giordano points out that Hardy’s characters ‘Tess’ in both the novel and the poem are depicted with misery and the cruelty of life; the speaker’s voice is presented in the verse and she recounts the plot of the novel. Giordano asserts that Tess wishes to disappear because she is given difficult choices in life that lead her to a downfall (Alexander, 1985, p. 91).

In short, for most critics, Hardy’s character in the poem appears to be innocent, and not responsible for what she encounters. But a semiotic reading shows that the verse presents the antithetical conclusion.

### **Reading the Text**

There are several ways in which the title can be read: “Tess’s lament” may suggest the state of regret for something she has done or grief for someone or anything she has lost. However, the name Tess etymologically elicits the concept of a harvest – the time of collecting crops. Thus, the name may refer to autumn, when the leaves fall from the trees, which marks the end of summer and leads to the coming season – winter in the later stages.

Above all else, the sense of forgetting through time is presented in the first verse by the speaker, Tess, who seems to be addressing her words to a male character, to “folk,” and to herself. Simultaneously, the language is addressed to the audience – both the society and the male character in the poem. Tess wishes to note down her memories for her implied audience (Wolf, 2014). Who are the future readers:

I would that folk forgot me quite,  
 Forgot me quite!  
 I would that I could shrink from sight,  
 And no more see the sun.  
 Would it were time to say farewell,  
 To claim my nook, to need my knell,  
 Time for them all to stand and tell  
 Of my day's work as done not to be recalled;

The term “folk” suggests people in general, particularly the surrounding ones, such as family, relatives, neighbors, or society. The word in this context also suggests the ‘Other’ half of Tess, which is depicted through the perception of others. Hence, the verse is based on three parts of the narratee; Tess, the male character, and the folk. The narrative voice “would” – in other words, *wishes* – to be forgotten (by others): she might be in a state in which she wants them to leave her behind, to neglect her, or even to slip her from their memory forever. Tess’s wish to be invisible from others’ visions suggests she is looking for isolation – she wants to grow smaller and smaller or to be invisible from the sight of others, to disappear from the reach of others’ eyes and escape from the gaze of society, which reflects power and control (Gaze, 2020).

The gaze here suggests the curiosity of society, gender dominance, or any other means of control. Laura Mulvey, in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” explains how women are the object of the male gaze in cinema and photography (1975, ps. 14-16) referring to Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage”, in which a child stands in front of a mirror and experiences self-reflection, which is the beginning of the self-recognition (1975, p. 17). From this standpoint, Tess appears to see the reflection of herself through not her actual eyes, but from the eyes of the “folk”. Furthermore, her wish not to see the sun anymore suggests two desires – literally to lose her sight, or metaphorically, to fade away for eternity or to die. At this stage, it is not obvious whether she is writing down her memories or if it is merely an interior monologue.

Tess’s desire for the sun to be hidden from her sight suggests a wish for ‘death,’ because the “sun”, which gives light and heat to living creatures, is generally a metaphor for life. In this sense, then her aspiration for ‘death’ becomes deeper as she wants to hear the sound of the ring or the “knell” coming from the bells. Meanwhile, she demands to be in her “nook” – a word which on the literal level describes a corner, a shelter, a hole, or a box. Metaphorically, however, it may refer to a small dark place or a (grave). In this regard as well, Tess seems to be expressing her final moments when she sees her “day’s work as done”. That is to say, her role in life has become unnecessary. And she has reached this point in her lifetime and she needs to be isolated from everyone else. The verse seems to be echoed with the sound of every statement whispered – starting from the sound /f/ as it is started from

“I would that folk forget me quite, Forgot me quite!”, and continuing with the voiced /s/ in “from sight and no more see the sun”.

The repeated voices in the line introduce the readers to the sound of the whisper, such as the phoneme /n/ in “to claim my nook, to need my knell,” and the voiced /t/ in “time for them all to stand and tell”. The bell seems to have the same echo, as the language moves through the sound and its repetitions. Apparently, there is a whisper of the last moment of death before “shrink[ing] from sight”.

The time taken between the lines shows an emphasis as the narrative voice pauses from one expression to another – the regret and the slow or low voice depicts the moment in which Tess compares her life in two different circumstances – her current situation and the past days – that construct both memory and forgetting within her. The verse appears to show the concept of forgetting in general, and at this stage, it seems to be in terms of visibility: not to be seen, to be disappeared, or to fall away just like the leaves in autumn. The evocations seem to provide some essential elements which are time, light, and sound. These terms may represent life and the way Tess wants to alienate herself from it. She seems to be making herself a bridge between life and death. This line also suggests ‘social conventions’ – the agreements and rules which are constructed semiotically around her by society.

This concept is developed by de Saussure, who explains that there is a mental relation between expression in language – a word or “signifier” – and its possible meanings, concepts, or “signifieds” (2011, p. 67). In a nutshell, meanings are conveyed through an arbitrary relation between the object and the language, whether it is written or verbal. From this viewpoint, the term “folk” in the poem suggests a society in general, and the social conventions by which Tess appears to be influenced by others to follow traditions and rules that have been set to shape the identity and separate right from wrong. The “time for them all to stand and tell/ of my day's work as done” points to the idea of a funeral, where Tess wishes, if there was time, to say goodbye to them and disappear. In short, social norms are depicted through language, and they seem to play the role of choosing Tess’s destiny. In addition, the pronoun “them” describes the “folk”: here Tess emphasizes referring back to the society with whom she shares her moments; she seems to be controlled by the gaze of society and she sees herself through the eyes of others.

Her recollection then takes her thoughts back to her earlier days:

Ah! dairy where I lived so long,

I lived so long;  
 Where I would rise up stanch and strong,  
 And lie down hopefully.  
 'Twas there within the chimney-seat  
 He watched me to the clock's slow beat -  
 Loved me, and learnt to call me sweet,  
 And whispered words to me.

The days of the “dairy,” refer back to her early farm-related work, and the recollections of the churn bring sweet memories to Tess’s mind, of when she used to wake up with hope. Better daytimes are described, when she would “rise up stanch and strong,” and her night times are remembered with a description of hope and faith – she used to “lie down hopefully”. Through these descriptions, the dairy farm is described as the opposite setting to the “nook”. The farm seems to be a symbol of life, while the nook appears to be a representation of death.

At this point, all these characterizations set up the idea that Tess is recalling a previous chapter of life, when she worked manufacturing dairy products – how she used to be happy and strong, and worked and slept optimistically. Her thoughts seem to take her back to the atmosphere, which is described with an image of the fireplace – the season of winter. The “Chimney- seat,” a warm place, seems to be related to the sun which evokes the sense of life: it is where the male character “watched her”. Tess describes the male gaze (Mulvey 1975, pp. 14-16) observing her – “he watched me to the clock’s beat” – and its power seems to control her recollection of the past, so she fails to escape from the shadow of those days. And this gaze is not only the male character’s but also the gaze of other people – “folk” – looking at and controlling her.

Thus, Tess seems to be dominated by the look of the male character in which in various ways has constructed her identity, the gaze; the act of watching here is panoptic, because it creates the kind of “power relation” that Foucault describes in his “Panopticon”. However, besides the concept of power, the image also seems to give the sense of a romantic relationship. This can be seen in the way he watches her and whispers to her, through the passage of time that is implied by “the clock’s slow beat”. In the same way, passing the time seems to be slow at some points or in some chapters of her life. The “clock” appears to play a key role in indicating the times in

which both remembering and forgetting occur. Eventually, Tess recalls the whispering of his voice as he spoke to her in words that made her happy. The striking point in this language is the repetition of expressions in different contexts; for instance, the whisper is depicted in two different places within the poem – once with the sense of darkness and loneliness, later with companion and love.

Several paradoxes are presented within the language – for instance, the shift from being hidden or small to be strong and hopeful, and the change from loneliness to being accompanied by the man and being told words of love by the fire-place. The terms evoking this lead the reader to the previous part of the stanza in which the exclamation mark “ah!” provides the sense of both pain and pleasure. On the one hand, the pain seems to be rooted in the recollection of those days; on the other hand, the latter can be depicted with the connection of the words “strong”, “hopefully”, “sweet”. To put it differently, there is a contradiction in both senses. Hence, the shift back and forth appears to strengthen the struggles of forgetting and memory of the past, and this conflict raises the theme of love that is depicted in the verse in various ways – as the speaker seems to recall the past days, she expresses her love for them, for the farm, and for the one who used to “[love her], and learned to call [her] sweet, and whispered words to [her]”. The whispers from the male character are echoing in her thoughts. However, those recollections appear to be an obstacle in which all those delightful memories have become like poisonous and sticky plants, in which she is entangled, and she cannot move forward. Tess uses the plants as a metaphor to depict her life and to show the comparison between her present time and the past.

For instance, the other side of love is depicted in the verse that causes the speaker’s current situation – suffering and loneliness. That is to say, Tess confesses for something that she has done through the expressions “twas I who made the blow to fall/ on him who thought no guile”, and this shows the concept of deception. As a result, the narrative voice is left behind; the male character seems to be gone. The signifiers “and now he’s gone, and now he’s gone” appear to indicate Tess’s melancholy after the departure of the male character. Concisely, the other side of love is depicted, in which she is left behind with sorrow and regret. The social conventions seem to appear in terms of Tess’s need for love and identity – the relationship that is embraced with passion is a group of signifiers in which it is expressed through “[words of love]”. In short, through the language “he” has told her words – and through the language, she remembers them. Besides that, the departure



and the absence of the male character seem to destroy Tess's identity and individuality, for when reconstructing them, Tess seems to be in the struggle because of the social norms and ideology in which she cannot be on her own without the male character – the one who recognizes her. Since all the social norms are constructed through language, Tess's past and present are a collection of memories that are produced for a reason that she is striving to find – her identity.

And now he's gone; and now he's gone; . . .  
 And now he's gone!  
 The flowers we potted p'rhaps are thrown  
 To rot upon the farm.  
 And where we had our supper-fire  
 May now grow nettle, dock, and briar,  
 And all the place be mould and mire  
 So cozy once and warm.

The male character seems to be lost, has left, or might be dead. The recurrent expressions “and he's gone, and now he's gone/and now he's gone!” emphasize that he – is away from Tess. Furthermore, the sound of /gɒn/, in the repeated expressions “and now he's gone” may represent the clicking sound in the “clock's slow beat-”. The sound plays a key role in the speaker's thoughts once again. Apparently, all those events and memories are still there, and she can often hear those voices. Tess launches into a comparison between her situation and various plants through both rhetorical devices – ekphrasis and prosopopeia – for instance, the ekphrasis works through the expressions “and where we had our supper-fire/ may now grow nettle, dock, and briar/ and all the place be mould and mire” in which Tess describes the setting, and the plants are metaphors for depicting the theme of love.

The “flowers” suggest multiple explanations: on one hand, they seem to be a symbol for conveying a message that cannot be spelled out, like silence or a whisper. On the other hand, she compares herself to those flowers in the sense that they were once potted with love and passion. However, they were also thrown away and became rotten on the farm – which seems to be a metaphor for her dead body in the dark “nook,” or to be rotten deep in the muddy ground. Moreover, those flowers are compared to their relationship, because the flowers refer to a particular type of plant that is characterized by colors and a good smell, and which also give a sense of protection and love. They, therefore, express the senses, which also seem to be

connected to the idea of voiceless words that are spilled out by the speaker, or written. Roses also carry the meaning of “bitterness” or “devotion” (Boeckmann, 2020), and this provides the sound of the whispers that have been depicted earlier in the stanza.

The flowers are potted, yet they might be “thrown”, which seems to suggest the idea that they are being tossed away, rotten, or being ruined on the “farm”. The scene seems to depict the environment of a farmhouse: the setting is in the country, which seems to suggest the flowers lack the sense of recognition after they have been potted: they are thrown away without any attention and forgotten.

Once, in the past, the roses were potted and they were alive, while in the present time, they are rotten in the mud. These associations are similar to those seen in previous expressions, where Tess’s situation has been changed, from being strong and hopeful, to the state that she is left in of misery and melancholy; and this seems to be the result of being forgotten or neglected. Despite that, the term “supper-fire” appears to provide the same sense of “chimney-seat” and the “sun” that provides enthusiasm and tenderness of love, devotion, and life. In general, the expression and the need or the wish for life is expressed through “fire”, because it suggests the heat and light that bring the sense of hope and love again.

However, Tess continues to repeat the divergent descriptions of plants, that are related to death – the expression “may now grow nettle, dock, and briar” indicates the plants which all cause pain and allergy – and she uses them as metaphors for exasperation or disgrace. Furthermore, *prosopopeia* functions in the verse in the way Tess presents the male speaker: he seems to be absent, but the memory from the past – “he watched me to the clock’s slow beat” – leads the reader to adopt that ‘whisper’ from him, though in the present time, and Tess merely speaks in his absence.

She shifts the statements from the recollection of the pleasant days to the consequences of that love affair:

And it was I who did it all,  
Who did it all;  
'Twas I who made the blow to fall  
On him who thought no guile.  
Well, it is finished--past, and he  
Has left me to my misery,

And I must take my Cross on me  
For wronging him awhile.

The opening words of the stanza seem to show a sense of blameworthiness. Another way of saying this is that Tess seems to see herself as convicted for what happened, through her repetition of the expression “and it was I who did it all”. In light of that, she makes a huge shift from being lonely to being guilty. And she describes the male character as being innocent, which is to say, she depicts herself as the one who “made the blow to fall,” for which she proposes different explanations – she might have been unfaithful to him or she may have deceived him. Literally, the words “’twas I who made the blow to fall” seem to show the meaning of hitting him with something, while from metaphorical level, it also connotes the idea that Tess has disappointed him in a way or another. After a pause, she changes her thought from being a sinner to being a victim, and this suggests the destruction of her identity.

The signifiers “well, it is finished--past, and he left me to my misery,” suggest that Tess is restricted to the past, with its bitter-sweet memories which control her present time. Her repetition of the term “past,” which is connected to time, implies that it plays the role of authority over everything around her, so its evocations enhance the concepts of social conventions. The speaker’s identity is another factor that is entangled by the relation between them since eventually, the departure of the male character causes the misrecognition of Tess’s individuality. Guilt and victimization, life and death, light and darkness, are the evocations in which Tess is lost between and slipping among constantly. She symbolizes herself as Jesus Christ in terms of crucifixion, she seems to be lost for being guilty and a victim, and also she appears to be perplexed for being forgotten and ignored by others, and also for letting others forget her. As a result, she appears to find herself guilt-ridden. However, since the term “cross” symbolizes crucifixion or death, she then shows her sacrifice for the social conventions, in the same way, that Christ was crucified and died by taking on and representing the sins of others (Coleman, 2020).

The term “cross” thus enhances the ideas of death, as it is repeated in the lines “to claim my nook, to need my knell” in which the speaker appears to indicate the action of dying in both places. In this way, Tess seems to condemn herself for being sinful at one time, and then for being a victim – providing the contradictory idea

once again. She then emphasizes “wronging him,” which has several possible meanings, such as abusing or corrupting him. The idea at this stage seems to be related to the previous line – turning the flowers into nettles and dock implies that she is not able to go back to those days nor to keep on moving. In the same way, Tess plays the role of both the reprehensible or guilty one, and the sufferer.

The verse continues with the recollection of Tess’s wedding day:

How gay we looked that day we wed,  
 That day we wed!  
 "May joy be with ye!" all o'm said  
 A standing by the durn.  
 I wonder what they say o's now,  
 And if they know my lot; and how  
 She feels who milks my favourite cow,  
 And takes my place at churn!

The speaker’s thoughts seem to move back here again to the recollection of the past times – to happy days, as her attention takes her back to the day of their wedding. At that time, they were joyful and everyone was “standing by the durn,” but the expression refers to the doorpost: the term “durn” is a euphemism of ‘darn’ and etymologically refers to something that is damned or cursed. Thus, this reference can be explained in two different ways: on one hand, the door that leads to the house is “so cozy once and warm,” referring to their marriage; on the other hand, it can be seen as an entrance to the hell that she is suffering from. This paradoxical evocation appears to dramatize the influence of the social conventions, indicating that there is an irony for the people wishing them happiness, because that door can be an entrance to unhappiness in their new life after marriage. So in this sense, the language connotes the idea of shifting from life to death, or from love to misery.

Tess appears to be drowned in the recollection of their wedding: the expression “how gay we looked that day we wed,” refers to the concept of marriage, which is a process constructed by society; the wedding day is one of the ceremonies which is undergone through communities as a common feature. The striking point within the statement is the word “looked”, which seems to evoke the external appearance of the individuals, put on to satisfy the society – were they really happy? Or did they only appear to be delighted at their wedding? Plainly, Hardy’s character

is questioning all the standards and rules on which our perception of reality relies on. Tess appears to show that those norms have two sides in terms of their impact on oneself: on the one hand, gathering in the ceremonies may bring a sense of happiness; on the other hand, she questions “I wonder what they say o’s now”. To put it another way, society and social conventions play their part in causing her suffering, because of what she feels after what she has done.

Moreover, those sociocultural traditions function to produce Tess’s identity not only culturally, but also in terms of gender. The way she appears to struggle with those recollections from the old days shows her attempt to find herself, and the memories of the male character are another factor by which she finds herself as a woman who has been given the concept of love culturally, and who needs to be told words of love. The idea can be thought of in terms of the concept of gender issues discussed by the American philosopher, Judith Butler in her “Gender Problems”: Butler’s analysis explains how the concept of gender is constructed by social conventions, as binary views are created by leading individuals from the early stages of childhood to learn and follow what society believes are masculine and feminine behaviors (Butler, 2006, pp. 29-30). Moreover, Butler explains that both genders – feminine and masculine – are performative acts. That is to say, they are things that people do, how they ought to behave, and what they wear to make them appear as different genders. For instance, the collection of memories that Tess holds in her thoughts, such as sitting by the fire and working on the farm, or the way the male character calls her “sweet”, are restrictions and expressions of a social system that shapes Tess as a woman.

Like Butler, the French existentialist philosopher, political, and feminist social theorist, Simon de Beauvoir, states in her *The Second Sex*, that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman”: this illustrates that *woman* is the sex that has been given her identity culturally and she is brought up through a set of rules that constructs her in such a way that she believes that she is different from men, and dependent on them. De Beauvoir thus states that “as long as the temptations of the facility remain,” that is to say, the emotional and financial needs that women are being forced to starve for, they will find their identity within the opposite sex (Beauvoir, 2010, pp.15-16). From this perspective, Tess seems to be lost in the absence of the male character.

The expression “how gay we looked that day we wed,” evokes the concept of the gaze, by which, through observation, Tess and the partner appear to be joyful among the “folk” – that is, once again conforming to the social traditions, since conventionally, brides are required to be happy at their wedding.

Consequently, the speaker appears to wonder what they might say if they know about her “lot” – a word which suggests several meanings, such as “choice” or “chance.” Here it seems Tess is questioning whether they would feel sympathy about her or be ashamed of her. Obviously, the pronoun “they” is related to the “folk” – the community who set the rules and the norms for Tess, the people who cause her happiness and her misery. They are also the ones who have constructed her identity through making her have recollections that have complicated her thoughts and directed her perceptions.

Tess then shifts her focus to a milkmaid who has taken her position on the farm, and she wonders what “she feels who milks [her] favorite cow, and takes [her] place at churn!” That is to say, the ekphrastic scene offers a clear picture of a rural girl who works in the dairy. She describes this picture in terms of the female gaze, and Tess observes the country girl who works on the farm, with a female gaze that does not evoke sexual desires, but rather, the sense of envy that itself is also constructed by social conventions.

The expressions here also appear to be related to Tess’s desire for the setting where she used to work – as she says: “ah! dairy where I lived so long” – and also the place back when they had dinner, and “he” who used to tell her words of love; this desire seems to take Tess back again in her thoughts. As the result of the distance in time and her alienation, Tess finds herself the one who is left to suffer from the misery. Despite the delight that Tess feels with the memories of their wedding day, wishing to have them all written, her personal memories seem to be constructed by social conventions.; the events from the past days are related to the social norms and are controlled by the rules which have been set for her to follow through the abstractions in her thoughts. And she wishes to forget them. However, she wishes to have them forever in her mind, and to be written in memory, which mysteriously points to her quest to find her identity. This appears to be constructed by the slipping between both forgetting and memory; as Nietzsche says in his book *Untimely Meditations*, this is:

The ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the

capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration. He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is - worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. (1997, p.62). The key to finding happiness is not to forget the past, but rather to restrain the present circumstances, without comparing them to past events in terms of historical perspectives. To put it another way, Tess appears to compare her current situation to the time back when she used to work on the farm and how she used to sit by the fire with her partner. Nietzsche provides a metaphor for this through the example of a cow that doesn't feel pain as a result of forgetting: on the metaphorical level, the cow seems to be similar to Hardy's character, Tess, who appears to be a country girl; and the image of her milking the cow brings her happiness. To put it another way, the "cow" here can be seen as a metaphor for her past days back at the churn, in terms of happiness.

The speaker appears to be motionless or passive in the present situation, as she continues to remember all of it:

It wears me out to think of it,  
To think of it;  
I cannot bear my fate as writ,  
I'd have my life unbecome;  
Would turn my memory to a blot,  
Make every relic of me rot,  
My doings be as they were not,  
And what they've brought to me!

Tess appears to be implying here, in her last words, that she is done with accepting her "lot" to be "writ": she is not strong enough to tolerate her fate. The expression "would turn my memory to a blot" suggests the black spot of the stain of ink on a piece of paper covering the space where memories are written: here she once again wishes to have her life undone, and to be omitted from everyone's thoughts.. However, despite her attempts to "have [her] life unbecome", paradoxically, she seeks to forget her memories, but through maintaining them: to hold on to her identity that is constructed by her memories of the past. The way this kind of forgetting takes place, in general, is explained by Friedrich Nietzsche using the example of a "leaf": as a

child sees different examples of leaves, and draws its shape in its memory, the specific different shapes of “leaves” are drowned in the memory and forgotten through time as the child grows up and becomes an adult, leaving only a general concept which keeps only the outline of the original shapes (Murphy, 2001, pp. 30-33). In brief, the idea of Tess forgetting her specific memories gives her the illusion that she cannot find her identity, and it creates a general concept of loss for her, but there are still traces of the original experience kept present in it.

Tess seems to have the general concepts of love and domestic life in her memory, where they have constructed her identity and control her present situation; the social conventions around these concepts have been accumulated in her unconscious and they lead her in her path. To put it another way, she seems to be unsure of herself – whether to seek the old days and hope for them to be brought back or to forget them and disappear for eternity. Thus, social standards are the primary issue that determines the other themes in her life. Tess blames everything around her for causing her misery: apparently, her “fate” is to be written and it cannot be reversed, so this is why she wishes that her life would be undone: she wishes not to have existed, to be invisible to everyone else’s sight, as she says in the first stanza. She goes even further with the wish to make every “relic” or every part within her rotten –evoking the concept of “rot” in the previous stanzas, which also points back to the image of the pure and lively flower she used to be, active and bright. Eventually, she became rotten just like those plants which were thrown away; and this points to her death, since through death the corpse becomes musty and rots. She “would” or she wishes that her memory would turn to a “blot”: on the one hand, this suggests obliteration, being blown out, or put out and extinguished.

In a nutshell, she wants her recollections to be clear of all those memories that imprison her and stop her from being free and strong again. Tess is essentially trying to make a new memory through forgetting, and wishing for everyone to forget her and her deeds— although she fails in this. On the other hand, her wish also suggests blotting the ink on the paper, and new beginning all those memories by turning them into a collection of written signs. The language of the poem first appears to be in the form of a monologue, but later it becomes clear that throughout the poem, Tess is in the process of writing those diaries. The title signifies that Tess is the speaker, who is striving to collect all the memories that she preserves in her head, just like collecting the crops in autumn. Moreover, she seems to be a symbol of each leaf that falls alone



and turns to be dead or rotten after their earlier period when they were so lively on the tree branch.

Tess's recollections of the past show that the concept of *time* plays a vital role in the verse, poem. The way she remembers those days that cannot be brought back seems to be the cause of the sorrow of her present moment. As Nietzsche (1980) says, correlating happiness and the passage of time:

Whoever cannot settle on the threshold of the moment forgetful of the whole past, whoever is incapable of standing on a point like a goddess of victory without vertigo or fear, will never know what happiness is, and worse yet, will never do anything to make others happy. (p.9).

The passage of time seems to collect the memories of the events that Tess has been through, and she seems to be lost in the illusion of the duration of time; her thoughts stick to the previous incidents that she finds her true present time to be shaped by in the past.

The concept of time functions in various places and different ways; for instance; the expressions "would it were time to say farewell/time for them all to stand and tell" imply that Tess's regret for her life brings her to her conclusion, in which she wishes to vanish for eternity since her former life has faded away. The memory of back when she used to "[live] so long" takes her thoughts back to that time and "how [they] looked that day [they] wed". The days of the dairy and the time of their marriage seem to be converted into a stream of thought that she lives with. For example, the passage of time seems to be the cause that has turned the "flowers" into sticky plants "the flowers we potted p'rhaps are thrown to rot upon the farm", and the evocations of "where we had our supper-fire, may now grow nettle, dock, and briar" signify the changes which occur within time. The differences of past and present tenses indicate the distinction of these two situations throughout the poem.

### **Comments**

Hardy's "Tess's Lament" is a broad exploration of various notions related to social conventions. These social conventions imprison Tess through memory and forgetting – she wishes to forget and disappear from everyone's sight. Her memories of the days back on the farm block her path and they are depicted through metaphors

of sticky plants. The social conventions are constructed through the gaze – Tess’s look at her image, the male gaze, and the society's gaze are forming her identity. However, she shows the readers that she is guilty rather than being a victim, and her sin is related to her actions and decisions. This semiotic analysis of the text shows that the poem is the reverse of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and from this perspective, it is clear that Tess’s fate is directed by her deeds – pointing to the theoretical frame of ‘feminist existentialism’ which can also be seen depicted plainly in Hardy’s poem, “The Ruined Maid”.

## CHAPTER IV

### Feminist Existentialism in “The Ruined Maid”

In this chapter I present the introduction of the verse – when and where it was published, and I discuss the analysis of the verse. Then I conclude my reading with comments on the text.

#### **Introduction**

Hardy’s poem “The Ruined Maid” was composed in 1866. It was published in the collection *Poems of the Past and Present* in 1901; two years later, the second edition of the verse was published by Macmillan in London (1903). The six four-lines stanzas present a conversation between two characters and the absent character – Melia – who seems to be the protagonist or the central character. The verse begins by presenting a female speaker who reports Melia’s speech and also describes her in various ways, through the transformations in her appearance, attitudes, and her accent: she has changed from a poor country maid to a lady. The narratee seems to be the implicit representation whom the narrative voice speaks to. That is to say, there is no actual receiver in the text to represent the second character. In this chapter I focus on the radical part of the verse – the logic of the protagonist, Melia, who determines her life through her deed – being ruined – and the transformation in her appearance and her language. She seems to be establishing a movement and reversing the stereotyped ideology that the working classes are victimized by their status, suggesting that they can change that by an uprising in different forms. Melia herself has taken part in that rebellion.

Readers of the poem have focused on the most obvious parts of the poem such as linguistic reference (the use of the Dorset dialect): Minogue (2007) for examples, compares Hardy’s characters ‘Melia’ and ‘Tess’ because both speak in this dialect, which is the language of the rural maids who do not have education and belong to the working class. The analogy is also presented in the story through the depiction of pure country girls in two different ways – both of them are considered to be ‘ruined’. However, Melia shows much delight in that situation, while Tess seems to be miserable (pp. 164-165).

Loriaux (2016) claims that the dialect in Hardy’s verse may be associated with his childhood – that is to say, the place where he grew up. Even though his family

did not speak in that dialect at home, it was spoken by the people in the area, and besides that, Hardy was inspired by the work of his former advisor, William Barnes – for example, the terms ‘barton’ and ‘hag-ridden’ are found in Barnes’s “Glossary” (pp. 104-106). Loriaux also focuses on Hardy’s use of Dorset grammar: the archaic pronouns ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ that are used in the position of subject and object are related to the same dialect (p.107). And the expression “you ain’t ruined” is a blend of both rustic and urban dialects – Hardy’s verse seems to be a representation of ‘sociolinguistics’ that shows a sense of mockery at the social conventions through language (pp. 109-110).

Like Minogue and Loriaux, Jones (2004) focuses on the language of the verse – the Dorset dialect. He explains that some of the nineteenth-century poets used this dialect, and Hardy was one of those whose memory could provide the dialect, since he had heard it from his father’s workmen and other people in Dorset. Jones also notes that Hardy, Kipling, and Barnes are the essential poets who depicted ordinary people in their works since the time of Shakespeare (p. 22).

Other critics have read the verse as a cultural framework: Renner (1992) points out that even though “The Ruined Maid” appears as a humorous poem, many critics have taken it as a serious piece of work that reflects social issues during the nineteenth century such as ‘prostitution’. Renner focuses on the time reference of the verse that is composed in (1866), the period when during the “passage of Contagious Diseases,” which was caused partly by prostitution in Victorian society. From that perspective, the core of the poem is the social problems that are presented through a conversation between two maids – Melia, and her friend in town who seems to be astonished to see Melia in fine garments and speaking in a proper accent. She reminds Melia how poor and miserable she used to be when they used to work on the farms with torn clothes and starvation; however, it is being “ruined” that has caused this transformation (p. 10). Renner remarks that most of the readers do not consider the meaning of ‘ruined’ or they often find a wrong connotation of it. The term was used during the Victorian era to describe girls having illegal affairs or intimacy before marriage. Nevertheless, Melia seems to be delighted to live with the sin, and the poem appears to be pure irony or mockery, because Hardy’s character shows a better condition than being ‘ruined’ (p. 20).

Inniss (1972) states that Hardy’s verse depicts the problems of prostitution during Victorian times. It shows how working-class girls were sexually victimized

and turned into women expecting pregnancy without having a ring; it was very difficult for them to get rid of their “scarlet mark”. Inniss also says that Melia appears to be an example of many of those maids who were misled and fooled, yet she is cheerful for being in a high status; so “The Ruined Maid” ironically shows the joyful side of that phenomenon (p. 116). Hewitt (2019) points out that the poem deliberates the problems of sexuality and gender issues, and through “form and content” Hardy has conveyed his message wherein a comic sense is integrated with irony through the verse (p. 68).

I argue that Hardy’s verse suggests other concepts and aspects such as capitalism, desire, time, social conventions, gender problems, and the gaze. Melia seems to be an example of those maids whose life has been changed and eventually have been called “ruined,” not simply because she is a victim of seduction or temptation, or she wished to be involved in prostitution; the poem narrates a story of a woman who has decided to develop her ‘essence’ through having a relationship. The verse also suggests other social issues, among them, capitalism.

The German philosopher, Karl Marx, in his “Communist Manifesto”, coined the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘bourgeoisie’ in his discussion of capitalism. The former refers to the working-class, who are the ones making the products, the class of people who are alienated from the goods they produce, society, and themselves. They are exploited by the latter class – the bourgeoisie – who are the consumers of the goods, run capitalism and control the lower class (Marx & Engels, 2007, pp. 12-20). Marx defines capitalism as an economic system that depends on the materials which are brought from nature and produced by a certain class of the community and would be taken by the other class. This system is based on a trade in which the working class has nothing “but to sell their labor”; they are also considered like other means of production such as factories and machines. The group that makes the profits are the bourgeoisie.

This social structure of differentiation between the classes of society can be seen throughout Hardy’s “The Ruined Maid”. For instance, the speaker addresses Melia by saying: "you left us in tatters, without shoes or socks/ tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks/ and now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!". These terms, signifying the suffering of the working-class and how they work on the farm with poverty and bare feet, seem to be a clear depiction of the proletariat. The shift in Melia’s appearance suggests that she is now a lady from the

bourgeoisie. The language of the poem presents the difference between the social classes as a difference in language: "at home in the barton you said thee' and thou,[and] thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other' but now/ your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!" These expressions show the significance of the high-class accent, while Melia presents a mockery of this sense, where it is the maid who speaks in that accent.

Time plays the role of a strut that separates these two different conditions, and the expression of the verse indicates a shift in Melia's social class: "you left us in tatters, without shoes or socks, tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up dockes/ and how you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!" These expressions also show the significance of the passage of time, which covers or encompasses the progress of the actions and the transformations. The use of both past and present tenses also functions as an indication of the shift from being in the working class to being in the upper class.

### **Reading the Text**

The general interpretation of the title, "The Ruined Maid", is based on the historical context – the poem was composed at the time when Victorian society suffered from social problems, such as the differences between the working class and the bourgeoisie, prostitution, and the spread of diseases (Renner,1992, p. 10). From this perspective, the title appears to depict a victimized woman, both sexually and socially: the title character literally appears to suggest multiple meanings; the term "maid" in the context of the poem means – an unmarried girl – while today the word signifies the meaning of a female servant. And the signifier "ruined" has different meanings: in the Victorian era it was used to indicate women who have been sexually exploited and lost their virginity before marriage, and who were also called "fallen women", while currently the term suggests the meaning of damage financially and it also means ancient (Warmelo, 2015). However, this reading focuses on the irony in the title, which suggests two different ideas. On the one hand, Melia calls herself "ruined", hence the title character – a 'ruined maid' – implies it is a subjective concept that is chosen by Melia, not by her audience. On the other hand, if the title describes a 'ruined maid' and not 'ruined Melia', to suggest that only working women are being "ruined" then it may be a more objective perception.

The first line of the verse introduces the readers to an absent character – “O’melia” –using a female name that is derived from ‘Melia’; and the apostrophe functions as an indication that Melia is actually away. Therefore, the dialogue is being recited by an anonymous female speaker to a narratee – an unknown receiver. To put it another way, the narrative voice is recounting a prior conversation to the readers:

"O 'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!  
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?  
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?" —  
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

The speaker quotes the conversation from a meeting that she had with Melia, and describes her marvelous appearance that “crowns everything” – the signifiers here connote something that is sublime or beyond compare. Moreover, the narrative voice seems to be astonished to see Melia in “town”, and in her “fair garment”. The location of their conversation seems to be problematic; since ruined women are supposed to be in town then the speaker also might be a fallen woman. Her “prosperity” suggests wealth, fortune, or well-being, so it seems to be a surprise to see Melia in that status. Melia gives a striking reply, “O didn’t you know I [have] been ruined?” This declaration is daring and fearless, and at first appears to suggest a feminine sense of prestige, beauty, and character, but the verse suggest broader issues, as readers are introduced to a farming scene:

— "You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,  
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;  
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!" —  
"Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined," said she.

The view of working on a farm with starvation and poverty is presented through the terms “you left us in tatters, without shoes or socks” and the aura of deprivation is depicted through the phrases “digging potatoes, and spudding up docks”. In addition, Melia’s torn clothes have turned to “gay bracelets and bright feathers three”; this transformation seems to be a choice that Melia has made, because she repeats the expression, “that's how we dress when we're ruined”. Melia does not appear to be in disgrace or miserable; instead, she seems to show a brave face for what she has done.

As the recounting of the conversation continues, its language shows that the transitions are not only in the maid's aristocratic mien, but also in her accent:

— "At home in the barton you said thee' and thou,'  
 And thik oon,' and theäs oon,' and t'other'; but now  
 Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!" —  
 "Some polish is gained with one's ruin," said she.

The narrative voice points out that Melia's former language was rural, for instance, she used the pronouns "thee and thou" instead of "you". Loriaux (2016) suggests that Hardy's use of Dorset grammar and the archaic pronouns 'thee' and 'thou' in the position of subject and object are related to the same dialect which shows the language of workers (p.107). The logic of the verse shows the significance of the transformation, because Melia states that "some polish is gained with one's ruin," an expression that indicates a step of achievement, and in this way, Melia shows the skill she has gained through developing her way of speaking. The argument here is that her accomplishment is having the courage to use the upper-class language without being a member of that community. This seems to be extremely offensive for the bourgeoisie because she calls herself 'ruined' and at the same time presents herself as a woman from the upper class.

The fact that "[Omelia's] talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!" suggest that Melia appears to be like those of the capitalist class, because her speaking is elevated and has become standard, in the same way that, as sociolinguistic studies of dialectology show, dialects that are used by certain groups may depend on their geographical location or social status (Mallinson, 2015). Labov (2006), for example, states that language is a means of communication that varies from one group of people to another because it relies on their culture and the way they live, thus languages are diverse because they are based on different social classes, ages, and ethnicity (p.5). From these perspectives, the poem presents another side of the story which is based on the significance of language. Readers of the poem have focused on the pronouns "thee" and "thou" stating that they belong to the Dorset dialect, but I suggest that these pronouns do not necessarily belong to that dialect because they are an archaic and old-fashioned form in the English language (Enless, 2019). In addition, it seems to be difficult for contemporary readers to realize that those terms belong to a certain dialect, so the focus can be seen as neither on one particular



dialect nor on the significance of the upper-class accent, because language is purely a means of communication and each community has its own version of the language.

The following lines of the poem show the significance of social conventions:

— "Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak  
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,  
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!" —  
"We never do work when we're ruined," said she.

Here, the female speaker reminds Melia about her former appearance; her "hands" used to look like "paws" – very thick and large like feet. Not only her hands but also her face used to be bloodless and thin, while at the moment her rosy "cheeks" are surprising the speaker. The poem presents an image of a lady wearing a fine dress, gloves, and a hat with three feathers. Each of these features shows the significance not of Victorian fashion, but the social conventions. For instance, wearing gloves played an important role for women to show their character, especially during meals or walking on streets: not only women from the upper class, but also working women had gloves. In short, the eyes of the society in every corner of town made women extremely watchful, and the gaze here does not imply only sexual dominance, but also social norms. As Foucault shows in his discussion of power relations, which focuses on the concept of power in "panopticism", observation and the eyes of the society control every individual through imposing certain ideologies of behavior and appearance.

Thus, Victorian women were presented in the uniform of dresses, gloves, and decorated hats, actually not as a fashion, but as a homogenous look to show their femininity in the way it had been constructed by social conventions. Therefore, Melia states "we never do work when we're ruined": this suggests that the poem does not focus on 'prostitution', because it is considered to be a job and some of the "fallen women" had worked in that business. But Hardy's character declares that she does not work. Hence, Melia is acting as a member of the bourgeoisie in her language and her appearance, and she does not do labor.

Similarly, the narrative voice tells Melia of how "[she] used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream", portraying domestic life to look like a nightmare that is full of black magic and witches:

"You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,  
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock; but at present you seem

To know not of megrims or melancho-ly!" —

"True. One's pretty lively when ruined," said she.

“Sighing” and “socking” are the way Melia used to complain about the misery, while in the current situation, she seems unaware “of megrims or melancho-ly!": she lives in luxury. Melia’s reply shows she is not upset at all about being ruined – "true. One's pretty lively when ruined" –bringing down the curtains on the social conventions by declaring that there is actually pleasure in being ruined.

The speaker concludes the narration with the wish that she had “feathers” – either a pen or wings:

"I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,

And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!" —

"My dear — a raw country girl, such as you be,

Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.

On the literal level, she is showing her desire to have the same high-class fashion. On the metaphorical level, however, she wishes to have both a pen and wings; that is to say, she wishes to have the literacy to improve her language, and to have wings to fly, and have freedom and courage like Melia. But Melia calls the narrative voice “a raw country girl” who “ain't ruined” – she is still a virgin – the term “raw” refers to someone who lacks experience or who is immature. The grammatical form “ain’t” is informal and plainly does not fit “high [company]”, because it is considered to be nonstandard, and it is usually used by less educated people (Nordquist, 2019).

From this angle, Melia is still the same rural maid, yet she is not a virgin. Therefore, the struggle shifts from the problems of prostitution or the victimization of working women to a broader issue, which is the courage to speak up and announce that women are capable of choosing their destiny and breaking the laws and traditions. The poem, therefore, suggests the same perspective that appears later in the 20th century in the existentialist slogan “existence precedes essence”, which was coined by Jean-Paul Sartre to refer to the fact that human beings are first born, and then the decisions they make construct their identity and choose their destiny (2007, pp. 22-23).

Another issue that is raised in the poem is the problem of gender. Readers of the poem may wonder why only women would be called “ruined”, “fallen” or “prostitute”. There is a missing part of the logic, which is that they depend on the

perspective and gaze of the opposite gender – men: since women are being “ruined” by the other sex, they must resist and take their own role in the story. This is the argument of the existential feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman”. In a nutshell, social conventions construct women with the feminine features as a gender and to be different from men (Beauvoir, 2010, pp.15-16). Therefore, the terms “ruined” or “fallen” are applied to women only, not men because this is what society has agreed on. De Beauvoir’s perspective suggests that feminist issues should be viewed through existential lenses; that is to say, women like Melia become free to show their essence through the decisions they make.

### **Comments**

“The Ruined Maid” is often interpreted in terms of social problems: critics see ‘Melia’ as a typical character of Hardy who is being ‘ruined’ and in return, she has shifted socially. My analysis shows that the language of the verse provides a sense of rebellion against social conventions – a woman announces that she has been “ruined” as a result of having a sexual relationship before marriage. The term ‘ruined’ is utilized only for the female gender: women are supposed to obey the social ideology, so even though they have “feathers” on their hat or they walk in their “sweeping dress,” they are still called “ruined”. Hence, Melia wants to create an equation between a fallen woman and the aristocratic one: she ignores the social classifications and invents a new conception that she is a maid, “ruined”, “bourgeois” – and still a *woman*! From an existentialist perspective, ‘Melia’ is a free woman, choosing her destination rather than being victimized. However, through the eyes of society and readers of the poem, she is usually viewed as a victim who is being sexually abused. From this perspective, it is clear that power relations in readers’ societies are constructing the identity of Melia. These ‘power relations’ are the main focus of Hardy’s poem “Neutral Tones”, which is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### Power Relations in “Neutral Tones”

In this chapter I shed lights on Hardy’s last selected poem, I give a short introductory part. The second section presents the reading of the text, and finally I give my last comments on the verse.

#### **Introduction**

Hardy’s experimental poem “Neutral Tones” was composed in 1876, and published in the collection *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* in the middle of December 1898 by *Harper & Brothers* in London (Dalziel, 1997). The collection was first published by the end of the nineteenth century and at the dawn of the twentieth century. Some critics have therefore focused on the language in terms of this time reference. Doherty, et al. (1974), for example, state:

The poem is loaded with the kind of philological information which the linguistic philosophers of the Romantic movement were discovering as they investigated vernacular languages and literature. The context of the poem embodies the shift of interest in language from mentalism, grammar, and linguistic universals (1974, p. 289).

Hardy has blended both archaic and modern lexicons in “Neutral Tones” under the influence of the period when it was written. The poem is composed of four stanzas, each one consisting of four lines. The first lines of the poem present a female speaker who sketches an ekphrastic image of nature through a recollection of a winter day. Later, the description of the atmosphere shifts to the man’s facial expressions – the lover in both the second and third stanzas. Eventually, the speaker concludes the narration with the sense of having a bitter experience of a love story, ending by re-describing the sitting and comparing it to the male character, in terms of being neutral in colors, sounds, and emotions.

Readers of the poem have compared the language of the verse to the poetic style of Wordsworth: Wells (2014), for example, compares Hardy to Wordsworth in terms of their appreciation of nature and depicting experiences through it, with the difference that Hardy presents his protagonist under the influence of memories. Thus, the character here seems to be lost, cold, and passive (p. 189). Wells points out that like his other verses, Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” focuses on the separation of two

lovers (p. 194). Like Wells, Miller (2007) claims that Hardy's poetic style in "Neutral Tones" is somehow derived from Wordsworth's poetry in terms of creating meaning through life experiences (p. 101). She states that Hardy shows his characters living their moments of life in memory rather than as direct incidents; she calls this "the self-unseeing" (p. 98). And she suggests that although a "third perspective" that Hardy has added to his verse seems to be abstract and neutral, he depicts real experiences of the individuals and both factors, distance and time, play the role of authority in the verse (p. 102).

Other critics have read the verse in terms of gender references. That is to say, the narrative voice appears to them as a male speaker and some have read it biographically. For instance, Senior (2006) points out that Hardy's "Neutral Tones" is often considered as "personal moments" and narrates a memory of a male speaker expressing his emotions to a woman in a setting that appears to be neutral in colors and sounds. Hardy depicts his model in this verse through both "look and words" which leads to the failure of a love story (p. 214). Similarly, Hazen (1971) points to biographical references in the verse that have been investigated by scholars – Hardy was in love with his relative, Tryphan Sparks – but then the date of the poem shows the vagueness of the real story behind it (p. 335).

The language of the verse has also fascinated some readers. For example, O'Neill (1989) remarks that Hardy's use of metonymy in "Neutral Tones" shows the substitution of the speaker's direct attitudes to the objects in the setting. For instance, the color of the dead leaves and the color of the "white sun" reinforce the sense of passion and sentiments in the verse (p. 133).

I argue that there is no indication of the male gender in the verse, so the image and voice of the speaker can be interpreted in different ways, and also it suggests the possibility of a female persona. Furthermore, other aspects and themes are depicted in the poem, such as the gaze, time, and love. These concepts are presented through the implications of the metaphors – the colors and the sounds – which are in fact neutral, silent and colorless.

### **Reading the Text**

The title "Neutral Tones" suggests various possibilities. On the literal level, "tones" suggest the shade of a color or the quality of voice, and something which is

“neutral” is usually detached or inactive. Hence, the phrase may signify a voice that lacks any specific pitch, in other words, without a particular level of highness or lowness which would be associated with a female or male speaker. Metaphorically, the logic of the verse also indicates that it is a reference to emotions and sentiments that are neutral and passive.

The verse begins with a speaker who seems to describe the scene in terms of silence and the tediousness of the context:

We stood by a pond that winter day,  
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,  
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;  
—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

The opening words suggest a moment when two lovers are standing near a “pond” on a winter day – implies that it is cold. The ekphrastic scene of the sun being “white” suggests possible meanings such as being colorless, pale, gray, or snowy because it seems to be cursed by God. O’Neill (1989) claims that the white color of the sun indicates that the natural elements such as sun, trees, and leaves are victimized by the same “force” that punishes the lovers (p. 133). O’Neill also comments on the color of the leaves – their color suggests the fire and what is remained has turned into “ash”. Moreover, the colors of the surroundings suggest a sense of “judgment” on the couple’s love more than their natural circumstances (p. 134). However, I suggest that the color of the sun functions as a metaphor of value, the value of love that has been faded away. The American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay *Nature* explains that metaphors work by analogy: human beings are in the struggle to find the truth through associating things to each other and they always relate them to themselves:

...man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the center of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. (2007, p. 14)

In other words, human beings relate things to themselves, to find the truth through a series of metaphors, and also to find the essence of the value. From this perspective, the color of the leaves and the sun show that they lack their values; that is to say, the sun appears to be colorless and white instead of being bright. Similarly,

the colors of the stale leaves refer to valueless plants. This series of metaphors represent a valueless love relation that seems to be futile because of the loss of its originality. This is also suggested by the image of the leaves dropping on the “sod” that is described as “starving” presenting the image of dead earth that is the result of drought.

Metaphorically, the image of the leaves appears to represent a later stage of autumn, in other words, the death of the year. In these terms, the atmosphere is related to the death of the sentiments and the love story between the couple – this is reflected in a series of metaphors of nature. The expressions “they had fallen from an ash,” refers to the trees : on the one hand, this suggests an ash tree, but on the other hand, it might refer to burnt trees where flames have turned their leaves into ashes. Wells (2014) suggests that this representation of the dead or rotten leaves indicates the end and the failure of a love relation (p. 191). The plants are described with the color “gray” which is the same color as the “sun” as it is pale or silver. Hence, the sky (“sun”), the earth (“sod”), and the “leaves” are all depicted as grayish – the result of mixing both colors, black and white.

These evocations are suggested metaphorically by the colors of the ashes. Moreover, they may represent good and evil: the color white shows a sense of innocence or purity, while black represents the concept of vice or wickedness. From this angle, the description of the setting presents both concepts of color and sound, as the leaves are described as gray. This blend of colors functions as a metaphor for two different levels of emotions, leading to the equation of neutral sensibility. A neutral sound – silence – is also offered to the reader to visualize the leaves falling from the trees tenderly like ashes. A similar association between colors and sound is illustrated by the Russian art philosopher and painter, Wassily Kandinsky, who explains how looking at colors can create the sounds of music, and listening to music makes the listener imagine the colors through the interpretation (Guerman, 2005, p.53). From this perspective, readers may compare those colors, white, black, and gray, to the silence of the lovers standing there by the puddle. Although, there is neither motion nor spoken words, the sound of leaves falling appears to represent language, and at the same time, this association between neutral sound and colors in the landscape also constructs a visual image.

In the following lines, the speaker shifts from describing the mood of the location, to the man:

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove  
 Over tedious riddles of years ago;  
 And some words played between us to and fro  
 On which lost the more by our love.

This stanza focuses on the concept of the gaze that is depicted in the expression “your eyes on me”, and illustrates the power relation between the characters through observation. This is the same kind of relation which is described by Mulvey in her study of the gaze between both genders, and in Foucault’s explanation of how individuals are controlled through eyes watching them (1977, pp. 195-206). From these perspectives, the female speaker is somehow controlled by the male gaze and she is imprisoned by mysterious questions in the eyes of the male character. The “tedious riddles of years ago” can be understood in various ways, but in this context, “riddles” suggests the attempt of digging into man’s eyes to seek and find the answer to questions that have been wondered about for years, but have not been answered due to a lack of communication. The language here provides a sense of illusion and a mysterious concept, and similarly, the depiction of the view appears to be dreamlike or imaginary – a foggy scene – so it is not clear what the questions are.

This mystery is constructed through the passage of time “years ago” that has a vital role in the verse. The Italian physicist, Carlo Rovelli, states in his *The Order of Time* that “time is an illusion in which our naive perception of its flow doesn’t correspond to physical reality”. Furthermore, he explains that the universe obeys “quantum mechanics”, otherwise, the actions are just a series – they undergo through what we design as past, present, and future (Jaffe, 2018). In other words, understanding the concept of time might be sophisticated, many believe that time travels, and universal consent is that time is somehow “constant”. However, the passing of time now seems to be an illusion, because “Einstein's theory of special relativity says that time slows down or speeds up depending on how fast you move relative to something else” (Howell, 2017). From this perspective, Hardy’s character appears to be lost in the fantasy of time and she cannot find the puzzling question in the eyes of her partner. Hence, time also plays the role of finding the truth, but the aura fades away over time. For this reason, “years” is merely a signifier that is spelled out by the narrative voice without any concrete signified, so although she has been endeavoring to find the pursuit of truth she has always failed.



The speaker then shifts the description from her lover's eyes to "some words" that are unknown in terms of being written or spoken: language has corresponded back and forth between the narrative voice and her partner, but those words also seem to be 'neutral'. That is to say, they are just signifiers with expected signifieds, and through the passage of time, they have lost their reality and their existence. They, therefore, appear to be only metaphors with their intrinsic value missing; they are examples of language, which as Nietzsche explains is simply a collection of metaphors, and there is no ultimate truth behind them. Nietzsche describes this giving the example of coins losing their picture; comparably, the language has been losing its original meaning because it is merely made of metaphors and it has been utilized without questioning it or realizing there is no essence behind it (Murphy, 2001, pp. 2-4). Concisely, the phrase "wear and tear" is used by Derrida to explain how truths are metaphors which are the only embodiments of language where the original meanings have been worn away, and there is no point to reach behind them and find the truth (pp.6-7).

In the same way, the "words" between the female speaker and her lover appear to be purely metaphors with their original meanings worn out and torn up, playing "to and fro" or back and forth. In other words, they move in two opposite directions as the characters fall apart. Therefore, their separation seems to be the result of a loss of authenticity or "aura" : their seeking for reality and the honesty has failed, so "your eyes on me were as eyes that rove/ over tedious riddles of years ago". Eventually, the chain of metaphors has eliminated truth. And, as Walter Benjamin explains in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, both space and time play a role when the aura of a work of art or text is lost, because language changes constantly as time passes. This is why the corresponding words seem to be "lost the more by [their] love": the language becomes meaningless the more they repeat it.

Readers of the verse may propose various interpretations of the colors and sounds because they are outside Hardy's ekphrastic poem, and so the pond, the sun, the leaves, and the man's eyes offer "tedious riddles" to the reader through a third gaze – the reader's own gaze. Eventually, there is silence, either because the silence of words has destroyed their love or because their lack of love has destroyed the language. The end of this relation launches with the "eyes" and shifts to the "words" and then eventually, it discards them, and each possibility goes in a different way: on

the one hand, both characters have become so close that they don't need either their sight or language; on the other hand, they may be so separate that they cannot have the connection in any way.

The poem now describes the man's passive facial gestures:

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing  
 Alive enough to have strength to die;  
 And a grin of bitterness swept thereby  
 Like an ominous bird a-wing ...

The smile on the man's lips appears to be the "deadest thing"; this seems to be compared to the dead leaves, and it appears to have neutral sentiments, the same as the neutral colors of the surroundings. The figure of prosopopeia emerges in the line as the narrative voice describes the absent man, and she appears to talk to this character who seems to be away. The "grin of bitterness" is the facial expression of the absent man, which illustrates his feelings. Although it is not clear whether the character is fictional or he is there, his image is visualized in the text through various gazes – both male and female, and the reader's gaze. The satirical point is made in the description of his smile being "alive enough to have the strength to die": the "grin" refers to a smile that has "swept by" – either cleaned the "bitterness" or passed by and is now hidden. This may suggest that the other character is being seen as guilty or in shame as if the male character has wronged the speaker and the smile is merely a masquerade. The "grin" is therefore compared to an "ominous bird" – suggesting a bad *omen*; the smile seems to be wicked enough to bring bad fortune. The final lines of the verse are narrated by the speaker, who re-describes both her partner and the elements of nature:

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,  
 And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me  
 Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,  
 And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

Here she appears to conclude with a definition of "love" as something that after taking "lessons" seems to betray everyone. The lover's face is compared to the "sun" that is cursed by God. The "tree" is dead and turned into ashes; the man has a dead smile. And the "pond" seems to be a metaphor for the second character's eyes – that is surrounded by those "grayish leaves," suggesting the color of ashes; the "eyes", in other words, are circled with the darkness of being evil that is related to

the color black. Miller (2007) states that in the expression “since then, keen lessons that love deceives,” Hardy’s character shows his perspective and creates an experience through a memory (pp. 101-102). Hazen (1971) also comments on this line, suggesting that the image of nature has a crucial meaning that is related to the emotions of the speaker – they give a bitter sense to their love that is ended (p. 333).

I suggest instead that this line suggests the concept of love that is constructed by social convention and it is merely a metaphor and shifts over years. The quest of the female speaker to find the meaning of love in the eyes of the male character is unattainable and hopeless; it is an illusion because there is not reality.

### **Comments**

Hardy’s ekphrastic verse “Neutral Tones” presents a female speaker describing a wordless conversation with a male character, both standing by a puddle on a cold and pale winter day. The description of the setting and the male character are compared in terms of being natural, but the sentiments and emotions of the lovers are represented through the gaze and a collection of metaphors that are constructed by social conventions. Power relations formed by the ‘eyes’ of the characters and the third gaze of the reader play a vital role in this poem; the reader’s act of looking at the speaker and the speaker’s look at the male character shows how gender issues are constructed in language and in terms of emotions. The characters finally find their destruction through the natural elements, which are all neutral in colors, sounds, and emotions because they are forms of metaphors, and truth has disappeared behind them.

## CHAPTER VI

### Conclusion

Hardy's novels and poems are usually considered as reflections of Victorian society and in terms of depicting and mirroring real life back then; they are also seen to explore serious problems during that era such as women's issues, different social classes, love, marriage, and self-moments. This thesis has focused on three of Hardy's poems: "Tess's Lament" (1901), "The Ruined Maid" (1866), and "Neutral Tones" (1876), which critics have looked at through biographical and historical lenses; however, as I have shown, the language of these works, when they are read closely, shows multiple significations, and many of them are ironic. Therefore my study has employed a semiotic analysis, which allows us to see the reverse of these critical perspectives – for instance, it becomes clear that these texts show a shift in power relations between men and women, and the arguments in them are more radical than traditional. These significations can best be understood through the concepts of the panopticon (Foucault), the gaze (Mulvey), truth understood as a metaphor (Nietzsche, Derrida), and gender issues (de Beauvoir, Butler).

My analysis of "Tess's Lament," in the first chapter has explored the complicated issues that Tess undergoes, as she wishes to be vanished after she has been alienated from the joyful days and the warm atmosphere she used to have with her partner. Eventually, her evil deed mirrors her image and makes her see herself from the perspective of society. Her shame for what she has done causes her to suffer from the memory of the cheerful days when she used to work on the farm, and from the image in her memory of the male character whose looking and words of love hold her to the past and prevent her from moving forward. Memory and forgetting within Tess mislead her from her true identity and ideology, so this is why she wishes to be disappeared from everyone's sight and be hidden forever.

Hardy's "The Ruined Maid" suggests deeper issues as Melia declares that she has been 'ruined'. Previous studies have read it as a model of victimized maids or working women during the nineteenth century; I have argued that Melia shows her freedom to revolt against social conventions – she has chosen to be an aristocratic woman despite her ruin. Melia's fine garment and proper accent show the social norms in which women are constructed to be feminine, and the gaze of society imposes their power to consider Melia as a fallen woman.

The final chapter in my study has investigated “Neutral Tones,” in terms of power relations. The poem describes the neutral colors and sounds of the setting with two figures standing by the pond, but focuses on a silence, where all the communication happens through the power of looking, which transfers all the language needed to be spelled out by the characters. Moreover, the text enables the third gaze of the reader to visualize the location – the white sun and the gray leaves which provide the silent voices of the leaves falling from the trees. These evocations show how original meanings are lost in language, and how the metaphors that are left can be given connotations so that each one of them can be opened up into multiple layers of significations.

In summary, this study has interpreted Hardy’s poems individually through semiotic lenses so that the codes of the words would be opened and the meanings would be connected. Through linking these threads, issues such as social conventions, the gaze, gender issues, existentialism, and power relations can be seen coming together, as the main focus of the texts. These analyses demonstrate that Hardy has shown the stronger part within women and the other side of the obvious picture of society.

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