ESSAY THREE

Discuss the 'Fallen Woman' as a Familiar Feature of Victorian Writing

Victorian social conventions placed the female inside the male domain, a domestically cultivated flower rather than a wild one, uncontrollable and free to roam. Woman was idealised: the angel in the house, the wife complementing her husband, the helpmate of man. Social conditions offered the Victorian woman little in occupation so her aim in life was to secure a husband, succumbing to the political propaganda. As Foster states:

> Because so much importance was attached to the roles of wifehood and motherhood, marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfilment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural.(Foster 1985: 6)

In this role of wife, woman's great function is to praise her husband and, in return, she shall be praised for ruling inside the home where she can be 'incapable of error' (Ruskin 1865: 149) In Ruskin's lecture his view is that a husband is a chivalric knight guarding his wife from the 'peril and trial' he encounters. For the 'noble' woman, her true place is in the home, an 'incorruptibly good household nun', praised for choosing 'self-renunciation' over 'self-development'(D'Amico 1992: 69). This could also be viewed as oppression. Rather than the female 'complementing' the male, she is oppressed by him, and the praise offered by Ruskin could be viewed as a weapon, lulling the female into a false consciousness, trapping her

inside the home. For the Victorian woman, serving man's desire appears more important to serving her own. In these social conventions an unmarried woman, virginal, innocent and ignorant of sexual matters, is defined as pure, well situated for marriage. The woman not wishing this 'glorified' role of wifehood, while still wishing to express her sexuality and satisfy her desires, however, is deemed to have 'fallen' and is equated with a prostitute, 'a horrible spectre'(Dijkstra 1986: 13)

Tess, Hetty and Ruth are 'fallen women'. To ascertain how they are represented in Victorian literature I will question the authorial intention of their creators. At one end of the spectrum they appear to liberate female sexuality, providing a voice for the silent scream within. At the other end, however, the heroines perish under the pen of their creators so, it could be argued, they reinforce the patriarchal ideology of the day by preventing the women's attempts to completely break free from man's dominance. This 'penning in' is also suggested by Hunt's painting *The Awakening Conscience*.

For Hardy and Gaskell, their eponymous heroines are Wordsworthian daughters of nature: Tess a 'picturesque country girl' (*Tess 11*), Ruth a lover of nature, finding relief in the open air and pleasure in the rain (*Ruth* 58) Their childlike innocence invokes fairytale themes: Tess naively taking in the strawberry as Snow White biting into the poisoned apple; Ruth meeting her Prince Charming at a ball. Hetty desires social advancement, her sexual desire expressed through her vanity and narcissism as she relishes the idea of being observed by Luke, Mr Craig and Adam Bede, who 'not much given to run after the lasses, could be made to turn red or pale any day by a word or a look from her.'(*Adam Bede* 97) Eliot appears to scorn and mock Hetty, the coquettish puss tempting Arthur with her 'long dewy lashes' and her vanity

must not be fed by having 'her little noddle filled with the notion that she's a great beauty. Hetty's portrayal places her in a materialistic position with a desire for finery and adornment, Arthur, not Adam the required supplier. The free indirect discourse draws the reader in to the scene and Hetty's thoughts, for she delights in Arthur's presents. For Eliot, then, Hetty is the sinner Eve, ready to tempt Arthur and cause his downfall. Rather than showing assertiveness Eliot presents a deluded child-woman as the role of a woman is to be guided by intellectual man. Arthur, rather than 'misguiding' Hetty, is drawn into Hetty's web by her alluring sexuality, which she uses as a pathway to social improvement.

For the modern reader this is indicative of authors conforming to male conventions, Eliot 'excusing' Arthur for his unethical behaviour, adhering to the double standard morality. If women are placed in the 'correct' environment, the home for Ruskin, they can be protected and remain pure. Tess and Ruth are forced outside the home environment, the former by the death of a horse, the latter by Mrs Mason, so are vulnerable and unprotected from male pollutants.

Hardy shows an erotic fascination with Tess; she is his creation, her sexuality defined by him. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the male author in 'fathering' his text uses his pen as a metaphorical penis (Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 3) the connotations of pen also suggesting an imprisoning of Tess in the text. Unlike Eliot, Hardy does not allow Tess's thoughts to roam; she and her feelings are viewed in the eyes of others. Hardy's language suggests he desires Tess as much as the male protagonists. His representation of Tess is doubly voyeuristic as the reader is invited to watch Angel gazing at her, Hardy's use of meronyms placing Tess in both a passionate and a passive role: 'he saw the red interior of her mouth ... she had stretched one

arm so high ... he could see its satin delicacy ... her eyelids hung heavy over their pupils' (*Tess* 148). Meronyms are also used in Chapter 14 where Hardy portrays a cinematic view of Tess, arguably for the male audience, Tess the object of sexual desire. From 'this morning the eye returns...' Hardy seems to build up tension, subjecting Tess to a 'controlling and curious gaze', Freud naming this action scopophilia (Mulvey 1998: 557). Hardy could be viewed as promoting the interests of men, exploiting Tess for 'homosocial desire'(Sedgwick 1998), collectively dominating her. Even though Tess never courts attention she 'seduces' it; her name is the climactic event: 'It is Tess Durbeyfield'. This domination is supported by Alec's treatment of her. The reader is led to believe that Tess is a victim but is also shown her passion so is aware of female sexuality.

Ruth is by far the most innocent with no mother to guide her and neglected by Mason. If Tess is to be credited with knowledge of sexual matters, Ruth is not. Her attraction to Bellingham is an unconscious one; she watches him dancing with interest but she has no idea of the association of the camellia received from him. She believes its beauty causes her to tend it carefully not the fact that Bellingham has given it to her. She is given alluring qualities as she winds in and out between luxuriant, overgrown shrubs, 'careless of watching eyes' but her innocence is never far away as she is 'unconscious of their existence'. Ruth is a naive heroine who does not recognise her own sexual desire, an orphan who equates with Wordsworth's Lucy, a feeling, loving heroine, knowing she is pretty only because people have told her so. She has a natural impulse to taste the glory of the outside world, having been an inmate at Mason's establishment for five months. Bellingham, struck by Ruth's innocence, wishes to 'tame' her in the way he 'tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park'(*Ruth* 31). Ruth possesses no knowledge of sexual matters and Tess, rather than being conscious of sex, shares this

ignorance: 'How could I be expected to know ... there was danger in menfolk? Why didn't you warn me? (*Tess 72*). For the Victorians, sexual desire was a dangerous symptom of original sin and girls were protected from it by 'a conspiracy of silence' (Stoneman 1987: 103), all three female characters victims of absent or negligent maternal figures and ignorant of their own sexual nature, their sexuality repressed by society's laws.

Edward Tilt sympathised with woman's conflict between passion and duty, viewing female desire as 'analogous to male' (Matus 1995: 44), stating music and mental inactivity pampered those desires. William Acton, however, insisted on a difference between male and female desire. In *Functions and Disorders* he compares female sexuality to the animal world, citing the wincing pain of a female cat to suggest 'female distaste throughout nature for the sexual act' (Matus 1995: 45). If Acton's view is followed Tess is violated only if she displays no sexual desire; she can remain a pure woman, faithfully presented. Alternatively, if Tilt's view is followed, Hardy liberates female sexuality, showing Tess as a willing participant in her first sexual encounter. To the Victorian mind, a virtuous woman might submit reluctantly to her husband's sexual advances, only the 'fallen' woman finding actual pleasure in sex. Tess is deposited in an ambiguous position by Hardy's language. Like Hetty, she could be a willing participant, wearing a thin muslin dress on a chilly night, her falling into reverie on a pile of leaves a precursor to her 'fall' with Alec. Lying on her back in sylvan surroundings she could be waiting for sexual fulfilment as suggested by Arthur Hacker's wood nymphs in his painting *Leaf Drift*. Tess, as a person, is invisible, so the sexual act itself is ambiguous, Hardy unsure how to label Tess. As Laura Claridge states:

> It is as if the possibility that Tess is raped protects her from the position of having engaged in 'liberated' sex, as if the idea of free choice might sully her important purity (Claridge 1993)

The reader is aware, albeit implicitly, of Tess' 'fall', but for Hetty and Ruth, their conceptions appear to be 'immaculate'; Ruth's child Leonard described as 'a mysterious holy child'. As they 'fall' unknowingly the female authors appear to evade the problem of female desire, Gaskell instead focusing on placing Ruth in a situation of respectability. Eliot's treatment of Hetty after the 'act', however, seems to deny her that attribute. Hetty is a social outcast, alienated, frantically trying to locate Arthur in the false hope that she can secure marriage, wandering in despair, contemplating suicide, her life 'as full of dread as death'. The authorial tone of the narrator is quite emphatic: Hetty is to be blamed for her foolish sin and the reader is to be encouraged not to emulate her. Hardy seems to offer Tess the highest degree of female sexuality, allowing her to take control of her emotions but, although she forgives Angel his indiscretion he cannot forgive her in return, Hardy highlighting the double standard of Victorian morality. Earlier in the plot Tess, the sexual predator, creeps towards Angel 'stealthily as a cat ... cracking snails'. Returning to Tilt's view the music of Angel's harp could be seen to excite her desires. She closes in on Angel but ensures her presence is hidden from him, the 'gaze' now subverted. Alternatively Hardy could be erotically gratifying his male reader, the 'juicy grass' sending up 'mists of pollen at a touch', while the transitivity keeps Tess in a subordinate role. She is languid, part of a heady summer evening; her eyes had been dazed by Alec, now her ears are dazed by the harmony and the atmosphere. Yet Hardy seems unable to allow Tess to survive; along with Eliot and Gaskell he ends his creation's life.

Ruth's innocence and Tess' ambiguity free them from 'cheapening paradise', but Hetty has 'made a brute' of Arthur, and this representation of femininity conforms to the conventions of the day, Eliot satisfying the reading public and the ideological stance. The female protagonists symbolise victimisation by male exploitation, their authors highlighting the injustice of double standard morality. If authors have authority over their work one could expect them to write freely about controversial subjects. Eliot, using a male pseudonym and Gaskell refusing to have her novel in her house, suggest their authority was limited. It would seem likely that Eliot, due to her unorthodox liaison with Lewes, would exhibit unconventionality, but Hetty is placed in the conventional role of 'fallen' woman. It could be argued that Tess' Ruth's and Hetty's desires are repressed, the authors sacrificing the inner feelings of woman to satisfy an ideological moral law. Female passion has been revealed but then concealed by the evasion of the actual sexual act and the consequent deaths of the heroines, suggesting Hardy, Gaskell and Eliot are denying female sexuality. Historically, *Ruth* inspired Josephine Butler to campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act, in an attempt to protect the female body (Barreca 1990) and socially Hardy, Eliot and Gaskell have highlighted the need for change. Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, its beauty for all to see, Tess, Ruth and Hetty are allowed to 'free' their sexuality, but they are only allotted the three days' existence of the butterfly. It could be argued, under the metaphorical penis of patriarchy, the authors have silenced Woman, have left her screaming within.

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To conclude, the Victorian woman can no longer be framed; the boundaries have been blurred. The 'pure' woman has deviated from the conventional norm; she can no longer be defined. It could be believed, however, the inner conscious of Woman has been revealed, rather like Munch's *The Scream* which displays, unmistakably, male figures in the background and a depersonalised, sexless, tormented figure in the foreground. This figure, I suggest, is both Woman and the authors, afraid of the power of female sexuality. This could

suggest why each 'fallen' woman has to leave an 'angel' behind, in the forms of Jemima, Dinah and Liza-Lu. On a positive point, the authors have planted the seed for Women's Rights Movements, such as the Suffragettes, to follow, and, for the Victorian female reader, the encouragement to fight for liberation and an end to male dominated society.

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