ESSAY ONE

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

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* may be characterised as a 'social problem' novel. Basch (1974: 263) states, 'Mrs Gaskell's impure women came from ... the work and exploitation which she knew, relatively speaking, better than other novelists.' Gaskell was the wife of a Unitarian clergyman in Manchester. She devoted her time to setting up homes for fallen women, and after *Mary Barton* women became her central characters, her novels primarily seen through women's eyes. Thomas Hardy, since his career began, has been notably associated with his portrayal of female characters. Erving Howe even writes about 'Hardy's gift for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women.' (Boumelha 1982: 3) From this point of view, I intend this essay to establish a comparison between Gaskell's 'fallen woman' in *Mary Barton* and the way in which Thomas Hardy frames his central female character in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

In the context of the nineteenth century, there emerged an increasingly ideological 'rethinking' of sexuality, particularly of the female. Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* later in 1871 argued that men and women were somehow mentally different. Darwinian sociology led to sexual stereotypes such as Clement Scott's 'men are born "animals" and women "angels" so it is in effect only natural for men to indulge their sexual appetites and, hence, perverse, "unnatural" for women to act in the same way.'

(Quotation from Boumelha 1982: 18). The centrality of the female characters in both novels brings into question the problems concerning the female nature.

The first time we are introduced to the 'fallen woman' character - Esther - in *Mary Barton* is on learning of her disappearance. John Barton and George Wilson, two mill workers in the industrial town of Manchester, are discussing the last time they saw her.

'"Say's I, Esther, I see what you'll end up at with your artificials ... stopping out when honest women are in their beds, you'll be a streetwalker, Esther ... don't you go to think I'll have you darken my door.'" (1998: 6) John Barton's language creates an immediate comparison between Esther and an 'honest' woman; she exists either in one paradigm or the other. This also becomes evident in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: upon being told of Tess's rape, Angel states, '"You were one person: now you are another."' (1998: 228). Ingham (1993: 82) writes that this is an erasure of Tess's identity, which Hardy has replaced with a deceitful 'Magdalen' figure. This is more prominent in Mary Barton, in Gaskell's contrasting figures of Mary and 'plain little sensible Margaret, so prim and demure.' (180) Mary is wooed by Henry Carson, son of a wealthy mill owner, and rejects the attentions of her faithful childhood sweetheart. Esther is also wooed at a young age, and the parallel Gaskell makes between the two is their good looks. '"She was as pretty a creature as ever the sun shone on"' (Wilson on Esther: 5), and (concerning Mary: 32) 'Margaret could hardly take her eyes off her.' Similarly, it is Tess's appearance which first attracts Alec D'Urberville to her, and her husband Angel, who describes her stay at Talbothays: 'He had never before seen lips and teeth which forced upon his mind with such persistent iteration the old Elizabethan simile of roses filled with snow.' (151)

Beauty, for Elizabeth Gaskell, seems to constitute much of Esther's (and Mary's) potential downfall. This might also seem the case for the narrator's perception of Tess, yet he evokes sympathy for her too: 'Inside this exterior ... there was the record of a pulsing life which had learned too well, for its years, of the dust and ashes of things, of the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love.' (280-1) It is nor the looks of the other women, Marian and Retty, which lead them to drinking excessively, and Retty trying to drown herself (221), but the fact that they have fallen in love with Angel Clare. Love seems to be the reason for all the girls to become 'impure'. Tess states (385) that she killed Alec D'Urberville because she owed it to him and because he called Angel 'a foul name' (386). Love does not even seem to become apparent in *Mary Barton* though; Mary wishes to marry Carson because he was 'rich and prosperous and gay' and did not want Jem because he was a poor mechanic (152).

Love in *Tess* causes the protagonist to 'fall' once more, yet the narrator earlier praises this kind of love: 'Clare knew that she loved him ... but he did not know at that time the full depth of her devotion ... what honesty, what endurance, what good faith.' (213). The narrator seems to approve of this kind of selfless worship, his message seems to be 'a good woman loves like this' (Mitchell 1994: 194). If, then, Tess is ultimately good it is hard to determine why Hardy ultimately punishes her. Similarly, Esther's only crime it seems is falling in love with a man higher in station than herself, who promised her marriage but did not keep his word. Like Tess, Esther has a child without marriage who died soon after. Diane D'Amico gives her definition of the fallen woman: 'Some may well have been young women who willingly took a lover and then were later deserted, and others were likely to have been what we would now consider the victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.' (1992: 69). Under these conditions, Esther relates to the former, as she is guilty of falling in love with the wrong man and is

punished with the loss of her beloved child. Tess was, however, (depending on the reading) either raped or seduced by Alec, both equally evil because of her very young age. Yet Hardy punishes Tess also by the loss of her child, Sorrow the Undesired, and by hanging her at the end of the novel. Esther, too, dies at the end of *Mary Barton*, cold, hungry and diseased due to her prostitution. Mary, however, representative of the 'nearly fallen woman' sails to America with her husband Jem where they have a child together. This is significant of what Brady states about the Victorian novelists: 'Both the celebration of virginity and the fascinated fear of the 'fallen woman' suggest the Victorian need to confine female sexuality to reproduction.. (Higgonet 1993: 88). If marriage and children are the ideals of the Victorian woman, then Tess is robbed of this female privilege, because of the sexual attraction she initially held for Alec D'Urberville to rape her. Unlike Mary Barton, who is aware of her desirability, 'Mary liked making an impression, and in this it must be owned she was pretty often gratified' (32), Tess seems to resent her beauty, shown in her removing her eyebrows (280) and at other times she just seems blissfully unaware of it: 'She was yawning, and he saw the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake's ... It was a moment when a woman's soul is more incarnate than at any other time; when the most spiritual beauty bespeaks itself flesh..' (169)

In many ways Tess's downfall is not due to self-perceptions of her own beauty, but due to those of others. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is intensely voyeuristic, not just through Hardy's characters Angel and Alec, but also the narrator, who essentially makes everything about Tess available for looking at. This is seen after the rape and Tess's return to Marlott to work in the cornfields. Hardy's narrator states '... the eye returns involuntarily to the girl in the pink cotton jacket, she being the most flexuous and finely-drawn figure of them all.' (88) Judith

Mitchell calls this Tess's 'to-be-looked-at-ness' and discusses it under the terms of Laura Mulvey's 'fetishistic scopophilia' (188). In this way not only is Hardy's Tess exploited by Angel and Alec, but by the narrator, because she exists merely as a spectacle for a primarily masculine gaze. We are not just invited to look at her, but notice her 'soft arm' (176), its 'feminine smoothness' (88) its taste of whey (176) and the smell of butter and eggs on her breath (242).

Even her ordeal with Alec D'Urberville at The Chase is written from the point of view of the observer her feelings are not narrated and she is silent in the months she lives with D'Urberville after this, up to the baby's death. In this way we are even more inclined to believe that this was 'rape', it is such a huge part of Tess's life yet her feelings are not even documented in this story of her life. Nor are her reasons for killing Alec D'Urberville evidenced and documented in her defence. Gaskell's Mary Barton is given justice as due to consequences beyond her control her father kills her lover. Gaskell, though, evokes hunger, severe poverty and death of children; the circumstances surrounding Mary seem to go her way. Jem is freed from suspicion of Carson's murder, her father dies and escapes prison and she and Jem are able to flee England away from people - like in *Tess* - who may object to her behaviour with Carson. Mary is given a chance to redeem herself after Carson's death; it is self-sacrifice in finding an alibi for Jem and later in maternal devotion. The two protagonists both carry characteristics of the two types of women that Victorian ideals created, the virgin and the whore. For Tess, her sexuality for others is the source of her guilt through her life, her 'tragic flaw'. We have learned that the narrator objectifies Tess, but he also violates her at the hands of her two lovers, and this violent imagery is persistent throughout. 'A bit of her naked arm is visible ... and as the day wears on it's feminine smoothness becomes sacrificed by the

stubble and bleeds' (88). Boumelha suggests the existence of 'phallic imagery of pricking, piercing and penetration' (120). This is also seen in Prince's death, where his neck is pierced and Tess covers the wound with her hand. her plight is also symbolised by the death of the birds (279); freedom and flight are stolen from them and are shown mercy in Tess wringing their necks, just as Tess becomes free in killing Alec and in her own hanging. Although death has a major role in *Mary Barton*, value here seems to be placed upon 'staying alive' in the industrial society of disease, malnutrition and poverty.

Nature is a large part of Hardy's construction of the 'fallen woman', in an era when men are associated with culture and intellect, women with biology and reproduction. The ongoing nineteenth-century discourse about the 'nature' of women confined them to gendered social roles. Brady states: 'Hardy's narrators persist in constructing ... female characters according to standard notions about women's weakness, inconstancy and tendency to hysteria' (89). This can be seen where Angel and Alec both accuse her of being capricious, tantalising and teasing in her refusals to marry both of them. The male characters seem not to be able to take 'no' as her answer and assume she is coy or unsure in her own mind. This is also evident in Mary's refusal of Mr Carson:

'"Mr Carson! ... I have made up my mind to have nothing more to do with you ... He, young, agreeable, rich, handsome! No, she was only showing a little womanly fondness for coquetting.' (158)

Yet in *Tess* it becomes evident that the narrator himself equates his main character with the female as a gender. 'With the woman's instinct to hide she diverged hastily' (196), and later: 'The heart of a woman knoweth not only its own bitterness, but also its husband's..' (244).

Hardy's generalising commentary binds Tess to her sex, yet not in the same way as Gaskell, who writes for Mary: '"I know I've been wrong in leading you to think I liked you; but I believe I didn't know my own mind."' (158). In fact, Mary does not seem to 'know her own mind' throughout the whole of the narrative. In Jem's case, she feels a 'dread of him' (89); she loves 'another far handsomer than Jem' (91). Yet the narrator states later '...she [Mary] missed the luxury she had lately enjoyed in having Jem's tender love at hand' (420). Exactly how Mary's change of heart happens is not documented, nor are her walks with Carson in his courting even given narrative, yet this is vital to our understanding of how and why such women are able to 'fall' in the eyes of Victorian society.

In many ways, Gaskell prioritises her novel as a realist account of the conditions of the working class, and although this includes documenting the plight of the 'fallen woman' she comes from a different environment of harsh working conditions and the misery of the slums. Although Esther embodies the definition of the 'fallen woman' she is only a brief, fleeting character who Gaskell neith attempts to analyse or understand. More than Hardy, Gaskell offers hope to Victorian women, in Mary's ability to escape society's constraints, in spite of her mistakes. However, although *Mary Barton* is a 'realist' novel, Mary's consequences are hardly practical for all women, and hardly constitute the social awareness that Gaskell is acclaimed for. Hardy's narrative therefore is more realistic, yet, as many critics have said, Tess herself is not. Boumelha states 'Tess herself is almost less a personality than a beautiful portion of nature violated by human selfishness ... She is the least flawed of Hardy's protagonists, but she is also the least human.' (123). In many senses the narrator puts this across 'her breathing was now quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman' (395) at the scene at Stonehenge. Her unwillingness to live unmarried to Angel and Alec

shows her innocence of morals and perhaps this is the reason for Hardy's afterthought of a sub-title for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 'A Pure Woman'. Tess is like Hardy's moral argument, that Tess is pure and good regardless of chastity, and as Angel says to her. 'I wish half the women in England were as respectable as you' (241). Tess is the idealised heroine, Hardy's attempt to voice his opinions of the value and dignity concerned in being female, in the setting of his fictional 'Wessex'. In this way Tess is not *real*, in the sense that she is the embodiment of Hardy's ideal woman, when in reality no one remains so selfless, so innocent as Tess in the consequences of her life, which ultimately plague her until her death. In this way, Tess is more acceptable for us, if *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a parable. Yet Hardy's novel participates, nevertheless, in a male-centred discourse *about* the female, and in both the novels historical circumstances and dominant ideology are the framework behind the portrayals.

The narrator states about Tess: 'She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides, Tess was only a passing thought' (91). This is true of all women, especially in the Victorian era; whether the Wife, the Mother, the Maid or the Whore, the characters of *Tess* and *Mary Barton* exist based on stereotypes derived from contradictions in what constitutes 'a woman'. It is not surprising that in the face of this adversity the female heroines of contemporary fiction become the representative organs enabling the manifestation of moralistic ideas prevalent at this time.

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