

The status of
femininity in
"wuthering heights"
and "tess of the
d'urbervilles"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Both Thomas Hardy's tragic novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, set in impecunious rural England, and Emily Brontë's gothic novel *Wuthering Heights*, established at two adjacent houses in the Yorkshire moors, question whether the imperfect male constructs stem from the gender separatism prominent in the contemporary society or from an inflexible class structure. Thus, these novels raise controversy around the portrayal of their female protagonists. The texts were published in the 1800's, and describe a generation where women had few choices and many obligations - a main concern of both Hardy and Brontë, who were anxious to express their thoughts on the social conventions and propriety at the time. The demise of the female protagonist within both novels involves their relationships with males. In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë establishes clear contrasts between the two genders and appears to favor masculinity over femininity while depicting women as indecisive and unstable characters. Similarly, Hardy stresses the dominance of men in all aspects of society through their power and strength (both physical and mental). However, it is the morality of Tess, an exploited female, victim which is championed. Rather than condemning her for not conforming to social norms, Hardy celebrates her individuality and moral purity. This morality is all the more admirable given the social disadvantages that being born into a poor rural working class family places upon her.

Following the Romantic Movement, Brontë re-examined the position of women in society; she presents a world in which men control the personal and social outcomes of women within a social framework. Her exploration of gender roles in *Wuthering Heights* identifies the archetype of the 'unreclaimed creature' in the unequal Victorian society: the man. Edgar does

not allow Cathy to leave Thrushcross Grange, which restricts her intuitive character. This drives her desire to defy her expected obedience, leading her to run away to Wuthering Heights while there she is suppressed by the 'fierce, pitiless, wolfish' Heathcliff, who brings her under a superior patriarchal dynamism as he cunningly uses Linton's illness to put Cathy in the box that is her gender stereotype. Though his animal energy and passion are admired, he is certainly morally condemned as he 'possessed of something diabolical,' represented when Nelly describes him as a 'bird of bad omen' and 'knave' and by Joseph as an 'evil beast.' In a way then, Cathy's fate is both determined by the constraining oppression of her class seen in Linton's demands, and by the domination of the powerfully male Heathcliff.

Much like Bronte, Hardy uses society which plays a vital role in men's actions as we see embodied in Angel the inequalities of British society so that his perception of females changes when he travels to Brazil - a land that rejects ideals and encourages diversity. "He had mentally aged a dozen years" as he learns to amend his previous judgements of Tess' faults. Angel is a loving man constrained by the staid attitudes and assumptions of his family and social background. It is only when he leaves this environment that he is able to perceive the pettiness and prejudicial hypocrisy of his (and his community's) attitudes, allowing him to realize that "the beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed." Hardy both uses Angel to emphasize that in a corrupt bigoted society, innocent women suffer both at the hands of ruthless selfish men (Alec) but also

tragically suffer at the hands of those who are essentially good but also trapped by their social prejudices (Angel). Angel becomes a "slave to custom and conventionality," but returning from Brazil opens his eyes as he begs for forgiveness: "Tess! Can you forgive me for going away?" Brazil, in the late 1800's, was far more advanced in its treatment of women - "[...] there can be no doubt that there was less discrimination against women in education than in most countries of the world at the time"

Wuthering Heights is structured through flashbacks in the form of a dual narration by Lockwood and Nelly Dean. This creates contradictory narrative perspectives, which intrigue the reader and aid the understanding of the plot. Allowing Lockwood and Nelly Dean to interact and lodge with the characters at Wuthering Heights and The Grange automatically creates a sense of obscurity as to their bias in the novel. "Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen [...]" Nelly's narration is compelling yet highly erratic as she speaks as if she is gossiping with a friend. The unreliability of the narrator shapes our view of Cathy's "imprisonment" by men because Nelly's hyperbolic opinion at some points of the novel suggests that men exaggerate their position and authority in society. Unfortunately, because of the law in the 19th century, men were able to dictate everything; even if their decisions were unbecoming there would be no objection raised against them: "In the legal realm women were decidedly dependent, subservient, and unequal." Bronte appears to be more concerned with the dynamics of gender relations than with class conflict, but in a way Heathcliff's background influences his relationship with Cathy so that the two issues are intertwined. On the other hand, "The desired effect -

which the writer need not to be aware of – is a perpetuation of the unequal power relations between men and women.” Bronte is not purposely trying to degrade women but is rather hoping to explore the discrimination in society and how the immorality and deceit leads to the belittling of everyone eventually. A significant stage of the novel is when Linton and Cathy have an argument – Linton says “He wanted all to lie in an ecstasy of peace’ and Cathy ‘ wanted all too sparkly, and dance in a glorious jubilee.’ She says ‘ his heaven would be only half alive’ while he said hers ‘ would be drunk.’ The juxtaposition of the underlying imagery, metaphors and antithesis within the dispute exemplifies how Linton controls Cathy’s character by apparently being considerate. This tactic is mainly represented when Linton uses his illness as a powerful tactic to sway Cathy’s actions, again demonstrating the corruption and sometimes insidious control of the patriarchal society.

Bronte wishes to demonstrate how men’s actions can be completely counterproductive in such efforts simply to dominate and control women. This conception is demonstrated through the naivety of Linton, who seems to misunderstand that Heathcliff is using his illness to persuade Cathy over his inheritance. Sadly, it may not be Linton’s callousness but Heathcliff’s terror that causes him to act this way towards women, “ With streaming face and expression of agony, Linton had thrown his nerveless frame along the ground: he seemed convulsed with terror” Heathcliff’s craving for revenge is almost monstrous; his own son dreads what he will do to him if he doesn’t do what he says: ‘ In place of so entirely filling the canvas that there is hardly a scene untainted by his presence.’ It certainly seems here that it is Heathcliff’s domineering maleness rather than his social position which is

prompting his behavior towards Cathy. Vital to the framework of the novel is the author's and readers' sympathy for the mistreatment of women in the nineteenth century. At the time, *Wuthering Heights* was deemed a highly corrupt narrative, since it confronted and threatened the disciplined civilized behavior of human beings. This theme is paralleled in Shakespeare's plays, which were an inspiration to Emily Bronte: in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Hamlet*, the treatment of young women is somewhat ruthless. Shakespeare's most famous female characters were usually victims of men, a status which connoted the loss of their purity and innocence. Their inferiority was also significant in terms of the plot - since it helps us perceive the relationships between the men and women better: "Women were defined physically and intellectually as the 'weaker' sex, in all ways subordinate to male authority."

Hardy was similarly concerned with the difficulties faced by women both in their relations with men and in the development of their social role. Writing forty years after Bronte, he too focuses on a rural environment, but here the changes brought by industrialization also impact women, creating tension between "the ache of modernity" and nature. Hardy's use of seasons reflects this conflict, as when he uses summer to parallel the blossoming relationship between Angel and Tess. (Angel even refers to Tess as a "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature.") Their relationship is therefore implicitly seen as "natural," only to be thwarted by male arrogance and social prejudice. Tess is hypothetically 'A Pure Woman,' but is subjugated socially as "Victorian society exacerbates an age-old harsh and hypocritical definitions of virtue and exhortations for maidens to conform." Social prejudice allows no room for her to 'right her wrongs' as "Once victim,

always victim: that's the law." Her tragedy is pre-destined because of the way the society works; hence, she epitomizes the fact that ' bad things happen to good people' and vice-versa, as the perpetrator is left without receiving the repercussions for his actions while Tess is condemned for her " terrible sins." In this manner, Hardy attacks the destructive nature of Victorian morality and hypocrisy.

Certainly, like Tess, Catherine is primarily presented as a victim, and although men's control over women is pre-eminent, in Wuthering Heights society's vital role is reflected in the strategically characterized, dominant narratorial voice of Nelly Dean as she personifies societal norms. She never had a husband and was told to " mind her place," demonstrating the social oppression of women. Society was dismissive about women's status and relative position. Women were forced to submit themselves to men in order to gain any form of social position. Catherine marries Edgar instead of Heathcliff for love, as she remarks, ' if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars' and concerning Edgar ' he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood.' This mentality could be interpreted as suggesting that women were selfish and demanding riches and glory rather than that men were dominant. After the marriage, Nelly says, " It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn" - Bronte's use of natural imagery of the opposing plants here in relation to the personality of Catherine. The idea of the obstinacy of a thorn, and of the Lintons as sweet as honeysuckles, emphasizes the inversion of the expected social roles of both genders. This statement echoes modern views, as women are now allowed to experience life in an almost equal and

far less oppressive environment, and certainly Bronte ensures that the characters of Catherine and Young Cathy embody a social change in attitudes towards female equality. In a way then, her novel seems to imply that Cathy's subjugation stems from society, even though the visual metaphor of a flower that represents 'the love that clings without harming anyone'; 'embracing the thorn' alludes to how men still believe they have the ability to 'tame' the individuality of women, which is implicitly seen as socially dangerous.

"From simple girl to complex woman," Tess' situation can be seen to allude to The Book of Genesis, which is an important motif in the novel, as when we are told that Tess 'regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam.' The analogy here is that Tess is the distressed Eve, and Angel the honorable Adam, which reflects her own perception of her social rank. Hardy's description of Tess' garden being full of 'weeds emitting offensive smells' is a metaphor of her paradise which is soon to come crashing down again. The Garden of Eden represents not only paradise but also the loss of it: the introduction of sin. This is most clearly shown through the character of Alec, who adopts the persona and archetype of a Victorian melodramatic villain and seducer, and in effect seems to victimize the protagonist, and segregate her from her community, so that contemporary as well as modern readers would view him as a villain. Alec demeans Tess 'The Maiden' in PHASE THE FIRST into Tess 'Maiden No more' in PHASE THE SECOND. Through Tess, as an 'untinctured vessel of emotion,' Thomas Hardy explores the injustice faced by women in a patriarchal society, giving the novel a degree of verisimilitude: "I was born bad, and I have lived bad,

and I shall die bad..." Alec embodies Satan as he rapes Tess under a ' forbidden tree,' giving her the ' fruit' that gives her sexual knowledge in exchange for her innocence. Many people have been taught that the fall and original sin of humanity is the fault of women and some, particularly contemporary readers, may feel that the subjugation of Tess is through her own indecisiveness - " the greatest misfortune of her life was this feminine loss of courage at the last and crucial moment."

Male domination and the oppression of class divisions both have a major role to play in the subjugation of women and are far from mutually exclusive. Class divisions affect men just as men affect class divisions; it would be inapt to blame the full state of affairs on one factor. In Hardy's and Bronte's works, women all share a common trait of over-optimism and suffer as a result of their own unrealistic expectations of society.