

**THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN 19TH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JANE EYRE BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË AND TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES BY THOMAS HARDY**

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*This article examines the representation of women in nineteenth-century English literature through a comparative analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Drawing on feminist literary criticism and socio-historical scholarship, the study investigates how both novels simultaneously challenge and reflect the prevailing Victorian ideologies of femininity, morality, and social class. The analysis demonstrates that while *Jane Eyre* constructs female subjectivity through the discourse of moral autonomy and spiritual equality, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* deploys the figure of the fallen woman to interrogate the sexual double standard embedded in Victorian patriarchal culture. Both authors, despite divergent narrative strategies, mount a sustained critique of the structural constraints imposed upon women, thereby anticipating the feminist discourses of the twentieth century.*

**Introduction**

The nineteenth century in Britain was a period of profound social transformation in which industrial capitalism, evangelical religion, and imperial expansion combined to produce one of history's most elaborately codified systems of gender relations. The so-called doctrine of

separate spheres assigned women to the domestic realm while reserving public, professional, and political life for men (Poovey, 1988). Literature became a critical site at which these ideological formations were simultaneously reproduced and contested. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) demonstrated in their foundational study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, women writers of the period encoded their social anxieties within narrative forms that both conformed to and subverted dominant cultural scripts.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) stand among the most powerful literary investigations of womanhood produced during the Victorian era. Despite being separated by more than four decades and authored from gendered positions that are themselves different — one a woman writing from the inside of female experience, the other a man representing it from without — both novels address a convergent set of concerns: the tension between female desire and social prohibition, the mechanisms of patriarchal authority, and the moral frameworks through which women's conduct was relentlessly evaluated. The present article undertakes a systematic comparative analysis of these texts, arguing that both novels mount a sustained and historically significant critique of the structures that constrained Victorian women's lives, thereby contributing to the long transformation of cultural attitudes that feminist political activism would eventually consolidate.

### **Main body**

Any critical engagement with the representation of women in Victorian fiction must begin with the ideological formation within which both authors were working. The dominant cultural ideal of Victorian womanhood was encapsulated in the phrase "phrase angel in the house", popularized by Coventry Patmore's narrative poem of 1854, which celebrated the female virtues of selflessness, purity, submissiveness, and domestic devotion (Patmore, 1854). This was not merely a cultural fantasy. It had concrete material consequences: the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 was the first piece of legislation to grant married women any legal ownership of their earnings, underscoring the extent to which women were, before that date, absorbed into the legal personality of their husbands (Shanley, 1989).

John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) offered the period's most rigorous philosophical critique of this arrangement, arguing that women's subordination was a product not of nature but of law and custom maintained by force of habit and self-interest. Mill's analysis is significant for literary study because it reveals that Victorian society was itself internally divided about the justice of its gender arrangements, and that literature was one of the primary arenas in which this division was worked out. As Nancy Armstrong has argued

in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), the realist novel of the Victorian period participated actively in the construction and naturalization of gender ideology, producing narratives that taught readers how to be properly gendered subjects. Yet the very realist conventions that served this ideological function also created spaces for its critique, since the detailed representation of individual experience inevitably exposed the gap between ideological prescription and social reality.

Elaine Showalter's foundational study, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), traced the development of women's fiction in English through what she identified as three historical phases. The Feminine phase (1840–1880) was characterised by women writers' imitation of male literary models and internalisation of dominant values; the Feminist phase (1880–1920) by active protest and advocacy; and the Female phase by a turn toward self-discovery. Showalter's schema is imperfect — it tends to underestimate the degree of feminist consciousness present in ostensibly conformist texts — but it provides a useful historical framework for understanding where Brontë and Hardy fit within the larger trajectory of gender representation. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* occupy transitional positions: they participate in the conventions of the realist novel while straining at its ideological limits in ways that anticipate the more explicit feminist writing of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is, first and foremost, a novel about the construction of female selfhood under conditions of severe social constraint. Its radical originality lay in its deployment of a first-person female narrator possessed of an inner life of extraordinary moral, emotional, and intellectual intensity. Jane's famous declaration — 'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me' (Brontë, 1847, p. 281) — encapsulates the novel's central aspiration: to present a woman who defines herself through acts of will and conscience rather than through her relationships to men or her conformity to social expectation. In this respect, *Jane Eyre* represents what Showalter (1977, p. 112) describes as a feminist fantasy of complete female autonomy, even as the narrative eventually domesticates that fantasy within the conventions of the marriage plot.

From the opening chapters, Brontë establishes Jane as a figure of structural non-conformity. Orphaned, economically dependent, and physically unimpressive by Victorian standards, Jane lacks the conventional resources of femininity — beauty, wealth, social connection — and must construct her identity through the cultivation of interior qualities. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argued influentially that this strategy of inward compensation is characteristic of the nineteenth-century woman writer's response to social exclusion: the

transformation of powerlessness into spiritual authority. Jane's refusals to submit — to the bullying John Reed in childhood, to Mr Brocklehurst's religious tyranny at Lowood, to the seductions of St John Rivers' zealotry, and most crucially to Rochester's desire — constitute a sustained exercise of female will that is, by Victorian standards, remarkable.

The relationship between Jane and Rochester lies at the novel's thematic centre. Rochester represents the tradition of aristocratic, libertine masculine authority — powerful, sexually experienced, and accustomed to the possession of women. Jane's repeated resistance to subordination, most dramatically enacted in her departure from Thornfield after discovering Rochester's first wife, constitutes the novel's most powerful assertion of female autonomy. As Poovey (1988, p. 136) observes, Jane's resistance is articulated not in political but in theological terms: she upholds the sanctity of marriage and the authority of law as defences against the seductiveness of romantic passion, thereby claiming moral authority within the very discourse — Christianity — that Victorian culture most consistently used to legitimate female subordination.

The figure of Bertha Mason — Rochester's first wife, confined in the attic of Thornfield — introduces the novel's most troubling ideological dimension. Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p. 360) famously interpreted Bertha as Jane's 'dark double': the embodiment of the passionate rage and sexuality that Jane herself must suppress in order to achieve social integration. Bertha's madness is coded through the language of racial and colonial otherness, a dimension that Jean Rhys would later address directly in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), reconstructing Bertha's story as a postcolonial counter-narrative to Brontë's. The containment and eventual death of Bertha is, structurally, the condition for Jane's domestic happiness — a resolution that reveals the limits of Brontë's feminist vision even as it celebrates female agency.

The novel's conclusion — Jane's inheritance of wealth and marriage to a humbled, blinded Rochester — has been interpreted in contradictory critical terms. Some scholars read it as a capitulation to domestic ideology; others see in Rochester's physical diminishment a symbolic levelling of the gendered power differential. What is unambiguous is that Brontë constructs Jane's happiness on terms that Jane herself has determined. The sentence 'Reader, I married him' (Brontë, 1847, p. 498) — with its grammatical subject firmly in the first person — signals a subtle but significant reversal of conventional gender agency in the domestic sphere. Jane does not receive marriage; she enacts it.

Brontë's treatment of class further complicates the novel's gender politics. As a governess, Jane occupies a liminal social position — educated above the servant class but denied the social standing of her employers. Showalter (1977, p. 118) notes that the governess figure in

Victorian fiction functioned as a site of ideological anxiety, embodying the contradictions of a society that educated women but systematically denied them economic independence. Jane's resolution of this structural problem through inheritance is, as Showalter notes, a fantasy solution — one that Brontë, writing from within a society unwilling to address the issue through political reform, could offer only in fictional form.

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, subtitled 'A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented,' offers a representation of Victorian womanhood that is in almost every respect the structural inverse of Brontë's. Where Jane Eyre constructs female subjectivity from the inside, through first-person narration, Hardy's omniscient third-person narration surveys the progressive destruction of a woman by forces that are, in all meaningful senses, beyond her control. Tess Durbeyfield is not represented as an agent of her own destiny but as a victim of a convergence of biological nature, social convention, masculine desire, and economic circumstance so overwhelming as to render individual will almost entirely ineffectual.

The subtitle itself constitutes Hardy's most direct challenge to the dominant ideology of Victorian sexual morality. By insisting on Tess's purity despite her rape by Alec d'Urberville and her subsequent sexual history, Hardy attacks the double standard by which Victorian society condemned sexually experienced women while exempting men from equivalent moral judgment. Penny Boumelha (1982, p. 120) has argued that the novel is fundamentally concerned with the gap between social and biological definitions of femininity: Tess is pure in the sense of being natural, instinctive, and uncorrupted by social pretension, but she is condemned by a society that defines purity exclusively in terms of sexual inexperience and conformity to patriarchal codes.

Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare, the two principal male characters, together embody the twin operations of Victorian patriarchy. Alec represents its overtly predatory dimension: he uses economic power to exploit Tess's material vulnerability and rapes her in the Chase, the novel's dark and symbolically laden wood. Angel Clare represents patriarchy's subtler but equally destructive face: his abandonment of Tess upon discovering her past reveals the hypocrisy of a moral idealism incapable of accommodating the reality of female experience. Hardy's central irony is that Angel, who presents himself as a free-thinking progressive who has transcended conventional religion, proves entirely unable to transcend the conventional sexual ideology that underlies it (Langland, 1997, p. 84). His treatment of Tess is, in this sense, the more damaging of the two male betrayals, because it occurs in the name of the very ethical principles he professes.

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The representation of Tess's body is central to the novel's feminist politics, though its implications have been vigorously contested. Hardy's narrator repeatedly foregrounds Tess's physical beauty and sensuality in passages that some critics, including Rosemarie Morgan (1988, p. 76), have argued reproduce the male objectifying gaze that destroys her, implicating the narrator — and by extension Hardy himself — in the patriarchal violence the novel purports to critique. Others have argued that Hardy's insistence on the naturalness of Tess's physicality is precisely the point: by making female sexuality visible and beautiful, he challenges a culture that defines female virtue through its denial. Whatever critical position one adopts, it is clear that Tess's body becomes the terrain on which the contradictions of Victorian gender ideology are most acutely inscribed.

Hardy's use of pastoral landscape is equally significant. Tess is repeatedly identified with the natural world — the Vale of Blackmoor, the fertile dairy at Talbothays, the exhausting fields of Flintcomb-Ash — and this identification suggests the violence that civilisation and its moral codes do to natural existence. The idyllic Talbothays sequences represent a temporary suspension of social pressure during which Tess approaches something like freedom; their subsequent destruction — by Alec's renewed pursuit, by the mechanisation of agricultural labour, and ultimately by the law — enacts the novel's central thesis: that the social determinations of sex are inescapable for a woman in Victorian England (Hardy, 1891).

Tess's murder of Alec and her execution have been read as both an act of desperate self-assertion and an inevitable consequence of a system that has already effectively condemned her. Boumelha (1982, p. 135) argues that the murder represents the only form of agency available to Tess within a social structure that has stripped her of every other form. The novel's final irony — 'Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess' (Hardy, 1891, p. 397) — is Hardy's most bitter formulation of the novel's argument: that the moral architecture of Victorian society functions with the indifferent destructiveness of a malign deity, and that women are its preferred victims.

Placed in comparative perspective, *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* illuminate both the continuities and the transformations in Victorian literary representations of women across the second half of the nineteenth century. Both novels are animated by a shared moral conviction: that the treatment of women in Victorian society is unjust, and that literature has a responsibility to make that injustice visible. But they differ fundamentally in their assessment of the possibilities available to women within that society.

*Jane Eyre* is, essentially, a novel of achieved selfhood. Its narrative follows a modified Bildungsroman trajectory — from childhood marginalisation through suffering, temptation,

and testing to eventual social integration — but with the crucial modification that the integrating institution is a domestic relationship restructured on egalitarian principles rather than the public sphere of professional or civic achievement (Fraiman, 1993, p. 89). Jane's triumph is partial and circumscribed — it is won within the domestic sphere, and it requires the symbolic diminishment of her male antagonist — but it is genuine. The novel insists that a woman can, through the cultivation of moral integrity and the assertion of spiritual equality, carve out a form of authentic selfhood within Victorian society. This is, as Beer (1983, p. 44) notes, ultimately an optimistic vision, however qualified its optimism.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles offers no comparable consolation. Hardy's deterministic vision, shaped by the naturalist currents in late nineteenth-century fiction and by the evolutionary biology of Darwin and Herbert Spencer, presents female destiny as a function of heredity, environment, and chance rather than individual will (Beer, 1983, p. 233). Tess is not defeated by any failure of character or resolution; she possesses, as Hardy repeatedly insists, a moral integrity and natural purity that far surpass those of the men who destroy her. She is defeated by a system that has no place for what she actually is. The contrast with Jane Eyre is stark: where Brontë's novel imagines female virtue as a force capable of negotiating with and partially transforming social reality, Hardy's novel demonstrates that social reality is capable of destroying the most authentic feminine virtue without compunction.

This contrast in novelistic outcome corresponds to a difference in narrative mode that is itself ideologically significant. Brontë's use of first-person narration grants Jane an interiority and a narrative authority that assert, at the level of form, the very female subjectivity that the novel thematically celebrates. Hardy's omniscient narration, by contrast, places Tess under a surveilling gaze — the narrator's, the reader's, and ultimately society's — that formally reproduces the objectifying structures the novel ostensibly critiques. As Morgan (1988, p. 103) has argued, this formal ambiguity is not a failure of Hardy's feminist intentions but a symptom of the historical limits within which any male author representing female experience in the 1890s was necessarily working.

Both novels also engage with questions of social class, though neither offers a systematic analysis of class exploitation. Jane's marginality as a governess and Tess's rural working-class origins place both women at the intersection of gender and class disadvantage, and both narratives acknowledge the material dimensions of female subordination — the dependence on male economic patronage, the absence of educational and professional opportunity, the vulnerability to displacement and destitution. Yet both texts ultimately prioritise the moral and emotional dimensions of female experience over its material conditions, reflecting what

Raymond Williams (1970, p. 87) identified as the characteristic ideological horizon of Victorian fiction: its capacity to perceive social suffering in personal and moral terms while stopping short of a structural analysis of the systems that produce it.

Despite these limitations, both novels make enduring contributions to the tradition of feminist literary representation. They insist, with compelling imaginative force, that women possess an interior life — moral, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual — that exceeds the roles to which patriarchal society seeks to confine them. In *Jane Eyre*, this interior life achieves partial expression and partial social recognition. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, it is legible only in the process of its annihilation — in the ever-widening gap between what Tess is and what the social order makes of her. Both strategies of representation, however different their outcomes, contribute to the long nineteenth-century argument about women's nature, rights, and social position that feminist political activism would eventually translate into legislative and institutional change.

### Conclusion

This article has argued that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* represent two of the most significant and searching engagements with the representation of women in Victorian fiction. Despite their considerable differences in authorial perspective, narrative strategy, and ideological resolution, both novels are animated by a shared critical impulse: the conviction that Victorian society's treatment of women is systemically unjust, and that imaginative literature has both the capacity and the responsibility to expose that injustice.

*Jane Eyre* achieves this through the construction of a first-person female narrator whose moral authority, spiritual independence, and refusal of subordination enact, at the level of narrative form, the autonomy that the novel thematically celebrates. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* achieves it through the radical pathos of an omniscient narration that renders Tess's destruction as social indictment rather than personal tragedy. Together, the two novels trace an arc from a mid-Victorian feminism grounded in the discourse of moral and spiritual equality to a late-Victorian proto-naturalism that locates women's oppression in the systemic operations of biology, class, and social convention.

The significance of these texts extends far beyond their immediate historical moment. The questions they raise — about female autonomy, the sexual double standard, the relationship between personal moral integrity and social survival, and the costs of patriarchal authority for individual women's lives — remain living questions in contemporary feminist discourse and in the broader public conversations about gender equality. Reading *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the*

d'Urbervilles together illuminates not only the conditions of Victorian womanhood but also the literary and theoretical traditions through which subsequent generations of feminist critics and writers have understood, inherited, and challenged the representation of women. Both novels endure as foundational texts of feminist literary criticism precisely because they articulate, with extraordinary intellectual honesty and imaginative power, the structural conditions of women's oppression and the human cost of its perpetuation.

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