

Immoral Ethics Redefined: *Tess of D'Urbervilles* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a widely held view that great writers have something to say about the important ethical issues confronting their age. This paper is an attempt to explore how ethics gets defined in Victorian and Contemporary times as far as the 'morality' of a woman is concerned and how Thomas Hardy and John Fowles dealt with it in their respective novels-- *Tess of D'Urbervilles* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Ethics or Moral philosophy is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: 'moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity'. The term comes from the Greek word *ethos* which means "character". Although moral principles refer to standards of behaviour there are various views on how those standards should be set and by whom. England in Victorian times had a strict moral code. Victorian morality can be described as a set of values that supported sexual repression with a strict social ethic. However, at the turn of the 20th century, morality as a theme, became more complex and is no longer concerned solely with rightness and wrongness, but is more interested in the many different kinds of moral status. In contemporary literature, postmodern ethics has greatly influenced narrative. The rewriting of the Victorian era has been one major area in the academic discussion of post modernity, the aim being to create self-awareness in the present. According to Gibson, the ethical resides in the indeterminable. Therefore, postmodern ethics rejects all those approaches to morality that emphasise universal and categorical principles as the basis of argumentation, such as Christian theology, Aristotelian teleology, and the Enlightenment project. Instead, postmodern ethics does not even seek to establish a secular, universal or objective morality on rational grounds, and does not believe that reality is comprehensible in any terms that suggest essences, static identity, or a whole. In fact, postmodern ethics emphasises immediacy and the singularity of ethical relations.

The fallen woman relentlessly troubled the Victorians. In a period obsessed with the idealization of female virginity, the consequences of sexual experience outside wedlock often resulted in ruin. While Victorians society advocated the idea of the angel in the home, its art overruns with images of the sexualized woman. In emphasizing her blamelessness, the fallen woman is apparently separated from the dangerously independent figure of the prostitute, though the boundaries between a fallen women and a prostitute at times tend to blur. Time and again the threat of a sexually impure woman is negated through art.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is grounded on a recognizable motif, that of a fallen woman. By means of this motif, Tess represents the prejudices of Victorian society. In 1892, Thomas Hardy wrote in his notebook, "The best tragedy—the highest tragedy in short—is that of the worthy encompassed by the inevitable. The tragedies of immoral and worthless people are not of the best." Thomas Hardy's willingness to challenge contemporary views of sexual morality and marriage made many

of his novels very controversial when they first appeared. The manuscript of his novel *Tess* went through a lot of different versions, and the controversial bits made it difficult for him to find a publisher. The publishers who rejected the novel put it more or less bluntly, that *Tess* (both the character and the novel) was too sexy to be put in print. The sexiness made it immoral in their eyes. In 1890, Hardy finally found a magazine willing to publish *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but only on condition that he censor some of the more controversial scenes. Later in 1891, Hardy was given the opportunity to publish *Tess* in book form version, where he defiantly added the subtitle ("A Pure Woman"), defending the purity of the heroine in spite of her rape.

As one of the most influential and well-received books in world literature, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* portrays a poor innocent country girl who is victimized by the combined forces of Victorian patriarchal society and at the same time demonstrates Hardy's profound sympathy for Tess, the protagonist of the novel. Tess's tragic fate is closely connected with two men's betrayal and mastery. The bourgeois hypocrisy and the male dominance incarnated in Angel and Alec cooperate in driving Tess to destruction. In the conventional world with a severe view on virginity and chastity, the sense of self-guilt and self-reproach haunts her through her life journey. After her sexual violation, the rigid society gives her no chance for regeneration. As the sacrifice of ethical prejudice, Tess is victimized by Victorian society, whose law she is driven to break and from whose moral codes she is alienated. Her deviation from the well-accepted ethical restrictions for women decides her tragic destination. Tess is clearly aware of the reality of the society she lives in and she realizes the social bias towards virginity and chastity. "Once victim, always victim: that's the law" (TD 321). Hardy seriously questions, "Was once lost always lost really true of chastity?". Tess's miserable fate is nothing but a "sport" for "the President of the Immortals," a terrible game played on females by males, leading her to the murder of Alec, which is her final and fierce act of protest against male-dominated social law although it inevitably leads her to her final execution. Tess tries to get free from men's control and find individuality but the social consensus of her times does not condemn or punish her seducer, Alec. Instead it disdains and hunts Tess, as a social outcast and religious offender, wherever she goes. Alec, the real sinner, is later converted to be a preacher instead of being criticized and punished by religious consensus. So unfair is the social law that it does not punish nor condemn the wrong-doer, but instead deprives Tess of her dignity by designating her as a fallen woman. However it is Angel's destruction of Tess is even more unbearable than Alec's. As a product of Victorian social culture, Angel cannot conceive of an equal relationship with Tess. His dissipation in London can be forgiven; while Tess's innocent "misconduct" cannot. Alec's violence and Angel's rejection both reflect the hypocrisy and narrow-minded prejudice regarding virginity and chastity. Alec physically ruins Tess by depriving her of her virginity; Angel spiritually destroys her by depriving her of her courage for life and pursuit for love. Thus Alec's barbarism and Angel's hypocrisy, interdependent on each other, are the two irresistible forces driving Tess to her dead end. By giving detailed description on Angel's unfair attitude towards women's sexuality and on his narrow-minded view on chastity, Hardy relentlessly mocks the hypocrisy of the Victorian moral standards. Angel's personal values and viewpoints about chastity are culturally shaped. Superficially, he divorces from his family and convention; effectually he still confines himself to his culture which enslaves him at crucial times. Angel's "double moral standard," is reflected in his attitude towards Tess the moment he is told of her past. Tess forgives his romantic dissipation with a woman in London, but Angel refuses to forgive Tess for her "disgraceful" past and this is further aggravated by his cruel desertion of Tess. Such behavior clearly exemplifies the "double moral standard" that prevails in Victorian society in relation to sexual lives and feelings of women.

Thomas Hardy's views about society's moral values are clearly influenced by Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Throughout history, humans have appealed to the supernatural in desperate need for moral direction. According to Christian tradition, God is said to have revealed his wisdom and morally perfect values to human civilization, compelling them to conform to his standards of perfection. This is the way humanity ought to behave according to the will of God as revealed in 'holy' scripture. However, for Hardy, the Darwinian model of nature remains a critical and revolutionary paradigm shift in human history, which made possible the ideas that shape the primary themes of his novel: the indifference and injustice of the natural world and the incompetence of Christian theology in attempts to provide a moral framework in such a world.

According to a critic, Hardy in developing these themes, does not so much expound ethical advice, but rather explodes the notion that Christianity's 'revealed' wisdom is the best source of ethics and morality, and instead suggests that it is, indeed, a potent source of immorality. In the novel Hardy, in keeping with his materialistic, "agnostic" point of view to which he so thoughtfully subscribes, explicitly concerns himself with illustrating the unjust disposition of an unjust and dogmatic Christian belief in a benevolent God through his satiric representation of such assumptions in the light of Tess's misery. Following the death of her child, Tess is reduced to pleading for her child's salvation, confronting the parson of the parish in a desperate attempt to secure a proper Christian burial for her child, and seek reassurance that Sorrow will not be condemned to an eternal residence in hell, "where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid" (84). But she does not receive this reassurance from the Vicar. It is in this powerful episode, which concludes with Tess adorning Sorrow's grave with "a bunch of [flowers] in a little jar of water", that Hardy justifies his agnosticism: not only is Christianity amoral, but immoral. If it were not for the immoral injunctions of ancient "holy texts", enforced by the menace of a celestial dictator who would wish the punishment of its creation? Thus Tess, in Hardy's mind, becomes the victim of an uncaring God rather than the merciful and loving Christian God. This victimization justifies Hardy's assertion that Tess is a pure woman even though society holds her responsible for multiple sins. Although Tess does not fit into Victorian conventions of female behavior, Hardy does not call her "non-impure," but "pure," which implies an ethical vindication beyond a delinking of sex and society.

John Fowles' 1969 historical bricolage *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is often regarded as the first comprehensive postmodernist novel or a postmodern double-coded discourse which examines values inherent in the Victorian era from a twentieth century context. The novel's use of intertextuality, metafiction and its irreverent attitude can be seen as a postmodern parody of Victorian fiction and the historical novel. For the purpose of examining the values and ideologies of the Victorian era in comparison to the postmodern paradigm, Victorian conventions are shown juxtaposed with postmodern techniques such as the authorial intrusion and alternative endings. In the novel, Fowles contrasts present day relationships, and morality with that of the Victorian era in the 1850s. Corresponding broadly with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* reveals realistically the prejudices of Victorian people, especially those pervading the life of a small coastal town Lyme Regis in Dorset. It is a typical provincial town where people hold firm to Victorian principles and social norms. The novel portrays the attitudes of the people of Lyme towards Sarah, "the French lieutenant's whore," the fallen governess. Mrs Poulteney, who belonged to the gentle class and considered herself to be a paragon of virtue, impersonates the religious sentiment and extreme moral attitude of the Victorian era and particularly those of Victorian Evangelicalism. For this reason she became a severe judge of immorality. She has a passion to expose all the vices of her employees and proteges, such as the secrets of Sarah Woodruff, through her own spies. She thus embodies the idea that Victorian religious practice was dominated by the desire to expose and control sexuality. Dr. Grogan is another character who gives Charles a lecture about morality and his duty to Ernestina, when he found out that Charles had fallen in love with Sarah.

Towards the end of the novel we find that the repressive norms and the people's insensitive attitude towards Sarah succeeded in driving her to Exeter. In the nineteenth century, Exeter was notorious for providing all sorts of 'wicked entertainment.' Brothels, dance halls and gin palaces thrived there. It served as a heaven for unmarried mothers and mistress who were victims of sexual abuse or social rejects. People did not care nor bothered about others so Sarah felt free there. It was in Exeter that Sarah seduced Charles Smithson, although he is betrothed to Ernestina Freeman, whose conformity contrasts to Sarah's rebelliousness. Sarah is completely different from other Victorian women because she does not follow social norms. Charles realises her extraordinary brightness as well as charm. Gradually his interest in her grows into an obsession. Deep in his soul he realized her immoral behavior. But he did not realize that Sarah had two qualities – passion, which he confused with sensuality and her imagination. He was not able to accept them because these two qualities were not irreconcilable with women's qualities in that time. Sarah was a mystery for Charles. Her face did not express what he expected. It was not demure, obedient and shy as it was demanded by the convention. When she told him of her affair

with Varguennes and how she became an outcaste as a result of it, he was surprised that a woman could unearth her intimate feelings and thinking before a man, he considered it as inconceivable. For him Sarah now symbolizes life's mystery, enchantment, and boundless possibilities-expanded intellectual horizons, sexual fulfillment, adventure, and romance. His fiancée, meanwhile, comes more and more to figure forth for him the hypocrisy and sexual repression that characterize the privileged classes. Together the women make concrete his vexing ethical dilemma: should he succumb to the temptation offered by the presence of Sarah by disregard both social convention and personal responsibility in order to ally himself with the woman he loves or should he honor his engagement to Ernestina? After an agonizing inner struggle he decides on the latter course, but he is defeated by a series of artful deceptions carried out by people whose interests his marriage will serve or protect. At the end of the book he has lost the woman he desired. His experience with her, however, refines and deepens his moral awareness, and he stands above the trite conventions of his age. Sarah, as the desired woman forces Charles to confront the inconsistencies between his moral code and his personal behavior.

The French Lieutenant's Woman also rewrites Victorian sexuality. It is a well known fact that that the Victorian era was silent on sexual matters. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* explores at least three Victorian discourses on sexuality—artistic, scientific, and theological. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood stands for artistic and cultural emancipation in the novel. The two other Victorian discourses on sexuality mentioned earlier, science and religion, are similarly seen in the novel as characterized by the will to sexual knowledge. Fowles's novel approaches sexuality from the point of view of an individual. The innocent woman, who either falls in love with a man, or is simply seduced or raped by a man and thus becomes an outcast, has been a common topic in world literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Thomas Hardy's Tess D'Urberville revealed already functioning social and moral stereotypes of the respective periods in America and Britain. These tragic figures were victims of hypocrisy, social and moral ignorance, but in John Fowles' novel the victim is a victimizer. The title of the novel, ironically, promises to offer the life story of a tragic figure seduced and abandoned, or further abused, terrorised and humiliated by a merciless seducer but there is no seducer in the novel, no acts that humiliate a weak innocent woman. On the contrary, we discover that the French Lieutenant's woman is the result of Sarah's 'creativity' and she becomes a seductress who manipulates Charles Smithson. For most of the novel we witness a young virgin's preparations to become somebody's woman rather than a fallen woman's struggle to fight against the attacks of Victorian society. Sarah Woodruff's greatest power stems from her creative manipulation of already existing social, moral and most notably fictional patterns and the tempting quality of the image she creates of herself. Sarah's 'writing' of her own fate also enables the novel to reveal the process by way of which the 'dominant' character deconstructs the myth of both the pure woman and that of the fallen woman and thus the fallen woman can be interpreted as the pure woman and the pure woman can be equated with the fallen one. This is also the case in Thomas Hardy's *A Pure Woman* as well, but John Fowles' intention is to suggest that a mysterious and beautiful woman's version of her own miserable or dignified fate is a valid possibility. The fact that Sarah is playing the role of a fallen woman and is determined to confront the hostile environment through the false image she designs and enacts. But once Sarah's pretence is revealed the novel discards its false interpretation as a traditional but limited Victorian novel and directs our attention to its postmodernity.

Sarah Woodruff pretends to be a fallen woman, a miserable victim of her uncontrolled passion, a possible mistress, a woman who is ready to marry the man who renounces the financial advantages offered up to him by life, a muse for artists, and finally a woman liberated by her status in all respects. she pretends to be bad, because her status as a bad woman guarantees her the freedom to credibly fulfill all her 'unfulfilled promises' and to provoke discussion of related moral, ethical, social and aesthetic problems. She does not actually lie because Charles, similarly to the other characters, formulates questions, which comprise 'prefabricated' answers. Her answer has to be considered, and can only be weighed in the light of Charles's question: "Miss Woodruff, I detest immorality. But morality without mercy I detest rather more. I promise not to be too severe a judge" (F.L.W. 136). Charles' text implies her 'immorality' and although he assures her of his sympathy, the cruelty against which he offers to defend her is comprised in the very formula he employs. As Sarah employs stereotypes to construct her image these discussions also strengthen her 'apartness' from the other character, whose verdicts she seems to justify through

her acts and thus they can merely reflect on her assumed status. Thus Sarah's decision to abandon Charles produces uncertainty as to her moral worth. Sarah Woodruff is a bad woman by Victorian standards, and she is not only aware of her sexuality, but as the French lieutenant's woman she also makes of it a symbol. Thus she deliberately contradicts the established social and moral attitudes of her time as a Victorian heroine, and also challenges the interpretation of her practices by twentieth century critics. When Sarah Woodruff projects her sexuality into a story about seduction she also casts herself in the role of the femme fatale. Thus she turns the prejudice of the world against the society that creates those prejudices. Due to the ambiguity principle at work Sarah also challenges the myth of the prostitute as she has an authentic status both as a pure woman and as a fallen woman. The image of the fallen woman is created by her. Since she inhabits the imaginary world of the novel, she discards the authenticity both of the Victorian novel and of its twentieth century rewriting.

2. CONCLUSION

There has been substantial discussion and debate amongst literary critics and others as to the ethical value of literature. There are those who line up with the sentiment expressed by Oscar Wilde, 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all' (2006, p. 3). This view has different proponents: those who believe that moral flaws are artistic or aesthetic flaws and that a great work of art or literature will be by its very nature ethical and those who believe a work of high aesthetic quality, a 'great' work of literature, is beyond ethical criticism. On the other side of the debate stand those who would argue that literature is always engaging with moral and ethical questions. As Helen Gardner points out: literature gives us images of human life and records human experience, it is inevitably full of moral ideas and moral feelings, strongly engages our moral sympathies, and tests our moral allegiances. (1982, p. 37). Much has been written the responsibility of the writer to the real people whose lives they are re-presenting in their works. However, there has been limited discussion among and by writers of fiction on the ethical questions and dilemmas arising in the process of writing fiction. That fiction writers have ethical responsibilities is based on the premise that fiction (like all art) has the power to make a difference to people's lives. It is because fiction has an impact on readers that writers have ethical and moral responsibilities.

Tess of the D'urbervilles is a novel crafted to serve as a source of moral reflection from which societal values can be discovered and superstitious religious dogmatism discarded. In both the novels, the protagonist, neither Tess nor Sarah tells the reader her story. We have no idea of what Tess felt during the rape or was it seduction? Hardy's text is constrained by the problematics of consent. Ultimately, the meaning of purity hinges on the relation between seduction and rape. Hardy attempts to preserve Tess's purity while at the same time representing Tess as a desiring or speaking subject. The figure of the seductive woman is thus enormously important for any reading of Tess. Hardy repeatedly exhorts us to desire Tess, which implies that she is the archetypal sensual woman who encourages such desire. Yet he also notes that Angel (and, by extension, judgmental readers) should read Tess' face as the true evidence of her purity. However, we can love her only if she is a pure woman, which creates a dilemma. If God punished a whore, a tramp, is he truly unjust or cruel? Tess' revelation places Angel in a crisis of the soul, so to speak: she presents him with a face that seems entirely virginal, and yet she has "fallen." She is not the pure ideal that he assumed she was and desired her to be. His discovery of this dual nature, of Tess' ability to appear spiritually innocent and yet be physically deflowered, distresses him. Hardy's ultimate point in his indictment of society is of course the supposed moral center of society: God and his laws. If God's pronouncements of justice are flawed, as Hardy declares them to be then society's cruelty can be reversed by rejecting those cruel laws. The injustice of the law is never addressed by its proponents, Hardy suggests-society salves its conscience when it simply hand its victims another verse. If neither of Tess' sins was of her own seeking, then the law has nothing to say to her. Here is Hardy's strongest case for a rejection of such a moral code. If we reject society's moral code, then Tess would be pure because, like the woman caught in adultery whom Christ forgave, no one could raise a stone against her. Fowles' on the other hand, rethinks Victorian morality. Fowles's novel emphasises a totally different view of reality and moral standards. The resistance of Sarah's character to every description, whether expressed in a euphemistic manner ("the French lieutenant's woman"), scientific terminology or lovers' jargon, can be interpreted in ethical terms as a denial of the Western obsession to possess the other

completely. Being the other to the very end of the novel, not giving up to the psychological analyses of Dr Grogan (or the reader) or to the Romantic Victorian narrative Charles (or, again, the reader) tries to impose on her, Sarah remains free from every effort to define her diversity and difference, even if she is still under the contingent historical pressures of her time. It is in fact Sarah Woodruff's face and look that starts the main plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Charles's quest for a new identity. According to the narrator, Sarah has "an unforgettable face," and afterwards Charles thinks of her look as a lance. There is certainly much that is sexual in this first encounter between Charles and Sarah, but the most important aspect of it is that Sarah's look deconstructs Victorianism. Sarah's look belongs rather to the next century, that is, her look is anachronistic—even if the contemporaries are not able to recognise the (post)modernity of her appearance. The novel's thematic emphasis lies ultimately on the recognition that it is ethical to acknowledge that any description of a face is inadequate and that it is the acceptance of this indeterminacy that is the most ethical act. In fact the novel seems to propose that, as an ethical act, desire for the other maintains the other's otherness. As a messenger of modern sensibility, Sarah is a perfect example of a character who represents the prehistory of the present. Ernestina, on the other hand, had "just the right face for her age" tells us nearly all that we need to know about Charles' fiancée. She is the stereotypical Victorian woman. Chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* emphasises a totally different view of reality and moral standards and the novel's three different endings seem to suggest that the reader should estimate the effect, way and degree of the impact of Victorian heritage on her or his personal life. Readers' relation to the moral endeavour of the narrator depends on whether he or she accepts the principle of freedom as justifying this new approach to the past and to its literary discourses and whether the text seems to succeed in its (postmodernist) ethical effort.

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