

**The Colonized Body: Lacanian, Foucaultian, and Feminist Critiques of
Subjectivity in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles***

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Abstract

This research paper re-evaluates Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by analyzing the disintegration of the protagonist's subjectivity through the intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucaultian discourse theory. The genesis of Tess's tragedy is located in the failure of the 'Symbolic Father'—a structural entity essential for introducing the child to the social order and fostering an autonomous identity, which Lacan posits is foundational to human development. John Durbeyfield's ontological paralysis and greed precipitate a collapse of this symbolic order, effectively rendering Tess vulnerable to the predatory mechanisms of the patriarchal 'Real'.

The paper argues that Tess's profound 'internal guilt' is not an intrinsic moral failure, but a sociopolitical construct perpetuated by the Foucaultian framework of 'Power/Knowledge'. Societal discourse defines 'purity' as a disciplinary tool, compelling Tess to internalize shame for an act of violence she did not commit. Consequently, her confession to Angel Clare is analyzed not as a moral obligation, but as the inevitable surrender of a 'broken self' conditioned by patriarchal power dynamics. Ultimately, the novel serves as a clinical dissection of how the failure of symbolic authority and the disciplinary surveillance of society systematically dismantle the female subject, forcing her to accept a guilt that is structurally imposed rather than ontological.

Keywords: Tess of the d'Urbervilles; Lacanian Psychoanalysis; Foucaultian Discourse Theory; Patriarchal Power; Female Subjectivity.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has long been read through the lens of tragic fatalism; however, a deconstructed analysis reveals the novel to be a meticulous documentation of the cruelty inherent in patriarchal power structures. The protagonist, Tess, operates within what may be termed a patriarchal 'Panopticon'—a societal apparatus that employs constant surveillance to discipline the female body and enforce heteronormative morality (Foucault 195). Her body serves as a 'site of politics,' a canvas upon which the masculine gaze inscribes rigid codes of virtue and transgression.

The psychological disintegration of Tess begins not with her own actions, but with the failure of her 'Symbolic Father,' John Durbeyfield. Hardy introduces John as a "day-dreamer" whose vanity regarding his "d'Urberville" lineage supersedes his paternal duty (Hardy 35). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Symbolic Father is the structural function that introduces the child to the social order, providing the necessary boundaries for the formation of an autonomous identity (Lacan 67). John Durbeyfield, paralyzed by his own "ontological inertia," fails to provide this foundation. By prioritizing his own narcissistic daydreams over the protection of his daughter, he effectively renders Tess a commodity for familial gain. This initial betrayal forces Tess into the 'Real' of sexual violence, marking the start of a predicament for which she later assumes false guilt. This introduction posits that Tess's tragedy is not a manifestation of 'destiny' but the inevitable outcome of a society that systematically destroys the subjectivity of the woman who refuses to conform to its disciplinary mechanisms.

The Subversive Purity: Hardy's Literary and Archetypal Reconfiguration

Thomas Hardy's definitive subtitle, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, serves as a radical subversion of Victorian moral hegemony. Unlike the traditional literary allegories of virtue—such as Edmund Spenser's Una in *The Faerie Queene*, who remains an untouched vessel of holiness (Spenser 45)—Hardy's Tess embodies a subjectivity forged through, rather than shielded from, the experience of violation. Hardy deliberately rejects the Spenserian paradigm of purity as static innocence, instead positing that purity is an ontological state that remains resilient despite the colonization of the female body by patriarchal structures (Hardy 112).

This tension between societal branding and intrinsic virtue is not merely a Victorian preoccupation; it reflects a deep-seated Jungian archetype within the collective unconscious. The transcultural resonance of this archetype is illustrated by the 1996 cinematic adaptation,

Prem Granth, which mirrors the structural trauma of Hardy's protagonist. By depicting the protagonist's struggle against the stigma of sexual violence, the film demonstrates that the patriarchal demand for a "pristine" female subject is a global phenomenon. As Kate Millett notes, literary representations often serve as mechanisms to reinforce subordination (Millett 120).

Hardy's insistence on the "pure" label for Tess is an act of defiance against this systemic erasure; he demands that the reader differentiate between the violence inflicted upon her and her own moral agency. By deconstructing the identity of the "fallen woman" and reconstructing her as a martyr, Hardy exposes the hypocrisy of a social order that prioritizes abstract purity over tangible suffering (Hardy 215). Ultimately, the universal tragedy of Tess lies in her role as the "Other," defined solely by the male gaze—a concept articulated in the structural dynamics of both Victorian England and modern patriarchal societies (Beauvoir 154). Hardy's narrative proves that this struggle for self-definition is not just a personal ordeal but a collective one, as societies continue to privilege performative morality over the protection of the vulnerable. Through the lens of Spenserian literary history and modern archetypal patterns, Tess Durbeyfield emerges as the enduring symbol of an unbroken spirit, challenging us to confront why civilization persistently punishes those it should protect.

The Symbolic Father's Collapse and the Economic Trap

The tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield is fundamentally rooted in the structural failure of the 'Symbolic Father,' John Durbeyfield, whose chronic indolence and vanity signify the collapse of the familial order. Hardy illustrates this through John's preoccupation with his "d'Urberville" bloodline, a narcissistic day-dreaming that blinds him to the material reality of his family's survival (Hardy 38). In a Lacanian sense, the father should represent the Law and the gateway to the Symbolic Order; however, John represents a vacuum of authority. His "ontological paralysis" prevents him from fulfilling his protective role, leaving the family in a state of precariousness that necessitates the commodification of Tess (Lacan 67).

From a Marxist perspective, this domestic instability is symptomatic of the broader socioeconomic pressures exerted upon the rural peasantry. The Durbeyfields are not merely victims of poor character, but of an economic system that necessitates the exploitation of its own members for survival. As Raymond Williams argues, Hardy's world is one where the "human condition is increasingly defined by the economic forces of the market," rendering the individual's moral agency secondary to the demands of capital (Williams 124). When the

family's horse, Prince, dies—the sole means of their economic sustenance—Tess is effectively pushed into the marketplace.

Thus, the familial crisis is a direct convergence of economic necessity and patriarchal entitlement. Tess is not merely “sent” to Alec; she is exchanged within a system where her body becomes the only currency remaining to secure her family's physical survival. Through this intersectional lens, the reader observes how the collapse of the father's symbolic authority forces the female subject to bear the burden of both economic failure and societal moral judgment.

The Mother as an Enabler: Complicity in the Patriarchal Order

In the tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield, the role of her mother, Joan Durbeyfield, represents a complex intersection of poverty, fatalism, and internalized patriarchy. While Joan is not the primary architect of Tess's suffering, she functions as an ‘enabler’ who facilitates the conditions for Tess's exploitation. Hardy portrays Joan not as a villain, but as a woman whose narrow worldview, shaped by the crushing weight of the Victorian class system, prevents her from protecting her daughter. As Hardy notes, Joan's consciousness is limited by a fatalistic acceptance of her lot: “The girl had never been more than a cipher to her mother, and the maternal instinct was weak in comparison with the instinct of the woman” (Hardy 35).

Joan's complicity lies in her belief that beauty and youthful charm are the only “capital” a peasant girl possesses to improve her economic standing. By constantly pushing Tess to seek out the d'Urbervilles, Joan views her daughter's body as a commodity to be bartered for social and financial security. This commodification aligns with what Marxist critics identify as the transformation of human relations into market relations, where even maternal care is secondary to survival (Eagleton 42). Furthermore, as literary critic Elaine Showalter observes, mothers in 19th-century literature often act as unwitting agents of patriarchal norms, forcing their daughters to conform to survival strategies dictated by men (Showalter 112). Joan's ignorance of the predatory nature of Alec d'Urberville is a systemic failure of a mother conditioned to believe that a woman's worth depends on her association with higher-status men.

Moreover, Joan represents a generational cycle of victimhood. She encourages Tess to conceal her past and perform a façade of purity, thus forcing Tess to participate in the very lie that eventually destroys her. This highlights a crucial theme in Hardy's narrative: the

patriarchal order survives not just through the direct actions of men, but through the compliance of women who police their own and their daughters' behavior to satisfy social norms. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, the woman embedded within traditional domesticity is often the most rigid enforcer of the values that keep her own kind in bondage (Beauvoir 180). Ultimately, Joan serves as a tragic mirror of the society that consumes Tess, making her both a victim of her environment and an unwitting architect of her daughter's downfall.

The Anatomy of Guilt and the Myth of Purity

The tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield is not found in the act of sexual violence itself, but in the discursive construction of 'purity' as a disciplinary mechanism. Through a Foucaultian lens, the patriarchal 'Panopticon' operates not by mere physical constraint, but by compelling the subject to internalize the gaze of the state and the social order, effectively becoming her own jailer. Hardy illustrates this early in the novel, noting that Tess lives in a world where her "innocent soul" is constantly at odds with the rigid, material interpretations of her body (Hardy 102).

In the aftermath of her trauma, Tess's subjectivity is colonized by a pervasive sense of shame that is not ontological, but sociopolitically engineered. Foucault argues that power is most effective when it is invisible, circulating through the "discursive practices" of a society (Foucault 194). By defining 'purity' as a physical, static commodity rather than a spiritual state, the Victorian social order renders Tess a 'broken' vessel. This materialist obsession with the female body reduces the complexity of human experience to a single physical marker. Hardy captures this dissonance when he writes, "She was ashamed to see herself in the glass, and would look at her face as if it were the face of a stranger" (Hardy 121). Here, Tess internalizes the societal alienation; she ceases to see her body as her own and begins to view it through the judgmental eyes of the patriarchal "Big Other."

This internalized guilt is further compounded by the stark contrast between Tess's self-perception and the predatory morality of Alec d'Urberville. While Alec occupies the role of the physical predator, it is the societal discourse—championed by the intellectual paralysis of figures like Angel Clare—that acts as the 'moral executioner.' Angel's rejection of Tess based on her 'impurity' is the ultimate manifestation of the disciplinary gaze. As critic Terry Eagleton notes in his analysis of Hardy's work, the protagonist is trapped within a "contradiction between the pastoral innocence she embodies and the harsh, commodifying market forces that demand a pristine, unblemished female subject" (Eagleton 84).

Tess's decision to confess her history to Angel is, therefore, not a manifestation of moral obligation, but a surrender to a discursive trap. She has been conditioned to believe that she is responsible for the violation inflicted upon her. By failing to differentiate between a violent incident and a moral choice, Tess reveals the extent to which the 'power/knowledge' apparatus has dismantled her autonomy. She exists in a state where her soul, which remains independent and resilient, is systematically invalidated by a society that only recognizes the 'colonized body' as the legitimate site of judgment. Consequently, Tess's guilt is a structural symptom of a culture that necessitates the sacrifice of the female subject to maintain its own fictitious definitions of virtue.

The Angel-Alec Dichotomy: The Structural Failure of the Symbolic Husband

The dichotomy between Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare serves as the ultimate indictment of the patriarchal mechanisms that govern Tess Durbeyfield's existence. While Alec operates as the impulsive, predatory manifestation of the 'Id'—driven by appetitive desire and devoid of emotional depth—his violence is transparent; he acts as an external force of physical violation. Angel Clare, conversely, represents a far more insidious threat. If Alec's violation of Tess is a localized trauma, Angel's rejection constitutes a profound ontological assault—a 'rape of the soul' that shatters Tess's remaining sense of self.

Crucially, Angel's failure must be understood as a collapse of his role as a 'Symbolic Husband.' In the transition from daughterhood to marriage, the husband is culturally positioned as the new symbolic anchor—a figure meant to embody sanctuary and protection. As Lacan posits, the father (and by extension, the husband in the symbolic order) is intended to provide the "Name-of-the-Father," a structural function that stabilizes the subject's identity (Lacan 67). By refusing to offer this protection, Angel abdicates his structural responsibility. When Tess confesses her history, she is not merely sharing a secret; she is appealing to her husband to provide the very validation that her biological father, John Durbeyfield, failed to provide.

Hardy underscores the depth of this betrayal when Tess pleads with him, "O, Angel—I should have told you! ... I am not what you think I am" (Hardy 204). Angel's response—"The woman I have been loving is not you" (Hardy 206)—is a calculated act of symbolic annihilation. By separating his 'ideal' Tess from the 'actual' woman standing before him, Angel effectively excommunicates her from the institution of marriage. As feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir argues, when a woman is forced to exist solely through the reflection of male desire, her displacement becomes inevitable (Beauvoir 154). Angel's

love was never an act of acceptance; it was a conditional contract dependent on the preservation of his own ego.

While Alec treats Tess as a physical object to be consumed, Angel treats her as a moral object to be discarded. Angel's rejection is not merely a personal lapse; it is a violation of the marriage institution itself, which theoretically promises union through thick and thin. By failing to provide this stability, Angel leaves Tess exposed to the very world that will eventually destroy her. As Hardy poignantly writes, "He looked upon her as a species of impostor" (Hardy 210), effectively stripping her of her identity.

Angel's intellectual paralysis forces him to sacrifice the living subject for the sake of an abstract, hollow morality. He adopts the role of the 'moral executioner,' using his perceived intellectual and moral superiority to justify his cruelty. This is why his betrayal is intrinsically more severe than Alec's; Alec destroys the body, but Angel destroys the spirit. In the framework of the 'Big Other,' Angel's judgment acts as the final confirmation of Tess's internalized guilt. Because she loves him, his refusal to forgive is the ultimate 'law' that condemns her. Consequently, Tess's tragedy is not just the result of a predatory environment, but the result of the failure of the 'Symbolic Husband' to function as a source of truth and reconciliation, proving that in a patriarchal framework, the 'moral' man is often the most destructive agent of all.

The Jurisprudence of Injustice: The State as the Final Oppressor

The final execution of Tess Durbeyfield stands as the ultimate indictment of a social and legal apparatus that prioritizes the preservation of patriarchal order over the recognition of human suffering. Tess's decision to kill Alec is not a premeditated act of malice, but a desperate, psychological rupture—the culmination of a life defined by systemic trauma. Throughout the novel, Tess is systematically stripped of every form of protection: betrayed by a biological father who neglects her safety, violated by a predator who treats her body as property, and finally abandoned by a 'symbolic' husband who denies her humanity.

The law remains silent when Tess is initially violated. Alec d'Urberville operates with impunity, effectively protected by a legal and social structure that views his predatory behavior as a male prerogative. Hardy highlights the disparity between her suffering and society's indifference when Tess cries out, "Once victim, always victim—that's the law" (Hardy 268). This line encapsulates the cruelty of her environment: the state provides no

recourse for the rape of a woman, yet it mobilizes its full power to punish her the moment she acts in self-defense.

When Tess finally takes the law into her own hands to end the cycle of her victimization, the Victorian legal system swiftly asserts its authority. The state is fundamentally blind to the cause of the crime; it functions as a rigid, monolithic structure that ignores the psychological devastation inflicted upon the subject by societal neglect. As Michel Foucault argues, the judicial system often functions not to achieve justice, but to reinforce the power dynamics that created the criminal in the first place (Foucault 101). By executing Tess, the state effectively erases the evidence of its own failure.

The hypocrisy is undeniable: the legal system treats Alec's violation of Tess's autonomy as a non-event, yet treats Tess's defense of that autonomy as a capital offense. Hardy depicts Tess's final moments not as the justice of a reformed criminal, but as the victimization of a martyr. As she is led to the scaffold, the reader is forced to confront a disturbing truth: the law is not designed to protect the vulnerable, but to discipline those who deviate from the patriarchal script. Tess was not a criminal by nature; she was a casualty of a culture that forced her into a corner and then punished her for attempting to break out. Her execution is not a delivery of justice, but an act of systemic erasure, proving that the law is merely a weapon used to maintain a gendered hierarchy where a man's violence is ignored, and a woman's survival is termed a crime.

Conclusion: The Tragedy of the Unbroken Spirit

The tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield is not confined to the nineteenth century or the valleys of Wessex; it is the perennial tragedy of the female subject under the weight of patriarchal hegemony. To view Tess as a single character is to miss the broader indictment Thomas Hardy intended. As feminist critic Kate Millett famously argues in *Sexual Politics*, the literary representation of women is often a mechanism for reinforcing their subordination; however, in *Tess*, Hardy offers a subversive counter-narrative, exposing the mechanisms that transform a woman's innocence into 'guilt' (Millett 120). Tess is not merely a protagonist; she is the personification of every woman whose autonomy is stolen by the intersectional forces of familial neglect, predatory desire, and legal erasure.

Hardy's final portrayal of Tess is the portrait of a martyr whose spirit remained fundamentally untouched by the corruption surrounding her. When she rests at Stonehenge, she is a soul stripped bare of social labels. Hardy writes with profound sorrow, "Justice was

done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess” (Hardy 449). This, the most haunting line in the novel, serves as a searing indictment of a universe that treats a woman’s life as a mere game of chance. Her execution is a state-sanctioned erasure—an attempt by the law to silence the living evidence of its own systemic failures. Tess’s story is the universal cry of the woman who is blamed for her own victimization, a pattern that persists in contemporary legal and social discourses where the victim’s character is scrutinized more rigorously than the predator’s actions.

The true indictment lies in the fact that Tess’s tragedy is not an archaic relic; it is an enduring reflection of a social order that continues to demand the sacrifice of the female subject to preserve its own fictions of purity. As Simone de Beauvoir highlights, woman is consistently defined as the ‘Other,’ a secondary being whose existence is contingent upon the male gaze and male approval (Beauvoir 154). Tess was the victim of a “Big Other” that viewed her body as a commodity and her spirit as an inconvenience.

In the end, Tess Durbeyfield remains a haunting presence—a symbol for every woman denied the right to define her own virtue. When the black flag rises, it marks the silencing of a conscience that was too pure, too honest, and too vibrant for a society built on the fragile foundations of hypocrisy. Her death is a quiet, devastating protest that demands we weep, not just for her, but for a humanity that allows such beauty to be crushed. Her story serves as a mirror to our own time, forcing us to ask why we continue to fail the vulnerable and why we privilege rigid, patriarchal structures over human lives. Tess is gone, but the questions she leaves behind—about why society punishes those it should protect—remain as a heavy, inescapable weight upon the collective conscience of us all.

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