

“CALL ME TESS”:
ARTICULATING AND UNWRITING IDENTITY
IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

by

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ABSTRACT

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In Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, male characters inscribe and project stereotyped images of femininity onto the novel’s eponymous heroine. In this thesis, I argue that Tess defies these inscriptions and projections not only through her use of violence, but also through a radical form of submission. Tess, who is often described by critics as a victim of fate, becomes in my argument a formidable figure; even her death, which is frequently read as a capitulation to the forces against her, becomes in this interpretation a deliberate act of defiance. Tess obliterates her own body, the contested site of inscription and projection, in order to deny it to her persecutors.

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To the women in my life, who've taught me all that I know

Introduction:

Negative Space and Power in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

“Woman is not born: she is made. In the making, her humanity is destroyed. She becomes symbol of this, symbol of that: mother of the earth, slut of the universe; but she never becomes herself because it is forbidden for her to do so.”

- Andrea Dworkin

This thesis project developed from an interest in the irresistible complexity of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and also of its eponymous heroine. I instantly understood Tess to be an admirable character, but also one who is doomed by forces beyond her control. Like most readers, I knew that Tess was a victim of fate and circumstance, and that *Tess* was a novel concerned with the destruction of an innocent woman. Yet the more closely I read, the more convinced I became that she was not a weak character, let alone a stereotypical victim. I found myself caught between two seemingly opposite views of Tess: she appeared powerful, yet also a victim. Is Hardy only suggesting that women are victims of social law, like so many critics assume? It seemed possible, yet the more I examined Tess' character, the less passive she appeared to me. How could she be merely a victim, someone who passively accepts her fate, when she verbally and physically asserts herself throughout the novel? Instances where Tess seemed powerful in spite of her circumstances provided evidence that Tess is not the helpless victim she may seem to be. As I researched *Tess*, I found many critics similarly struggling to credit Tess with agency while acknowledging the degree to which fate and

patriarchal forces persecute her. In the following paragraphs I will examine the critical debate on Tess' power and victimhood, and offer my own analysis of the contrasting aspects of Tess' character. An understanding of this debate is integral to this thesis because it led me to my argument for this thesis.

Rosemarie Morgan constructs the most powerful and strategic image of Hardy's heroine, and I agree with her assertion that Tess is "one of the strongest women in the annals of English literature" (Morgan 85). In *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, Morgan justifies this claim by analyzing moments throughout the novel where Tess verbally and physically asserts herself against Alec and Angel, such as the scene in which Tess strikes Alec with her glove. In many ways, Morgan sets out to destroy the stereotypical "dumb, gentle, unthinking, passive Tess who too often survives in interpretation" (Morgan 120) and resurrect her with power and agency. According to her, "sexual passion actively informs Tess' consciousness, her wisdom, her moral sense, her emotional generosity" (Morgan 89), highlighting the ways in which she uses her self-realized sexuality not only for her own pleasure, but to trick Alec and Angel.¹ Although I disagree that Tess uses her sexuality to her advantage consciously, I agree with Morgan's claim that Hardy portrays Tess as "complex... regenerative and destructive... philosophical, and mystical," (Morgan 98) instead of the flat and passive character that many readers see. Finally, I agree with Morgan when she characterizes Tess as confronting and destroying a past that haunts her, revealing that "Tess' resistance... knows no bounds" (Morgan 98).

¹ Morgan argues that since Alec and Angel are tormented by Tess' sexuality and physical beauty, she is using her sexual passion as a means of power over both men.

In *Thomas Hardy and Women*, Penny Boumelha complicates Morgan's argument by examining Hardy's narrative style. For Boumelha, the narrator is a penetrating force in the novel that deprives Tess of the chance to speak with her own voice:

In short, she is not merely spoken by the narrator, but also spoken *for*. To realize Tess as consciousness, with all that that entails of representation and display, inevitably renders her all the more the object of gaze and knowledge for reader and narrator. (Boumelha 120)

In this reading, Tess seems doomed to be misrepresented by narration that transforms her from an individual into an object to be looked at and sexualized. But Boumelha, in the same vein as Morgan, simultaneously argues that Tess' sexuality is her power, since she harnesses her sexual power over Alec and Angel. However, in Boumelha's interpretation, Tess' sexuality is also her downfall. Since it is located inside Tess' body and is "unknowable and unrepresentable" (Boumelha 121), men persistently endeavor to enter Tess' body in order to conquer her tempting sexuality. It seems that Boumelha simultaneously credits Tess with power, and yet limits her agency as a result of the alluring sexuality that men "wrestle from her by violence" (Boumelha 121).

Like Boumelha and Morgan, Bruce Hugman argues in *Hardy: Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that supernatural forces of fate do not predetermine Tess' life, although she may fall victim to limited choices. For instance, Hugman notes that Tess has little choice in working at Flintcombe Ashe, but not because a supernatural force pushes her there. Instead, Tess' life is the "result of the coincidence[s] of miscellaneous factors" (Hugman 71). Hugman justifies his claims by suggesting that, at least in Hardy's texts, sadness and suffering are parts of women's lives, but not because of "doom"; instead, according to

Hugman, arbitrary social law, criminal law, and the lust of men control Victorian women's lives. Although he attributes responsibility to Tess for her own actions, his reading of *Tess* is not as positive as Morgan's. Instead of claiming that Tess' actions are deliberate and defiant against the forces of fate, as Morgan argues, Hugman criticizes Tess' superstitious nature throughout the novel, claiming that her failure to realize the lack of mystical force behind her misfortunes shows that she is not successful in trying to change her circumstances. Like Boumelha, Hugman also attempts to characterize Tess as both active and victimized by fate, yet his argument eventually depicts her as weak, as he claims that she fails to exercise her own power.

On the other hand, many critics like Leon Waldorf argue that Tess' life is determined entirely by fate. In "Psychological Determinism in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*," Waldorf suggests that we cannot argue whether Tess has power or not because her life is so entangled with fate. Fate, in Waldorf's argument, is not necessarily a supernatural force, but the result of "an ambivalent attitude towards woman that is traceable both to Hardy and to the culture in which he lived" (Waldorf 61), suggesting that Tess is doomed due to social taboos about fallen women. Where Hugman argues that Tess' life is not fated because there are no supernatural forces in the text, Waldorf claims that human and social forces act as supernatural ones. Tess is also doomed because she cannot fill sexualized and idealized roles for Alec and Angel, since both desire a woman who Tess is not. Alec and Angel's expectations that Tess will occupy the idealized roles of temptress, Eve, femme fatale, or Goddess erase her individuality completely, leaving her powerless to articulate her own identity. Even after she asks Angel to "Call me Tess," Waldorf

claims that Angel nevertheless continues to idealize her as an epitome of virginity. Thus, Tess, in Waldorf's reading, is unsuccessful in trying to escape male idealizations. Unlike Morgan and Boumelha (who would argue that fate pushes Tess in certain directions, but he still has power to decide her own actions), Waldorf does not believe Tess has any power. In Waldorf's judgment, the men in Hardy's novel have psychological and physical control over Tess.

Like Waldorf, Jean Brooks argues that Tess is doomed, although by forces other than just Victorian social law. Brooks contends that Tess is fated by the laws of nature, heredity, society, and economics, "which abstract from people the differences which distinguish them as individuals" (Brooks 201). Yet in *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure*, Brooks argues that Tess is an admirable character because she fights to be recognized as an individual, in spite of these forces that erase her individuality and shape her future against her will. According to Brooks, it is unclear whether or not Tess can shape her future, but she nevertheless fights for spiritual survival. Through verbal, sexual, and physical assertions of herself, Tess is attempting to reclaim her individuality, even when Alec and Angel deny her the choice to do so. Much like Morgan, Brooks tries to reconstruct Tess from the trope of helpless victim, yet unlike Morgan, Brooks understands Tess' death as the work of fate, instead of the result of a deliberate choice on Tess' part. Brooks admires Tess for her continued struggle and believes that she can make human choices against supernatural forces. Unlike Hugman, Brooks shows Tess as powerful and human, while still claiming that social, male, economic, and supernatural forces determine her path through life.

The debate not only shows how vastly different critical interpretations are to Hardy's novel, but it also helps show where my argument is situated. I agree most with Brooks, Morgan, and Boumelha, and disagree most with Waldorf's claims. I see Tess as a strong character who does have power, even if circumstances in her life leave her with little choice. All three critics have one claim in common: they all resurrect Tess from passive victim to complex heroine. Reconstructing Tess as powerful, multifaceted, and an agent is an important task for critics, because it is clear from the text that Tess does not passively accept her fate, but instead endeavors constantly to articulate her own life and identity. Even though Brooks and Morgan disagree about whether Tess' power changes her circumstances, unlike Hugman and Waldorf, both of these critics give Tess responsibility, choice, and power, saving her from being merely a passive victim. I agree with Boumelha and Brooks, who both argue that Tess' demise is ultimately due to outside forces, but I also agree with Morgan that Tess is quite deliberate in her actions, especially those of violence and sexual power. Even though Tess is initially unaware of her power (in fact, she seems unconscious of it), she eventually discovers her strength and uses it against her persecutors. In this thesis, I argue that Tess is neither a free agent, nor a passive victim.

The critical debate detailed above led me to identify the forces that "fate" Tess, if such forces even exist. I came to the conclusion that male characters are responsible for Tess' downfall. More specifically, Alec and Angel doom her by repeatedly projecting idealized images onto her. The term "projections," connotes Angel and Alec's mental images of women and femininity that they ascribe to Tess. Both men manifest their

desires into these projections and envision them onto Tess' body. Both men form and inscribe Tess' identity by visualizing Tess as a feminine stereotype. In Alec and Angel's eyes, she is Madonna, Eve, damsel in distress, temptress, femme fatale, and countless others, but never just Tess the dairymaid.² Sometimes inviting the stereotypes without realizing the consequences, she moves among these projections. It would be easy to argue that Tess, who is clearly victimized throughout the novel, is passive to these projections, due to the inescapability of other's definitions of her. Since Hardy suggests that fate is a crippling factor in Tess' life, it appears that Tess has no choice but to accept projections from others; yet, Hardy presents us with many instances where Tess is indignant, assertive, and even violent in her resistance of the projections that are placed upon her.

In this thesis, I argue that Tess is pushed in certain directions by fate and these projections, yet she is not passive. Even though she never escapes the pressures from other characters, she never truly becomes a stereotype. Tess may invite projection early on in the novel, but as it progresses, she becomes increasingly resistant, and her death can be seen as a mode of defiance. Tess' death, often mistaken as martyrdom, reveals her desire to obliterate her body, to deny the very site of projection to her persecutors.³ Tess' death, therefore, is not a capitulation to Alec and Angel's projections, but instead can be understood as a form of resistance.

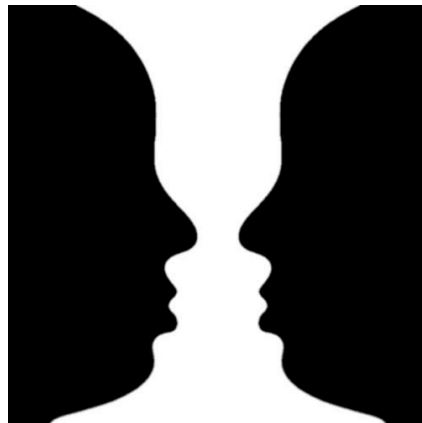
In order to argue that Tess is powerful in the face of male projections, I begin by discussing the ways in which projections shape Tess' identity and the negative consequences of this shaping. Projections are visual representations of male desires, but

² Interestingly enough, Tess herself initially desires explicitly to be more than simply a dairymaid. I explore this desire in Chapter Two of this thesis.

³ For a discussion of the reasons why Tess should not be read as a martyr, see Chapter Four.

they are also impressions that inscribe Tess' body and identity. The term "inscription," indicates the ways in which Tess' body is literally and figuratively marked with fate and projections from outside sources.⁴ Throughout the novel, Alec's engraves Tess' physical body, which is similar to the white gossamer fabric that Hardy describes as "doomed to receive" a dark pattern when he finds her sleeping in the Chase (57).⁵ Inscription pushes inward onto Tess' individuality, which I define as a "negative space."

The negative space is a model of Tess' identity, sculpted by inscription in a way that simultaneously diminishes and forms it. This model also allows me to reconcile Tess as both powerful and a victim. She undoubtedly suffers from Alec and Angel's inscriptions, but she also powerfully forms her identity and is not destroyed by the men who lay claim to her. In order to visualize the negative space metaphor, below is an image of the famous optical illusion in which two faces look inward, forming the shape of a vase:⁶



⁴ From here forward in this project, I will refer to "projections" as simply "inscriptions," as projections are forces that inscribe Tess' identity and body. Inscription is the effect of endless projections from Alec and Angel, who attempt to rewrite Tess' identity with their idealized images of women.

⁵ All citations will be from the Norton Critical Edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, edited by Scott Elledge, published in 1991

⁶ Many psychology texts, including *Perception: Theory, Development, and Organisation* refer to this optical illusion as the Rubin Vase.

The white vase in my account is Tess' definition of herself and the two black faces are the inscriptions that contour the negative space.⁷ As Alec and Angel inscribe, Tess' negative space changes forms, and also decreases. The negative space can also be manipulated, broken down, and recreated by experiences within Tess' life.

I am not claiming that the negative space is an inherent or essential self within Tess that is destroyed by projections, as that would wrongly imply that she is a flat character, limited to one predetermined self. Instead, Tess' self, her negative space, changes repeatedly due to influxes of inscription. I claim that Tess defies inscription (as in the "Call me Tess" scene), and that, while she initially invites shaping in an attempt to gain experience, she rejects inscriptions once they begin to transform her negative space into a mere image of Alec and Angel's desire.

One goal in writing this thesis was to show how Tess is powerful in protecting her body and identity, and also in exerting volition. In Chapter One of this thesis, I argue that Tess defies projections in order to defend her negative space and push the encroaching, fateful forces away from her. In examining scenes where Tess is verbally and physically assertive, I claim that Tess is occasionally successful in strategically denying Alec and Angel's inscriptions. Even when Tess does not effectively protect her negative space from Alec and Angel, she still endeavors to stop them. The goal in chapter is to show that Tess is not a poor and feeble victim, but a strong and unrelenting woman who fights to assert her individuality.

⁷ I will continue to use the term "negative space" throughout this thesis in order to signify Tess' identity, and the process in which it is shaped by inscription from Alec and Angel.

Since Tess sometimes willingly accepts inscription, I shift my focus in Chapter Two in order to argue that, even when she accepts the shaping of her identity by others, Tess is still an agent. Thus, this chapter examines how Tess is a victim to inscription (in fact, she may be doomed to be inscribed), but also powerful in subverting stereotypical feminine roles. In the beginning of the novel, it seems that Tess desires experience and her negative space is raw material, unshaped. Her desire for experience is evident when she is disheartened that Angel does not pick her for the May Day dance, and also when she occupies the role of damsel-in-distress as Alec triumphantly “rescues” her from the hostile townsfolk in *The Chase*. Even though Tess quickly learns that inscription leads to suffering, she eventually learns to manipulate Alec’s idealized female tropes as a mode of power.

Many critics base their claims that Tess is a helpless victim on the fact that her life is full of misery. Yet in “*The Vale of Soul-Making*,” John Keats suggests that suffering brings beneficial life experience. In Chapter Three I will discuss how Keats’ argument relates to my negative space model, in order to show how Tess can suffer, yet still be powerful. I will argue that Tess learns from her grief, as her “corporeal blight had been her mental harvest” (98). Tess employs the knowledge she gains from her suffering to not only use it against her oppressors, but also to form her identity, even when inscriptions threaten to destroy her.

Finally, in Chapter Four I examine Tess’ death in order to show that her execution is not a capitulation to Alec and Angel’s inscriptions, but rather a mode of defiance. In examining at the murder of Alec, Tess’ death, and Hardy’s poem “*Tess’ Lament*,” I argue

that Tess actively pursues her own annihilation in order to deny her body to Alec and Angel. In the end, Tess is not a martyr for a social cause, but a woman who obliterates herself in order to halt any future inscriptions onto her. Tess willingly unwrites her body and her identity from the world, desiring for her life to “unbe.” Ultimately, Hardy does not construct a pitiable character in order to align the reader with his social and moral philosophies. Although he may be using Tess’ life as an allegory to show the effect of strict Victorian social codes on women, Tess, in death, is not merely a suffering woman, but also a powerful one. Thus, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is not simply a novel about the destruction of an innocent woman as many critics assume. Instead, Hardy’s novel is about Tess’ determination in protecting, claiming, and destroying her own identity, which shatters the typical reading of Tess as a passive victim.

Chapter One:
“An Impulse of Reprisal”: Resistance Against Projections and Inscriptions

Many readers describe Tess as passive, inherently weak, or tragically flawed. Ted R. Spivey argues that Tess’ is a character who “always seems much more sinned against than sinning,” yet she “finally turns again to Alec, an action which is certainly an error of judgment” (185). In Spivey’s argument, Tess’ tragic flaw is her inability to reject the abusers in her life. Despite Tess’ seemingly weak and passive acceptance of abuse throughout the novel, Hardy provides many scenes in which Tess is a powerful agent, challenging Spivey’s argument that she is intrinsically pathetic or flawed. In these scenes, she is not only powerful, but also defiant and subversive. In this chapter, I will argue that Tess uses physical and vocal force – and sometimes even violence - against Alec and Angel, successfully averting their projections, thus preventing any inscription onto her negative space. Even early on in the novel when Tess seems unaware of Alec’s inscriptions, she experiences compulsions that tell her to reject Alec’s sexually charged proposals. It may seem that these impulses limit Tess’ agency, since she cannot control them, but when Tess betrays her instincts by not refusing Alec’s sexual advances, Tess shows that she has a choice whether or not to act upon her intuitions.

Tess is not always powerful or successful in rejecting inscription, though. She would not be the complex and multifaceted character that Hardy presents us with if she

was only either powerful or a helpless victim. A clear example of this complexity is the scene in which Alec feeds Tess strawberries. After The Chase⁸, Tess realizes that being shaped (that is, gaining new experiences to mature her identity) is something she originally desired, leads to suffering.⁹ However, before The Chase, Tess shows brief moments of defiance against sexual projections, but is unsuccessful in stopping them. In her first meeting with Alec, Tess tries to reject the strawberry he intends to feed her, saying, “No, no! I would rather take it in my own hand” (29). Alec quickly denies her and pushes strawberries, one by one, into her mouth until she cannot eat any more. Not only does this scene foreshadow the transgression in The Chase, it is the first moment where Hardy reveals the similarity between inscription and rape, as Alec suggestively parts Tess’ lips with the pointed object, marking her skin with the red strawberry juice. The rape of Tess’ body mirrors the rape of her negative space in which inscriptions penetrate Tess’ identity. In the strawberry scene, much like in The Chase, Tess is a victim to phallic inscription, but her state of victimhood does not limit her agency and she does not passively accept her identity as inscribed. Instead, in saying “no,” Tess attempts to reject Alec’s inscriptions. Tess verbally asserts herself, but tragically, when she tries to speak, men simply won’t listen to her (Higonnet 16). Even though she is unsuccessful in stopping him from inscribing her identity and her body in this scene, we should not ignore Tess’ endeavor to protect herself.

⁸ In the novel, The Chase is the forest in which Alec and Tess’ sexual encounter occurs, but most critics refer to The Chase when discussing the event itself. In what follows, I will use it to refer to the sexual encounter as well.

⁹ I discuss moments where Tess wants her identity shaped through experience in Chapter Two of this thesis.

In protecting herself, Tess uses power, even if she is ineffective. In the strawberry scene, Alec sees Tess as “more of a woman than she really is” (30), implying that she is young and naïve, he is inscribing premature sexuality onto her physical body, projecting the image of the sexually available and corruptible woman onto Tess’ negative space. It is interesting that Tess is quite unaware of this change in her identity, as she is “half-pleased, half reluctant” (28) and also obeying “like one in a dream” (30), but her initial resistance to Alec shows that Tess’ instinct is to remain uninscribed by him. She must receive the strawberries, though, in order for Alec to consider assisting Tess’ poor family. Thus, Tess’ pays the price of inscription for her family’s wellbeing.¹⁰ In the essay “Pay As You Go: On the Exchange of Bodies and Signs,” Elisabeth Bronfen argues that Tess is an active member in an exchange with Alec and, even if she must give up her body, she powerfully makes sure of her family’s survival (Bronfen 67). Although I do not want to argue that inscription or a manifestation of rape is a positive occurrence, I do agree with Bronfen that Tess actively, not passively, exchanges with Alec in this scene, and during The Chase. Tess should be regarded as powerful for her courage and her determination to save her struggling family, not weak and passive.

In the strawberry scene, Tess’ negative space, much like The Chase, is inscribed by Alec’s sexual desires, something he feels, but something Tess does not. The (re)formation of Tess’ negative space is detrimental to her life when inscriptions happen against her will. Although Tess experiences this “rape” of identity throughout the

¹⁰ Even though Tess’ guilt for the death of Prince (the family horse and only form of income) is the catalyst for Tess and Alec’s first meeting together, I believe that John Durbeyfield’s deteriorating health, the family’s newfound interest in their royal heritage, and their overall poorness are factors that would eventually cause someone to claim kin with the d’Urbervilles. Tess, being the most beautiful, would be sent to Alec eventually, even if Prince had never died.

majority of the novel, she constantly strives to erase descriptions from her body by destroying her past. When Tess travels to the dairy farm after The Chase, the narrator claims that she is determined to “annihilate” the past and live in “some nook which had no memories” (78), thus erasing Alec’s inscriptions from her negative space. The “experience” of The Chase, which marks Tess as a fallen woman, is “incapacitating” (77) to her life, yet Tess rises above Alec’s sexual markings, as “it was impossible that any even should have left upon her an impression that was not in time capable of transmutation” (81). The narrator suggests here that Tess, with time, has the capability to change her situations.¹¹ Tess wants to “obliterate her keen consciousness of [The Chase]” (78), erasing the memory of Alec in hopes to shed the status of being a fallen woman. In doing so, Tess reveals her self-determination by wanting to destroy inscriptions and Alec’s transgression (Morgan 98).¹²

In annihilating the past, Tess is attempting to rewrite her life story in her own terms. In trying to confront and destroy The Chase from memory, the narrator states, “there should be no more d’Urberville air-castles in the dreams and deeds of [Tess’] new life. She would be the dairymaid Tess, and nothing more” (78)¹³. Interestingly, Tess is ascribing to a stereotype to herself, but this ascription is of her own doing. By claiming

¹¹ Yet, while Tess is alive, she is not victorious in erasing the blight, but this is not a fault of hers. She attempts to rectify her transgression and forget the past, but it relentlessly haunts her. Alec follows Tess throughout the novel, and Angel’s hypocrisy ruins the latter part of her life, all because of The Chase. Regardless of if Tess is successful in actually obliterating her past, her desire to do so reveals not only her agency, but her strength in protecting her body and her identity.

¹² Whereas Morgan and I agree that Tess’ desire to escape the past is a mode of power, in *The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy*, Bert Hornback argues that Tess is naïve in believing that her past can be forgotten and that her false hope is her downfall.

¹³ Although it is out of the scope of my thesis, Tess’ rejection of her family’s dream of “d’Urberville air-castles” infers that she no longer fantasizing about class climbing as she does in the beginning of the novel, which I explore in Chapter Two. Hardy may be suggesting, though, that class climbing, or at least the unrealistic dream of it, makes Tess more vulnerable to inscription.

that she will fit into the role of “dairymaid” Tess is rejecting inscriptions Alec placed on her during The Chase. Even if Tess wants to reclaim the projected role of virginal dairymaid, she is doing so on her own accord. In rewriting her story, Tess may be forced to write herself as a trope because she cannot inhabit an unshaped identity. As seen in my negative space model, inscriptions and experiences make Tess’ identity recognizable. Without these inscriptions, her identity would simply be raw material, unshaped and nebulous. Tess, in rewriting her story, may be forced to occupy a trope simply because returning to a time without tropes is impossible. Even if Tess cannot ever return to her life before The Chase, she is exceedingly powerful in rejecting Alec’s attempts at inscription throughout the novel, successfully resisting in many scenes.

One moment of physical resistance occurs when Alec “saves” Tess on horseback. The scene is reminiscent of fairytales in which a noble knight on a white horse rescues a maiden from danger. Tess suddenly becomes the damsel-in-distress, a role that typically ends with the grateful female repaying her savior with a kiss, which Alec asks for after The Chase. On horseback, Alec takes advantage of Tess’ exhaustion, grabbing her waist when she falls asleep, even after she asserts that she does not want his “love-making¹⁴” (54). A “sudden impulse of reprisal to which she was liable” arises within her and she pushes Alec nearly off the horse. As he attempts to control, coerce, or physically shape her with his hands, Tess reacts instinctively against him. As I argued above, having instinct does not prevent Tess from having agency, evident in the line “she abandoned herself to impulse,” (53) where Tess is the agent in heeding her impulse or not. Even

¹⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines love-making as “courtship, wooing,” not a sexual act.

though her persistence does not stop Alec's seduction, her struggle reveals that she is intuitively self-determined and not passive to Alec's advances.

Yet as she heeds this negative space for a moment, another force halts her objections. Although writhing on the horse in discomfort from Alec's sexual advances, Tess answers quite strangely when Alec asks if he can treat her as a lover. She says, "I don't know – I wish – how can I say yes or no when –" (55), trailing off and subduing her defiance, probably due to the fact that Tess is financially indebted to Alec. The "fate" of the situation, which stops Tess from defying Alec, is not a supernatural force, but the exchange that Tess must make with Alec for her family to receive funds from the d'Urberville estate. Tess sacrifices her body and her identity for her family's wellbeing, because, as Anne Z. Mickelson argues in *Thomas Hardy's Women and Men: The Defeat of Nature*, Tess is forced to bear the responsibility of her family's "shortcomings" (114). Even though Tess, by "mechanism of guilt" (Mickelson 114), pays the price, her strength lies in coping with her choice to stay with Alec for her family.

Another scene in which Tess defies inscriptions is when Angel views Tess as Goddesses at the dairy farm, imagining that she is "no longer a milkmaid, but a visionary essence of a woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (103). Angel projects his personal obsession with virginity onto her, as he imagines Tess as "a fresh and virginal daughter of nature that milkmaid is," never listening when she endeavors – and fails - to tell him of her sexual encounter in The Chase until they are married. Although Angel considers himself to be a progressive man, his projections of perfect Victorian femininity show the reader that his beliefs are heavily rooted in the Christian

ideal of a purely virginal woman.¹⁵ Tess, weary of projections, simply asks Angel to “Call me Tess” (103), evoking her desire for him to see her without his ideals for women to be natural and pure. In asserting her given name, Tess reveals her desire for Angel to see her without stereotypes or idealizations, but simply as Tess. In this moment she tries to show him her negative space; even with the inscriptions from Alec, Tess needs Angel to accept and embrace Tess for her identity, yet he fails to do so until it is too late. Margaret Higonnet argues that this is because Angel is a slave to conventionality, but also a believer in the subordination of women, in which “his experience of women was great enough for him to be aware that the negative often meant nothing more than the preface to the affirmative” (136). Angel’s largest obstacle in the novel is to “disintegrate the falsifying projections by men onto individual women” (Higonnet 19).

Tess defies projections in this scene by asserting her own name to Angel and, during “non-human hours,” asserting her individuality, since Angel refers to her as an immortal goddess frequently. Yet Angel continually paints a portrait of Tess that does not look like her at all. In showing her strength, Tess never attributes any of Angel’s projections to her own identity, even though Angel smothers layers of female tropes onto her. Angel’s perception of her identity has changed, but Tess does not become “a visionary essence of a woman” (103). Through endeavors to defend her negative space from Angel’s projections of women, Tess stays human throughout the novel. Angel realizes too late that he doomed their relationship by idealizing her when he exclaims, “I

¹⁵ It is important to note here that many critics disagree and sympathize with Angel. For instance, Virginia Hyman argues that Angel is so obsessed with purity that his rejection of Tess’ complex impurity (i.e. that she is no longer simply a virgin beauty) mirrors his rejection of complexities in the Church and the social world.

did not think rightly of you – I did not see you as you were!” (298). Angel only sees the identity that Tess has tried multiple times to articulate to him once he realizes that she can never be his – not even in death.

Although it would seem that Angel’s inscriptions are more innocent than Alec’s, in “History, Figuration, and Female Subjectivity in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*,” Kara Silverman argues that Angel’s gaze is also quite detrimental to Tess’ identity:

Tess comes to an unhappy end not so much because she is subjected to the colonizing male gaze, but because she is constructed according to the image of Alec’s rather than Angel’s desire. [The narrator] will suggest, in other words, that if Angel’s glance had only found its mark during the May-Day dance, all subsequent disasters would have been averted... However, to subscribe critically to this binary would be to overlook the complexities of vision in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Within that novel, the gaze never innocently alights on its object. Rather, it *constructs* its object through a process of colonization, delimitation, configuration, and inscription. (Silverman 7).

Tess’ defiance against Angel, and Alec as well, is a direct rejection of their efforts to (re)construct her identity through their colonialist gaze. Even Angel, who never abuses Tess like Alec does, is not innocent as his ostensibly harmless projections of Eve, Demeter, and Artemis, shape Tess’ negative space. As shown in the scenes highlighted in this chapter, Tess powerfully articulates her identity in response to Angel’s efforts to see Tess as someone different than she is. Tess is also powerful in subverting Alec’s desire to violently inscribe Tess identity. Even at times when she is not successful in disrupting Alec and Angel’s formative gazes, Tess still exerts power and agency.

Chapter Two:
“Doomed to Receive”: Radical Acceptance of Inscription

Even though Tess resists inscriptions, she also sometimes invites them. In the beginning of the novel, Tess desires to gain life experience that would shape her identity, as she takes on responsibilities that could possibly better her family’s poor condition. Tess’ invitation of inscription, of identity shaping, usually leads to destruction and suffering. Despite the challenges that occur with her experiences, Tess is successful in accomplishing her goal in that, with suffering, she is shaped for life. If Tess desires inscription, at least in the first two phases of the novel, then I argue that she has agency by acting in her own self-interest, even if inviting inscription leads to her downfall in *The Chase*. Tess exerts what I call “radical acceptance” of inscriptions. Radical acceptance is Tess’ ability to encourage the shaping of her identity for her own self-interest. It is a form of covert power in which Tess occupies the role of the helpless woman, but uses the inscription to her advantage. It is true that in my model of negative space, inscriptions reduce Tess’ identity and that she is a victim to Alec and Angel’s projections. Most readers would assume that Tess’ acceptance of inscriptions is submission, but I argue in this chapter that although Tess suffers from inscription, she can not only learn from her experiences, but also occupy the role of victim to subvert oppression.

Yet *The Chase* is a scene in which Tess unconsciously occupies the role of victim, as she falls to Alec's sexual will and is marked as a "fallen woman." Whether or not Tess is raped is unclear, but she professes that she was unaware of "the meaning until it was too late" (60), suggesting that Alec tricked her into sex during *The Chase*. Critics have provided plenty of debate on whether or not Tess was raped in *The Chase*, but what is most important for the purpose of my analysis is the language of inscription during the scene. Below is an excerpt from the critically debated sex scene in which Hardy intriguingly hides the action from the reader:

The obscurity was now so great that [Alec] could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves. Everything else was blackness alike... Why was it upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive (57).

Tess is a "pale nebulousness" in the forest, due to the "obscurity" caused by the fog. The nebulousness is indicative of Tess' negative space, largely undefined, ambiguous to others, and perhaps even to herself. Alec stumbles upon a "white muslin figure," which shaped by Tess' white gossamer gown. The narrator states that the gossamer invites a "coarse pattern" to be traced upon it during sex, a phallic pen inscribing Tess' body with sexual experience and suffering. Intriguingly, Alec cannot distinguish Tess from the cloth that she is wearing. Without the muslin, she has no figure, yet clearly the muslin is not the same as her physical body, suggesting that the site of inscription is both different from and part of Tess' negative space. In Alec's eyes, there is no difference between the cloth and Tess' body, as both are pale white, representing Tess' virginity and

innocence.¹⁶ Since Alec makes the mistake of conflating the cloth with Tess' flesh, her body may be able to escape inscription. It may seem that Alec is confused here, and that in *The Chase*, he only inscribes the cloth. Tess' body, in this scenario, would never be marked, and she would remain "A Pure Woman," evident in the original subtitle to the novel.¹⁷ But, Tess only remains a pure woman in spirit, as Alec corrupts the white cloth and her pale body, the two signifiers of chastity. *The Chase* marks Tess and her body does not escape Alec's inscriptions. As Morgan argues, Tess "will almost certainly bear the aching smarts of her defloration" (95), and *The Chase* is one scene in the novel in which Tess is a victim to inscription, but learns from Alec's sexual betrayal to subvert any further inscription on her body.

Since Tess' body and the cloth are constructed as items of beauty, there is a sense in *The Chase*, continuing throughout the novel, that things of beauty are doomed to be inscribed. Alec and Angel are undoubtedly attracted to Tess' unearthly beauty, as it haunts both of them throughout the novel. Initially, Tess is attractive enough to burn an image into Angel's mind, a "white shape [which] stood apart from the hedge alone" (10), foreshadowing Tess' future status as "a pale nebulosity at [Alec's] feet" and a "white muslin figure" (57). Both of these images, as well as the narrator's description of Tess as an ambiguous "spot" (303) at the end of the novel, show how Tess' physical body is similar to the "negative space" of her soul, as both are undefined spaces that invite projection and inscription. Tess' feminine beauty, linked to her heredity, which is another

¹⁶ Throughout the novel Hardy uses the colors white and red to signify virginity and penetration, respectfully. This metaphor continues to the end of the novel in which Tess successfully penetrates Alec with the knife and his blood drips from the white ceiling.

¹⁷ Some may argue that the original subtitle is "A Pure Woman, Faithfully Presented by Thomas Hardy."

source of “doom” throughout the novel,¹⁸ invites inscription and projection onto her physical body, forming it very similarly to how Tess initially wants her negative space to be shaped by experience.

The Chase scene is the prime example where Tess’ beauty and ambiguous physicality betrays her. Bronfen argues that, as Alec sees Tess’ body as a pale nebulosity, he is using her “deanimated” body to bear a physical inscription (Bronfen 77). In The Chase, Tess is the *tabula rasa*, ostensibly a blank slate, a piece of cloth unto which a “coarse pattern [was] doomed to receive” (57). Not only does Alec’s violation of Tess shape her negative space, it is also “an act of autosigning [that] will define the ensuing trajectory of her life” (Bronfen 77). It seems that in The Chase, and throughout the rest of the novel, Tess’ beauty dooms her life, as it evokes overwhelmingly, yet strikingly different sexual feelings in Alec and Angel.

Alec cannot erase Tess’ beauty from his mind, evident when he abandons his evangelical duties, exclaiming, “now I cannot get rid of your image” (251). Alec calls Tess a “temptress” and a “damned witch of Babylon” (254), suggesting that her physical beauty compels him to inscribe her, especially when she is unwilling. Angel attempts to reconstruct Tess as a virgin, possibly in order to restructure his own lost view of God (Lovesey 914), but also to reconcile his sexual attraction to Tess’ imperfections. The narrator reveals Angel’s sexual attraction for Tess when Angel is observing her mouth.

¹⁸ In “*Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Neo-Darwinian Reading*,” Peter R. Morton argues that Tess’ fate is manifested in not only her heredity, but her biology in which she is not fated by God, but by her innate instincts. Morton also argues that Tess is constructed as purely human in a Darwinian world that is not devised for humans. Although I agree to some extent that Tess’ circumstances are a direct cause of her family’s financial situation in which Tess was born into, and I also agree that Tess’ beauty is a biological trait that betrays Tess, I do not agree with Morton that Tess’ instincts are her flaw. Instead, I argue in Chapter One that Tess’ impulses do not reduce Tess’ actions to being predetermined or forced.

Angel notices that her mouth is not perfect, but finds the “touch of the imperfect” the quality that gives Tess “sweetness, because it was that which gave [her] humanity” (118).¹⁹ Both Alec and Angel are compelled by Tess’ beauty, which seems to force her to be receptive to inscription from both men.

As for Tess’ agency during *The Chase*, I can understand why critics such as Morgan and Boumelha would claim that Tess is sexually aggressive and that she is not raped, because choice would give her agency in having sex with Alec. I can also understand why critics such as Hugman would interpret Tess as a victim, because doing so would exonerate her from blame, and also make the reader sympathize with her plight. Again, I am not vindicating Alec for his heinous behavior in *The Chase*, but I am arguing that Tess can be both powerful and raped by him. Tess is no victim, yet she is not happy with what some critics would call “her choice” to have sex with Alec. Although, for obvious reasons, it is uncomfortable for me to claim that Tess’ beauty invites rape, and that this rape is somehow formative, I want to claim that Tess does not have to suffer from sex.²⁰ Even though Hardy often dismissed any feminist readings of his novels, and was vehemently against the women’s suffrage movement (Turner 205), I believe Hardy suggests that terrible things are happening to poor Victorian women during “the ache of Modernism” (98), and those things need to change, but he is also saying that women do not have to be victimized by bad things that happen. Tess, although forever marked by

¹⁹ The irony in the description of Tess’ mouth is quite interesting in that Angel originally seems attracted to a fault in Tess’ physical body, yet when he learns of her blighted past with Alec in *The Chase*, Angel rejects Tess. Nevertheless, even though Angel is more interested in idealizing Tess than having sex with her, like Alec is, the description of Tess’ mouth shows that Angel is sexually interested in Tess, even though his religiosity may stop him from trying to do so.

²⁰ In chapter three, I look at John Keats’ model of self-fashioning in “*The Vale of Soul-Making*” to show how Tess learns, and is shaped, by her suffering.

Alec in *The Chase*, outlives the impact of the rape and must go on with her life. She undoubtedly makes her life worse with her constant self-blame, but only because society smites her for being “fallen.” Although it is perfectly warranted for women to feel ashamed, tormented, and victimized by heinous crimes such as rape, Hardy shows the reader that women like Tess can still be powerful in their lives and can remain “pure women” as the subtitle to the novel suggests. He does this by writing many scenes in which Tess acts out in her own self interest, even when she seems to be inviting inscription or welcoming victimization on herself.

I am not claiming that Tess invites inscription in *The Chase*, as that would lead me to defend Alec for tricking Tess into sex, but the aesthetic feminine tissue of Tess’ skin and the white cloth are so beautiful to Alec that he feels compelled to inscribe himself onto it – in fact, he may be doomed to do so. H.M Daleski argues that Alec is unsure of what impels him, but that it is a drive for mastery of an object (111). I would like to take Daleski’s argument even further to claim that Alec’s impulse to inscribe Tess’ innocent and virginal body mirrors the colonial desire of Britain during the nineteenth century. To Alec, Tess’ body is an uncharted land that he must master and mark. Carol Siegel would agree, as she argues that both Alec and Angel feel colonial impulses, as they want to possess an uncultured woman in order to “lift her out of her darkness” (Siegel 140). These “colonial impulses,” as Siegel calls them, are forms of inscription in which Alec writes the primitive, poor, and unmastered woman onto Tess’ identity.

Much like in *The Chase*, there are times throughout the novel when Tess’ body is inscribed without her realizing what is happening. For example, when Tess runs through

the garden at the dairy farm, “neither conscious of time nor place” (96), some ambiguous force - perhaps the narrator, perhaps nature - turns her into a stealthy cat. The force also transfigures Tess’ body by staining her hands with slug-slime. As she runs, the growth beats against her skin, reddening her usually pale skin, inscribing it similarly to the white gossamer fabric during The Chase Much like the white muslin, doomed to receive an inscription because of its purity, Tess’ body too is doomed, as even the trees have “inquisitive eyes” (97) that turn her into an animalistic and overtly sexual woman, another sexist trope. The ambiguous, fateful force also projects onto her when Tess and Alec go to the railroad station to pick up milk. The narrator describes Tess as “receptive to the contact with the whirl of material progress” as the phallic train enters the station. As Tess stands at the station, her negative space is vulnerable to shaping, this time by a penetration of industry. Forces such as the train and the “rank and juicy” (96) garden seemingly enter Tess’ negative space, shaping it even without her knowledge. This moment, as well as The Chase, are scenes in which Tess is a victim to her own beauty, but there are also moments in which Tess is an agent in inviting inscription, sometimes as a mode of power, and sometimes to her detriment.

In the beginning of the novel, Tess ostensibly wants her identity to be inscribed through life experiences. Tess’ motivations for wanting to be shaped lie in her disillusionment with her poor family and their coarse way of life. Tess believes she is “mentally older” than her “light-minded” (35) mother who, in the eyes of the “civilized,” is calloused and treacherous. Anne Mickelson argues that, from birth, Tess, like her mother, has great disadvantages being a poor peasant woman. These disadvantages are

largely due to the class-conscious and Victorian society, in which women simultaneously made political gains, but suffered “grueling forms of paid employment” (Christ 991). Lower class women “worked at factory jobs under appalling conditions,” which led many poor women to prostitution. To avoid this fate, Tess believes experience will free her of peasant life. Tess has every reason to want to grow up differently from her mother, who the narrator describes as reminiscent of girlhood youth and freshness (12), further portraying her as someone who used to be innocent and young, but is now jaded from peasant life. In essence, Tess thinks she must find ways to contour negative space, which is a “mere vessel unstructured by experience” (8), in order to soul-make in such a way that would allow class-mobility. Already on her way, Tess goes to a national school where she learns the “National teachings and Standard knowledge” (14) and where she also learns how to speak proper English instead of her mother’s rural vernacular. Tess also aspires to teach school, an occupation more respectable (at least in the mind of Tess) than a day laborer, which many poor women were forced to become (Mickelson 107). Her aspirations are directly tied to the shaping of her negative space, as experience would hypothetically form it in the shape of a Victorian lady, and Tess would be free of her poor lot. Even though Hardy clearly sympathizes with the poor for their blighted existence in the nineteenth century, he suggests that life does not necessarily improve with “civilization,” as Tess soon realizes that inviting experience as a way to form her identity only leads to suffering. Nevertheless, unlike *The Chase*, these early moments in which Tess desires inscription reveals Tess’ agency in deciding when and how her identity will be formed by experience.

Tess also invites inscriptions onto her negative space when Alec “saves” Tess on horseback on the evening that ends with The Chase. After her long walk during the Chaseborough fair, the local girls verbally attack Tess. Alec quickly arrives and Tess, “abandoning herself to impulse,” jumps on Alec’s horse, aware of his sexual attraction for her, yet unaware of the story she is inserting herself into (53). As Alec rides in, like a valiant knight on horseback, Tess gets becomes the damsel-in-distress. Tess occupies the damsel in distress role in the narrative, inviting the projection of the damsel trope onto herself as she willingly rides away with Alec. Much as she did when she took Prince, Durbeyfield horse, even though she is “not skillful in horse management” (21), Tess feels an instinct that she can handle difficult situations. Shortly after jumping on Alec’s horse, Tess realizes that she has jumped “out of the frying pan and into the fire (53), and tries to resist Alec’s advances. I discussed her resistance in chapter one, but what is most important about this pivotal scene directly before The Chase is that Tess, for a moment, makes the snap decision to inhabit a female stereotype, for better or for worse (in this case, much worse). Bert Hornback argues that this decision is Tess’ tragic fall, one that cannot be attributed to fate because she has a “heroic consciousness” (148). Although I would not call this moment Tess’ *fault*, as Hornback does, I would agree that Tess demonstrates tragic pride. Her heroic consciousness is linked to the shaping of her negative space because, in this instance, Tess tragic pride causes her to occupy a projection of ideal femininity, which transforms her identity for a brief moment, if not for longer. Alec also acts as a stereotype of the heroic gentlemen, whose prize for saving the helpless young lady is a kiss, which he asks for after the sexual encounter.

Yet in one scene, Tess occupies the role of a victim in order to protect herself, but also as an effective mode of subversion. Using inscription as a source of power is what I refer to as “radical acceptance.” The primary example of radical acceptance of inscription is when Alec arrives at the industrial farm and Tess, quite violently, strikes him with her glove. Before doing so, Alec tells Tess that she is “the cause of his backsliding,” implying that she is a femme fatale, a dangerously beautiful woman who uses sex to spite him (261). Although it would seem like Alec is attributing agency to Tess by claiming that she has ruined his life, and not vice versa, he uses the moment to project onto her, something she viscerally rejects as she uses her glove as a weapon. Tess then strategically implores Alec to reprimand her for the violent outburst:

“Now punish me!” she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow’s gaze before its captor twists its neck. “Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always a victim – that’s the law” (261).

Here, it would seem that Tess is simply inviting inscription, as she literally asks Alec to mark her body with phallic objects. Rosemarie Morgan argues that Tess, at this moment, is manipulating the situation by acting overly dramatic, making a scene of his ridiculous behavior (Morgan 97). I agree with Morgan, but I would also suggest that Tess is utilizing two tactical moves to protect herself from Alec. First, Tess is highlighting the Victorian double standard of sexuality, since Tess pays continuously for *The Chase*, but Alec does not. Tess tells Alec that since she is a victim by law, he should treat her like one with a physical beating. Secondly, Tess is not attractive to Alec when she is willing to suffer, only when she is not compliant, revealing to Alec his own perverted sense of

sex. Since he does not beat her in return during this scene, Tess is successful in protecting herself by inviting a stereotype of the helpless victim, strategically using the inscription as a mode of power in which Alec cannot overcome.

Tess, therefore, is forced to receive inscription (i.e. during The Chase), but she can also harness inscription and use it to her advantage. Tess is not simply a victim to inscriptions in my interpretation, as she is successful in utilizing inscription as a mode of power. Even though Tess is powerful in occupying the role of victim during the infamous glove scene, there are still moments in which Tess is doomed to suffer from inscription. Tess is surely a victim to Alec's sexual desires in The Chase, but her radical acceptance of inscription toward the end of the novel reveals that Tess is not completely destroyed by The Chase. Although she is marked for her life for the sexual transgression with Alec, Tess shows during the glove scene her refusal to yield to his desire, even if she must become the victim to do so.

Chapter Three: Suffering as Soul-Making

Even though inscriptions from Alec and Angel cause Tess to suffer, she is still powerful in her misery. To prove this, I will examine “The Vale of Soul-Making” by John Keats in light of Tess’ identity (re)construction.²¹ Keats, in a letter sent to his brother and sister in 1819, argues that the world is a “vale of soul-making” in which humans are “sparks” of intelligences, but are not individual identities until their souls are created (Keats 505). In the letter, Keats claims that this “vale” of a world acts like a school, crafting the soul through learning experiences. More specifically, Keats states that a “World of Pains” is necessary to create the soul. In Keats’ argument, “the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways” in order for soul-making to occur. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Tess undoubtedly suffers. Although she is raped, beaten, and abused throughout Hardy’s novel, a Keatsian interpretation of her experience suggests that suffering may create, instead of merely assaulting, Tess’ soul and identity. In this chapter, I will argue Alec and Angel’s inscriptions form Tess’ negative space and Tess’ soul through suffering, as Keats suggests.

²¹ All citations will be from *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*, published by The Modern Library Classics in 2001.

Referring back to the optical illusion that I use as my model of negative space, Tess' identity is literally shaped by inscriptions.²² As Alec and Angel's projections inscribe Tess' identity, she certainly endures physical and emotional pain, evident in many moments throughout the novel such as The Chase. Her suffering, along with Alec and Angel's act of inscribing her identity, forms Tess' soul, her negative space. Keats' model of soul-making suggests that Tess is not merely tormented by Alec and Angel's inscriptions. Instead of being obliterated by her experiences with both men, or simply surrendering to them, Keats' model shows how Tess can learn, grow, and be shaped by her misery, even if her life is overwhelmed with suffering.

The Chase is an essential example of how suffering forms Tess' soul and negative space. Tess, even though victimized and abused in The Chase, is not destroyed by Alec's betrayal. The narrator suggests that "Tess' passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest" (98).²³ In other words, Tess has learned from Alec's sexual betrayal and, like Keats' model of soul-making, has been constructively shaped even by experiences that are negative. Even if Alec's actions in The Chase mark Tess' negative space until her death, Tess' suffering still gives shape to her identity. Since Tess actively rejects inscriptions, or uses radical acceptance of them after The Chase, Tess has learned from her experiences and is powerful in avoiding unwelcome inscription.

Keats also claims that souls crafted through suffering are unique and "as various as the lives of man" (506). At first, it seems that Tess is not an individual because Alec

²² To see my visual model of negative space, please refer to the introduction of this thesis.

²³ Interestingly, Angel imagines Tess without her "corporeal blight," projecting the image of virgin dairymaid onto Tess. In trying to erase her transgression with Alec, Angel would be ruining the construction of her soul and obliterating Tess' knowledge learned from The Chase.

and Angel inscribe her identity with stereotypical images of women. Yet Tess' reactions to these inscriptions are unique and complex, and her identity changes even when Alec and Angel attribute archetypes to her. As Morgan claims, Tess' identity and personality changes after The Chase, as she learns to "[distance herself] from unwanted sexual advances... fully aware of how best she may repel them" (Morgan 95). In this sense, Tess is powerful in crafting her own identity and even her actions in spite of, and response to, Alec and Angel's relentless ideals and visualizations. She becomes an individual.

Even though Tess becomes an individual through suffering, Keats model of soul-making is problematic since it seems that Tess *must* feel pain in order to become an individual, or even a human. It is conversable that Hardy and Keats suggest that one must suffer in order to have a soul. Keats is definitely arguing that suffering is a necessary part of human life, but neither Hardy nor Keats are suggesting that Tess needs to be raped in order to have an identity. Instead, Hardy and Keats suggest that every human undergoes negative experiences, and, instead of being destroyed by misery, humans can develop identities and souls in reaction to tragic circumstances. Albert LaValley argues that Tess "refuses to be divided by the conflicting forces that beset her" (LaValley 6), revealing that she not only survives negative experiences, but actively rejects Alec and Angel's desires to limit or fragment her identity through inscription. I agree with LaValley's claim that "the source of the novel's unity and strength lies in Tess' superbly whole responses to her experience and suffering" (LaValley 9). Tess' "superbly whole responses" are those defiant moment in which she does not allow her identity to be fragmented by Alec and Angel's inscriptions, remaining one whole identity. Therefore,

even though Tess actively gains strength and character from her suffering, which frees her from simply being a victim of circumstance, she also uses her knowledge of Alec and Angel to remain undivided.

Chapter Four:
Death as Power: Obliterating the Body From the World

In the novel's climax, Tess murders Alec with a knife, fully aware that she will suffer a grave punishment for it. The final scenes of the novel and Hardy's poem "Tess' Lament" show that Tess is melancholy about her circumstances, but she is also confident. Tess willingly – and gladly – walks to her death, not only showing how strong she is, but how eager she is to annihilate her body. Although many critics see Tess' death as defeat, my reading of the final scenes of the novel shows how she is powerful in her death. In this chapter, I will argue that Tess dies in order to remove all traces of inscription and projection from her body, and to deny that body to her persecutors. Even though Tess is often read as a martyr, she, in my argument, she dies for her own cause, giving her power and agency in choosing the outcome of her own life.

Tess powerfully and actively pursues her own death in the novel's final scenes. In response to Angel's sudden entrance, "sharper words from [Alec]" (301), and arguably her own grief throughout the novel, Tess stabs Alec to death. She chooses the knife, a phallic weapon, suggesting that she is taking revenge and physically inscribing Alec, a reenactment of his transgression in *The Chase*. In doing so, Tess is also obliterating her own self, the very site of inscription, because she knows very well that for murdering Alec, her punishment will be death.

Thomas Hardy's poem "Tess' Lament," published eleven years after *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, reveals critical information about Tess' death. The poem provides support for my claim that Tess kills Alec to annihilate the past and his projections. The poem can be read as a companion to the novel, as it is the only time where Tess narrates her own life, something that does not occur in the novel. In "Tess' Lament," Tess speaks in first person about her life and her reasons for murdering Alec, and also discusses her feelings about her own death.²⁴ The sixth and final stanza of the "Lament" represents the murder scene. Tess' account of her own death describes how she deliberately pursues death:

I cannot bear my fate as writ,
I'd have my life unbe;
Would turn my memory to a blot,
Make every relic of me rot,
My doings be as they were not,
And gone all trace of me! (43-48)

The words "writ" and "trace" evoke the act of inscribing an object, in this case Tess. In this stanza, Tess declares how she can no longer live knowing that her life is "writ" by Alec and Angel.

Even though "Tess' Lament" can be read as a call for pity, Tess powerfully rejects her "fate as writ," accepting death as a means to unwrite herself. The "Lament" is understandably sad, yet even in her melancholy, Tess shows that she is not simply a victim. In the final line of the poem, she wants all traces of fate and inscription on her body to disappear, which would involve the obliteration of her physical body. Also, Tess

²⁴ Much like the novel, "Tess' Lament" does not provide an account of The Chase. The only glimpse of this moment comes in the fourth stanza, where Tess blames herself for driving Angel away. Hardy's purposeful removal of any narrative during The Chase in the poem shows

desires for memories of her to be blotted out.²⁵ Tess is suggesting that, since all memory of her has been blotted out, it has been rendered, in a sense, non-existent. Her physical body, and even the outlines of her negative space, will “be as they were not,” and Angel and Liza-Lu will only be able to remember her spirit. Tess’ request to “make every relic of me rot” further conveys the idea that all physical representations are to be destroyed.

Some may argue that Tess’ death is the culmination of her suffering, and that her demise is a capitulation to the forces of fate. In “Tess is a Victim of Men,” T.R. Wright summarizes this position:

Tess dies, at the end of the novel, a victim of fate, of civilization, and above all of male desire, having learnt ‘the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love.’ She never fully succeeds in becoming a subject rather than an object. (Wright 140)

Wright, quite pessimistically, seems to ignore the moments in the novel where Tess is powerful, and to assume that death equates to failure.²⁶ Although Tess does not survive for very long after the murder, the actions she takes in this period, especially the way in which she aggressively “overtakes” Angel immediately after leaving the scene of the crime (303), suggests that Tess is invigorated by her criminal act. In fact, Tess states that she “feels strong enough to walk any distance” (305). Her renewed sense of strength shows that, if nothing else, Tess does not regret killing Alec. Even though I disagree with Wright’s interpretation of Tess’ death, I am willing to acknowledge that Tess is somewhat compelled to kill by outside forces. I would suggest that she murders Alec in

²⁵ “Blotting” is very different than “erasing” a trace of her. Blotting suggests that the memory of her may remain after death, but only tarnished, hidden underneath stains and ink.

²⁶ Wright also fails to recognize the Victorian (and Hardian) tradition of death. In many Victorian works, death is glorified and embraced. Hardy’s works are no different, as characters die to escape the struggles of Victorian life.

angry opposition to these forces, but not simply because fate commands her to do so. Tess' actions are not undertaken in a vacuum separated from determinism, but her decision to kill Alec is her rejection of fate, his oppression, and inscriptions on her.

After killing Alec, Tess commits herself to death with dignity. As the policemen arrive at Stonehenge, she claims, "it is as it should be... I am almost glad – yes, glad!" and even more confidently "I am ready" (312-3). Despite the eagerness with which Tess embraces the next and final stage of her life, Hardy still clearly implies that she is a martyr. In order to be a martyr, though, Tess would be reduced to a suffering woman who has no choice but death.²⁷ Even though Hardy seems to suggest that Tess perishes because of ludicrous Victorian social codes, she does not die with a social cause in mind. This is evident in the fact that Tess dies without widespread recognition. She leaves no legacy in her world except for Angel's marriage to Liza-Lu. There is no statue of Tess after the execution, championing her cause for social rebellion. She is not remembered for her heroism or violent act, as her ancestors lie in their tombs "unknowing" of her struggle (314). Their unawareness of Tess' death reveals that she has also erased and unwritten her narrative from history.²⁸ Even though Hardy may be suggesting that Tess' sorrows are a consequence of Victorian social codes, Tess does not make a statement for others. Instead, she obliterates the blank slate on which Alec and Angel inscribe. Although it seems like Tess is inviting stain and inscription, something she endeavors to

²⁷ An *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "martyr" is "A person who suffers as a victim *to* (also *by*) something to the point of death." This definition was used during the time period in which *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* takes place.

²⁸ It could be argued that the novel itself is Tess' memorial, but only for us readers. In the fictional world of Wessex, Tess, as is evident in "Tess' Lament," has erased any traces of herself beside in Liza-Lu and Angel's memories.

avoid throughout the novel, in the end she is the one blotting and inscribing, dying on her own terms. In death, Tess inscribes her own body to the point of annihilation, blotting out her body and her identity. If Tess can be classified as a martyr, then, she is sacrificing her own body for her benefit, instead of looking for commemoration or grandeur. Her struggles are not written in history books. Instead, as seen in "Tess Lament," she unwrites herself from the world, literally erasing the "trace" of her existence from the earth (43-48).

Tess' death is liberating and admirable. By willingly committing a murder, and also willingly walking to her execution, she sheds projections and inscriptions; in death, she will be free of crippling stereotypes projected by others. If Tess cannot be defined as an individual, that is, if she loses her negative space, the only way she can escape the fate of inscription is to annihilate her human life. In other words, if she cannot win against the stereotypes while alive, she must erase herself so no more inscriptions can be written upon her form. In "Tess Lament," she claims that she "would have [her] life unbe," (44), suggesting that death is not an extension of Tess' story, but its blotting out. In essence, her death is a mode of power because, although she is pushed to extremes by fate, she actively chooses annihilation in order to rid her life of projections and also to deny her physical body to persecutors.

Conclusion

In recent years, many feminist critics such as Penny Boumelha and Rosemarie Margie have tried to reconstruct Tess as an agent since so many others have read her as a helpless victim. Yet the assumption that Tess can only be on one side of the binary of power and victimhood is extremely limiting. Reducing Tess to only one role restricts her individuality and her identity, very similarly to how Alec and Angel inscribe Tess with predefined images of women. My argument about Tess' negative space shows that Tess is a victim to Alec and Angel's idealistic projections of women, but also powerful in subverting those roles. In my analysis Tess is neither pure agent nor pure victim. She is a complex heroine who sometimes makes mistakes, is taken advantage of, learns from her circumstances, and uses that knowledge as a mode of power to protect her body and her identity.

Even in death, Tess cannot be reduced to a caricature. Morgan stresses Tess' resistance in death, noting that she does not become an Everywoman²⁹ or purely a victim:

Hardy retains, then, for Tess, with her emotional generosity, sexual vitality and moral strength, the capacity to rise above her fall... Nor does Tess' last hour find her bereft of will, self-determination and courage. In knifing the heart of the man who so remorselessly hunts her down, she turns her own life around yet again; but this time with readiness, she says, to face her executioner (Morgan 109).

²⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "Everywoman" as "An individual woman who in some way represents or symbolizes all women; (also) the ordinary or typical woman."

Morgan, in the quote above, argues that Tess has the resolve to not only put a stop to abuse by killing Alec, but also willingly accepts death as she is now free to “turn her own life around.” In death, Tess strongly sheds inscriptions by revealing her “emotional generosity, sexual vitality and moral strength,” and also her “capacity to rise above her fall.” Since inscriptions limit Tess’ individuality, I agree with Morgan that Tess reveals to Angel (and perhaps Alec) that she is not the flat and fragmented entity they conceived of her as.

More importantly, however, my negative space model reveals the existence of a threshold for suffering. Even though Hardy and Keats suggest that suffering is a beneficial part of human life, and see a situation in which Tess can learn from her grim experiences, my negative space model reminds us that misery’s benefits have their limits. These limits are revealed when Tess ceases to be shaped by inscriptions, and begins to be obliterated by them. As my negative space model suggests, when Alec and Angel look inward at Tess’ negative space, they reduce her identity in size. Even though Tess’ identity is shaped and formed by Alec and Angel’s inscriptions, there may come a point when Tess’ identity disappears and becomes only what both men desire to see in her. Instead of being a slave to these inscriptions, Tess, in death, eradicates her body on her own terms before Alec and Angel destroy her identity.

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