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Fallenness and Freedom: comparing the treatment of women in the Fin-de-Siècle novel

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Abstract

*Marking the end of the conservative Victorian era, the fin de siècle represents a turning point for women in Britain. Traditional ideas and values clashed with the concept of the 'New Woman' as the fight for the vote polarised public opinion. Changes in women's freedom, demands and behaviour met with push-back, coming from both men and conservative women looking to preserve the status quo. Although they are not always explicitly discussed, these tensions are evident in the literature of the time. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of The D'Urbervilles* provide two very different perspectives on the treatment of women in fin-de-siècle English society. While one shows women through the lens of an overwhelmingly male cast of characters, the other focuses on a female protagonist and allows the reader to share the experience of her treatment.*

[Keywords]: Feminism, Fin-de-Siècle, Victorian Literature, New Woman

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INTRODUCTION

Marking the end of the conservative Victorian era, the fin de siècle represents a turning point for women in Britain. Traditional ideas and values clashed with the concept of the ‘New Woman’ as the fight for the vote polarised public opinion. Changes in women’s freedom, demands and behaviour met with push-back, coming from both men and more conservative women looking to preserve the status quo. Although they are not always explicitly discussed, these tensions are evident in the literature of the time. Women in fin-de-siècle fiction are often generalised, either as weak and sentimental or as deviant and manipulative; they are objectified or idealised, with no compromise between decorative uselessness and god-like perfection. Some of these fictional women, however, are shown breaking away from these outdated standards by supporting each other and striving for independence. Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of The D’Urbervilles*, for instance, provide two very different perspectives on the treatment of women in fin-de-siècle English society. While one shows women through the lens of an overwhelmingly male cast of characters, the other focuses on a female protagonist, allowing the reader to share the experiences of her treatment.

The Virtuous and the Fallen

Nineteenth-century views of women, both in society and literature, are painted with what George Watt (cited in Golden, 2000: 13) refers to as the ‘dichotomy of two classes of women’: the virtuous and the fallen. Both of these classes are generalisations, and both are used to demean and belittle women. Even the ‘virtuous’ woman is not simply defined by her qualities; she is often ridiculed, shown as weak and incapable of controlling her emotions. The women featured in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embody what Felski (1991: 111) calls ‘a natural and excessive emotionality antithetical to the controlled consciousness of the aesthete’; their perceived sentimentality becomes a foil for the cynicism and mastery of feeling the male characters believe to be the better way of life. Thomas Hardy (1891: 13) follows a similar idea in his description of Tess, writing that ‘for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would lift over the curves of her mouth now and then’.

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This image of the childlike, innocent girl makes it all the more difficult for women to assert themselves and be taken seriously. Thus, men retain a feeling of superiority and can justify keeping women within the domestic sphere, away from the gritty realities of the outside world.

Another method used to generalise and demean ‘virtuous’ women is to dismiss them as dull, without intelligence or interest. Wilde’s Lord Henry offers, once again, an example of this method when advising Dorian, stating that ‘there are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can’t be admitted into decent society’. (Wilde, 1891: 47) Lord Henry thus believes women have no place in the public sphere because if they are respectable enough, they cannot be intelligent, and if they are intelligent enough, they cannot be respectable. Without the thrill of the unknown and the unusual, women are left to be seen as a dull, homogenous class, preoccupied with nothing but trivial domestic matters.

This thrill of the fallen woman, however, comes with its own set of negative generalisations. If the virtuous woman is meant to be unaware of her beauty, the New Woman uses it to her advantage. Lord Henry deplores this just as he deplores the dullness of respectable women, saying that they are charming but commit the mistake of ‘paint[ing] in order to try and look young’ (Wilde, 1891: 47). Make-up, along with ornate clothing, jewellery and other forms of ornamentation, has long held a pejorative association with femininity in Western culture. What Naomi Schor (cited in Felski, 1991: 1095) calls ‘the specific late-nineteenth-century nexus among femininity, decadence, and a self-consciously decorative and antirealist aesthetic’ feeds from this historic association, and is heightened by the rise of the New Woman and the fears it causes in public opinion. A woman who controls and cares about her appearance presents a danger to men, who see ‘artificial’ beauty as a kind of seductive manipulation.

The Idealised and the Emancipated

While the generalisation of women is prominent in fin-de-siècle literature and society, it is largely used in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Tess of The D’Urbervilles* to highlight the obverse: the extreme idealisation of an individual woman. Indeed, if all women are considered either respectable and uninteresting, or vain and dangerous, any one able to break away even slightly from this

perceived mould becomes special, a rarity to be held above the rest of the female sex. For Dorian Gray, this rarity is found in the character of Sybil Vane. He speaks of her in superlatives, telling Henry ‘she was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life’ (Wilde, 1891: 50); everything from her voice to her looks is described as different and better than what he has ever witnessed in a woman. Mahaffey (2012: 245) explains this idealisation as due to engrained and internalised homophobia, ‘displacing his ideal onto women, seen not as subjects but as displaced objects of desire’. In holding Sybil above all other women, Dorian is, in fact, de-humanising her, seeing her as an entity rather than a person. The same blind idealisation is shown by Clare in *Tess of The D’Urbervilles*, who sees Tess as ‘a visionary essence of woman’ and calls her by the names of female deities (Hardy, 1891: 167). If Dorian’s worship of Sybil Vane is compensation for homosexual desire, Clare’s worship of Tess represents, according to Lovesey, ‘a compensation for the loss of God’ (Lovesey, 2003: 915). The religious up-bringing he suppresses, is transfigured into an obsession with purity, personified, he believes, in Tess.

Wilde and Hardy, however, do emphasize the consequences of this extreme idealisation on the object. Both Sybil and Tess eventually suffer from backlash as they inevitably fall from the pedestal they were placed on. One mediocre performance is enough to change Dorian’s mind completely, causing him to despise the woman he once loved. Instead of placing the blame on himself for holding her to impossible standards, Dorian proceeds to blame Sybil, saying ‘you have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid’ (Wilde, 1891: 87). The same thing happens to Tess when she reveals her past to Clare; far from chastising himself for idealising her or failing to listen when she tried to confess, he rejects her, claiming ‘I thought – any man would have thought – that by giving up the ambition to win a wife with social standing, with fortune, with knowledge of the world, I should secure rustic innocence as surely as I should secure pink cheeks’ (Hardy, 1891: 304). Both men feel cheated, and their excessive reaction can be explained by Lovesey and Blake’s theories on the displacement of the ideal; the betrayal they feel is not solely about the women they idealised, but about the women’s now broken roles as replacements for homoerotic desire and religion.

The prominence of the male voice and its tendency to either generalise or idealise makes it difficult to get a grasp of fin-de-siècle women. Wilde and Hardy’s novels, however, both go beyond this

tendency to give a voice to their female character that not only shows them as individuals but reflects the concerns and demands of women at the time. Wilde was a strong supporter of suffragette campaigns, both in his work as editor of *The Woman's World* and in his own writings (Fitzsimons, 2016: 23). While these opinions are admittedly buried deep in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, they do appear in the character of the Duchess of Monmouth, who proudly declaims that 'women rule the world' (Wilde, 1891: 202). This glimpse of a different perspective suggests that, despite the prominence of the male characters' misogynistic values, there exists opposing points of view and people willing to defend them.

If this is as far as Wilde goes in his references to feminist ideas, Hardy takes it further, with a novel focused entirely on an individual, complex woman. This foray into Tess' life and mind defies, in many ways, societal ideas of femininity, such as the expectation of competition between women. Indeed, female solidarity is a pillar of the novel, often providing the support denied to our characters by fin-de-siècle society. At a young age, Tess she shows an appreciation of the work done by women at home, as well as a sense of responsibility that drives her to find work in order to help her family. This sympathy for other women carries on as she ages and befriends the other milkmaids. Instead of fighting for Angel Clare's affection, the girls bond over their shared love for him. This dynamic of female solidarity runs through to the end of the novel, when Tess makes Angel promise to marry her sister, thus giving her and her family the stability she could not provide.

The female solidarity in the novel moreover serves to demonstrate women's desire for independence from, and equality with, men. The club-walking depicted in the second chapter is the first example of this theme; while the men are still at work or refusing to take part, the women walk and dance with each other. Angel's brief participation is pleasant, but not necessary, as he sees the women still dancing upon leaving and remarks that 'they seemed to have quite forgotten him already' (Hardy, 1891: 16). Tess in particular embodies this desire for independence in her relationship with Alec D'Urberville. She does not hesitate to openly reject him, even when he offers to marry her, stating 'I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not – I cannot!' (Hardy 1891: 97). Tess thus deliberately chooses to suffer the fate of a fallen woman rather than to commit to a man she does not love. Her reluctance is not an isolated case; the fin de siècle marked the beginning of

a shift toward later marriage, and many blamed women for what Lovesey describes as ‘the resulting increase in the number of young unattached men, like Alec and Angel, at a time when the pathology of prolonged celibacy for men and women was hotly debated’ (Lovesey 2003: 919). With a will still untamed by experience, Tess seeks a relationship of equals, one she believes she can have with Angel, as her heart tells her that ‘truth is truth between man and woman, as between man and man’ (Hardy, 1891: 227).

Conclusion

In conclusion, while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* gives little voice to women, it does offer a realistic portrayal of the treatment of women in the fin de siècle, showing them as dehumanised or idealised, domestic or dangerous. The same treatment is shown in *Tess of the D’Urberville* and is rendered more striking by the novel’s insight into Tess’ mind and the thwarted desires for freedom and equality that faced many late-Victorian women.

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