

THE DE-SEXUALIZED WOMAN IN HARDY'S THE WOODLANDERS – BETWEEN VICTIMIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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*Abstract: The idea of an active female sexuality was regarded during the nineteenth century as unnatural, even perverted, and as a threat to the respectability of the Victorian household and, by extension, to the entire nation. Therefore, the prevailing image of the Victorian woman was that of a woman cloistered within the private sphere and her body enclosed and unrecognized or, rather recognized as inferior. Taking as starting point Thomas Hardy's novel *The Woodlanders*, the paper focuses on the representation of women as objects and on their reconfiguring as de-sexualized bodies, which are being remodelled and manipulated (by father, husband or lover) in order to become submissive and comply with patriarchal values. The instantiations of the female body's manipulation and training will be revealed through the use of Michel Foucault's theory on the docile body. However, the term 'de-sexualization' takes another interpretation, as borrowed from Foucault's line of thought, where it may be interpreted as a form of empowerment through which the woman, by becoming vocal and demanding her rights, actually gains power and manages to penetrate the public space, hence redefining herself in a male-dominated society. De-sexualization indeed empowers women to interact with the other sex, but it also triggers the loss or denial of their sexuality.*

Keywords: female body, Foucault, de-sexualization, objectification, empowerment

In a society which put great emphasis on the objectification and cloistering of the female body within the private sphere, emphasizing the sexual impulses that govern the human being and challenging the prescribed ideas according to which women lacked passion and erotic drive must have been a challenging task for a writer. The nineteenth-century patriarchal discourse on women reconfigured the female body into a body that was easily manipulated and submissive, rather than desirable. It was for this transformed, recreated female body that a new discourse emerged, one which represented the woman as a machine which could be handled as an object by the medical corpus of the age, whose determined, fixed task was to decide whether the female body was capable of reintegration in the society or had to be locked in an asylum or worse, disposed of among the outcasts of the society. Medical experts provided supposedly scientific arguments to prove that, whereas men had strong sexual drives, it wasn't fit for respectable women to feel the same. A leading figure of this idea was Dr. William Acton (1818-1875), who argued that "the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind"¹. For Acton female sexual activity was highly evident in lunatic asylums, while healthy women were free from these sexual drives, since they submitted the passions of the flesh to their husbands only: "The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences (...) As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification

¹ Acton, William, "Prostitution Considered in its Social and Sanitary Aspects" (1870) in Sheila Jeffreys (ed), *The Sexuality Debates*, Women's Source Library, Volume VI. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 2001, p. 61

for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him”². In other words, a body stripped of its sexual aura, de-sexualized and trapped in its domestic cage represented no danger for the ‘respectable’ society of nineteenth-century England.

This view of the female body as de-sexualized was encapsulated in the medical and literary discourse by propounding an image of the woman as asexual, devoid of sexual desire. Excess of sexual desire (most inherent in prostitutes and hysterics) had to be normalized through a cautious process of discipline. Discipline of the female body triggered discipline of female sexuality, hence the domestic female body had to be taught not to become receptive to (illicit) sexual passion, otherwise it would have betrayed the unity of the society and thus become a threat, a danger. The Victorian woman was expected to behave as purely as possible; she had to control her behaviour, her sexual appetite and her speech so that she could dominate and control the desires of the flesh; she was considered an extension of man, devoid of passions and interested in maintaining peace and tranquillity in the home.

In *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher Michel Foucault developed his thesis on the docile body, a type of body which is “manipulated, shaped, trained, [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces (...) A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved”³. The variety of meanings conveyed by this single phrase accounts for the transformation, reconfiguration of the body into a passive, manipulated and obedient tool, which by training becomes an active body, a skilful body which gradually increases its forces. By extension, we may apply Foucault’s theory on the docile body to the Victorian female body which is turned docile and becomes powerless in the nineteenth century patriarchal environment and is consequently easy to manipulate. Thus, subjected to a process of inferiorization, control and treated as a commodity, the female body becomes a site of male domination. Such is the case of the female body in Thomas Hardy’s novels – all throughout Wessex, most female characters are reconfigured by male characters as de-sexualized so they could maintain their control and power over them. In a typical patriarchal society, the restrictions imposed onto the female body restricted women’s freedom and these merely represented objects of trade, of inspection, bodies whose behaviour had to be regulated since childhood in order to prove their usefulness and docility in later years, when they had to be economically valuable. In this case, the woman was, without a shadow of a doubt, a victim of destiny, of money and of her secondary position in the society.

However, I will assign another interpretation of the term ‘de-sexualized’, starting from Foucault’s idea that, during the nineteenth century, a whole movement of de-sexualization took place and triggered the empowerment of women who, through their own de-sexualization, managed to empower themselves in order to interact, to speak the same language as the other sex. However, taking into account the discourse of prudishness and sexual repression which permeated the patriarchal Victorian society, it is practically impossible to separate the concept of *de-sexualized as empowered* from the image of the Victorian woman as passive, perceived as lacking a sexual body, submitted to male control, hence a docile body, as I will show in the subsequent analysis.

Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* deals with love, courtship, issues of class position, marriage and the status of women in the Victorian society. At the hub of the narrative Hardy places the returned native Grace Melbury, an educated young woman, who comes back to her patriarchal environment where she finds her father deeply interested in trading her marital future to the most prospective suitor, hesitating between Giles Winterborne, the hard-working but uncultured rustic and Edred Fitzpiers, the newly arrived mysterious doctor, a whole

² Acton, William quoted in Marcus, Steven, *The Other Victorians. A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009, p. 31

³ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1975), New York: Random House, 1995, p. 136

discourse which places Grace in the position of an auctioned object. Following Hardy's preferred narrative thread, this love triangle is disturbed by the appearance of the femme fatale Felice Charmond, who complicates the relationships between Grace and the two suitors. The novel's major focus resides in highlighting the status of the Victorian woman and the limited choices she had in a patriarchal society from the moment of her birth.

Grace Melbury represents the first instantiation of the de-sexualized woman turned into a victim of the society in which she lives. Grace is the perfect example of patriarchal oppression, of the woman turned into a docile and useful body, treated as an object by the different men in her life: her father and her husband. The patriarch of the household, Mr. Melbury, constructs his daughter as commodity and judges her value taking as starting point the money which he had invested in her education. In this context, Grace becomes a social victim within the patriarchal system which entraps her and thus limits her choices. Thus, when it comes to marrying his daughter, the father demands repayment for his investment: "since I have educated her so well, and so long, and so far above the level of the daughters hereabout, it is wasting her to give her to a man of no higher standing than he"⁴. Grace becomes gradually an object of barter for Mr. Melbury, who is unable to perceive his daughter as a woman, but as an item which he must re-locate as most profitably as possible. Unsatisfied with the prospect of his daughter marrying the not so well-off Giles, Mr. Melbury configures his daughter according to a plan: "I have (...) that plan in my head about her"⁵, according to which she should marry a man of higher position than his. When placing his daughter within a pre-established schema, the father annihilates the daughter's possible choice from the very beginning and re-configures *the woman* Grace into *the object* Grace by constantly disciplining her into forcibly participating into the predominant discourse of male superiority and authority over female weakness and submissiveness.

We may say that the strategies of discipline directed towards Grace's body represent subtle tactics, since they are deployed without weapons or terror, encapsulating forces that bear directly on her body, but without the use of violence. Grace is thus disciplined, turned docile through "a micro-physics of power"⁶, i.e. a power which invests bodies by means of a multifaceted network of subtle mechanisms. This micro-physics of power is, according to Foucault, "the power exercised on the body [and] is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed (...) to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; (...) one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege one might possess (...) [and] the overall effect of its strategic position – an effect that is manifested and sometimes entrenched by the position of those who are dominated"⁷. Hence, in the context of the father-daughter relation perceived in pecuniary terms, the dominated Grace has to prove the usefulness of her body.

For Foucault, the body is crossed by the intersection of a series of correlatives: power, dominance, control and subjection, all expressed and further exercised in socio-political relations. Even though for Foucault the body's usefulness is measured in terms of production (economic), he notes that "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and subjected body"⁸. Mr. Melbury gradually keeps his daughter under control, seen as a way of protecting his investment and which in fact turned into his obsession, consisting in "sow[ing] in her heart cravings for social position"⁹, which shows that the father wants his

⁴ Hardy, Thomas, *The Woodlanders* (1887), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 17

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 26

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p.81

daughter to understand and internalize the power and importance of money and social position.

Grace is trained into sheer docility and is continuously manipulated by outside forces – first of all, she is shaped and trained by her father to become an educated woman and marry to her own advantage; she obeys her father in being ready to accept the suitor that had been destined for her by her father; secondly, by Fitzpiers, the shrew seducer. Hence Grace's body is put to the test of discipline – discipline seen as involving a whole technology of the body, which is invested with relations of power and domination: it is branded, trained, worked, observed, punished and lastly turned into a de-sexualized object.

In a Foucauldian reading, Grace's body is re-configured by her father into a "body as a machine"¹⁰, a body in which disciplinary procedures were used to optimize the economic usefulness of the body, a significant moment in the development of capitalism, which required the controlled insertion, implementation of bodies into the new machinery of economic production¹¹. In this context, Mr. Melbury's de-sexualizing Grace entails a process of 'torture' for the daughter, who, upon returning in her native environment, lives the tragedy of the exiled; she feels uprooted, alienated, gradually turning from an unpleased person to one that is trying to please the others. However, in her case, as I shall demonstrate in the last part of this paper, this process of de-sexualization performed onto her body by outer forces transforms, re-configures Grace into a woman who will actually become empowered and raise her voice above her oppressors'.

Another instantiation of de-sexualization in *The Woodlanders* is provided by a female character who resorts to self-mutilate her body out of economic reasons. Marty South is a girl with "little pretension to beauty"¹² and whose hands are hard, rough, red and blistering. It is her hair which brands her femininity; her hair, in its abundance which made it almost unmanageable, brown, even though its "true shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut"¹³. It is through Marty that Hardy mirrors a harsh reality of the nineteenth-century society, i.e. the economic hardships most poor peasant girls had to endure and which eventually forced them into selling their own hair in order to survive: "Young women in England, who have beautiful tresses, are occasionally, we know, urged by poverty to part with them for money to the hair-workers"¹⁴. These girls were also providers of hair for the "boudoirs of [the] fashionable world"¹⁵, ladies of the middle class who needed to embellish themselves, to re-create their sexuality through artificial coils and curls, such being the case of Felice Charmond who augments her charms in order to ensnare and betray men, thus hair becoming a symbol of deceit (also used by Hardy in the depiction of Arabella Donn in *Jude the Obscure*, when Jude discovers that his wife's enormous knob of hair is a detachable piece).

It is lack of money and the realization that the man she secretly pines for (Giles) would never take an interest in her which make Marty sell what she regards as her only claim to beauty. Not only does she sell her hair, but she transforms this commercial process into a ritual of self-punishment when she actually cuts it herself, thus completely de-sexualizing her being. The process of de-sexualization brings about Marty's inner struggle, the turmoil at the thought of being deprived of her sexual, sensuous side: "I cannot part with it: so there!"¹⁶; "I say I won't sell it – to you or anybody"¹⁷; "I value my looks too much to spoil 'em"¹⁸.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, Volume 1, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 139

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p. 10

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Rowland, Alexander, *The Human Hair*, London: Pipee Brothers & Co., 1853, p. 158

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159

¹⁶ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p. 11

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12

When Marty cuts her own hair and transforms it into commodity, she effects a ritual of self-punishment. By altering her appearance, she also alters her relations to the onlookers. The punishment is visible when Giles sees her and he is startled by her looks: “your head (...) has shrunk to nothing – it looks like an apple upon a gate-post”¹⁹, to which Marty’s heart “swelled”²⁰ and “she could not speak”²¹. Thus, by robbing herself of an important feminine asset, Marty contributes willingly to her own de-sexualization by unmaking herself as a possible object of desire for the man she longed for (“I’ve made myself ugly – and hateful – that’s what I’ve done!”²²) by sacrificing her feminine looks.

A woman’s hair has always been evocative of her sexuality, and it has even been claimed that “a woman’s head hair is to the male a symbol of her pubic hair and hence of her very womanhood”²³. Thus it comes as no surprise on the part of prudish Victorians to dictate some rules of good behaviour for ladies in public, rules which stated that, after the period of adolescence, women were supposed to put their hair up and only let it loose in more private, intimate occasions. That is why, by contrast with the considerate ladies who would groom and tie up their hair, a woman with loose, unkempt hair would be easily associated with loose sexual mores. In the case of the unfortunate Marty, her short hair equates to lack of sexuality and sensuousness, which is noticed by Giles, who immediately re-configures *the woman* Marty into *the object* Marty, by comparing her head to an apple. Not only does Marty participate into the process of her own de-sexualisation, but she is also de-sexualized and objectified within the male discourse which associates hair with femininity.

The de-sexualisation of the woman occurs in this novel at the level of the ageing body as well. Felice Charmond buys Marty’s hair in order to increase her charms and thus render herself more attractive to Fitzpiers. Felice internalizes the process of ageing as one that transforms her body from *useful* to *useless*. The useful body is a body that can be, in Foucauldian terms, handled and trained²⁴. Therefore she interprets her body as capable of performing a series of functions considered useful by the patriarchal society, i.e. to meet a prospective husband, marry him and settle down. The panic of an ageing body is translated as her fear of becoming unacceptable, abnormal and unattractive in male’s eyes. Upon realizing and further acknowledging the signs of ageing, Felice internalizes the end of her usefulness ‘on the market’, usefulness which should be understood in her case as her power of attraction, which gradually fades away. She therefore tries to make her body useful again by decorating herself with artificial props (false tresses). When Fitzpiers discovers that Felice’s beautiful hair was only a substitute, he re-configures his mistress as another, de-valuing her from a sexual, sensuous woman to a de-sexualized, hence useless woman. Placed on a pedestal by her lover and by the members of the community in which she lived, Felice becomes an/other, associated with the woman’s *other* face, one that she had carefully kept confined, veiled, but which was unveiled so as to reveal the unequal play of power relations in Victorian culture: women pay for being other, for not being able to comply with the ideal(ized) standards expected by the Victorian patriarchal system.

The other meaning assigned to the term ‘de-sexualization’ in this paper was borrowed from Foucault’s line of thought and it is associated with a creative and interesting element in the women’s movement during the nineteenth century:

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 13

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cooper, Wendy, *Hair: Sex, Society, Symbolism*, London: Aldus, 1971, p. 65

²⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 170

“The real strength of the women’s liberation movements is not that of having laid claim to the specificity of their sexuality and the rights pertaining to it, but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality. These movements do indeed emerge in the nineteenth century as demands for sexual specificity. What has the outcome been? Ultimately, a veritable movement of *de-sexualisation*, a displacement effected in relation to the sexual centering of the problem, formulating the demand for forms of culture, discourse, language, and so on, which are no longer part of that rigid assignation and pinning-down to their sex which they had initially in some sense been politically obliged to accept in order to make themselves heard. The creative and interesting element in the women’s movements is precisely that”²⁵.

Hence I will extract this Foucauldian perception of the term and apply it to Hardy’s female character who is depicted as unsexing herself and renouncing for a moment at her sensuous, feminine side, in order to find a common language, to become ‘accepted’ and thus ‘understood’ by men. In order to achieve this, female characters in Hardy’s fiction are generally presented as inverting the dominant/submissive paradigm and consequently placing themselves in a position of power. In a male-dominated society like the Victorian one, where women were often the victims of sexual oppression, it was difficult for women to even consider the topic of female sexual agency and choice, since women were assigned, cloistered to the private arena. In this context, we may say that de-sexualization represented a strategy, a ploy bringing some significant changes in women’s status.

Throughout the novel, Grace Melbury is presented as a woman who is subjectively constructed by the male gaze, either the patriarchal gaze of her father, who seeks to entrap her in his system of normalization (as discussed above, Grace is nothing but a plan and an investment to Mr. Melbury, who is permanently seeking to restore his daughter to the society she had been taken away from) or the gaze of desire enacted by both Fitzpiers and Giles upon her body. However, towards the second half of the novel, Grace manages to achieve a certain degree of independence and manages to elude the gazes cast upon her, as she is attempting to configure an identity of her own: “I am a woman now, and can judge for myself”²⁶ and thus to defeat the constraints of the patriarchal society and the cultural context which define women in negative opposition to men.

It is when Fitzpiers’s gripping infatuation with her comes to an end, towards the second half of the novel and she becomes aware of her husband’s liaisons and the fact that she was a mere object which might bring his social integration in the Little Hintock community, that Grace stops being a mere spectacle and the dominant / submissive position is thus inverted. The narrator remarks that Fitzpiers had become “a silent *spectacle* to her”²⁷, which reveals the reversal of roles in the visual field as well. From object of both trade and information, Grace reconfigures herself as an assertive observer of her own self and of her life. Grace acquires a high level of knowledge the moment she ceases being the naive, country girl, compared to a “mere chattel”²⁸ in her father’s discourse. Foucault finely observed that “the function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating; it is interpreting”²⁹. The moment she becomes aware of the two mistresses in Fitzpiers’s life, Suke and Felice, Grace internalizes her own tragedy and begins the process of interpretation: what she had seen, gazed at up to that moment is transformed into bits of information that are further analyzed

²⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings. 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp. 219-220, my emphasis

²⁶ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p. 74

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185, my emphasis

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81

²⁹ Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1971), New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1994, p. 40

and internalized so that she is capable of empowering herself and deserting her cheating husband.

Therefore it is through a painful and meticulous process of interpretation that Grace manages to overcome the label she had been carrying for years and thus reclaim the boundaries of her own body. It is the conversation she has with Felice, when they were both lost in the woods, that helps Grace understand and recognize that the former had an affair with her husband: “O my great God! (...) He’s had you!”³⁰, and the episode in which both mistresses come to Grace and Fitzpiers’s household in order to inquire about the latter’s accident and Grace welcomes them with words full of bitter sarcasm: “Indeed, you have a perfect right to go into his bedroom (...) Wives all, let’s enter together!”³¹. This is the moment when Grace stops being the meek ‘angel of the house’ type of woman and reconfigures herself into an agent, a woman who is not afraid to voice the unhappiness and humiliation in her own marriage. Later in the novel, when she rediscovers Giles, Grace is in her turn re-discovered, re-configured by him as a new woman: “(...) a new woman in many ways whom he had come out to see; a creature of more ideas, more dignity, and, above all, more assurance, than the original Grace had been capable of”³². This new Grace speaks out her mind and detaches herself from the role prescribed to her by the conventional, patriarchal society and dares to make her(self) heard. She begins to make use of a high level of resistance in order to break the conventions of the male-dominated system. According to Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance”³³. In other words, resistance would not be possible if there were no power relations present, and instead of taking on a passive, powerless role, the subject Grace, by deploying resistance, takes part in the dynamics of these power relations by changing and re-creating them.

As the above analyses have shown, the woman perceived as de-sexualized becomes in Hardy’s novel a victim of the patriarchal system and she is made to adopt a passive position, i.e. the position of the prey in front of the hunter. Victimized by the authority of the patriarchal father (Grace), victimized and oppressed by the economic burdens she is subjected to (Marty), victimized by a society that places high value on exterior beauty, without which a woman feels she is unable to get a husband, marry, procreate, hence feeling unable to respond to the pre-requisites of the society in which she lives (Felice), the female character in *The Woodlanders* is being however offered temporary outlets in which to voice her unhappiness and freedom of choice (Grace). As Hardy’s female characters are placed on a site of struggle because they are preys to various forms of abuse, and they are rendered victims of oppressive fathers, husbands or lovers, the female body in this novel is constituted itself as an object through the methods inscribed within a male-modelled discourse. This act of objectification is to be understood as an act of domination and control, which leads to the discipline and very often punishment of the woman. Yet, Hardy’s novel also offers a reading of power as productive, not only repressive, as power is coextensive with resistance, and hence it produces positive effects. According to Foucault, where is power, there is a certain level of resistance³⁴ to it as well, revealed in Hardy’s novels by those female voices who actually break the silence and are delineated as active beings, empowered to vocalize their own self.

³⁰ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p. 219

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233

³² *Ibid.*, p. 252

³³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 95

³⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 95

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