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Breaking with the Conventions:
Victorian Confession Novels
and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

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VICTORIAN NOVELISTS secularize confessions as rituals of reform, but for the so-called “fallen” heroine they involve a romantic peak as well. Obsession with an unattainable confessor is common for “fallen” women in Victorian fiction. Guilty heroines worship and are inspired to sacrifice by their priestly confessors. These painful romances of social distance mask the power the confessor has over the penitent—usually the power of a middle-class man over a working-class woman. In standard confession novels, the confessor convinces the penitent that to redeem herself she must redirect her anger away from the oppression of working-class women and towards her own faults. However, in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), the heroine’s redirection of rage away from the unjust hierarchies of gender and class leads to tragedy. My article focuses on *Tess* as the *fin-de-siècle* culmination of a line of Victorian confession novels.¹ According to Dennis Foster, most narratives use confession to “reestablish the violated law.”² Unlike standard confession novels, *Tess* doesn’t do that. Instead, *Tess* argues against the convention that confessions which reinscribe the gender and class hierarchies lead to the “fallen” woman’s salvation. *Tess* shows the injustice of the sexual double standard, along with the hypocrisy of gender and class hierarchies that always place the middle-class male confessor above the penitent working woman.³

Before exploring Hardy’s novel in depth, we should examine the features of the typical confession novel. In Wilkie Collins’s *The New Magdalen* (1873), George Gissing’s *The Unclassed* (1884), and, to some extent, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), these features appear in
a form that foreshadows Tess's critique of them. One feature is that the sins and desires which "fallen" women confess have a sexual nature or origin. The term fallen implies how negatively many Victorians felt about women who committed such so-called sins, for there is no equivalent term for men. In Victorian fiction, a woman rarely falls through any other route than sex: the so-called fallen woman is usually an adulteress in thought if not in deed. Michel Foucault argues that confession of illicit desire is part of the nineteenth-century obsession with sexuality that results in the sexualization of all aspects of life. Victorians require confession because they assume that sexuality reveals the essential truth of human nature. Foucault calls the era's "deployment of sexuality" an attempt to control bodies through the strengthening of conscience rather than through public punishment. Conscience monitors even the most minute secrets of desire. Since control is internal, thoughts become at least as important as actions.

Even when the "fallen" no longer sin, they remain corrupt by Victorian standards if they entertain improper desires. Freud points out that the reformed forever feel guilty because their wishes can't be renounced. Since desires persist because they cannot be fulfilled, conscience demands more and more self-denial, endlessly. Therefore, the "fallen" woman's confession usually stimulates her transformation into a masochistic ascetic. For example, in Collins's The New Magdalen, Mercy Merrick plans to return to a hated refuge for prostitutes to protect the minister/confessor she loves from her allure. In Gissing's The Unclassed, a novel Hardy admired, Ida Starr embraces poverty as a laundress after confessing to the middle-class intellectual whom she loves that she is a prostitute. And in Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen Harleth renounces high society after confessing to her beloved priest-substitute that she wished to murder her tyrannical husband. These novels suggest that romances that express themselves only through confessions fuel the woman's desire for renunciation and make the process pleasurable. Tess revises this convention through its heroine's unrelenting suffering.

The novel also revises the convention that the "fallen" woman's confession creates intimacy with the confessor, since Tess's confession drives Angel away. Foucault describes how confession usually creates "spirals of power and pleasure" by transforming desire into discourse. Pleasure rewards guilt in this ritual of purification that fosters romance by exposing the penitent's vulnerability. Renunciation becomes the "fallen" woman's performance for the superior male who elicits it
through confession. Motivated by the pleasure and pain of telling her 
secrets, the “fallen” women in Gissing, Collins, and Eliot reshape them-
selevse to impress their confessors. Gissing’s Ida Starr, Collins’s Mercy 
Merrick, and Eliot’s Gwendolen Harleth hide their love for their con-
fessors because they see themselves as unworthy. The conventional “fallen” 
woman’s passion motivates the self-denial through which she secretly 
hopes to attract her confessor. Tess, too, hopes to reclaim Angel after 
her confession if she punishes herself enough. When Tess eventually 
discovers the falsity of that fantasy, she supports the novel’s critique of 
the romance of confession.

Although the woman’s confession releases her from guilt and enables 
er to become worthy of her confessor, conventional confession novels 
condone the gender and class inequality on which Victorian love de-
pended. Because the confessor is her moral and social superior, the 
“fallen” woman submits to him gratefully, preserving the traditional 
patriarchal relation between man and woman: consider Collins’s Mercy 
and Julian, Gissing’s Ida and Waymark, or Eliot’s Gwendolen Harleth 
and Daniel Deronda. Julian is Mercy’s superior through his virtues as 
well as by class, since Mercy is an orphaned, illegitimate offspring of the 
upper class to which Julian legitimately belongs. To become a minister, 
Julian adopts the work ethic of the middle class, whereas Mercy tries to 
escape the killing work of nursing through a lie. Mercy only becomes 
worthy of her beloved through renouncing him and the guardianship 
that she could have improperly held onto, confirming the middle-class 
virtue of self-denial. The hierarchies of gender and class are thus kept 
in place by the confession ritual that is supposed to create peace of mind 
and virtue. Like Mercy, Gissing’s wayward Ida and Eliot’s Gwendolen 
passionately want moral mentors, fulfilling the stereotypical “feminine” 
need for a spiritual leader.\(^{11}\) Lowly Ida and Mercy, like respectable 
Gwendolen Harleth, prefer men who have the righteous, unattainable 
air of priests.\(^{12}\) Any moral or social equality between the purified 
penitent and her confessor is illusory. For Collins, Gissing, and Eliot, 
that is as it should be. By contrast, Tess reverses the conventional moral 
position of male and female to show that the hierarchies of gender and 
class that put the man above the woman are wrong. The novel charac-
terizes the “fallen” woman as superior to her confessor, although neither 
she nor her peers recognize her as such.

Of course the relationship between the powerful confessor and the 
degraded female resembles the one between Christ and sinners. In the
parable of the lost sheep and the story of Mary Magdalene, Christ rescues and comforts the torn, lost soul who submits to him. As an androgynous god, Christ unites a mother's unconditional tenderness with a father's authority. A nineteenth-century Scottish divine, Henry Drummond, preaches that only when God "imprints himself" upon a man can that man become Christlike. The sinner is passively feminine, waiting to receive an aggressive, masculine god—as "fallen" women such as Eliot's Gwendolen confess to, obey, and worship their authoritative yet tender confessors. Like Christ, Collins's Julian is self-sacrificing, forgiving, generous, compassionate, and chaste. Julian embodies the convention of the holy man who raises the lying prostitute to his moral level. His illness allows Mercy to marry him as his nurse, deemphasizing their passion and instead emphasizing her self-sacrifice. Such a marriage completes Mercy's transformation from working-class street prostitute into middle-class household angel. In allowing Mercy to marry her confessor, Collins anticipates Hardy by violating the convention that "fallen" women must stay single as a penance which protects decent families from contamination. Through the private discourse of guilt and penance, secular confessions distract the fervent participants from public concerns such as how the poverty and consequent vulnerability of young women like Mercy, Ida, and Gwendolen may have compelled them to "fall" in the first place.

Confession thus leads women to espouse a life of renunciation that the novels of Collins, Eliot, and Gissing admire. Even though Gissing's Ida and Waymark deride asceticism, they judge themselves by the code of renunciation that Collins's Mercy and Eliot's Gwendolen espouse. That code emphasizes self-sacrifice and the private life, not reform of society. Although Gissing's novel tries to unclass its characters, it replaces a class system based on property with one based on renunciation even while it vilifies the extreme forms self-denial can take. The novel does not annihilate class. Rather, it adopts a moral basis for class that resembles the one in The New Magdalen—sacrifice after confession. Like Angel Clare at the end of Tess, Gissing's Waymark eventually becomes kind, charitable, and unselfish—a legacy of stereotypically "feminine," Christian virtues despite his dislike of institutionalized religion.

Such a moral basis for class does not threaten the economic status quo. Even though Ida helps poor young girls within the slums she inherits from her grandfather, her charity is circumscribed and ineffec-
tual, a pastime rather than a calling. This hobby fits her new status of heiress. Since Ida realizes her own wealth came by luck not because of her deserts, she pities "those poor disinherited ones." Like Collins's Mercy, Gissing’s newly wealthy prostitute is haunted by her past poverty. Her painful memories make her compassionate but also aware of how difficult it is to improve the lives of the poor, even as she realizes the fragility of her own good fortune. Ida and Waymark will presumably focus most of their energies on each other rather than on trying to reform the social ills of which they are as keenly aware as are Mercy and Julian. Limited charity is typical of fortunate protagonists like Collins's and Gissing's who espouse renunciation as a penance yet don't have to suffer it for long. On the other hand, Tess's charity towards her family is earned through exchanging her body for cash as Alec's mistress, not through a convenient inheritance like Mercy's or Ida's. As the last of the "fallen" D'Urberville aristocrats, Tess is more permanently disinherited than Collins's or Gissing's heroines. Tess criticizes the conventions of the "fallen" woman's renunciation and charity by making its heroine's sacrifices horribly permanent, her punishments undeserved.

Luce Irigaray's ideas about man as the gazing sex can be applied to the standard confession novel—man who sees woman as his mirror—woman who, through her defectiveness (actually, difference), makes man feel perfect. The male confessor elicits and enjoys the revelation of the woman's painful secrets while she feels relieved of them. Dennis Foster notes that the voyeuristic confessor "falls" too: "Confession, through the reenactment of sin, sins again, even to the point of drawing the listener into interpretations that inevitably have their own strayings." As Beth Kalikoff writes about Victorian sexual confessions, "Shorn of its legal and religious trappings, the ritual exposes a communal sadism." Although mid-Victorian novels such as The New Magdalen and Daniel Deronda don't portray the confessor as sadistic, The Unclassed anticipates Tess in doing so. Waymark's prejudice about female chastity that conflicts with his supposed modernity makes him reject Ida's confession at first. Her confession activates his cold, critical side much as Tess's activates Angel's. Quickly reforming Waymark, Gissing does not build on Waymark's provincialism to expose the "communal sadism" of his culture in the way that Hardy builds on Angel's.

Whereas Tess criticizes the convention of sacrifice after confession for causing the "fallen" woman to punish herself for disobeying the double
standard, Gissing and Collins admire renunciation as a sign of womanly virtue. Humanistic Eliot, naturalistic Gissing, and sensationalistic Collins don’t take renunciation to the extreme that Hardy, the tragedian, does. Instead, Collins and Gissing allow their self-denying heroines to marry upstanding men who forgive them—for Gissing, a fairy tale ending that William Scheick complains is out of keeping with the pessimism of the rest of The Unclassed.21 These marriages reconcile the Victorian polarities of whore and angel. Tess criticizes such socially constructed polarities, however, by starring a pure “fallen” woman whose culture does not see her as such.22 Although confession redeems the so-called “fallen” woman in Gissing, Collins, and Eliot, it does not in Hardy. Indeed, Tess exhibits the skepticism about traditional romance typical of fin-de-siècle literature. Renunciation is not pleasurably painful in Tess.

Tess shows that the romance of confession can make women see themselves as inferior to men, and the working class as inferior to the middle class, by having its heroine deem her punishment as just. When Angel rejects Tess’s confession, she accepts her punishment even though she realizes that Angel is enforcing a sexual double standard through it. Through the gradual destruction of its heroine, the novel exposes female self-sacrifice and the double standard as traps for the working-class woman. Like a fallen angel, Clare bridles at Tess’s confession even though he too had an affair before marriage. As Charles Pettit writes, “It is because he [Angel] is seeing in visions and stereotypes that he has nothing to hold on to when Tess’s confession reveals the real past of the real woman.”23 Although Angel thought that he was freeing himself from class prejudice by marrying a peasant, he confirms the gender and class prejudice that labels working-class women as lustful animals and middle-class women like Mercy Chant as sexless angels. The novel exposes the sexual connotations of the animalism that Angel associates with the working-class woman by having Tess follow Angel with the “dumb and vacant fidelity” of a dog that Angel symbolically kicks.24

Tess’s fidelity also recalls the role of feudal serf that she adopts in calling herself Angel’s “wretched slave.”25 Tess’s refuge in this role elicits Angel’s middle-class severity because he thinks that the world will see him as the dupe of lower-class entrapment into cuckoldry. In his fear that the supposedly typical impurity of a working-class girl might debase him, Angel resembles his two brothers—whose “mental limitations” he had previously condemned.26 Like his brothers, Angel lacked
"an adequate conception of the complicated forces at work outside the smooth and gentle current in which they and their associates floated." Thus none of them can empathize with the brutal forces that push working-class girls like Tess into sexual employment. The brothers later remark on seeing Mercy Chant: "Ah! Poor Angel, poor Angel! I never see that nice girl without more and more regretting his precipitancy in throwing himself away upon a dairymaid, or whatever she may be." "Whatever"—as though Tess is not human due to her occupation. They assume that Angel's association with Tess degrades him into throwing himself away like trash. Angel's rejection of Tess is exactly like his brothers', except that it takes Tess's confession to prove to him that she embodies the lowness of her class. However, Angel pretends it is the decrepit aristocrat in her, not the peasant, that caused her "fall"; in this way he protects his supposed admiration for the peasant class. Yet in ordering Tess about, he treats her contemptuously as a servant, not with the respect due to an aristocratic superior or to his wife. Carol Siegel connects Tess's subservience to that expected of colonized people by long-suffering Imperialists like Angel. As Angel's brothers might have done had they married Tess, Angel acts like a hypocritical priest who refuses absolution, then doles out excessive penance to the peasant girl whose faith overrides all her doubts about her confessor's fairness. If Terence Doody is right that the conventional novel uses confession to build community, Angel violates the conventional in using Tess's secret to cement barriers of class and gender between himself and his wife.

Angel does not think that the blot on Tess's purity can ever be eradicated. In that opinion he differs from Collins's more optimistic Julian who feels that even though Mercy was once a prostitute, she can reform. Because of Angel's resentment, the blot on Tess's purity becomes real—that of Alec's blood on the white ceiling, the blood of deflowerment transformed into a murder-wound. Tess's reluctant agreement with the double standard makes her initially condone Angel's condemnation of her. She endorses the ideology of male mastery that allows Angel more sexual freedom than she has. Jan B. Gordon notes that Tess's placement of Angel on a pedestal is consistent with her Puritan origins. The irony is that Tess's sadness, a consequence of her affair, attracted Angel through making her deeper and more mysterious than the other dairy maids. By showing that Angel is not the conventional forgiving confessor since he espouses a more genteel form of the sexism and class prejudice that encourage Alec to rape peasant girls, the novel indicts the Victorian
ideology of male mastery as warped. In support of this view Penny Boumelha argues that Clare's labelling of Tess as an angel complements, rather than opposes, Alec's view of her as a temptress; both men objectify the female rather than apprehending Tess as a complex individual like themselves. Through featuring a narrow-minded confessor, the novel criticizes the smug, middle-class emphases on virginity and self-denial which damage Tess.

In keeping with the novel's critique of the idea that the working woman must punish herself, Tess abandons self-interest more dramatically than Ida and Mercy do. Because Tess is haunted by fears that Angel will reject her due to her past, her love for him seems desperate: "her one desire, so long resisted, to make herself his, to call him her lord, her own—then, if necessary, to die." Janis P. Stout notes that when Tess rejects Angel's proposal, her pattern of endless self-denial begins. When Angel leaves her, Tess imagines their suicide in the river as a "luxury"; like the desperate heroine of Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome (1911), Tess fantasizes joint suicide as "fit" and "desirable." After she returns to Alec, Tess dissociates herself from her body as though it were "a corpse" because Angel no longer values it. With "a pitiful white smile" that makes her appear deathly, she tells Angel about murdering Alec. Tess's eroticism is linked to her sacrifice for a lord who proves his unworthiness by rejecting her confession. The gender hierarchy collapses under his unforgiving rigidity that exceeds the severity of his Evangelical parents. The novel does not criticize Tess for loving such a flawed confessor, but rather criticizes the gender and class ideology which encourages her to idolize him and to degrade herself in traditional masochistic Magdalen fashion.

The hell that Tess enters after Angel leaves her is not the comfortable shelf upon which he intended to discard her. Since her independent spirit prohibits her from relying on Angel's parents, Tess redisCOVERS THE cruelly limited options for employment for working-class women. Since Tess blames herself, not Angel, for her punishment, she returns to the role of "fieldwoman pure and simple," disfiguring herself to discourage men from harassing her. Hers is a wintry hell of unremitting labor. Tess's Lucifer is Farmer Groby, a boss who taunts and overworks her to prove himself her "master," in an ironic echo of Alec's and Angel's dominance that reveals its economic nature. Farmer Groby colludes with Alec in urging the exhausted Tess to join Alec, since if Tess becomes Alec's whore she confirms the farmer's condemnation of her. The thresh-
ing-machine is “the red tyrant that the women had come to serve,” with its “despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves,” and its “Jacobs-ladder” of a “red elevator.” Red suggests the blood of sacrifice, deflowerment, and murder which Tess’s tragic depiction of the working woman requires of her. Like the threshing-machine that symbolizes the institutions that oppress the working woman, Alec and Angel both erode Tess’s ability to survive. When Tess serves on another machine, the wheat rick, it shakes her to the point of putting her into “a stupefied reverie” that prepares her to become Alec’s sexual machine despite her repugnance towards him. Marian, too, stupefies herself with drink, and Izz hypnotizes herself with futile fantasies of a romance with Angel. That none of the three can recapture the edenic Talbothays experience shows that the working woman is subject to the vagaries of what seems to be chance, but is really class and gender prejudice in an increasingly industrialized England.

Chance seems to conspire against Tess throughout the novel, emphasizing the vulnerability of the working woman who has no safety net. The homelessness of Tess, her mother, and siblings involves more than chance, however. The Durbeyfields’ exile from Marlott is not brought on by chance, but is part of the larger change from the stable village populations that had their own traditions to the migrant worker populations who lived only to serve their masters. Marlott will become Flintcombe-Ash, a factory of numbing farmwork, no longer the nostalgically portrayed, comical community that opened the novel.

The other cause of the Durbeyfields’ exile is the prosperous villagers’ disapproval of Tess and her father. The middle- and upper-class locals regard Tess and Durbeyfield as the typical “fallen” woman and lazy drunk who arrogantly overreach their station through their fantasy of aristocratic heritage; thus, what appears to be chance—the death of Durbeyfield—merely provides an opportunity for brutal social forces to evict the family. Echoing Angel’s view of “fallen” women as criminals, middle-class villagers scold Joan for “harbouring” Tess. When Tess tends her baby’s grave, the villagers think she is “idling.” The punishment of Tess that Angel sets in motion when he rejects her confession is carried out by the less educated members of his class who share his Puritanical views.

Later, it is probably Alec who cancels Joan’s reservation at the inn in Kingsbere because he wishes to return Tess to the sexual wagemaking to which he long ago doomed her. Since she cannot earn enough to help
her family any other way, prostitution is the work she must perform. At least prostitution pays well: Tess’s family will no longer have to ride in a crude wagon because of being “only women, not regular labourers.”46 Tess can provide them with comfortable transportation and lodging after accepting irregular employment in the informal economy in which Victorian working women often participated to supplement their meagre earnings. As Alec’s mistress Tess confirms the label of irredeemable whore that Angel, Farmer Groby, and the prosperous villagers persist in giving her. T. R. Wright explains that Tess’s tragedy is caused by not being able to avoid this label: “Try as she may to resist and repress her sexuality, Tess cannot escape her role as an object of erotic fascination.”47 Discussing five novels about female awakening that don’t include Tess, Susan Rosowski notes that “an inner, imaginative sense of personal value conflicts with her [the heroine’s] public role”; this is true of Hardy’s novel as well.48 Although she too does not mention Tess, Marianne Hirsch sees the conflict between the protagonist’s self-definition and society’s as typical of the English Bildungsroman, in which there is often “the loss of self through the excessive involvement in opposing and corrupt social values.”49 Tess, like heroines of other novels of personal development, is caught by a market ideology which sees her as having only erotic value.

Because Tess finally accepts that valuation, she feels more guilt about having married Angel than over her initial affair with Alec. Her guilt fuels her agonized, idolatrous love for Angel. In her worship of a man whom she regards as her moral and social superior, Tess resembles other “fallen” women such as Ida Starr and Mercy Merrick. As though Angel were her god, Tess adopts his beliefs because he believes them. Tess’s faith is in an unworthy object: Angel only becomes worthy of her faith after she has lost it, by finally loving her as she is. The reader is frustrated at Tess’s lack of anger at Angel’s heartless provincialism.49 Yet according to Marian, the pair split through no fault of either—“something outside ye both.”50 Angel’s conversion to tolerance redirects the reader’s anger towards the culprits outside the couple—Victorian notions about class and gender.

In achieving unconditional love for Tess, Angel at last lives up to his model, Christ, after having affirmed the stereotype of a vengeful, Old Testament god. Angel’s stereotypically feminine qualities of charity and sympathy ultimately defeat his patriarchal rage, but that softening only comes when he declines through an emasculating bout with consump-
tion. Angel returns from Brazil wasted and deathlike, his illness a sign of the dangerous asceticism that had made him reject Tess as imperfect. In the Dimmesdale tradition, Angel turned his rigorous scrutiny against himself, destroying his health. His self-destruction due to guilt recalls how Tess’s guilt destroyed her self-esteem so that she could tolerate Alec’s sexual mastery.

When Angel finally accepts Tess, he kisses her “endlessly” with his deathly “white” lips as though only when weak and dying can he act erotically. White, the color of both innocence and death, suits the two because their love is a “ghostly” one of souls attempting to free themselves from cultural stereotypes. Angel feels as guilty as Tess when he receives her second confession—this time of a real crime—and associates love with a mutual death that would free them from the unjust social world. No longer does Angel uphold the stereotypical male’s (or master’s) sadism and female’s (or serv’s) masochism that he had fostered when he rejected Tess. At last he grants Tess the confessor’s superiority which he had once claimed. Angel and Tess eroticize death because of the failure of the confession ritual to redeem the “fallen” woman and uphold the gender and class hierarchies as it had done, if problematically, for Mercy Merrick, Ida Starr, and Gwendolen Harleth. Saddled by rituals and stereotypes that don’t work, Tess and Angel are enmeshed in the cultural decay which Angel bitterly contemplates throughout the novel.

At Stonehenge Tess sleeps on an altar that suggests she is being sacrificed to the ancient double standard which her culture espouses. Her Christian penance turns into a pagan retribution that includes self-sacrifice. Tess breaks the convention that the violated heroine turns her rage on herself, committing suicide by drowning herself or through starvation. Yet, as Frank Giordano argues, Tess’s murder of Alec is also her own suicide, since she knows she cannot escape the law. Deserted by her husband, Tess becomes her own avenger, recalling the portraits of her fierce, aristocratic foremothers.

Tess’s murder of Alec resonates with Gwendolen Harleth’s wish to stab her autocratic husband, who lifted her to wealth and misery. The most striking parallel to Tess’s act is when the humbly born mother pushes her daughter’s highborn seducer off a cliff in Anthony Trollope’s An Eye for An Eye (1879). Tess’s retribution fits the supposed barbarity of her class that made the upper class of British employers resist extending the vote to the lower class of employees for decades. To placate
the anger of the working class and the fears of the upper, conservative essayists—such as Carlyle, Ruskin, and (through his Young England movement) Disraeli—revive the feudal responsibility of lords for their serfs to recreate a meaningful context for the servitude of one class to another in the industrial world. *Tess* suggests that such a humane feudalism never existed. The ancestral D’Urbervilles evicted, exploited, and raped peasants in the manner of the Alec D’Urbervilles of *Tess*’ own day. Alec modernizes the Norman knights’ right to spend the first night with their serfs’ brides. When Alec jumps out of the D’Urberville crypt, the parallel between the real and the fake D’Urbervilles is made clear; both are base opportunists who manipulate the lower class when they happen to be born into ascendancy. The sexual violation of Tess, like that of Madame Defarge’s sister in Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), therefore becomes symbolic of the abuse of the working class by the wealthy. And Angel’s lack of forgiveness for Tess’s so-called “sin” symbolizes middle-class refusal to empathize with the violated working class. Sympathy had quelled working-class violence in earlier novels such as Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850), Mrs. Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), and Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866); without it, Tess’s own “ache of modernism” becomes the murderous rage of isolation.

*Tess*’s violence against Alec recalls that of Adam, a carpenter, against the squire who seduced his fiancée in Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859). The righteous anger of the lower class against the upper leads to mob violence in several Victorian works. *Tess* presents an apocalyptic vision of class and gender reprisal that is especially disturbing because, after all, Alec did try to marry Tess. *Tess* differs from the conventional novel in daring to make the revenger a female protagonist who remains remarkably pure despite her violence. If *Tess* had been corrupted by revenge like Madame Defarge, it would have weakened the novel’s attack on the British justice system as an enforcer of class and gender prejudices. Instead of exposing cruel social forces, *Tess* would have been another study of how revenge poisons character. The key to the survival of Tess’s virtue after her revenge may be that she becomes a mad tool of primal justice when she kills Alec—a demon that Alec and Angel have created who returns to mildness after murder. Because the story of the D’Urberville coach fits a Gothic convention, it prepares the reader to accept Tess’s revenge as inevitable given her ancestry. The novel suggests that Grundyists are indeed mistaken in thinking pre-marital sex must destroy female purity since it can persist after mur-
der. The reader believes in Tess's purity in part because the many resonances between her and archetypal figures such as the corn-maiden stop during the Sandbourne section but return after the murder, according to Michael Ponsford. As J. Hillis Miller writes, "To be led by a new 'sentiment' of human worth or meaning to call the 'impure' the 'pure' may lead to an overturning of the usual relations of possession and dominance in society." Accepting that Tess's purity endures causes the reader to question the Victorian gender and class hierarchies which condemn her.

The irony is that Tess believes she is obeying Angel in murdering Alec, suggesting that monsters are created when the mind is numbed through the servitude of one class and gender to another. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* illuminates Tess's numbness when serving Angel, Alec, and Farmer Groby of Flintcombe-Ash. Self-discipline keeps Tess obedient, dead to the ignominy of her servitude except during the several occasions when she attacks Alec. Through killing Alec, Tess seems to claim her equality with him even though she simultaneously confirms her subservience to Angel. As when the uncle of Little Em'ly refuses to take money from Em'ly's seducer's mother in *David Copperfield* (1850), Tess proves, too late, that she is no longer her seducer's possession; yet the sad part is that she uses violence to prove her right to become Angel's possession, for Angel had told her he would not live with her while Alec was alive. The confessor's words caused violence, not the peace they produce in conventional novels. Whereas Collins and Gissing let the working-class woman's subservience to her confessor lead to a happy marriage, *Tess* portrays the self-destructive anger of the working-class woman because she cannot free herself from notions that place the middle-class man above her, no matter how little he deserves it.

The execution of Tess dramatizes the novel's critique of the justice system. Her right to primal justice—an eye for an eye—with a member of the upper class doesn't exist in the supposedly civilized nineteenth century. Thus the upper class need not fear that large numbers of kept women will murder the aristocrats who seduced them. Nearly half a century earlier, the threat of working-class reprisal had caused British law to forbid working-class girls from claiming child support from their aristocratic seducers, as dramatized in Frances Trollope's *Jessie Phillips* (1844). In this forerunner of *Tess*, the wealthy seducer murders his illegitimate child but, of course, the working-class mother is convicted for the crime. *Tess*, like *Jessie Phillips*, derides the legal system for
assuming that working-class women are snakes who entice wayward aristocrats. The dead female “criminal” becomes the scapegoat for the sexual crimes of upper-class males.

Whereas Tess pays and pays for her rape, affair, and murder, Angel gets off relatively lightly for creating the conditions which led Tess to kill Alec. Angel’s doom is merely to end up with a diminished version of Tess, her spiritualized younger sister, Liza-Lu. The novel suggests that since Angel is a conventional Victorian though he believes himself a rebel, Liza-Lu may be all he can handle; she is the meek angel in the house which Tess was not. Angel’s similarity to Alec as an affluent oppressor of a working-class woman is not recognized by the society that shares Angel’s severity. Nor is it seen by Tess because she agrees with her culture’s ideas about class and gender. As a result, Tess asks Angel to care for Liza-Lu as a favor. Unfortunately, Angel, not Tess, gets to start over. As Ann Mickelson writes, “It is an ironic ending which speaks eloquently of the lack of even a rough egalitarianism for woman in society.” However, vexed readers of the ending of Tess may see that the usual tidy salvation of the “fallen” woman by her confessor is really a disturbing tale of a working woman being betrayed by Victorian ideologies of gender and class which serve the confessor’s interests.

Unlike Angel, Alec overpays as part of the novel’s revision of the evil, aristocratic seducer role. Yet Alec pays because Tess paid even more unfair penalties imposed by him, by Angel, and by their prosperous allies in Flintcombe-Ash and Marlott. Like Jessie Phillips, Tess plays a martyr’s role before her execution when Angel and Liza-Lu hold hands, “the drooping of their heads being that of Giotto’s ‘Two Apostles.’” Instead of the male confessor being the Christlike figure he was in The New Magdalen and Daniel Deronda, Tess becomes the martyr to be learned from and memorialized, a peasant angel degraded by prejudice. In reversing the moral positions of Tess and Angel, as well as in having Tess turn from the masochism expected of the penitent working woman towards the violence expected of the aristocratic seducer, the novel not only criticizes the double standard but exposes the inaccuracy of class and gender polarities in general. Confession fails to redeem because it rests on distorted expectations of male superiority and female degradation, as well as of middle-class virtue and working-class immorality; Angel’s unfairness and Tess’s innocence thus reverse both gender and class stereotypes.

In a century when faith was questioned, the agnostic Hardy, like
William Blake a century before, uses religious rituals to symbolize the cruelty of class and gender barriers.\textsuperscript{58} In \textit{Tess} the Magdalen is no Lamia but a victim of self-loathing bred by the sexism and class prejudice that condemn her for her supposed sins and may cause her to commit real crimes. \textit{Tess} removes the confessor from his traditional position of moral superiority to reveal what Kalikoff calls “the morally bankrupt nature of the institutions and their representatives.”\textsuperscript{59} By contrast, Collins and Eliot admire the affluent confessor for his Christian virtues. Yet Collins’s novel seems nearly as angry about the sexual exploitation of working-class women as Hardy’s. \textit{Tess}, like standard confession novels, reveals confession’s erotic overtones, yet explicitly ties them to death. For Collins, Eliot, and Gissing, confession is the ecstatic culmination of sublimated eroticism as well as a “fallen” woman’s moral crucible. But this is not so in \textit{Tess}; Tess’s self-annihilating eroticism does not lead to her redemption—rather, possibly to damnation through murder and indirect suicide. If damnation is Tess’s fate, then the Victorian God, too, is implicated in the heartlessness of the prejudices which doom Tess.

Confession in \textit{Tess} creates a romance of distance that solidifies unjust gender and class hierarchies. Confession does not “emblemize the power of the woman who violates the code of her community and who challenges the social order,” as Kalikoff contends about \textit{Tess} and other texts.\textsuperscript{70} Instead, through confession the working woman is deceived into accepting her humiliation as deserved. Differing from \textit{Tess}, standard confessional novels by Collins, Eliot, and Gissing revitalize confession as a ritual of salvation by secularizing and romanticizing it. These writers replace religion with romantic love in the tradition of Victorians such as J. S. Mill who substitute faith in humanity for faith in God. Collins, Eliot, and Gissing focus on the drama and romance of redemption through confession. Their highlighting of confession draws attention away from the oppressive forces of gender and class that encourage working-class heroines to sin. On the other hand, \textit{Tess} parodies the conventional confessor and creates a woman with only a sad history, not a sin, to confess.\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Tess} critiques a ritual that forces working-class women to surrender to male authority under the guise of redemptive romance.
Notes

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1. Novels in which confession leads to repentance include Charles Dickens's David Copperfield (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850), Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth (1853), Mrs. Wood's East Lynne (1861), Charles Reade's The Cloister and the Hearth (1861), Wilkie Collins's The New Magdalen (1873), and Daniel Deronda (1879), and George Gissing's The Unclassed (1884). In Dickens's Oliver Twist (1837) and George Eliot's Adam Bede (1859), the woman's sexual fall leads to real crimes, and female confessors sympathize with the female criminal—Nancy, the thief, and Hetty, the murderer. In the century's children's stories, confessors are often authority figures whose forgiveness of erring children makes them want to fit the societal mold: see, for example, Gillian Avery, ed., The Hole in The Wall (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).


16. For a Foucauldian approach to confession, see Jeremy Tambling, Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

3. I am not sure that Hardy intended such an interpretation. For a feminist view of Hardy which resembles mine, see the introduction by Margaret Higonnet, ed., to The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Higonnet writes that Hardy "tested and subverted constraining gender definitions to an unusual extent" (3).


5. I use the label 'fallen' woman throughout my article because it expresses the self-condemnation felt by the heroines I discuss, as well as the social distance between them and their 'upright' confessors.


10. Foucault, 45.

11. See an example of this feminine stereotype in Arthur T. Pierson, ed. Pulpit Power and Eloquence: One Hundred Best Sermons of the Nineteenth Century (Cleveland: Barton, 1901), 368.

12. Charles Reade explores the dangerous romantic nuances of the relationship between priest and female parishioner in Griffith Gaunt (1886). Anti-Catholic propagandists of the Victorian era, such as The Red Dragon of Popery, complains of priests seducing their confessants. The priest in Charlotte Brontë's Villette (1853) is portrayed as mentally seducing Lucy Snowe during her confession.

13. Pierson, 197.

14. Their marriage echoes the union of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and the blind Rochester.

15. More typically, in Henry Kingsley's Ravenshoe (1862), the brother of a fallen woman lauds her decision to become a nun instead of marrying her lover and staining his name. A fallen woman in Rousseau's Julie (1761) refuses to marry a lord to avoid disgracing him; instead, she becomes a nun. Since Collins simultaneously lived with two women, it is not surprising that he preaches that fallen women who are generous and kind deserve to be accepted by respectable Victorians.

16. The source for this idea is John Kucich's argument that Victorian protagonists establish a hierarchy based on the ability to repress which reinforces the traditional class system by keeping the middle-class male on top. See Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
19. Foster, 17.
22. Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth, who also remains pure in her alignment with nature despite a fall, can be seen as a docile forbearer of Tess. Both women suffer ostracism and martyrdom because of the double standard and the sexual exploitation of working-class girls.
25. Ibid., 226.
26. Ibid., 156
27. Ibid., 157.
28. Ibid., 294.
36. Ibid., 372.
37. Ibid., 377.
38. In *Woman and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 1988), Rosemarie Morgan argues that Tess's confess is a courage and Angel's cowardice.
39. Michelle Masse argues that the drama of the Gothic comes from the heroine's struggle to accept unnatural masochism as the feminine norm. Unlike Jane Eyre (whom Masse analyzes although she omits Tess), Tess does not resist the temptation to sacrifice herself to an unworthy male she idolizes, except when she writes a blaming letter to Angel. See *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
41. Ibid., 286.
42. Ibid., 319.
43. Ibid., 327.
44. Ibid., 347.
45. Ibid., 353.
50. Tess of the d'Urbervilles, 278.
51. Ibid., 378.
52. Ibid., 128.
53. Consider Samuel Richardson's Clarissa, the prostitute Martha in David Copperfield, and the fallen heroine of George Meredith's Rhoda Fleming (1865), among others.
55. Heathcliff's revenge against Hindley in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1847) is another Victorian example of working-class reprisal for a sexual injury: Hindley prevented young Heathcliff from becoming a viable suitor for Cathy's hand.
56. Such works include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh (1857) and Charlotte Bronte's Shirley (1849).
57. Masse discusses Gothic heroines who are debased by their revenge in novels by women writers. None are left untainted by their violence, as Tess is.
58. My argument here is indebted to that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who discuss the split self in heroines created by women writers in The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
59. Mary Jacobus points out that conventional moralists find it hard to accept that Tess's purity persists despite her actions. See "Tess, the Making of a Pure Woman," in Modern Critical Interpretations: Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 46. Critics who find Tess's purity problematic include Lynn Parker in "Pure Woman and Tragic Heroine?" Studies in the Novel, 24.3 (1992), 273–81. Parker argues that the conventions governing the tragic ballad heroine clash with those governing a woman Victorians could conceive of as pure.
61. See Miller's "Repetition as Immanent Design" in Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations, 83.
63. In "Sympathetic Criminality in the Mid-Victorian Novel," Alexander Petitt argues that appealing criminals force the reader to "reappraise the relationship between environment and criminal deed in a manner that is compatible with the tenets of juridical reform." See Dickens Studies Annual, 19 (1999), 290.
64. I do not understand Harold Bloom's "common reader" who takes "masochistic pleasure" in Tess's suffering, for to do so would be to avoid the anger that the novel's social critique generates. See Bloom's introduction to Thomas Hardy (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 15.
65. Mickelson, 123.
66. Tess of the d'Urbervilles, 389. Along these lines, another forerunner to Tess is Hetty Sorrel in Eliot's Adam Bede. Hetty commits infanticide because she cannot take her illegitimate baby home, since she knows her aunt and uncle would exile them both.
67. Henry Kozicki suggests that Tess is pure in the way a ritual scapegoat such as Christ bears away the evil in both nature and history. See "Myths of Redemption in Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles," Papers on Language and Literature, 10 (1974), 158. John A. Anonby calls Tess "a saint who is able to function in a universe devoid of moral direction" in "Hardy's Handling of Biblical Allusions," Christianity and Literature, 30.3 (1981), 18.
70. Kalikoff, 110.
71. A critique of confession similar to Tess's appears with the use of an unforgiving female confessor in Edith Wharton's "The Old Maid" (1925), set during the Victorian era. The conventional romanticizing of confession seen in Collins and Gissing is revised through having a male penitent and a female confessor in James's The Wings of the Dove (1905).