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The Rise of the Feminine Voice in Thomas Hardy's "An Imaginative Woman"

Vanessa Gómez Vera¹

This present article deals with the idea of the feminine voice in Thomas Hardy's short story "An Imaginative Woman". As a naturalist writer, Hardy portrayed women's faith as tragic and obscure; this how Ella Marchmill, Hardy's heroine, encounters nothing but doom and disease when trying to free herself from her ascribed duty as the "Angel of the house". However, it is through her narration that she can challenge the social impositions that were place upon women; their public role and their intimacy. The concept of the "New Woman" rises as a feminine figure that opposes these constraints: a woman who speaks her mind and explores her sexuality by means of her imagination, the only place that does not surrender to male domination.

KEYWORDS: FEMINISM, THE NEW WOMAN, ANGEL OF THE HOUSE, THOMAS HARDY.

Thomas Hardy's short story "An Imaginative Woman", written in 1894, serves as a significant sample of the Victorian nineteenth century literature, which gave birth to the binary conception of women's role as either the "Angel of the House" –a devoted wife and mother–, or Femme Fatale –a temptress with no morals that deviated man from the bonds of virtuousness and wedlock. The culmination of the latter was the "New Woman", a female figure that neglected marriage as her main concern and who found in education a source to free herself from masculine repression. The shift in

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the paradigm of women's role was perceived as a threat to the dominant male discourse as it affected their own masculine identity and authority within society. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the rising figure of the New Woman in the character of Ella Marchmill, Hardy's heroine, a woman who begins to challenge the impositions placed by society on women's voices, as well as their position within marriage and thus sexuality.

It is essential to acknowledge the status of women in the nineteenth century, their role and the expectations that Victorian society placed upon them. According to Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity* the women of the nineteenth century were irrevocably seen as the "household nun or the incarnation of the ideal" (211). Thus all of those who fell from this category were seen as oddities and threats to the idealized figure of the Angel of the House.

The concept of the New Woman, as Shearer West points out in *Fin-De-Siècle*, "Embodied the freedoms that women were gaining, the fact that women were controlling their own property, attending universities and participating in local politics" (86). This figure echoed the feminine claim that was prompted by Mary Wollstonecraft in "A Vindication of the rights of woman" in 1792, restating the importance of their rights to education and social politics. From this stance, the New Woman not only enhanced the feminine consciousness of their rights but it extended the awareness of the women's plight to a more intimate scope, encouraging women to think about their status within marriage and sex life. The New Woman questioned her role as the soulkeeper of the household and began to explore in education and sexuality, new forms of feminine nature. In this sense, in "An Imaginative Woman" Ella starts to dwell on forbidden spaces—writing and reading poetry—which liberate her from the roles of submissive mother and wife. This challenge makes her face the internal anxieties that come from the act of liberation as well as the social scorn that comes from the transgression of the Victorian moral codes.

The socio-cultural context given by Hardy's fiction can be considered as a historical document as the author explicitly states his position regarding his work when saying: "There is something in the world that ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them" (qtd. in Boulmelha, 2). He recognizes himself as a social critic concerned with unveiling those truths that were often concealed behind the hypocrisy and the moral of its times. As a naturalist writer Hardy wanted to portray with accuracy the relationship between men and women in terms of legal and domestic considerations, and he was especially emphatic in relation to women's intimacy since he

had a “gift for creeping intuitively into the emotional life of women.” (Boumelha, 47) His female heroines embodied both strength and weakness, so that they were able to break through the conception of passive “Household Nuns”. Hardy’s women were no longer spectators of their lives but instead they were active instigators of their usually doomed destinies, as can be observed in his most well-known novels *Tess D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Both writings portray tragic endings; while in the former Tess is ostracized for having lost her virginity before marriage, and after so much despise she commits murder; in the latter, the heroine Sue, leaves her husband for her cousin. This act provokes the death of two of her children and a miscarriage. Both novels portray the negative conception of women as active creators of their lives since for both women, the consequences of their actions of liberation lead them to terrible deaths.

Hardy’s work shows the difficulties that women faced when pursuing their autonomy, as most of his female characters portray that “Their fates reflect to some degree the exigencies of plot and prevailing Victorian attitudes about women” (Wittenberg, 50). Thus it is characteristic of Hardy’s women characters to suffer terrible afflictions or punishments after having chased physical or intellectual liberation. Clearly their wretched fates represent the Victorian scorn that was placed upon the New Woman but at the same time, this doomed condition reveals the naturalist author behind the plot, as Hardy wanted to depict the inescapable power that social conditions exerted upon freedom of action.

From this point of view, the path to women’s liberation seems to have faced several limitations in different areas of feminine interest, especially that of education and the right to literacy. As Shearer West points out in *Icons of Womanhood*: “The idea that women were incapable of undergoing the ‘ordeal’ of education was prevalent . . . Education was felt to destroy women’s ability to have children and to intensify the possibility of nervous disorders” (87). Thus, it was felt that it was not only inappropriate to women to educate themselves because they had an inferior capacity, but it was believed that biologically this process would lead them to hysteria or insanity. Even reducing a woman’s vital energy to have children and raise them as a devoted mother—Angel of the House—since she would dedicate herself to intellectual affairs instead of committing to her family.

On this line, Bram Dijkstra also comments that “It was incumbent upon women to cultivate herself. . . If she insisted on cultivating masculine characteristics that was a clear sign of degeneracy” (213). Education itself was seen as a masculine right which no women had the right to exercise, since

it not only meant a political threat for the patriarchal discourse but it also signified that morally it would lead to chaos and degeneration of the race. The concept of degeneration was largely addressed in scientific studies of the time which focused on the apocalyptic view of the end of the century; they increased the fear that race would come to an end, and that all form of civilization would die out. According to Dijkstra “there were only two possible social developments: evolution or degeneration. The road to progress was masculine aggression, the road to destruction sappy effeminacy” (211). These assumptions took on scientific validity and they were used as motto for the conservative Victorians who saw stability in the stagnation of their gender politics. In fact the French philosopher Proudhon saw two clear options, for the political issues of the end of the century: “Either the subordination of women, guaranteed by the modesty of their position in life, or the degradation of men” (qtd. in Dijkstra 211). Thus it was believed that the feminine subjugation would secure the existence of order and peace within society therefore, and any attempt to break this status quo—either by the vindication of women’s rights or by their empowerment in gender politics—would signify a dangerous threat not only for society but for the existence of humankind.

The issue of women’s right to education was largely represented in readership. Indeed, reading was allowed and advised for women, essentially those texts of religious nature or domestic affairs. In 1834 the publication of the *Female Instructor* and *Young’s Woman Guide to Domestic Happiness* were considered icons of virtuous literature as they taught young ladies to improve their feminine nature. In “Images of Victorian Women and Books” Susan Casteras picks up on one of the main advices given by the *Female Instructor*. “To every woman, whether single or married, the habit of regularly allotting to improving books a portion of each day . . . cannot be too strongly recommended. I use the term *improving* in a large sense, as comprehending all writings which may contribute to her virtue, her usefulness, her instruction and her innocent satisfaction; to her happiness in this world and the next.”(4) As long as the book improved women’s behavior and their innocent satisfaction, it was allowed and conceived as an instrument that might enhance their virtues. Clearly in this time, the term virtue was limited to her representation of moral support and guidance within the household. Those manuscripts that fell from the didactic nature and purity in content were considered dangerous, as they corrupted the innocent minds of those who read. The *Female Instructor* also dwells on this by stating: “Let her not indulge herself in the frequent perusal of writings, however interesting in their nature, however eminent in a literary point of view, which are likely to inflame pride, and to inspire false notions of generosity, of feeling, of spirit, or of any other

quality deemed to contribute to excellence of character” (qtd. in Casteras 4). Political manuscripts were present in this category as they might kindle the flame of social vindication. Poetry and Romance were also ascribed here for their power to exalt feelings and light passions from the young’s ladies heart.

In this sense, the knowledge of sexuality that these innocent women might absorb through reading was considered extremely dangerous, as it jeopardized the chastity of virginal daughters and the purity of mind of the Angel of the House.

Manuals such as these show that, even though women’s sexuality was rendered unspeakable in the public sphere, the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of texts that would study and analyze the topic. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michael Foucault refers to the end of the century as a time in which sexuality was approached in terms of scientific study as means to repress and analyze the potential sexual deviation in women. According to the author: “The central issue then, . . . is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permission; . . . but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak” (11). For Foucault, the fact was that through the validation of these studies, the male discourse had empowered the truth regarding sex; in other words, through the proliferation of these texts, sex was rule and labeled by the eyes of men. Power and authority regarding sexual discourse was addressed by the male hegemony.

In her book *Thomas Hardy and Women*, Penny Boumelha also addresses this issue: “This period represents the decisive shift of sexuality from the area of moral discourse to that of the scientific” (12). There was an evident transition or change in the sexual ideology of the time, which could not only be visible in the scientific studies but also in the female characters found in literature. In this sense, Ella Marchmill represents the beginning of the New Woman exploring the possibilities of sexuality out of wedlock, as she allows herself to have orgasmic experiences when reading the verses of her imaginary lover, as it can be seen in the following lines: “To gratify her passionate curiosity she now made her preparations, first getting rid of superfluous garments and putting on her dressing-gown, then arranging a chair in front of the table and reading several pages of Trewe’s tenderest utterances” (12). Ella transforms reading, as a sexual experience as she indulges herself in provocative stanzas and outfits that set an atmosphere of intimacy and sensuality; these feelings assert Ella’s defiance to the stagnation of her marital life because she wants to explore and

experience, the sexual drives that were granted exclusively to her husband and therefore, she challenges the binary opposition that dominated the sexual ideology of Victorian times.

It can be said that the conceptualization of the New Woman reaches several realms of womanhood, thus she does not only neglect the inflicted duty as *The Angel of the House* but most likely she thrusts herself into an intellectual and bodily liberation that makes her question her imposed identity. This is key when understanding Ella as a character that embodies the concept of the New Woman because she represents the eagerness for intellectual cultivation and sexual thriving.

Hardy's short story takes place at Soletnsa, a beach in Upper Wessex. Ella Marchmill is the wife of William Marchmill, but most importantly she is an aspiring poet who writes under the male pseudonym "John Ivy" since "Nobody might believe in her inspiration if they found that the sentiments came from a pushing tradesman's wife, from the mother of three children by a matter-of-fact small-arms manufacturer" (5). In fact William and she differ in temper, the man portrayed as extremely practical and Ella as a "palpitating and impressionable creature" (2). When they depart on a family vacation, she obsesses with the former possessor of her room, the poet Robert Trewe, whose verses "Contrasted with that of the rank and file of recent minor poets in being impassioned rather than ingenious, luxuriant rather than finished" (5). Ella falls in love with the poet and since she is convinced that he would exalt the passion and admiration that her husband could not, she eagerly devises a plan so as to meet him personally.

The tension in the story rises from opposition between husband and wife, as two forces that are different due to their masculine and feminine nature: "In age well-balanced, in personal appearance fairly matched, and in domestic requirements conformable, in temper this couple differed, though even here they did not often clash, he being equable, if not lymphatic, and she decidedly nervous and sanguine" (1). Hardy portrays the alleged feminine characteristics of the time; Ella is clearly portrayed as a "hysterical" woman when saying that she is nervous. In contrast, William's character is practical and distant; this sets out as the two main polarities of the story: the masculine force which is rational and objective and the feminine nature, weak and ill. This binary opposition represents the ideology to which both sexes were ascribed as part of their intrinsic nature. Women were seen as passive beings reflected in their "Anabolic nature that prepared them for the tiring role of motherhood and gave them greater potential to recover from disease" (West 89). This prime difference was vital in evolution since women were granted with the continuance of

life and it served as the justification for the feeble character to which women were characterized. The indicated opposition sets the author's awareness of women seen through the eyes of men since their discourse praised the female capacity only in terms of motherhood and upbringing. Women in Hardy's eyes had more ambitions than the household, that is why the author moves his narration to the intimate scope of marriage and the unfulfilled expectations that were lying in the soul of the Victorian Wives.

The author focuses on Ella's desires and reflections about her marriage when saying: "Then, like a person who has stumbled upon some object in the dark, she wondered what she had got; mentally walked round it, estimated it; whether it were rare or common; contained gold, silver, or lead; were a clog or a pedestal, everything to her or nothing" (2). Ella's evaluation of her marriage is disruptive in her own intimacy since she has to acknowledge the frustration that she has been hiding along the years. This element is essential when understanding Hardy's vision of the New Woman because he posits marriage as one the main concerns in the quest of feminine identity; the New Woman acknowledges that she can define her nature by her own terms outside the bonds of wedlock.

The author's talent to express female intimacy has been considered part of his unique style. The interest given upon marriage in the story, asserts the importance of this institution in the Victorian society. Hardy specially addressed the role of women within marriage, their unfulfilled expectations and their feelings towards sexuality. For the writer, marriage was seen as a resource which women had to deploy in order to survive in terms of economic and social relations since in Victorian times, women could not make it through without the aid of men. In relation to this Boumelha adds: "The sexual dominance of the men is reinforced by his economic power. There is often a pre-existing relation of employer and worker in those couples" (42). In this hierarchal relationship the man was evidently the ruler and the almighty warder of women's activities and choices; as a "worker" in the contract of marriage, the woman was only expected to fulfill her devoted duty as a Household Nun or the Angel of the House.

This image of marriage is asserted in Hardy's depiction of characters since he refers to William as a man with "proprietor's obtuseness"(2); he is even more accurate when portraying Ella as an objectified woman due to her angelical beauty when saying: "She was dark-eyed, and had that marvelously bright and liquid sparkle in each pupil which characterizes persons of Ella's cast of soul,

and is too often a cause of heartache to the possessor's male friends, ultimately sometimes to herself.”(2) In this passage Hardy reveals Ella’s defiant nature as she reflects her passion through her eyes. However it is also clear that she is conditioned as male dependent. As Bram Dijkstra defines it: “The absolute dependency of woman on man was widely seen as the proper ‘vinelike’ condition for woman” (222). This status of women clinging onto a man not only enhanced the impairment of feminine autonomy but it also served to reinforce the masculine condition of superiority and dominance. Shearer West adds that “Women were defined in terms of men, and were seen to be helpless and purposeless outside their relationship with men” (89). It is easy to infer that without the masculine protection, women were doomed to live in disgrace and could not survive or even exist.

The role of women within the bonds of wedlock was a clear reflection of the social impositions that were placed by the Victorians. According to Dijkstra: “A man’s wife . . . could, by staying at home—a place unblemished by sin and unsullied labor—protect her husband’s soul from permanent damage” (8). It follows that as women were economically impaired, they could only contribute to the contract of marriage in terms of emotional protection and moral guidance. This sole virtue had to be protected and secured from those interests that might lead them astray from their duty; in this sense, Dijkstra comments: “Women, then, both inside and outside of marriage, were to aspire to the vestal purity of the nun” (14). This image of females as Angels of the House was not only deeply rooted in the male consciousness, but most importantly it was considered the prime virtue by women themselves since they defined their identity and nature in terms of their capacity to transmit a moral code and to procreate life.

For these same reasons, Hardy wanted to portray women as active figures in society. For the author, something had changed or had to change in the Victorian society of the nineteenth century, and he envisioned this shift in most of his female characters as well as in his plots of marriage. As Boumelha states: “The choice of marriage partner, long staple element of plot, takes on new resonances. For Hardy it will continue to be a significant structure, but its power as an organizing principle of coherence is evidently unsettled” (25). Hardy’s fiction spoke of the tensions that rose from the contrasting perceptions of women’s role and functions within society. The Women Question which represented the social debate about the position of the female gender came to increase these anxieties since women’s expectations were no longer circumscribed to the household. The feminine role within society was significantly important for male discourse since it guided the behavior and the functions placed upon women. The questions on whether women should be

educated or participate in local politics were jealously scrutinized by men, who saw in the vindication of women's rights, a real threat for the survival of marriage as an everlasting institution. If women were educated and had access to universities, they would inevitably enter the workplace; if this happened, the role of men as economic suppliers would eventually disappear and thus would their hegemony over the women's identity.

Hardy knows that marriage for women was a tool of economic survival. In "An Imaginative Woman" he describes Ella's reflection about having married William, as it follows: "Indeed, the necessity of getting life-leased at all cost, a cardinal virtue which all good mothers teach, kept her from thinking of it at all till she had closed with William, had passed the honeymoon, and reached the reflecting stage" (2). Hardy is groundbreaking because he perceives that the alleged sanctity of marriage can be reduced to a practical tool of economic benefit. This condition is not only seen in the female character of Ella but is also embodied by the landlady of the house at Solentsa who was left in "needy circumstances by the rather sudden death of her husband" (3). Thus she eagerly waits for William's answer to stay since she needs the family's presence to make it through the month. As can be seen, despite coming from different social backgrounds these two female characters in the short story are portrayed as "clinging vines", which suggests that the relationship of male dependency crosses all layers of society.

Marriage was not only conflictive in terms of economic dominance but also in terms of intimacy. Women had the main role of Soulkeepers thus any hint of sexual desire was considered an aberration. As Dijkstra says: "The point was that woman should cling to the man but should also avoid tempting him beyond his capacity to withstand her enticement" (224). Women were not allowed to feel sexual desire since marital sex was confined to the sole object of reproduction. In fact since sex was ascribed inherent to the male feature if a woman showed any sexual thrive she would fit in the archetype of a criminal, as the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso states: "The psychology of the female criminal, who is excessively erotic, weak in maternal feeling, inclined to dissipation . . . , increase her resemblance to the sterner sex" (qtd. in West 89). The inclination towards the enjoyment of sex was demonized since it signified the loss of her modesty.

Consequently since women were considered passive beings, it was largely believed as Dr. Harry Campbell pointed out: "That a large proportion of women do not experience the slightest desire before marriage" (qtd. in West, 90). The image of the Angel of the House enhanced this

assumption since women were depicted only in terms of moral values and religious interests. The idea that they could feel desire threatened this image as it empowered women of a masculine feature; if desire was discussed and assigned to an individual then without question it should be to one of the male sex since it was determined by his own nature of being creator and possessor.

In terms of social politics, the assumed lack of sexual appetite in women was also considered influential since “The female indifference to sex was a necessary component of civilized society” (West 90). This was part of the reason why Victorian society defended the decency of the feminine nature because they feared that without the women’s virtue they could not survive to what they perceived as the end of civilization. Women could not leave the safety of the household since the ruin of her moral virtue would signify the downfall of Victorian organization. Hardy shows that Ella’s sexual awakening is coupled with a loss of interest in her family, as it is seen in the following lines: “She was possessed by an inner flame which left her hardly conscious of what was proceeding around her” (8). In “An Imaginative Woman”, the sexual awakening arises when Ella acknowledges that she is fed up with the stagnation of her marital life. She knows that William and she are radically different and that his practical nature would never satisfy her feelings, this is why she fantasizes with a male author of poetry, Robert Trewe, since his work arouses in her the deepest emotions. Ella feels that she is alone and that her husband does not care for her needs, that is why her imagination seems to kindle her sexuality when thinking of a man that might understand her feelings and desires: “She thought how wicked she was, a woman having a husband and three children, to let her mind stray to a stranger in this unconscionable manner. No, he was not a stranger! She knew his thoughts and feelings as well as she knew her own; they were, in fact, the self-same thoughts and feelings as hers, which her husband distinctly lacked” (13). It is through her imagination that Ella can liberate the repressed frustrations and passions from her marriage. That is why she defends it from her own questioning; her right to fantasize with a man that shares her desires.

In the nineteenth century, women could not acknowledge their desire since it was not an intrinsic feminine characteristic. As the Austro-German psychiatrist Kraft-Ebing says: “If she [a woman] is normally developed mentally, and well bred, her sexual desire is small. If this were not so the whole world become a brothel.” (qtd. in West 90). Women’s acknowledgement of sexuality would not only defy the female identity as conceived by patriarchal discourse but it would also be the end of all decorum and stability within society. On this same line of thought, the idea of sexuality for mere pleasure was also looked as a sin; as the French philosopher Proudhon thought:

“Every woman, however she may call herself and however refined she may be, who refrains from child-birth without refraining from sexual relations, is a whore” (qtd. in Dijkstra 216). The image of women as child bearers ruled for most of the nineteenth century. If a woman boasted of enjoying sexual life, she was immediately scorned as an outcast since she might stain the uncorrupted notion of Angel of the House.

In Hardy’s short story *Ella* subtly advances on her exploration. The eagerness to discover the passions that rise from the poet’s words obsessed her. Thus when staying in Robert Trewe’s rooms at Solentsa she searches for any object or image that might further kindle the flame of passions. Books, pictures and clothes are Ella’s fetish, since they have all been touched by the poet’s body, as can be seen in the following lines: “And now her hair was dragging where his arm had lain when he secured the fugitive fancies; she was sleeping on a poet’s lips, immersed in the very essence of him, permeated by his spirit as by an ether” (14). Ella’s image when facing Trewe’s picture is orgasmic and there is the hint of a masturbatory experience, as Hardy gives special attention to the heroine’s body and the sensations that rise from her gazing at the portrait.

At this point of the story Ella is waking up to the experience of pleasure after a long sexual anesthesia, a feature that was believed to be shared among the virtuous women of the time; in relation to this Boumelha picks up on the William Acton’s writing, who was mainly known for his books on masturbation: “There can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in abeyance . . . and even if roused (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate with that of the male . . . the best mothers, wives and managers of the household, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences”(14). This perspective asserts Ella’s moderation of her sexual desire since Hardy knew that women of his time were not allowed to experience an act that belonged to the male’s intrinsic nature.

From this point of view, Ella begins to challenge the social constraints in terms of sexual ideology since she thrusts herself into a journey of bodily awareness. The eagerness for new emotions and passions is superior to the pressures exerted by the ideal which has to be followed; this sets Ella in the transition from the Angel of the House to the New Woman since even though she experiences sexual liberation of sorts, it nonetheless comes with the anxieties of old Victorian forms. Thus, after Ella has gazed at the portrait of her fantasy, she questions “How wicked she was, a woman having a husband and three children, to let her mind stray to a stranger in this unconscionable manner.” (13)

Ella's awakening to pleasure is also portrayed in her delight of reading because it is in this cultural sphere where she feels that all her frustration is forgotten. In this sense, books turn out to be the catalyst of women's passion as well as its object, and so they are doubly dangerous. In the nineteenth century, women readers were advised about reading and learning. Poetry, in particular, was the type of literature that was scarcely recommended as it lacked any practical use for the improvement of their role. Reading was not only seen as a waste of time but, as Susan Casteras puts it: "Reading was also a source of pleasure, although too much emotional indulgence in literature was deemed inadvisable" (11). The idea of pleasure in reading comes as a way of compensating the desired experiences and emotions that were missing in the daily life. Casteras refers to the experience of reading in the nineteenth century as an "Escape from everyday reality to that of daydream" (12). This echoes Ella's reading experience since the boredom and the solitude drive her to plunge in literature as a way to alleviate the repressed emotions in her life.

It seems that Hardy knew of this compensation; since the narrator constantly addresses the way in which Ella sees herself in the poet's writing: "She knew his thoughts and feelings as well as she knew her own; they were, in fact, the self-same thoughts and feelings as hers, which her husband distinctly lacked" (13). This identification is essential as it denotes the way in which women relate to writing as a liberating experience where inner thoughts and feelings can be spoken out loud without the fear of repression.

In this sense, Ella identifies with the male other because she possesses characteristics that were rendered by society as masculine, such as writing. She feels that she is represented by the other that shares her same aspirations and ambitions, a confidant who can express them in writing for his condition as man; this right was neglected to Ella for her nature as a woman. Moreover, it is through the act of reading that Ella embodies the challenge of the New Women in search for her own nature since she wishes to be defined in terms of her own femininity. It is likely that Ella's attempt at writing poetry serves as a means to find her own role within society, to discover her female subjectivity through her own language and not that of male discourse.

In "An Imaginative Women" the act of reading is observed as identification and recognition of the feminine self with emotions such as pleasure. The fact that Ella experiences an extramarital affair in the form of daydream is no less significant, because as Casteras states: "Daydreams are pleasurable because they provide expression, release, or simply indulgence for emotions or needs

which are not otherwise satisfied, either because of psychological inhibition or because of the social context" (14.) Female dissatisfaction as seen in Hardy is mainly given by the sexual ideology that was present at the time; women could not feel and could not speak of sexuality since it was not ascribed to their nature. Nonetheless, the psychological component is also present in Hardy's short story since Ella's affair is only part of her imagination. This is representative of Hardy style as Boumelha describes it: "Women for Hardy have an inherent physical weakness which makes them more vulnerable to mental conflict." (37) This is key in the short story as the whole plot develops around the tensions that the fantasy provokes in the feminine character. In this sense, it seems that even though Hardy initiated the recognition of the New Woman in literature, he was nonetheless influenced by the Victorian archetypes that characterized women as weak and prone to illness.

When understanding readership and sexuality in Hardy's text, there is the powerful image of the open book against the heroine's body. This represents according to Casteras: "A symbol of feminine yearning, and the powerful combination of woman plus book (particularly the underlying eroticism of the open book and the book pressed to some body part) seems to transform the act of a female reading into a state of desirability, accessibility, and heightened sexuality" (15). This conception is powerful as the image of a woman holding a book means a woman in possession of her right to feel pleasure. This is threatening for male discourse as it entitles women as possessors, a role that was regarded masculine by right.

In this sense, women readers would indulge themselves in pleasure in secluded places such as the bedroom. In "An imaginative Woman" this is explicitly enhanced by the fact that Ella sleeps in the room of her alleged "lover", this act as a fetish that arouses the woman desire as in the following lines: "There they were - phrases, couplets, bouts-rimes, beginnings and middles of lines, ideas in the rough, like Shelley's scraps, and the least of them so intense, so sweet, so palpitating, that it seemed as if his very breath, warm and loving, fanned her cheeks from those walls, walls that had surrounded his head times and times as they surrounded her own now" (13). The image of the room increases the intimacy and the ecstasy that Ella experiences but at the same time it reveals the bond of women to the household, as Casteras comments: "This sense of desire coupled with reading is typically domesticated within the home setting of a parlor (sometimes a bedroom), a place of middle or upper-class private enclosure with walls and other boundaries that affirm a woman's homebound stature" (16). The bedroom for Ella is this doubly significant since it not only enhances her fantasy by fetishizing her lover's belongings, but it also acts as a constant reminder of her wrongdoing, as she

it is somehow violating the sacredness of the family's shelter. The bedroom acts as a physical imprisonment but it is also a liberating space in which Ella can unleash her silenced passions and thoughts without being despised.

In "An imaginative Woman", liberation is not only seen in the heroine's enjoyment of reading but it is also evident in her attempt at writing poetry. In the nineteenth century women writers were oppressed by the patriarchal consciousness which dictated that writing was intrinsically part of the male potential. In fact, the British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins considered that the most significant talent of the artist is "Masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is" (qtd. in Gilbert & Gubar 3). It was thought that if a woman attempted to write any particular genre it would signify that it was an attempt of being masculine, and thus the rejection of her feminine nature. It was also believed that since women were not gifted with the male talent of writing, they could never masterfully write on any matter. This feature enhanced the females' self-consciousness when expressing their voices in writing as they feel that they would always be silenced by the male superiority. Ella embodies this self-effacing feature since she has to write under a male pen name, John Ivy, since nobody would read her stories if people knew that they came from a mother and wife (5). She understands that to be worthy of consideration, she has to imitate the male other since the natural talent was not ascribed to the female gender.

The worthless attention that was given to women's writing seems to be shared by Hardy as he writes: "A ruinous charge was made for costs of publication; a few reviews noticed her poor little volume; but nobody talked of it, nobody bought it, and it fell dead in a fortnight - if it had ever been alive" (5). This shows that even though Ella writes under a male identity, her career as a poet is doomed to fail as she cannot fool her nature. Hardy's claim is clear; women in Victorian society were intellectually inferior to men and thus they could never create a text that might capture the public's interest. In fact, the Victorian artist John Ruskin argued on differences between both sexes, claiming that the man "Is eminently the doer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention . . . Woman's talent, however was for 'modesty of service'. Her capacities are not suited for 'invention or creation' (qtd. in Dijkstra 13). Women could only acquire intellectual inspiration by imitating the male superior. In this sense, Ella believes that if she touches Robert Trewe's pencils or clothes, she might be tainted with the male's expertise, as shown in:

Possessed of her fantasy, Ella went later in the afternoon, when nobody was in that part of the house, opened the closet, unhitched one of the articles, a mackintosh, and put it on, with the waterproof cap belonging to it. "The mantle of Elijah!" she said.

"Would it might inspire me to rival him, glorious genius that he is! . . . The consciousness of her weakness beside him made her feel quite sick" (9).

Ella assumes her inferiority when she thinks that the poet's genius could be passed by his clothing. Hardy is clever when echoing the imagery of the mantle of Elijah, as it symbolizes the passing of authority from God to the prophet². Thus, the male is depicted as an almighty creator; he is the only one who can "father" a text of considerable value. Women, on the contrary, are depicted as almost inexistent within the cultural realm.

In their book *The Madwomen in the Attic*, authors Gilbert and Gubar asserted that the male hegemony in the poetry of the nineteenth century was lead in terms of their sexuality, stating that: "Male sexuality, in other words, is not analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (4). It follows that since women lack penis they would also lack the talent and power that comes from the possession of the phallus. This tells us that Ella's failure at writing poetry is not only due the patriarchal context of the time but it is somehow forbidden by nature. Thus, Gilbert and Gubar argue: "Not only is 'a woman that attempts the pen' an intrusive and 'presumptuous Creature,' she is absolutely unredeemable: no virtue can outweigh the 'fault' of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed the boundaries dictated by Nature" (8). A women attempting to write, to possess a pen is a woman attempting to possess a penis, or more broadly, the phallic representation of authority and power. This idea was threatening for Victorian discourse since it meant that women acknowledged that in order to rise from weakness they had to become virile. The statement also shows that women who venture to defy nature are hopeless and cursed, as they degenerate tradition and civilization.

Ella's punishment for having transgressed the social impositions was the death of her inspiration, since Robert Trewe killed himself after being criticized for his poetry. She says: "O, if

² For Judeo-Christian tradition, the symbolism of the Mantle of Elijah represents authority and power; as suggested by Professor David Condon in "The Mantle passes from Elijah to Elisha: 2 Kings 2:1-15": "The symbolism can be seen in the use of Elijah's mantle as a representation of God's authority and the calling of the prophet (cf. 1 Kings 19:19) . . . The mantle also serves to foreshadow the ministry of Elisha which is to come in the following chapters in which he shows himself to be clothed in the God's authority and power" (5).

he had only known of me - known of me - me! . . . O, if I had only once met him - only once; and put my hand upon his hot forehead - kissed him - let him know how I loved him - that I would have suffered shame and scorn, would have lived and died, for him! . . . But no - it was not allowed! God is a jealous God; and that happiness was not for him and me!” (22) The heroine’s misdeed is doubly faulty: she explored sexuality to the edge of infidelity and she attempted to develop intellectually. Moreover, Ella was chastised for wanting to write her story, for speaking out loud about the ambitions and desires that women silenced in the imprisonment of the household. Ella’s downfall starts when she raises her voice and claims her right to be creator of her life and the possessor of her sexuality. This restates that the only virtuous path for women is to embody the role of the household nun since it secures a merry existence within the walls of stagnation.

The attitudes towards women writers and readers were related with the female’s right to education, as part of a social politic of the nineteenth century. Women were thought unable to receive a higher learning as they were not biologically prepared to knowledge. According to Doctor Harry Campbell: “Women were lacking in will-power, imitative, highly emotional, had short attention spans; were incapable of thinking abstractly . . . Had active imagination and told many lies” (qtd. in West 90). All of these characteristics made women prone to stupidity and nervous collapses as they were inherently brainless and weak-minded. Education for women was thus labeled as another burden which women’s feeble capacity could not endure. Women who wanted to write inside the literary sphere were seen as oddities, as Nietzsche suggested: “The only people who dedicate themselves to higher learning in one way or another are the ugly, hysterical, or very poor . . . Tell how many normal women, how many healthy and perfect women, there are in our literary circle” (qtd. in West 87). Women writers and readers were often labeled as outcasts; this shows that the patriarchal discourse feared that women outside their conventional role could begin a new social order that would end in emancipation.

In this sense, women could never cultivate themselves in reading or writing because it would only be beneficial for the setting of liberal ideas. Women could only aspire to educate themselves in religious or domestic instructions since it would improve their role as Household nuns. From one way or another, women could never aim at learning because of their individual yearning, on the contrary as Ruskin says they had to be: “Enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation”(13). Education for women could

only be attained in terms of self-sacrifice since it was broadly considered a privilege rather than a right which women could not exercise freely in the public sphere.

In the long run, Women's education in the nineteenth century was largely addressed in terms of male convenience; if women educated themselves, they would not need economic protection or support from men. If women read what they desire or if they could write openly about their frustration, it would mean that women were beholding voice and could be heard by the liberals who saw the New Woman as an equal pair for labor and intellectual attributions. In this sense, reading was significant as it "communicates that the woman in question has typically moved away from the company of others to indulge in her passion and need for separation" (Casteras 37). Through reading, Ella in particular draws apart from the impositions and began a quest for her individuality. From this stance, Ella's limitation is that she read the male version of reality; since in her time women's thoughts were not largely published. It is likely that if Ella had read a women author, she would have embarked not only in the transition of the New Woman, as reader and intellectual, but most likely she would have been able to write under her own name since she knew that she was not alone in the quest for her subjectivity.

Even though Ella's representation of the New woman is not complete, it needs to be acknowledged that she challenges the Victorian impositions upon reading and writing. She sets the path for the upcoming New Women who will not be afraid of writing their own verses, recognizing their unique voices without a hint of self-effacement.

Hardy's heroine questions her role as soulkeeper since she knows that is not her sole purpose in life; instead, she questions and rejects her role as devoted mother and wife by dedicating her time to cultivate herself in literacy. She also rejects the purity ascribed to the Angel of the house as she explore on the forbidden sexuality outside of wedlock. Though is not a complete sexual liberation, Ella challenges the sexual anesthesia that was placed upon women's nature.

Ella's ending is tragic since she dies of an unknown disease, and the lover of her fantasies commits suicide just before she discovers that he has dedicated to her some verses entitled "To an unknown Woman". If indeed pessimistic, the author's portrayal of the short story is realistic, as women who pursued freedom were often represented by scorned pariahs of Victorian society. Their endings are fateful as they somehow moralize on the female's appropriate behavior. Hardy did not

advocate for these attitudes, but most importantly he reproduced the injustice and the doom that these women received, when daring to venture on liberation. Hardy's stake is that women in his time could not easily draw from their roles as Angels of the House or Household Nuns since these attributions were devised long time before they were born. In fact, it represented a vicious circle in which mothers and daughters could not escape because it threatened the reality and the civilization in which they lived and perished. In other words, women unconsciously knew of the importance of their subjugation because they were made to believe that it was the basis for their gender's survival and that of the race. Women were forced to think that their importance rested upon their capacity to bear children and to serve their husband, this dutiful service maintained the status quo of their lives and that of the males, who defined female identity for their own benefit.

Finally, it can be said that the nineteenth century witnessed the tensions that arose from the confusing role of women within society. These tensions increased the eagerness of women to define their own identity and roles in their lives. The New Woman was born from the women's oppressed voices, who wanted to construct their own language and narrate history through their own words. Ella represents the beginning of the New Woman, a figure that though fearful of her doings dares to speak for herself, and for all of those who see in her story a model for inspiration.

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