

Decoding Forgetting: A Semiotic Reading of Memory in Thomas Hardy’s “Tess’s Lament”

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Abstract Thomas Hardy’s “Tess’s Lament” (1901) has often been read within the context of Victorian societal norms, particularly concerning women’s challenges. While commonly examined alongside Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, this paper takes a different approach; it examines the verse’s signs and symbols rather than focusing solely on historical and social contexts. Through a semiotic lens, this study aims to uncover the underlying meanings by dissecting the words and exploring the philosophical foundations of Hardy’s work. Contemporary theories of signification by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes are emphasized, along with Nietzsche’s metaphorical dimensions, Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory, and gender perspectives from Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler are also explored. Eventually, the analysis reveals how Tess embodies philosophical aspects throughout the narrative, offering a deeper appreciation of the complexities in Hardy’s work through the hidden meanings within the expressions.

Keywords Thomas Hardy. Tess. Gaze. Semiotics. Social conventions. Memory. Forgetting.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Critical Review. – 3 Theoretical Framework, Semiotic Approach in Reading Hardy’s Verse. – 4 Reading “Tess’s Lament”. – 5 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Thomas Hardy's poem "Tess's Lament" was composed in the collection *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901), and it was published after his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The six five-line stanzas of the poem are recounted by the narrative voice - Tess - who seems to depict an overflow of thoughts. In the first lines of the poem, a sense of melancholy and a desire for her disappearance is expressed by the speaker, whose memories take her thoughts back to the cheerful moments in the past - back when she used to live on the farm with the male character (a husband or a lover). The moments of courtship are portrayed in the second stanza of the verse.

Eventually, the language of the third and fourth stanzas shows the male character's departure and absence, which seem to result from the speaker wronging or betraying him. Later, and in the last stanzas, Tess expresses her envy towards the "dairymaid" who has taken her place on the farm. And once more, she expresses her wish that her life would end. On a general level, the verse presents the concepts of memory, time, life, and death, which are entangled with problems of love, home, marriage, family, and betrayal, that is, shifting external and internal conflicts.

The speaker appears to be drowning in her recollections and wishes they could all be forgotten. The verse opens with a general expression of these sentiments, followed by a flashback to a cheerful time and an association embraced by love and passion. Tess's thoughts eventually take her back to a series of images between past and present times. The language in the text shifts temporally, moving between past recollections and the immediate perception of reality. As the narrative voice moves with the flashback, she goes through a stream of happiness and love to regret, guilt, loneliness, and sadness.

These emotions shape Tess's thoughts, which take the form of a lament with all its immediate connotations of sorrow, grief, and mourning. The lament presents several entangled concepts, memory and forgetting in particular, through which it questions social conventions. These concepts are intertwined through Tess's voice; it recalls past days and expresses regret for things she has done and despair over her current situation. Therefore, she wishes her life would come to an end, and she could disappear from sight: "I would that folk forgot me quite, forgot me quite".

2 Critical Review

Critical readings of the poem frequently associate its titular character with Tess, the central figure in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which was published in 1891, approximately a decade before the

poem appeared. Hardy's tragic novel tells the story of Tess, a country girl whose misfortune leads to her downfall. Tess appears to be an innocent rural girl from a poor family; her father sends her to their relatives to work there. Eventually, the relative's son, Alec, after many temptations, finally rapes her, and later she gives birth to a boy, who dies very young. After a long time of hardship, she leaves the place and turns to work somewhere else. However, she meets the one whom she worships, Angel Clare. At first, Tess seems unable to tell him about the tragic story of her life, but very soon after their wedding day, she reveals everything. Clare does not forgive her and leaves her, and Tess then spends a long time working on the farms. Most obviously, misery and poverty are depicted in the novel, which ends with the death of Tess, after she is charged with murdering Clare.

The language of the work also brings out several other themes, such as social class distinctions, love, and social traditions (Rao, Yuan-yuan 2018, 71).

Since the name "Tess" is repeated in the verse, critics have read the poem through such lenses and given the same interpretation to both the novel and the verse. Several critics find a direct relationship between the poem and the novel. Knoepfmacher (1990), for example, claims that the character of Tess in the poem is taken from the novel. In brief, the poem and novel complete each other in terms of having the same story of the same character - Tess - who seems to be a farm girl and the representative female voice whom Hardy has presented in his works to portray gender issues during the nineteenth century (1058). Paulin (1975) also suggests that the verse completes the novel, in the way Tess's memories with Angel are depicted in the lines "he watched me to the clock's slow beat -/ loved me, and learned to call me Sweet" (155-6). Paulin argues that Hardy's novels and poems are annotations to each other. And Irwin (2000) goes even further, claiming that the verses are the same stories and are parallel to the works of fiction (24). Giordano points out that Hardy's character Tess in both the novel and the poem is depicted as miserable and subject to the cruelty of life; the speaker's voice is presented in the verse, and she recounts the novel's plot. Giordano asserts that Tess wishes to disappear because she is faced with difficult choices in life that lead to her downfall (Alexander 1985, 91).

In short, for most critics, Hardy's character in the poem appears to be guiltless and pure, and not responsible for what she encounters. However, a semiotic reading shows that the verse presents an antithetical conclusion.

3 **Theoretical Framework, Semiotic Approach in Reading Hardy's Verse**

This essay takes a reflective approach to analyzing Hardy's "Tess's Lament". Setting aside conventional interpretations that rely on historical or biographical context. Instead, it draws on both Roland Barthes's and Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic perspectives to dissect the poem's language and uncover the layered meanings in each line. By doing this, the study opens up new theoretical pathways for reading the text. In essence, the analysis concentrates on linguistic structures, metaphors, and the more subtle or concealed messages embedded in the poem. In his *Elements of Semiology* (1967), Barthes writes:

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, first published in 1916, Saussure postulated the existence of a general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology, therefore, aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention, or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (9)

In other words, Barthes's semiotics is based on Saussure's explanation that language is a pure sign system that consists of both signifiers and signified - words and their meanings (Marklemon 2015); for Saussure, language is made up of signs, which integrate their signifiers (the image, the word, or the sound) through an arbitrary association to their meanings or the concepts.

Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) explains that the unknown voice in a literary work causes the loss of every origin, so it is unclear who is speaking in a text. The narrative voice in a poem, therefore, cannot be identified: it is confusing to know whether it is the poet himself speaking or multiple characters in the text (142). According to Barthes, at the moment of producing a literary text, the author finds his death, and the reader is born: "the death of the author" is a metaphor to show that there is no reference to biography in the literary text, and there is no need to put some blood into it to understand the meanings of the words.

Barthes goes deeper as he investigates the meanings of words and the semiotic system, and in his *Elements of Semiology* (1964), he explains "denotation" and "connotation", referring to the literal meanings and the deeper level of the significations of the signifiers. In a semiotic analysis, it is understood that language is made of a system of significations which consists of three elements: "words are the expressions (E), and they are related (R) to the content (C)"(1967,

89). This relation seems to be the same arbitrary system that has been coined by de Saussure, relying on social conventions. A connotation is a system of signifiers and signifieds, in which each time a new sign is added to the system, a new concept or content is created (1967, 91). Therefore, the signifiers offer more than one signified, and that depends on the context provided by the surrounding signifieds.

Hardy's verses present codes, metaphors, tones, and hidden meanings, and the only way to understand them is to open up the expressions and seek their etymological meanings, as well as the relations between the signifiers. For example, in "Tess's Lament", which the critics have related to the novel, seeing Tess as a victimized woman, the signifiers in the lines: "t'was I who made the blow to fall/ on him who thought no guile" show another layer of signification: that 'Tess' has 'wronged' the 'male character. The expressions connote the words' arbitrary relation to the content:

"t'was I who made the blow to fall" - E1	= signification of the system1
Tess has done something - C1	= signification of the system1
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"On him who thought no guile" - E2	= signification of the system 2
The man is innocent - C2	= signification of the system 2

4 Reading "Tess's Lament"

There are several ways in which the title can be read: "Tess's lament" may suggest the state of regret for something she has done or grief for someone or anything she has lost. However, the name "Tess" etymologically elicits the concept of a harvest - the time of collecting crops. Thus, the name may refer to autumn, when leaves fall from trees, marking the end of summer and leading to the coming season - winter. In a semiotic sense, it seems to evoke the concepts of time, memory, and forgetting. As explained through Barthes's semiotic system:

"Tess" - E1	= signification of the system 1
Harvest - C1	= signification of the system 1
"Tess's lament" - E2	= signification of the system 2
Forgetting the memory - C2	= signification of the system 2

Above all else, the sense of forgetting through time is presented in the first verse by the female speaker, Tess, who seems to be addressing her words to a male character, to "folk", and to herself. Simultaneously, the language is addressed to the audience: both the

society and the male character in the poem. Tess wishes to note down her memories for her implied audience (Wolf 2014), who are the future readers:

I would that folk forgot me quite,
 Forgot me quite!
 I would that I could shrink from sight,
 And no more see the sun.
 Would it were time to say farewell,
 To claim my nook, to need my knell,
 Time for them all to stand and tell
 Of my day's work as done not to be recalled;

The term "folk" (E1) denotes people in general, particularly the surrounding ones, such as family, relatives, neighbors, or society (C1). In terms of Barthes's semiotic system, the word in this context also connotes the Other's half (C2) of Tess (E2), which is depicted through the perception of others. Hence, the verse is based on three parts of the narratee: Tess, the male character, and the folk. The narrative voice "would", in other words, wishes to be forgotten (by others): she might be in a state in which she wants them to leave her behind, to neglect her, or even to slip her from their memory forever. Tess's wish to be invisible from others' visions suggests that she is looking for isolation; she wants to grow smaller and smaller or to be invisible from the sight of others, to disappear from the reach of others' eyes and escape from the gaze of society, which reflects power and control (Roof 2007).

The gaze here suggests the curiosity of society, gender dominance, or any other means of control. Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", explains how women are the object of the male gaze in cinema and photography (1975, 14-16) referring to Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage", in which a child stands in front of a mirror and experiences self-reflection, which is the beginning of the self-recognition (1975, 17). From this standpoint, Tess appears to see the reflection of herself through not her actual eyes, but from the eyes of the "folk". Furthermore, her wish not to see the sun anymore suggests two desires; literally to lose her sight, or metaphorically, to fade away for eternity, or to die. At this stage, it is not obvious whether she is writing down her memories or if it's merely an interior monologue.

Tess's desire for the sun to be hidden from her sight suggests a wish for "death", because the "sun" which gives light and heat to living creatures, is generally a metaphor for life. In this sense, her aspiration for "death" becomes deeper as she wants to hear the sound of the ring or the "knell" coming from the bells. Meanwhile, she demands to be in her "nook" (E1), a word which on the literal level denotes a corner, a shelter, a hole, or a box (C1). In addition, it

could be read metaphorically (E2), it may refer to a small dark place or a grave (C2).¹ In this regard as well, Tess seems to be expressing her final moments when she sees her "day's work as done". That is to say, her role in life has become unnecessary. She has reached this point in her lifetime, and she needs to be isolated from everyone else. This seems to be related to de Saussure's sign system, as he defines it as a social convention. The verse seems to be echoed with the sound of every statement whispered - starting from the sound /f/ as it is started from "I would that folk forget me quite,/ Forged me quite!", and continuing with the voiced /s/ in "from sight and no more see the sun".

The repeated voices in the line introduce the readers to the sound of the whisper, such as the phoneme /n/ in "to claim my nook, to need my knell", and the voiced /t/ in "time for them all to stand and tell". The bell seems to have the same echo as the language moves through the sound and its repetitions. Apparently, there is a whisper of the last moment of death before "shrink[ing] from sight".

The duration between the lines emphasizes the narrative voice's pause from one expression to another, the regret and the slow or low voice depict the moment when Tess compares her life in two different circumstances, her current situation and the past days - that construct both memory and forgetting within her. The verse seems to show the concept of forgetting in general, and at this stage, it appears to be in terms of visibility: not to be seen, to disappear, or to fall away - evoking the image of falling leaves in autumn. The evocations seem to provide essential elements: time, light, and sound. These terms may represent life and the way Tess wants to alienate herself from it. She appears to be making herself a bridge between life and death. This line also suggests de Saussure's 'social conventions' - the agreements and rules which are constructed semiotically around her by society. As he explains that there is a mental relation between expression in language, a word or signifier, and its possible meanings, concepts, or the signified (2011, 67).

In a nutshell, meanings are conveyed through an arbitrary relation between the object and the language, whether it's written or spoken. From this viewpoint, the term "folk" in the poem signifies a society in general, and the social conventions by which Tess appears to be influenced by others to follow traditions and rules that have been set to shape the identity and separate right from wrong. The "time for them all to stand and tell/ of my day's work as done", points to the idea of a funeral, where Tess wishes, if there was time, to say

1 Throughout the analysis, (E1) (C1) and (E2) (C2) will be used to refer to the first and the second levels of significations (denotation and connotation), which are based on Barthes's semiological system of signification.

goodbye to them and disappear. In short, social norms are depicted through language, and they seem to play the role of choosing Tess's destiny. In addition, the pronoun "them" describes the "folk"; here Tess emphasizes referring back to the society with whom she shares her moments. She seems to be controlled by the gaze of society, and she sees herself through the eyes of others. Her recollection then takes her thoughts back to her earlier days:

Ah! dairy where I lived so long,
 I lived so long;
 Where I would rise up stanch and strong,
 And lie down hopefully.
 'Twas there within the chimney-seat
 He watched me to the clock's slow beat -
 Loved me, and learnt to call me sweet,
 And whispered words to me.

The "dairy days" evoke Tess's recollection of the early experiences working on the farm, and the memory of using the churn stirs pleasant feelings in her, reminding her of a time when she used to wake up with hope. Brighter days are depicted through moments when she would "rise up stanch and strong", while her nights are recalled with a sense of optimism and trust - she used to "lie down hopefully", filled with faith. Through these descriptions, the dairy farm is described as the opposite setting to the "nook". The farm seems a symbol of life, while the nook appears a representation of death. At this point, I would shed light on de Saussure's notion of social convention and its integration into the sign system. Tess's recollection also evokes de Saussure's theory, as memory is closely tied to social norms. The delineation of these characteristics serves to establish the notion that Tess is reminiscing about a prior phase of her existence during which she was engaged in the production of dairy commodities, reflecting upon her erstwhile state of contentment, resilience, diligent labor, and hopeful repose. Her thoughts seem to take her back to the atmosphere, described in an image of the fireplace and the season of winter. The "chimney-seat", a warm place, seems to be related to the sun, which evokes a sense of life: it is where the male character "watched her". Tess describes the male gaze (Mulvey 1975, 14-16) observing her, "he watched me to the clock's beat", and its power seems to control her recollection of the past, so she fails to escape from the shadow of those days. And this gaze is not only the male character's but also the gaze of other people (folk) looking at her.

Thus, Tess seems to be dominated by the male character's gaze, which, in various ways, has constructed her identity; the act of watching here is panoptic because it creates the kind of "power relation" that Foucault describes in his "panopticon". However,

beyond the concept of power, the image also seems to convey a sense of a romantic relationship. This can be seen in the way he watches her and whispers to her, through the time that is implied by "the clock's slow beat". Similarly, the passage of time appears to decelerate intermittently, or within specific chapters of her life journey. The "clock" appears to play a key role in indicating the times at which both remembering and forgetting occur. Eventually, Tess recalls the whispering of his voice as he spoke to her in words that made her happy. The striking feature of this language is the repetition of expressions across different contexts; for instance, the whisper is depicted in two places within the poem: once with a sense of darkness and loneliness (C1), later with a companion and love (C2).

Several paradoxes are presented within the language; for instance, the shift from being hidden or small to being strong and hopeful, and the change from loneliness to being accompanied by the man and being told words of love by the fireplace. The terms evoking this lead the reader to the previous part of the stanza in which the exclamation mark "ah!" provides the sense of both pain and pleasure. On the one hand, the pain seems rooted in the recollection of those days; on the other hand, it can be depicted through the connection of the words "strong", "hopefully", and "sweet". To put it differently, there is a contradiction in both senses. Hence, the shift back and forth appears to strengthen the struggles of forgetting and memory of the past, and this conflict raises the theme of love that is depicted in the verse in various ways, as the speaker seems to recall the past days, she expresses her love for them, for the farm, and for the one who used to "[love her], and learned to call [her] sweet, and whispered words to [her]". The male character's whispers echo in her thoughts. However, those recollections appear to be an obstacle, in which all those delightful memories have become like poisonous and sticky plants, in which she is entangled, and she cannot move forward. Tess uses the plants as a metaphor to depict her life and to show the comparison between her present time and the past.

For instance, the other side of love is depicted in the verse that causes the speaker's current situation – suffering and loneliness. That is to say, Tess confesses to something that she has done through the expressions "was I who made the blow to fall/ on him who thought no guile", and this shows the concept of deception. As it's explained through Barthes's semiology, the second system of signification adds a deeper level of connotation; Tess admits that she has wronged him. As a result, she is left behind; the male character seems to be gone. The signifiers "and now he's gone, and now he's gone" appear to indicate Tess's melancholy after the departure of the male character. Concisely, the other side of love is depicted, in which she is left behind with sorrow and regret. The social conventions seem to arise from Tess's need for love and identity; the relationship that is embraced

with passion is a set of signifiers through which it is expressed in "[words of love]". In short, through the language, he has told her words, and through the language, she remembers them. Besides that, the absence of the male character seems to destroy Tess's identity and individuality, for when reconstructing them, Tess seems to be in a struggle because of the social norms and ideology in which she cannot be on her own without the male character, the one who recognizes her. Since all social norms are constructed through language, Tess's past and present are a collection of memories produced for a reason she is striving to find her identity:

And now he's gone; and now he's gone; [...]
 And now he's gone!
 The flowers we potted p'rhaps are thrown
 To rot upon the farm.
 And where we had our supper-fire
 May now grow nettle, dock, and briar,
 And all the place be mould and mire
 So cozy once and warm.

The male character seems to be lost, has left, or might be dead. The recurrent expressions "and he's gone, and now he's gone/and now he's gone!" emphasize that he is away from Tess. Furthermore, the sound of /gɒn/, in the repeated expressions 'and now he's gone', may represent the clicking sound in the "clock's slow beat". The sound plays a key role in the speaker's thoughts once again. Apparently, all those events and memories are still there, and she can often hear those voices. Tess launches into a comparison between her situation and various plants through both rhetorical devices – ekphrasis and prosopopeia – for instance, the ekphrasis works through the expressions "and where we had our supper-fire/ may now grow nettle, dock, and briar/ and all the place be mould and mire" in which Tess describes the setting, and the plants are metaphors for depicting the theme of love.

Semiotically, the "flowers" suggest multiple explanations: on the one hand, they seem to be a symbol for conveying a message that cannot be spelled out, like silence or a whisper.² On the other hand, she compares herself to those flowers in the sense that they were once potted with love and passion (C1). However, they were also thrown away and became rotten on the farm, which seems to be a metaphor for her dead body in the dark "nook", or to be rotten deep in the muddy ground (C2). Moreover, those flowers are compared to

² *Flowers Meaning and Symbolism* (2014), *FTD.com*, <https://www.ftd.com/blog/flowermeanings-and-symbolism>.

their relationship because they refer to a particular type of plant characterized by color and a pleasant smell, and which also conveys a sense of protection and love. They, therefore, express the senses, which also seem to be connected to the idea of voiceless words that are spilled out by the speaker or written. Roses also carry the meaning of "bitterness or devotion" (Boeckmann 2020), and this provides the sound of the whispers that have been depicted earlier in the stanza.

The flowers are potted, yet they might be "thrown", suggesting they are being tossed away, rotten, or ruined on the "farm": the scene seems to depict the environment of a farmhouse. That is to say, the setting is in the country, which suggests the flowers lack recognition once potted: they are thrown away without attention and thus forgotten. Once, the roses were potted and alive, while in the present, they are rotten in the mud. These associations are similar to those seen in previous expressions, where Tess's situation has been changed, from being strong and hopeful to the state that she is left in of misery and melancholy; and this seems to be the result of being forgotten or neglected. Despite that, the term "supper-fire" appears to provide the same sense of "chimney-seat" (C1) from Barthes's semiological system of signification; it also connotes the meaning of the "sun" that provides enthusiasm and tenderness of love, devotion, and life (C2). In general, the expression and the need or the wish for life is expressed through "fire", because it suggests the heat and light that bring the sense of hope and love again.

However, Tess continues to repeat the divergent descriptions of plants, which are related to death; the expression "may now grow nettle, dock, and briar" indicates the plants that all cause pain and allergy, and she uses them as metaphors for exasperation or disgrace.

Furthermore, prosopopeia functions in the verse in the way Tess presents the male speaker: he seems to be absent, but the memory from the past "he watched me to the clock's slow beat" leads the reader to adopt that "whisper" from him, though in the present time, and Tess merely speaks in his absence. She shifts the statements from the recollection of the pleasant days to the consequences of that love affair:

And it was I who did it all,
 Who did it all;
 'Twas I who made the blow to fall
 On him who thought no guile.
 Well, it is finished --past, and he
 Has left me to my misery,
 And I must take my Cross on me
 For wronging him awhile.

The opening words of the stanza suggest a sense of blameworthiness. Another way of saying this is that Tess seems to see herself as convicted for what happened, through her repetition of the expression "and it was I who did it all". In light of that, she makes a huge shift from loneliness to guilt. She describes the male character as being innocent, which is to say, she depicts herself as the one who "made the blow to fall", for which she proposes different explanations - she might have been unfaithful to him, or she may have deceived him:

"Has left me to my misery" - E1	= signification of the system1
Tess is left alone - C1	= signification of the system1
"For wronging him awhile" - E2	= signification of the system2
Tess has wronged him - C2	= signification of the system2

Literally, the words: "twas I who made the blow to fall" seem to denote the meaning of hitting him with something (C1), while from a metaphorical level, semiotically, it also connotes the idea that Tess has disappointed him in one way or another (C2). After a pause, she changes her thoughts from being a sinner to being a victim, and this suggests the destruction of her identity.

In terms of de Saussure's sign, the signifiers: "well, it is finished-- past, and he left me to my misery", suggest that Tess is restricted to the past, with its bitter-sweet memories which control her present time. Her repetition of the term "past", which is connected to time, implies that it plays the role of authority over everything around her, so its evocations enhance the concepts of social conventions. The speaker's identity is another factor entangled in their relation; eventually, the male character's departure leads to the misrecognition of Tess's individuality.

Guilt and victimization, life and death, light and darkness - these are the forces between which Tess is lost, slipping within and beyond them. She symbolizes herself as Jesus Christ in terms of crucifixion, she seems to be lost for being guilty and a victim, and also she appears to be perplexed for being forgotten and ignored by others, and also for letting others forget her. As a result, she appears to feel guilty. However, since the term "cross" symbolizes crucifixion or death, she then shows her sacrifice for the social conventions, in the same way that Christ was crucified and died by taking on and representing the sins of others (Coleman 2020).

The term "cross" thus enhances the ideas of death, as it is repeated in the lines "to claim my nook, to need my knell" in which the speaker appears to indicate the action of dying in both places. In this way, Tess seems to condemn herself for being sinful at one point and then a victim, thereby providing the contradictory idea once again. She then

emphasizes "wronging him", which can mean abusing or corrupting him. The idea at this stage seems to be related to the previous line: turning the flowers into nettles and dock implies that she is unable to return to those days, nor to keep moving. In the same way, Tess plays the role of both the reprehensible or guilty one and the sufferer. The verse continues with the recollection of Tess's wedding day:

How gay we looked that day we wed,
 That day we wed!
 "May joy be with ye!" all o'm said
 A standing by the durn.
 I wonder what they say o's now,
 And if they know my lot; and how
 She feels who milks my favourite cow,
 And takes my place at churn!

The speaker's thoughts seem to move back here again to the recollection of the past times - to happy days, as her attention takes her back to the day of their wedding. At that time, they were joyful, and everyone was "standing by the durn", but the expression refers to the doorpost: the term "durn" is a euphemism for "darn" and etymologically refers to something that is damned or cursed. Thus, this reference can be explained in two different ways: on one hand, the door that leads to the house is "so cozy once and warm", referring to their marriage (C1); on the other hand, it can be seen as an entrance to hell that she is suffering from (C2). This paradoxical evocation appears to dramatize the influence of the social conventions as it's explained by de Saussure, indicating that there is irony for those who wish them happiness, because that door can be an entrance to unhappiness in their new life after marriage. In this sense, the language conveys the idea of shifting from life to death, or from love to misery.

Tess appears to be drowned in the recollection of their wedding: the expression "how gay we looked that day we wed", refers to the concept of marriage, which is a process constructed by society; the wedding day is one of the ceremonies that is undergone through communities as a common feature. The striking point within the statement is the word "looked", which seems to evoke the external appearance of the individuals, put on to satisfy society - were they really happy? Or did they only appear to be delighted at their wedding? Plainly, Hardy's character is questioning all the standards and rules on which our perception of reality relies. Tess appears to show that those norms have two sides in terms of their impact on oneself: on the one hand, gathering in the ceremonies may bring a sense of happiness; on the other hand, she questions, "I wonder what they say of now". To put it another way, society and social conventions

play their part in causing her suffering because of what she feels after what she has done. Put simply, language presents a riddle in which individuals are entangled, and through the sign system, this riddle invites readers to decode the underlying narratives:

"How gay we [were] that day we wed" – E1	= signification of the system1
They were delightful – C1	= signification of the system1

"How gay we [looked] that day we wed" – E2	= signification of the system 2
They weren't delightful – C2	= signification of the system 2

Moreover, those sociocultural traditions shape Tess's identity not only culturally but also in terms of gender. The way she appears to struggle with those recollections from the old days shows her attempt to find herself, and the memories of the male character are another factor by which she finds herself as a woman who has been given the concept of love culturally, and who needs to be told words of love. The idea can be thought of in terms of the concept of gender issues discussed by Judith Butler in her "Gender Troubles": Butler's analysis explains how the concept of gender is constructed by social conventions, as binary views are created by leading individuals from the early stages of childhood to learn and follow what society believes are masculine and feminine behaviours (2006, 29-30). Moreover, Butler explains that both feminine and masculine genders are performative acts. That is to say, they are things that people do: how they ought to behave, and what they wear to make them appear as different genders. For instance, the collection of memories that Tess holds in her thoughts, such as sitting by the fire and working on the farm, or the way the male character calls her "sweet", are restrictions and expressions of a social system that shapes Tess as a woman.

Like Butler, Simon de Beauvoir, states in her *The Second Sex* (1949), that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman": this illustrates that woman is the sex that has been given her identity culturally and she is brought up through a set of rules that constructs her in such a way that she believes that she is different from men, and dependent on them. De Beauvoir thus states that "as long as the temptations of the facility remain", that is to say, the emotional and financial needs that women are being forced to starve for, they will find their identity within the opposite sex (Beauvoir 2010, 15-16). From this perspective, Tess seems to be lost in the absence of the male character.

The expression "how gay we looked that day we wed", evokes the concept of the gaze, by which, through observation, Tess and her partner appear to be joyful among the "folk", that is, once again conforming to the social traditions, since conventionally, brides are required to be delighted at their wedding.

Consequently, the speaker appears to wonder what they might say if they know about her "lot", a word that suggests several meanings, such as choice or chance (C1). Here, it seems that Tess is questioning whether they would feel sympathy for her or be ashamed of her (C2). Obviously, the pronoun "they" is related to the "folk", the community that set the rules and the norms for Tess, the people who cause her happiness and her misery. They are also the ones who have constructed her identity, giving her recollections that have complicated her thoughts and shaped her perceptions.

Tess then shifts her focus to a milkmaid who has taken her position on the farm, and she wonders how "she feels who milks [her] favourite cow/ and takes [her] place at churn". That is to say, the ekphrastic scene offers a clear picture of a rural girl working at the dairy. She describes this picture in terms of the female gaze, and Tess observes the country girl who works on the farm, with a gaze that does not evoke sexual desire but rather the sense of envy, that is constructed by social conventions.

Tess's longing for her old workplace and memories of romantic moments pulls her back into reverie. Despite her joy in recalling their wedding, societal expectations shape her memories, causing inner conflict. Tess wishes to forget these constraints yet desires to preserve them, hinting at her quest for identity. This appears to be constructed by the slipping between both forgetting and memory; as Nietzsche says in his *Untimely Meditations*:

The ability to forget or, expressed in a more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel unhistorically during its duration. He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is - worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. (1997, 62)

The key to finding happiness is not to forget the past, but rather to accept the present circumstances without comparing them to past events. To put it another way, Tess appears to compare her current situation to the time when she used to work on the farm and sit by the fire with her partner. Nietzsche provides a metaphor for this through the example of a cow that doesn't feel pain as a result of forgetting: on the metaphorical level, the cow seems to be similar to Hardy's character, Tess, who appears to be a country girl (C1), and the image of her milking the cow (C2) brings her happiness. To put it another way, the cow here can be seen as a metaphor for her past days back at the churn, in terms of happiness. The speaker appears to be motionless or passive in the present situation, as she continues to remember all of it:

It wears me out to think of it,
 To think of it;
 I cannot bear my fate as writ,
 I'd have my life unbecome;
 Would turn my memory to a blot,
 Make every relic of me rot,
 My doings be as they were not,
 And what they've brought to me!

Tess appears to be implying here, in her last words, that she is done with accepting her "lot" to be "writ": she is not strong enough to tolerate her fate. The expression "would turn my memory to a blot" suggests the black spot of the stain of ink on a piece of paper covering the space where memories are written: here she once again wishes to have her life undone, and to be omitted from everyone's thoughts. However, despite her attempts to "have [her] life unbecome", paradoxically, she seeks to forget her memories, yet by maintaining them, she holds on to an identity constructed by her past. The way this kind of forgetting takes place, in general, is explained by Nietzsche using the example of a "leaf": as a child sees different examples of leaves, and draws its shape in its memory, the specific different shapes of leaves are drowned in the memory and forgotten through time as the child grows up and becomes an adult, leaving only a general concept which keeps only the outline of the original shapes (Murphy 2001, 30-3). In brief, Tess's forgetting of specific memories gives her the illusion that she cannot find her identity, and it creates a general sense of loss for her, yet traces of the original experience remain.

Tess seems to have the general concepts of love and domestic life in her memory, which have shaped her identity and controlled her present situation; the social conventions around these concepts have directed her to a certain path. To put it another way, she seems to be unsure of herself, whether to seek the old days and hope for them to be brought back or to forget them and disappear for eternity. Thus, social standards are the primary issues that determine the other aspects in her life. Tess blames everything around her for causing her misery: apparently, her "fate" is to be written, and it cannot be reversed, so this is why she wishes that her life would be undone: she wishes not to have existed, to be invisible to everyone else's sight, as she expresses that in the first stanza. She goes even further with the wish to make every "relic" or every part within her rotten, evoking the concept of "rot" in the previous stanzas, which also points back to the image of the pure and lively flower she used to be, active and bright. Eventually, she became rotten like those plants which were thrown away; this points to her death, since through death the corpse becomes musty and rots. She "would" or she wishes that her memory

would turn to a "blot": on the one hand, this suggests obliteration, being blown out, or put out and extinguished.

In essence, Tess desires to liberate herself from memories that confine her, aiming to start anew by forgetting and hoping others will forget her actions, though she fails. This desire also suggests a fresh beginning, transforming memories into written symbols. The poem initially seems like a monologue, but it reveals that Tess is writing her diaries. The title indicates Tess as the speaker, gathering memories like autumn crops. She symbolizes each fallen leaf, once vibrant on the tree, now solitary and fading.

Tess's recollections of the past show that the concept of time is vital to the poem. The way she remembers those days that cannot be brought back seems to be the cause of the sorrow of her present moment. As Nietzsche (1980) says, correlating happiness and the passage of time:

Whoever cannot settle on the threshold of the moment, forgetful of the whole past, whoever is incapable of standing on a point like a goddess of victory without vertigo or fear, will never know what happiness is, and worse yet, will never do anything to make others happy. (Kaufmann 1980, 9)

The passage of time seems to collect the memories of the events Tess has been through, and she seems to be lost in the illusion of time's duration; her thoughts cling to past incidents, and she finds her present situation shaped by the past.

The concept of time functions in various places and different ways; for instance, the expressions "would it were time to say farewell/ time for them all to stand and tell" imply that Tess's regret for her life brings her to her conclusion, in which she wishes to vanish for eternity since her former life has faded away. The memory of the past when she used to "[live] so long" takes her thoughts back to that time and "how [they] looked that day [they] wed". The days of the dairy and the time of their marriage seem to be converted into a stream of thoughts that she lives with. For example, the passage of time seems to be the cause that has turned the "flowers" into sticky plants, "the flowers we potted p'rhaps are thrown to rot upon the farm", and the evocations of "where we had our supper-fire, may now grow nettle, dock, and briar" signify the changes which occur within time. The differences between past and present tenses indicate the distinction between these two situations throughout the poem.

5 Conclusion

Hardy's "Tess's Lament" is a broad exploration of various notions related to social conventions. These social conventions imprison Tess through memory and forgetting - she wishes to forget and

disappear from everyone's sight. Her memories of the days back on the farm block her path, and they are depicted through metaphors of sticky plants. The social conventions are constructed through the gaze - Tess's gaze on her image, the male gaze, and society's gaze are forming her identity. However, she shows readers that she is guilty rather than a victim, and her sin is tied to her actions and decisions. This semiotic analysis of the text shows that the poem is the reverse of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and from this perspective, the verse shows the concept of "feminist existentialism". In addition, the poem reveals a hidden side of Victorian women, one that differs from the literature review. My semiotic reading shows readers that Hardy's poem can be read as a critique of the nineteenth-century social context through the lens of gaze, power relations, and social conventions.

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