

## Mimesis as the Triumph in the Victorian Symbolic Law

### SUSAN REPRESSION ET DE L'EMANICIPATION A L'EPOQUE VICTORIENNE

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#### Abstract

This study will examine the traces of Lacanian psychoanalytic principles, specifically the Symbolic Order and its process underlying selected Thomas Hardy's novel, *the Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). The use of Lacanian psychoanalysis will allow for a greater understanding of the Victorian cultural unconscious, which presupposes that women are passive and muted, and should be kept as such. This is to underscore the patriarchal authority of that society, and its suppression of women achieved by restraining and viewing them as being devoid of self. This study also illuminates women's potential power in light of Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concept, Mimesis, thereby exploring the Victorian Victorian woman's capability to threaten the unconscious of their identity in that Symbolic era. By investigating these theoretical observations, I hope to highlight the continuing issue of commodifying the value and dignity of women which can be observed in the patriarchal system of the Victorian era exist today however women can learn from such strategies of resistance and reverse the inferior symbol of women in the present society.

**Key words:** Mimesis; Symbolic Order; Thomas Hardy; Victorian Age; Women

#### Résumé

This study will examine the traces of Lacanian psychoanalytic principles, specifically the Symbolic Order and its process underlying selected Thomas Hardy's novel, *the Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). The use of Lacanian

psychoanalysis will allow for a greater understanding of the Victorian cultural unconscious, which presupposes that women are passive and muted, and should be kept as such. This is to underscore the patriarchal authority of that society, and its suppression of women achieved by restraining and viewing them as being devoid of self. This study also illuminates women's potential power in light of Luce Irigaray's psychoanalytic concept, Mimesis, thereby exploring the Victorian Victorian woman's capability to threaten the unconscious of their identity in that Symbolic era. By investigating these theoretical observations, I hope to highlight the continuing issue of commodifying the value and dignity of women which can be observed in the patriarchal system of the Victorian era exist today however women can learn from such strategies of resistance and reverse the inferior symbol of women in the present society.

**Mots clés:** Mimesis; Ordre symbolique; Thomas Hardy; Epoque victorienne; Femmes

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#### INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century in England saw the appearance of the middle classes as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The mid- to late-Victorian period is generally viewed as one in which the ideology of domesticity reached its peak. Eleanor Gordon and Gweneth Nair in their article, *The Myth of the Victorian Patriarchal Family*, discusses that the structure of this ideology is usually associated with the Industrial Revolution and the rising middle classes, particularly those professing an evangelical belief system, which

was openly developed to create a separate identity that would firmly differentiate them from the landed people in the society (2002, p.125). In fact, in Victorian society women were to a large extent considered as goods within the patterns of the patriarchal system, which was related to middle class society. There were many different ideas to this ideology, but the most significant in terms of its consequence to the lives of women was the notion of separate spheres. One of these was the private sphere which was the women's domain, and the other was the public, political and economic sphere controlled by men. Gordon and Nair add that the role of women within this Victorian domestic ideal was that of moral guardian, and their task was to create a safe place from the harsh realities of the commercial world. The fact that women were excluded from both the economic and political areas of society is laid out in *Family Fortunes*, a seminal work in which social historians, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, (2002, p.xxiv) argue that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "formal political and institutional power remained the preserve of a small group of men." They go on to note that although women could "cajole, persuade, and negotiate, there were many spaces in which they had no place" Literary and social critic, Richard Altick argued in his book, *Victorian People and Ideas* that this observable fact occurred as a result of the changes in the British economy. However, he further attributes it to changing attitudes towards the fundamental differences between men and women beginning in the eighteenth century. He asserts that "the nation's increasing wealth and the growing complexity of the mercantile economy required a special kind of managerial expertise which supposedly was a peculiarly masculine gift" (1973, p.51). In this way, women were gradually placed in an inferior position economically and were disadvantaged politically. In *Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660-1760*, Michael McKeon (1995, p.299) emphasizes that:

"by limiting quasi-independent domestic production [toward the end of the eighteenth century], capitalist improvement exerted pressure on what was increasingly understood as "the labor market," so as to throw women in to competition with men. [...] That men tended to prevail in this competition was both a cause and a consequence of developing conceptions of familial income as primarily male income"

Stevi Jackson mentions that in general, married women were not considered legal persons and could not own property. A woman was expected to submit to her husband's authority, to serve him, to minister to his personal needs, as well as to contribute to the prosperity of the household enterprise (1992, pp.155-8). Jane Mills (1992, p.131) also mentions that a woman at that time "[was] no more than a bondservant within marriage". The issue was so important that the women who were not supported by the male-headed family were considered as unusual and kept out of polite society. According to Stana

Nenadic (1995, pp.277-8):

"[T]he long training required of male professionals, and the consequent late age of marriage, also commonly gave rise to sibling households, in particular the pairing of a bachelor brother with a spinster sister. In these circumstances the sister acted as the household manager in lieu of a wife, and often provided vital professional support to brothers engaged in such areas as medicine or church, where the home was closely associated with professional duties".

Sophie Bowlby, Susan Gregory, and Linda McKie in their article *Doing Home: Patriarchy, Caring, and Space*, also mention that the image of women as the angel of the house dominated the Victorian middle-class women. Even those who have shown that working-class women did not withdraw from economic activity have tended to accept the view of middle-class women as economically inactive, dependent, and predominantly performing a service role in the household, at least until the late 19th century. All of these strategies were the way to focus on the married woman and neglect single and widowed women. Women who did not follow the rule of the bourgeois housewife were not considered as important as married women (1997, pp.344-6). Davidoff has asserted that "as adults, sisters often took over housekeeping roles supported by their brothers in a financial and emotional bond not dissimilar to the conjugal" (Gordon & Nair 2002, p.127). Nancy Folbre (1994, p.252) also mentions that women were allocated as "set of responsibilities to which they have been unfairly assigned". He believes that "the current organization of social reproduction is unfair, inefficient and probably unsustainable" (1994, p.255). F. J. Forman (1989, p.137) also mentions that "for women, work outside the home brought conflicting loyalties and obligations: in a world where time is money, and where money can mean time, women have little of either". It came to the point that Victorian society was capitalistic with the focus on the economic aspects of men's business to make them wealthy, and women were portrayed as commodities under the dominance of men. The capitalist economic society kept women away from the public sphere to put women under the pressure of financial issues and caused women to be sold or forced to accept men in marriage simply because of money. My reference to the term 'Commodity' also highlights the Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of 'subjectivity' in relation to Victorian women. In the next section, I will discuss the issues relating to the identity of women in the Lacan's concepts.

## WOMEN'S IDENTITY AS SELFNESS IN THE SYMBOLIC LAW

According to Lacan, language is central to investigating the unconscious because they are both complex structures and because the analyst, in investigating the unconscious, is always using and examining language (Payne, 1993,

p.43). Lacan based his theories on Freud's psychological ideas and Saussure's linguistic terminology, but he modified them a little. As a matter of fact, Lacan had numerous theories on different psychic matters and many other noble ideas (as cited in Campbell, 2004, p.34). But only his category of human psychic development and his theory of language and the unconscious will be applied here, to see how a person as a unified subject can be physically affected by a psychological condition that s/he experiences. As Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson (1993, p.137) argue, to know anything presupposes a unified consciousness which does the knowing. Such a consciousness is like a focused lens without which nothing can be seen as a distinct object. They mention later that "the medium through which this unified subject perceives objects and truth is syntax, an orderly syntax makes for an orderly mind" (1993, p.137). One of the basic premises of humanism is the existence of a stable self, which possesses free will and self-determination. Freud's notion of the unconscious was one of the ideas that began to question or destabilize this humanist ideal of self. But Freud hoped that by bringing out the contents of the unconsciousness, he could minimize repression and neurosis. For him the 'I' will replace the 'id' (unconscious), by consciousness and self-identity (as cited in Barnard 1992, p.79). Like Freud, Lacan categorizes the development of a child's psyche from infancy to adulthood in three stages: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. In these processes, language is Lacan's main concern, being interested in how language affects the child's sense of identity. Bowie explains that "[the three parts] are not mental forces, personifiable on the model-builder's inner stage, but orders each of which serve to position the individual within a force field that traverses him" (1992, p.72). In fact, Lacan thinks that through the symbolic, the child stops being an infant and makes steps in this realm of language, signs and representations of all kinds, with its accruing of a law which structures the subject. In other words, the child needs to enter the symbolic order so as to achieve the full subjectivity which is associated with the acquisition of language (as cited in Montashery 2006, p.12). Then the child experiences a system of linguistic differences and therefore accepts language's predetermined position in such binary oppositions as male/female, father/son and so on. Consequently linguistic expressions transform the child from the unity of being to split social being. Lacan's Symbolic order, which is loosely related to Freud's Reality principle, "is the realm of law, language, society, and cultural beliefs. Entrance into the symbolic order determines subjectivity according to a primary law of referentiality that male sign (phallus) is as its ordering principle" (as cited in Montashery, 2006, p.12). Thus, the phallus is part of the symbolic order into which the child is born: "it is not something he creates, but something he encounters" (Wilden, 1968, p.187). He thought that it is in the symbolic stage that a child becomes aware

of separation from the mother, and the stage is through absence or lack and reflects the desire for another or for the mother. As the result, the awareness of separation is castration (Donovan, 1992, p.112). The separation from the mother brings the castration complex for both sexes in which: The man is 'castrated' by not being total, just as the woman is 'castrated' by not being a man. The man's lack of wholeness is projected onto woman's lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic 'lack': she is a hole (as cited in Hoshyar Rashti, 2006, p.53). Therefore the big difference between sexes which caused the protest of many feminists is clarified here as "men try to deny their separation or alienation through their affirmation of phallic means of mastery" (Donovan, 1992, p.112). It is Michael Henchard, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who acts as the bearer of the Name-of-the-Father. His pessimistic symbolic language is manifested in his speech, and it is through the construction of women's subjectivity in the culture of the Victorian symbolic order that Henchard puts his wife, Susan, in a perfectly inferior position: "I'll sell her for five guineas to any man that will pay me the money and treat her well; and he shall have her for ever, and never hear aught o' me. But she shan't go for less. Now then—five guineas—and she's yours" (Hardy, 1936, p.13). Henchard's putting his wife up for auction serves to highlight Lacan's postulation:

"Woman is introduced into the symbolic pact of marriage as an object of exchange along basically androcentric and patriarchal lines. Thus, the woman is engaged in an order of exchange in which she is an object: indeed, this is what causes the fundamentally conflictual character of her position—I would say without exit. The symbolic order literally submerges and transcends her" (as cited in Fraser & Bartky, 1992, p.123)

Susan was presented as commodity. Her subjectivity is shattered under the norms of the symbolic society. She is trapped in the symbolic process. Susan's split in subjectivity does not happen just once in her life, but at another instance eighteen years later, when Henchard attempts to treat her as commodity again and buys her back. Henchard's patriarchal symbolic is constructed unconsciously; Susan is expected to be the object of exchange since she lacks the phallus, and she is used to guarantee Henchard's power and mastery. He "sat down at the table and wrote a few lines; next taking from his pocket-book a five pound note which he put in the envelope with the letter—adding to it, as by an afterthought, five shillings" (Hardy, 1936, p.68). While Susan reacts by saying: "I am quite in your hands, Michael, she said meekly" (Hardy, 1936, p.74). Henchard not only dominates with patriarchal power his wife, but also his daughter, Elizabeth-Jane. He tries to control the society's perception of Elizabeth, and emphasizes the legal language which is constructed under the rules and norms in that symbolic society. This is evident when he scolds Elizabeth for her accent, with even her handwriting coming under scrutiny: as she "produced a line of chain-

shot and sand-bags, he reddened in angry shame for her, and, peremptorily saying ‘Never mind—I’ll finish it,’ dismissed her there and then” (Hardy, 1936, p.131). Therefore, Susan is victimized under patriarchal culture; she is sacrificed in this realm. The principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis used above indicate how her subjectivity is suppressed in Victorian cultural traditions, and their identities reduced to mere commodities.

## WOMEN’S MIMESIS TO REGULATE THE SYMBOLIC LAW

In this section, I will discuss how Luce Irigaray’s concepts of Mimesis shows that “woman has held the place of reflection, having been expected to uphold and facilitate the masculine element” (as cited in Cimitile, 1992, pp.130-1). It will be explicated that the heroines resubmit themselves and transform their subordination as commodity by affirmation through mimesis performed in the patriarchal language of Victorian society. This will shape a new portrayal of their characters after this transformation, affecting the others as well. According to Irigaray (1985, p.142), one way to challenge the ways in which women are denied from subjectivity and characterized as unthinking bodies is to:

“[T]urn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. Rack it with radical convulsions, carry back, reimport, those crises that her ‘body’ suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her. Insist also and deliberately upon those blanks in discourse which recall the places of her exclusion and which, by their silent plasticity, ensure the cohesion, the articulation, the coherent expansion of established forms.”

Irigaray highlights the notion of mimesis, believing that it can be considered a tool for disrupting the world in which the male takes the role of subject. In fact, “Irigaray’s discussion of mimesis reveals the hidden excess within the history of philosophy that is the condition for masculinist philosophical discourse of Western tradition” (Cimitile, 1992, p.131). Irigaray also follows the path of Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* believing that the way that de Beauvoir defined the role of woman—man as the subject, the absolute, and woman the Other—can be changed with a positive form of identity (Green, 2002, p.2-3). In other words, Irigaray meditated on women as “the other of the same.” She says “I was the other of/for man, I attempted to define the objective alterity of myself for myself as belonging to the female gender” (1985, p.7). For Irigaray, this “analysis can work to free the patient’s energy through the creation of language, not only by playing on words or meanings but also building new linguistic structures” (1985, p.157). In fact, she wants to challenge psychoanalytic discourse, which is constructed based on the old traditions and the exclusion of women from subjectivity: “as we have already seen, even with the help of linguistics, psychoanalysis cannot solve the problem of the articulation of female sex in discourse [...]

what remains to be done, then, is to work at ‘destroying’ the discursive mechanism” (1985, p.76). Furthermore, Irigaray claimed that in some philosophical discourses woman is defined in terms of being deficient in history. In an interview from 1972 entitled *The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of Feminine*, she advanced an account of her overall project later put forth in *Speculum of the Other Woman*: philosophical discourse must be “challenge[d]” and disrupted as it is the foundation for all other forms of discourse (1985, p.74). What Irigaray means by discourse here is not merely speech, but rather the way in which we understand the world through the particular machinery of a philosophical system, stating that “philosophical discourse has a position of mastery and of potential reappropriation of the various productions of history”. And mimesis can be used to break this position of mastery:

“To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible,’ of ‘matter’—to ‘ideas,’ in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means ‘to unveil’ the fact that, if women are such a good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere.” (1985, p.76)

According to Irigaray’s perspective, this harmful view of women cannot be broken by ignoring it; instead, women themselves must participate in this negative view about women, without once again reducing themselves to it. For instance, if women are thought of as irrational, then this description must be engaged such that it is made fun of rather than only repeated. This type of engagement will “overthrow syntax by suspending its eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity” (1985, p.142) Based on Irigaray’s postulation, if women repeat a negative description of themselves in a way that clearly defies this negative description, then it suggests that women are something other than irrational (Braidotti 1994, p.131). Thus, Irigaray’s goal is not to situate woman into the male position, but rather to undermine the structure which provides the place for both male and female:

“For what is important is to disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively masculine parameters, that is, according to a phallographic order. It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it—that amounts to the same thing in the end—but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallographic law.” (1985, p.68)

Irigaray believed that woman must take on the feminine role historically given to her in order to enter the philosophical discourse at all: “one must assume

the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (1995, p.76). She states that “if I were claiming that what I am trying to articulate, in speech or writing, starts from the certainty that I am a woman, then I should be caught up once again within ‘phallographic’ discourse” (1985, p.122). Similarly, Susan shows her power through subordination to affirmation in her auction. When Henchard puts her up for auction, he points at Susan’s body in order to find a customer, and asks her to stand so that the potential customers can see her better. And she does. When Henchard asks if she agrees with her five-guinea price, she “bowed her head with absolute indifference” (Hardy, 1936, pp.12-13). As she leaves with Newson, her buyer, she confirms her subordination calmly: “paus[ing] for an instant, with a close glance at him. Then dropping her eyes again, and saying nothing, she took up the child and followed him as he made towards the door” (Hardy, 1936, p.15), before saying to Henchard, “‘Mike,’ she said, ‘I’ve lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper. Now I’m no more to ‘ee; I’ll try my luck elsewhere. ‘Twill be better for me and Elizabeth-Jane both. So good-bye’” (Hardy, 1936, p.15). Susan reinvents her image of female subject which is fragmented and scattered in the phallographic imaginary. The reader witnesses her efforts at becoming a woman in the patriarchal society, which has scattered her identity. However, Susan finds a way to threaten the cultural symbolic, and regulate the harmful view of herself as commodity: by engaging the negative view of commodity, she never again reduces herself to commodity. Thus, when Henchard wakes up the next morning bewildered, he roars out “‘Tis like Susan to show such idiotic simplicity. Meek—that meekness has done me more harm than the bitterest temper” (Hardy, 1936, p.19). Susan resubmit herself and transforms her subordination to affirmation, by way of mimetic actions performed in the very language of the oppressor, namely the patriarchal Victorian society.

## CONCLUSION

It has been clarified that a patriarchy can choose to terminate women’s existence through exclusion, in order to ensure the stability of the symbolic world. Women’s voices are taken away from them, forced either into muteness, or speaking in the male voice. Each of them is a victim of language which perpetuates the marginalization of females, or their exclusion. In the novel studied here, Hardy shows that Susan is given the role of commodity in order to gratify Henchard’s needs and desires, in the realm of symbolic rules and law, and this is shown with respect to Susan. Hardy portrays the patriarchal motive of excluding women from this world, in order to inhibit the insecurity that these women are capable of causing, as well as the attempt to exchange women as goods so as to

suppress and silence them. Yet Luce Irigaray allows for a paradoxical triumph and show the awareness of women’s struggles in the world of the patriarchy. In Hardy’s novel, it shows the reader that it is not the inferiority of women which leads to their oppression, but instead the attempts of subduing them, in light of the tension they can cause to the patriarchy. Susan could overcome this inferiority and recover it through assigning the capabilities of her potential body, as Luce Irigaray suggests they unconsciously do. For instance, Hardy also depicts Susan trying to become woman who is transforming subordination to affirmation through playful mimesis, and they are somehow successful in reaching transcendence and shattering the traditional view of women as commodity and secondary to men. This research leads to an understanding that women need to revive their fixed negative point of view in the symbolic law and society and turn it into a positive tool for overcoming and building a new identity.

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