

Dress, Movement, and Sensation: An Impression of Nineteenth-Century Peasant Dress in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Keywords: body / sensation / nineteenth-century dress

Abstract

This paper is underpinned by an understanding of bodily sensation as integral to the study of dress, hence having an essential impact on the way dress and dressing can be actively and temporally experienced. It argues for a sensual and dynamic connection between dress, movement, and sensation as a trigger for an embodied experience. The bodily sensation of the elaborately-structured dress which framed the everyday existence of nineteenth-century women, for example the active encounters of the body with dress – the rubbing, slapping, sliding, stretching, brushing, ruffling, and swelling of dress against the form and fleshiness of the body – will be speculated upon as another way of learning about the intimacies between dress and the body.

*Out of the rich and varied multiplicities of the Victorian wardrobe, this paper picks out, as its subject of interest, the often-overlooked female peasant wardrobe which includes the field or work dress, the everyday garb, and the modest Sunday best. The ambition of this paper is not to provide an historical or socio-cultural analysis of Victorian peasant dress. Rather, the central idea is to put forward an impression of the bodily experience of peasant dress through Thomas Hardy's nineteenth-century novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*,¹ through Hardy's poeticism and acute sensitivity towards the most delicate details of the lives of late-Victorian peasantry. By speculating on Hardy's arousal of dynamic multi-sensorial impressions of Tess, through what she wears and how she moves in accordance with the rhythm of the season and across the spectrum of her immediate environment, the paper suggests how bodily sensation of late-Victorian peasant dress is inherently tied to the experience of that particular time and place.*

Introduction

The clothing of the peasantry in the Victorian era was typically a watered down version of the fashions of the middle class.² Its utilitarian and hard-wearing nature marked a clear distinction from the costume of a gentlewoman, which was more focused on aesthetics and the economic display of a delicate life with minimal active pursuits. The majority of studies conducted on

Victorian costume concentrate on the costume of the lady, rarely documenting the everyday garb of the working class. Peasant dress worn by hard working women of the age rarely survives in costume collections,³ which is a practical reason as to why it is not as vigorously documented.

The daily physical activities of peasant women of that age were part of the nature of their lives and immediate environment, and their clothing was built for endurance and utility: their embodied experience of 'wearing' was inseparable from their physical activities and environment. This paper proposes to examine the embodied experience of peasant dress through nineteenth-century popular literature – Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. R. Murray Schafer (1977, p.8) notes, in regards to finding sources of historical perspectives, that it is worth turning to earwitness⁴ accounts from literature and mythology, in addition to historical and anthropological records, and that "a writer is trustworthy only when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known." Even though Schafer is specifically referring to historical soundscape, it is reasonable to extend this to multi-sensorial experiences. In Thomas Hardy's novels one can not only hear, but taste, see, smell, and touch the people and places he describes in moving and poetic ways.

Thomas Hardy and Tess

The story and character of Tess embody Hardy's attitude to the pervasive "ache of modernism,"⁵ intermingled with the restrictive social and moral codes of the Victorian age and the underbelly of hypocrisy. His sympathy lies with the working class and the natural world, rather than with the middle and upper echelons of society. Depending on which moral codes one chooses to subscribe to, Tess is either innocent or morally flawed – a tragic heroine or an adulterous murderess. Hardy's intentional obscurity as to whether Tess is a pure woman provoked moral debates within strict Victorian sensibilities when the book was first published, and his portrayal of Tess as a sensuous creature, steered by her natural impulse to lust and love, collided with social expectations of the 'ideal lady' as an unsexed being. However, Tess is, first and foremost, a young peasant girl from the rural southwest of England, a rustic creature attuned to nature and it is through Tess that Hardy infuses his romantic sentiments about the natural world. Hardy was acutely attuned to the poetic world of the senses – sound, touch, smell, sight, and taste – and it is through his lush poetry that he enlivened the delicate realism of everyday life. The changes in Tess' wardrobe correspond to the rhythm of the environment, the cycle of seasons, and the spectrum of her emotional states. Hardy tells the story through

complex impressions of Tess as a sensate being, a minute – albeit essential – detail within the larger composition of the natural world. Following Hardy's literary technique, perhaps there is an argument for this dynamic impression to extend to a sensual impression of Tess' peasant wardrobe – how she wears it, and how she moves in it – as a way of triggering an embodied understanding of peasant dress in late Victorian England.

Phase the First: The Maiden – The White Dress

The first impression Hardy conveys of Tess is of a white, billowy creature against a sun-lit background, dancing in the greens with a band of women – all clad in white in the tradition of the summer May-Day dance. In this early phase of her life Tess is a child-woman, a “mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience.”⁶ Hardy creates an impression of ephemeral innocence and genuine vulnerability, coloured by the gentle sounds of a rustic creature of nature rustling peacefully within its immediate landscape. Untouched by men – although dangerously coveted – she is a pure, white figure under whose bodice “the life throb[s] quick and warm.”⁷ The softness of her maiden form is accented by a red ribbon in her hair, bouncing to her movements. Hardy does not elaborate on Tess' dress apart from describing it as her best frock, a “thin white gown,” which had been “wrung up and ironed by her mother's own hands”⁸ just the day before. As she whirls about in a sunny green enclosure in her white dress which she “so carelessly green[s] about on the damping grass,”⁹ we get a sense of the frock brushing in soft whispers across the field in its encounter with the wind and grass. Hardy describes her as “so modest, so expressive, she had looked so soft in her thin white gown¹⁰...” These descriptions trigger an impression of her naivety and freedom, which are echoed by the softness of her gown. Tess' clothing not only moves with the elements of the landscape and seasons, but it also bears the mark of her active encounters with grass and soil; a quick backward glance to her rural childhood describes her as a young child marching home from school with her “long stalky legs tight stockings which had ladder-like holes at the knees, torn by kneeling in the roads and banks in search of vegetable and mineral treasures.”¹¹ It is possible here to imagine the bodily sensation of her knees rubbing against soil and gravel and the tearing of her stockings, evoking an almost tangible sensation of Tess as a child of the soil. While this soiling of the ground-length dress has a touch of a romantic association in Hardy's novel, it is an everyday obstacle for women in the Victorian age, which necessitated various skirt-lifting devices to avoid dirt and moisture on the hem of skirts.¹² Hardy alludes to the awkwardness of the heavy, wide skirts at several points through the book, as Tess gathers not only dirt, but insects¹³ and rain water,¹⁴ on her skirt.

In preparation for her journey to be a dairymaid at the *Trantridge* poultry farm, Tess' mother dressed her in her "Sunday best" – the same white, muslin frock with its "airy fullness."¹⁵ On the way to the farm on Alec's gig cart, Tess becomes increasingly uneasy at the recklessness of Alec's driving. The sensation of careless speed and the noise of the seemingly uncontrollable motion of Alec's cart add to the impression of Tess as a creature of vulnerability, the sense of which is readily suggested by her thin white dress. As their bodies rock to the motion of the cart and the irregular surface of the road, the wind blows "through Tess' white muslin to her very skin."¹⁶ The subtle sensation of Tess' dress and its contact with her bare skin would have been provocative in the context of the strict Victorian sensibility towards the naked body, much more so the full, bouncing body of a child-woman.

Towards the end of *Phase the First: The Maiden*, the impression of summery lightness and warmth takes a slight, mysterious plunge into the coolness of autumn; "Twas very warm when I started, and I didn't know...that it would be night,"¹⁷ Tess replies when Alec asks her why she only has "that puffy muslin dress on."¹⁸ Hardy creates a deepening sense of mystery and blackness as Alec and Tess lose their bearings whilst riding through *The Chase*. Genuinely lost in "the fog, which so disguises everything,"¹⁹ Hardy brings us right into a world of secrets in which all light is absorbed, and all sound muted. The only sounds are the jostling of branches as Alec moves about and the low rustling sounds of dead leaves upon which Tess lies sound asleep; "She could hear the rustling of the branches as he ascended the adjoining slope, till his movements were no louder than the hopping of a bird."²⁰ Similarly for Alec, he could only catch a glimpse of Tess' white muslin figure, still and unmoving like a corpse. The deep silence, stillness, and blackness, broken only by the subtle sounds of her regular breathing, evoke the tragic and pivotal point in Tess' life at which the fragility of her innocence, as suggested by her flimsy and virginal white dress – like her "beautiful feminine tissue...practically blank as snow as yet"²¹ – is torn apart at coarse hands.

Phase the Second: The Maiden No More – The Dress of Rhythm and Stealth

As described by the title of this phase, Tess is now a changed woman. She has returned to her home in Marlott in October, after an unfortunate four-month sojourn at Trantridge. In this phase of her life, Tess is a darker, more complex creature, often hiding and moving stealthily – a stark contrast to the soft, virginal child-woman in a white dress from the past summer. The impression of Tess is of a creature in hiding, and the sounds are muted and low: "Why did you slip away by

stealth like this?"²² said Alec, as he catches up with her after she secretly leaves the farm, toiling on foot with a great burden of a basket on her arm. In August the following year we discover that Tess is now a disenchanted mother of a sickly child, conceived with Alec. Distressed by the whisperings about her in church, she avoids being seen in public by hiding behind her clothes, staying in during the day and leaving the house only when the sun sets. Her nondescript clothes take on the identity of a social and emotional shield, concealing her from the scrutiny of prying eyes and ears. After a period of seclusion, Tess gains enough confidence to reappear during the busy harvest season. Working in the fields, she wears a drawn cotton bonnet with great flapping curtains, pulled down so far as to hide her face, and buff leather gauntlets to protect her hands from the stubble. Like Tess, the other girls wear tight-sleeved gowns and petticoats, while the older women wear brown-rough "wroppers" or overalls.²³ She also wears a pink cotton jacket which stands her apart from the other women, and a bonnet pulled very low over her head, which could illustrate both meekness²⁴ as well as humiliation, the latter using the bonnet as a means for disguise. Tess covers her face, either with a low bonnet or a veil, to hide from the public, which is the constant source of her distress. While Hardy does not describe in detail Tess' dress, he conveys the sensations of her clothes through a description of the daily sequence of her movements whilst working in the fields in a petticoated gown:

From the sheaf last finished she draws a handful of ears, patting their tips with her left palm to bring them even. Then stooping low she moves forward, gathering the corn with both hands against her knees, and pushing her left gloved hand under the bundle to meet the right on the other side...she brings the ends of the bond together, and kneels on the sheaf while she ties it, beating back her skirts now and then when lifted by the breeze...at intervals she stands up to rest, and to retie her disarranged apron, or to pull her bonnet straight.²⁵

There is a natural rhythm to the clock-like monotony of the Tess and the other field-women binding corn in the fields, as if they are performing a dance.²⁶ Like an integral portion of the fields, their skirts would have swished and rustled harshly, dragging on the stubble in a motion that is both rhythmic (nature) and mechanical (machines). The state of connectedness with nature and the immediate environment, and the embodied experience of Tess' being, are echoed in a passage in a later chapter in which Tess is described as sensing the "rustle of the straw"²⁷ as having the "weight of bodily touches."²⁸ The monotony of field work is broken only by

a break at the hour of eleven, during which Tess nurses her baby; this she does with a maternal pride tinged with slight distress, as “with a curiously stealthy yet courageous movement, Tess unfastens her frock and begins suckling her child.”²⁹ This act of stealth using her frock is a significant moment as Hardy uses the quality of silence to evoke the inexpressible and the taboo. The atmosphere of stealth occurs at several points throughout the story, particularly during Tess’ darker phases. This sense of muteness extends to Tess’ movements as well as her environment and the rhythm of the seasons; during Tess’ depressive periods, entire spring and summer seasons pass without any acknowledgement. It is as if Tess moves stealthily through these joyless periods like a ghost living in the shadows of life.

Phase the Third: The Rally – The Frothy Dress

In this phase of her life Tess regains her vitality for life as she leaves home again after “two silent reconstructive years.”³⁰ The notion of silence here is healing and reenergizing, like a dark winter before springtime. Hence on a “thyme-scented, bird-singing morning in May,” she departs for *Talbothays* dairy to be a dairymaid, sensing a change in the air “from heavy to light...clear, bracing, and ethereal,” and hearing a “pleasant voice in every breeze, and in every bird’s note seemed to lurk a joy.”³¹ This multi-sensorial impression of a higher spectrum foregrounds a new period of bountiful love (albeit ethereal) during which she encounters the love of her life, Angel Clare. In contrast to the heavy field-dress, leather gauntlet, and low bonnet she wore during the lower, darker spectrum of the previous harvest, Tess is described in this phase as wearing a light summer gown in her first intimate encounter with Angel. Lured by the sound of Angel’s harp, she finds herself moving stealthily as a cat towards it, the hem of her skirts trailing through the damp garden with its “juicy grass [and] profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts.”³² This impression of growth, staining, and moistness has an undertone of lust and exchange of bodily fluids, particularly when Hardy describes her “cracking snails underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slugslime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights.”³³ Moving at one with the sensation of the landscape and the harmony of Angel’s harp which passes like “breezes through her,”³⁴ Hardy creates a sensually-dynamic impression of Tess’ cautious yet awkward movements in her whispery gown with its layers of skirts and petticoats rustling against the stickiness of untamed foliage. There is a possibility here that Tess is wearing the same white, muslin frock – her only good dress – which she wears during the momentous events of her life, and which would have gathered the marks and stains of each occasion.

Tess' next occasion is her trip to the church with the other three milkmaids, all dressed in light summer attire. The four young girls, in a spectrum of "pink, white, and buff gowns [with] white stockings and thin shoes,"³⁵ create an impression of a soft and quivery group of birds. The connection between Tess and the liveliness of her immediate landscape through her clothing is mirrored in this scene when her "gauzy" skirts brush up from the grass "innumerable flies and butterflies which, unable to escape, remain caged in the transparent tissue in an aviary;" here we get a sense of Hardy's use of metaphor to suggest the girls as being trapped like rustling "pigeons"³⁶ in their elaborate, prohibitive layers of dress, which, on another level, also hints at Hardy's sentiments about the working class confined within their social parameters within strict Victorian class sensibilities.

On the way to church, the girls are met with a flooded lane which they hesitate to cross, impeded by the mass and fragility of their light gowns and shoes, which they do not want to soil. Coincidentally Angel comes to help, offering to carry the girls across individually in his arms. When it is Tess' turn, there is an intimate, sensual exchange as he tells her, "You are like an undulating billow warmed by the sun, and all this fluff of muslin about you is the froth."³⁷ Tess, in this instance, could be wearing the same "puffy muslin dress,"³⁸ which Hardy uses to symbolize sexual vulnerability. The sensation of froth, in this context, is suggestive of sensual bodily sounds and secretions. This sexual provocation is not the first between Tess and Angel, as in a previous scene Hardy describes the hem of Tess' "petticoat just touching his gaiter"³⁹ in a suggestive manner.⁴⁰

Phase the Fourth: The Consequence – The Unnatural Dress

This phase of Tess' life is racked with the contradiction between the bliss of her marriage to Angel and the haunting guilt of her past life which she is doomed to revisit. In this phase Tess puts on a variety of new (lady's) clothes and accessories, all gifts from Angel. Being a peasant girl this is the first time Tess wears silk garments and jewels. However, this change of dress evokes a sense of unnaturalness and impending doom: when she is putting on a new silk "perfect morning costume"⁴¹ which she intends to wear on her wedding day, there grows a sense of unease about her, which is in stark contrast to the sheer freedom with which she wears her plain white muslin frock. As she ponders the effect of her silk attire upon her body, her underlying sense of discomfort comes to a head as she is reminded of her mother's ballad of the mystic robe: "that never would become that wife – that had once done amiss..."⁴² The words are from a children's ballad called *The Boy and the Mantle* which is about a magic mantle that

changes to a horrid colour when worn by the impure and unfaithful. The ballad thus adds a sense of doom to Tess' discomfort as she wears the silk dress. In the evening of their wedding Angel presents Tess with his godmother's necklace, with pendant, bracelets, and earrings. While Tess is a "fine bird" when "clothed as a woman of fashion,"⁴³ she is fundamentally a creature of nature and is more suited to cotton and muslin; "I think I love you best in the wing-bonnet and cotton-frock – yes, better than in this,"⁴⁴ Angel tells her. When Tess puts on the fineries, she is no longer the simple and rustic girl of the land and the seasons, she becomes another. While she still has the precious necklace around her neck, she tells him about her "impure" past with Alec and the bastard child, Angel calls her an "impostor,"⁴⁵ and that the woman he has loved is not her but another woman in her shape: "You were one person; now you are another."⁴⁶

This sense of being an imposter is echoed in a scene at a later phase in her life, when she dresses up to visit Angel's parents in the distant Emminster Vicarage. Dressed as a "simple country girl with no pretensions to recent fashion,"⁴⁷ she puts on "a soft gray woolen gown, with white crape quilling against the pink skin of her face and neck, a black velvet jacket and hat"⁴⁸ that Angel had bought for her. She also wears a woolen veil, keeping it down like a screen, as if in disguise. Tess ventures on a fifteen-mile walk in her old, work boots for comfort. Right before she reaches the outskirts of the Vicarage, she changes her thick boots to a pair of "thin pretty ones of patent leather,"⁴⁹ hiding the former in the hedge so she can retrieve them later on her return journey. Coincidentally, Angel's brothers and Mercy Chant – the prudish lady whom Angel was previously bound to marry – find the boots, exclaiming that either "some tramp" or "some impostor" must have hidden the boots, so as to go into town barefoot to "excite [the] sympathies' of the upper classes."⁵⁰ From this it is apparent that the division of the working class from the middle and upper echelons of society is most insidious through economic differences in dress and appearance, that an uneducated country girl who dons the dress of a gentlewoman should be called an impostor. Even though Tess' attempt at dressing up in a suitably plain lady's outfit is harmless, she wears her veil down to appear anonymous, and hides her old, work boots to disguise the fact that she can only afford to journey on foot, indicating a sense of bodily unease when she ventures slightly across the economic and social divide.

Phase the Fifth: The Work Dress

In this phase of her life Tess' life takes a second dive into the darker spectrum of loneliness and seclusion from light. After her confession to Angel, Angel decides to separate from her and

leaves England. An entire summer passes without recognition, and in October, more than eight months after the separation Tess is again a changed woman, instead of a “bride with boxes and trunks which others bore, we see her a lonely woman with a basket and a bundle in her own portorage,”⁵¹ reminiscent of the scene when she stealthily leaves *Trantridge* to escape Alec, with a great basket on her arm. Toiling on foot, we get an impression of the weight of her heavy clothing, compounded by her basket, which is both an impression and an extension of her heavy emotional burden. She is no longer wearing the pretty dresses from her marriage, instead she is “compelled to don the wrapper of a field-woman.”⁵² On her way to *Flintcomb-Ash* – “a starve-acre place”⁵³ – to be a farmhand, she wears one of her oldest field-gowns which she has not worn since her phase as a solemn unwed mother to disguise herself from the public. She ties a handkerchief around her face under her bonnet, “covering her chin and half her cheeks and temples, as if she were suffering from toothache. Then with her little scissors...she mercilessly snip[s] her eyebrows off...”⁵⁴ Grieving over her ethereal happiness with Angel, Tess’ defiles herself to conceal her good looks and to protect herself from being coveted by any other man other than him.

Thus Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the landscape; a fieldwoman pure and simple, in winter guise; a gray serge cape, a red woollen cravat, a stuff skirt covered by a whitey-brown rough wrapper, and buff-leather gloves. Every thread of that old attire has become faded and thin under the stroke of raindrops, the burn of sunbeams, and the stress of winds.⁵⁵

Tess’ clothing reflects Hardy’s impression of Tess as an integral creature of nature, her tattered clothing bearing the mark of the three natural elements of wind, air and water. In this phase of her life, her clothes have a sense of dread and weariness, albeit utilitarian and protective for the kind of harsh, mechanical field work at *Flintcomb-Ash* – the coarsest conditions yet for Tess. While the self-defilement provides a sense of bodily ease for Tess, her heavy and bulky clothes add to the burden of the laborious work. Like the other field-women, Tess wears “Hessian ‘wroppers’ – sleeved brown pinafores...tied behind to the bottom to keep [her] gown from blowing about.” Every now and again her “scant skirt” reveals her boots that reach up high around her ankles.⁵⁶ Like her previous experience as a field worker, Tess toils hour after hour like a machine in the fields. In the cold and wet season Tess would have worn a few layers of petticoats under her gown, upon which is layered a coarse hempen pinafore, to compensate for the scant overskirt. Fully clothed from head to toe, she also wears a “curtained hood” to cover

her head, and “yellow sheepskin gloves with gauntlets.”⁵⁷ While the layers of dress shielded her from the harsh environment, the weight and bulk of her clothes would have made her movements heavy, like a cumbersome beast of nature trudging through the fields. A stark contrast to her light-footed dancing in a light muslin dress during the summer May Dance, the oppressiveness of her clothing and the tyrannical environment at *Flintcomb-ash* metaphorically suggests the tragic burden of Tess’ darkest phase.

This sense of heaviness, both mentally and physically, is further suggested in a moving account of Tess and the other field women having to work through the pelting rain, with the water creeping up “first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides,”⁵⁸ through their gowns, layers of petticoats, sleeves, hoods, and gloves. Their clothes would have stuck to their bodies like an attack of the violent environment upon helpless creatures. The rain “race[s] along horizontally upon the yelling wind [and] sticks into them like glass splinters,”⁵⁹ adding to the tyrannical weight of their clothes, all of which takes a certain “stoicism,” and even of “valour,”⁶⁰ to bear. In the harsh conditions of the wet season they would not have been able to dry their clothes, hence having to put the wet clothes on again the next morning for the same mechanical work.⁶¹ Again, this enduring sense of discomfort and fatigue is echoed in a passage further down the chapter as the workers are back in the fields with their wrappers “[clinging] about them to wearisomeness [and the] damp curtains of their bonnet flap[ping] into their faces.”⁶² The state of the clothing suggests the cumulative effect of the weather and environment upon Tess and her fellow field workers, creating an overall impression of an inextricable link between dress and the immediate environment, which is, on a metaphorical level, an impression of the tumultuous state of their lives. The heavy and sullen sky is referred to as “the uniform cloak of darkness...turn[ing] into a disordered medley of grays,”⁶³ suggesting the synaesthetic quality of the environment. The connection between Tess, her dress, and the environment is movingly captured by Hardy in the following passage:

[The women] wrapped themselves up in their thickest pinnars, tied their woollen cravats round their necks and across their chests, and started for the barn... They trudged onwards with slanted bodies through the flossy fields, keeping as well as they could in the shelter of hedges, which, however, acted as strainers rather than screens. The air, afflicted to pallor with the hoary multitudes that infested it, twisted and spun them eccentrically, suggesting an achromatic chaos of things.⁶⁴

In the face of chaos, there is a sense of the women's strength and stoicism as they wrap and secure their clothes tightly around their bodies, protecting themselves from the harsh elements through the physical defense afforded by their clothing. As their clothing twists and spins violently in the wind, moving with and to the rhythm of the wind, we get a further impression of their entire beings enraptured by their tumultuous state of being in that particular time and place.

Phase the Sixth: The Dress and the Machine

Apart from the wild winds and rains at *Flintcomb-Ash*, Tess' life during this period is compounded by the introduction of the imposing threshing machine to the fields, a beast of a machine that separates grains from stalks and husks. The threshing machine buzzes, spins, and hums from day to night, spitting out bits of straw and husk which get caught in Tess' dress, over which she wears a tight pinafore. She periodically stops only to wipe her perspiring face, which is coated with corn-dust, as is "her white bonnet,"⁶⁵ which gradually becomes brown from the dust. The "penetrating hum" of the threshing machine "thrills to the very marrow"⁶⁶ those who stand near it, and Tess, the field-woman who has to continually feed it, cannot stop working, because the machine does not stop. Like a mechanical extension of the machine, her whole body trembles to the incessant quivering of the machine, her knees "trembling so wretchedly with the shaking of the machine that she [can] scarcely walk."⁶⁷ Hardy's impression of this uncontrollable machine invading the labour of the agricultural world is metaphorically captured in the way the trembling machine penetrates through Tess' dress to "[her] muscles and nerves."⁶⁸ Unlike the previous scene where the wind occasionally lifts her skirt or gently blows her thin muslin dress to her skin, this ceaseless shaking of her body, through layers of dress, is unnatural and invasive, and it cannot be stopped unless the machine is turned off. This sense of her person being invaded is further hinted at in the following scene when a rat scurries up the skirt of one of the field-women, Marian. In an attempt to help Marian dislodge the rat, the other women, in order to avoid the same invasion, devise various schemes of skirt-tucking and self-elevation.⁶⁹ This physical invasion of Marian's private space underneath her skirt is a powerful metaphor for Hardy's angst towards the introduction of clumsy agricultural machines into the natural world, a disturbance that further instills its physical resonance in the trembling of the bodies and dress of the field-women forced to be in the proximity of the machines.

Phase the Seventh: Fulfillment – The Final Dress

In the last phase of Tess' life, she returns to the cruel persuasion and temptation of Alec, who reappears in her life when she is at her lowest, most desperate point. She becomes his mistress

and transforms into a lady of wealth and gentility, holidaying with him at a fashionable resort town. When Angel returns to find her, he is stunned at her appearance, as Tess is no longer the rustic creature garbed in muslin and cotton, and heavy work boots, but a fragile, domestic pet swathed in delicate gowns. Her indoor ensemble consists of an embroidered “loose cashmere dressing-gown...with her neck...rising out of a frill of down [and] matching slippers;⁷⁰ she is dressed for lolling around with minimal physical work. When she leaves the house she is fully dressed in a “rustling”⁷¹ walking costume and other “dainty habits”⁷² – silk stockings, an ivory parasol, and a feathered hat and veil. However, even with the fine clothing upon her body, she feels like a “victim, a caged bird.”⁷³ Taken away from her natural environment, the swishy clothing is a superficial façade that exacerbates her environmental misplacement. Even though Hardy does not describe her outfits in detail, the impression of what Tess wears in this fashionable phase of her life is of a fundamentally different nature to her previous utilitarian, peasant wardrobe of coarse field gowns and the white muslin dress.

Impassioned by her realization that Alec had lied to her about Angel’s disappearance, Tess murders Alec and rejoins Angel. Now a fugitive, Tess escapes with Angel, and the reunited pair plunges towards the depth of the woods in ethereal bliss like two wild, liberated creatures. Tess is still wearing the fashionable walking outfit which marks her as an alarming signal amongst the plainness of country folk, hence the couple moves with stealth and “great quietness”⁷⁴ to disguise their movements, the soft shuffling of their feet and clothing blending into the rustling of leaves and bushes. The “rough and chill grass” dampens Tess’ skirt and shoes,⁷⁵ and would have soaked through to her feet and ankles. In the dark, and lured by the tune of the wind which Hardy describes as “the note of some gigantic one-stringed harp”⁷⁶ – recalling a few summers ago when Tess is lured by Angel’s playing of the harp at *Talbothays* – they stumble upon *Stonehenge*, a mystical place of sun worship and sacrifice in pagan folklore. As a “heathen”⁷⁷ herself, Tess, at last, feels at home; this is the stage of Tess’ ultimate fulfillment. As she lies on a slab of stone, like a sacrifice on an altar, she is enraptured in a state of inward bliss and fulfillment that defies outer guise. Angel covers her body with his overcoat, like a lover to a corpse. The season is an “English May,”⁷⁸ which harks back to the opening scene of the virginal Tess dancing in the May Day dance – when her skirt bore similar stains of moist grass – signaling her return to nature and innocence.

Conclusion

Hardy's poetic impressions of the landscape and seasons trigger an awareness of the bodily sensation of Tess' peasant wardrobe, which primarily consists of field-gowns and her "Sunday best" – the white, muslin frock which most aptly defines her intrinsic state of being, that of a girlish simplicity. Hardy does not provide any detail of the dress, apart from referring it to "thin," and "airy," suggesting vulnerability and ethereality. This negation of detail has the effect of creating an impression of Tess, when clothed in this long, white frock, as an undefined, white apparition – an ethereal virgin carelessly floating about on the greens in a sun-lit summer. Here we get a sensation of the lightness of the dress, and the ease with which her body moves in it. As the wind blows through the dress to her very skin, the sensation is one of nudity and vulnerability. Indeed, the thought of wearing a loose, thin gown would have triggered the alarm of strict Victorian conservatism regarding the female body. In contrast, her winter field gowns are heavy and mournful, and as she toils in the fields from dusk till dawn, fully covered from head to toe, we get a sense of the weight and bulk of her clothes upon her being, in both bodily and spiritual sense. Tess also walks everywhere with a basket on her arm, her heavy skirt adding to the bodily burden. When she is working next to the buzzing thresher, her whole body shakes to the ceaseless humming of the monstrous machine, and this is a harrowing account of the pervasive working class angst against the age of machine and modernity in the late nineteenth-century. The sensation of peasant dress, of which is built for hard-wearing and utilitarian purposes, is thus inherently tied to the nature of peasant's work and daily activities, which is, in turn, implicated by the immediate landscape, such as the nature of the soil, grass, wind, and rain.

The bodily experience of Tess' clothing is either an impression or an extension of her emotional states, which Hardy infuses with her immediate landscape⁷⁹ and the cycle of the seasons to curate a universal symphony of indivisible parts. The sequence of Tess' seven states of being is inherent in the changes in her wardrobe – from her vulnerable maiden phase in which she wears a thin, muslin gown that exposes her sensual form, to her depressive periods in which she wears heavy-duty and protective clothing to disguise herself. In her later phases she dons the fineries of a gentlewoman, albeit with her veil down. The elegant lady's costume has an unnatural effect on her modest, peasant sensibilities, as she is twice referred to as an impostor. The intimate relationship of her body to dress is evident in the way her clothing plays an essential role in communicating ideas of emotional affect, bodily sensation and movement. Hardy weaves complex multi-sensorial impressions that may begin to suggest a particular

experience of bodily sensation and an embodied awareness of nineteenth-century peasant dress and its relationship to the body, the essence of which is inextricably linked to the immediate experience of the particular time and place.

Endnotes

¹ Hardy, T, 1998, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, edited with notes by Dolin, T, Penguin Classics, London. The novel was first published in 1891, and is a fictional story of an innocent girl of rustic beauty and purity whose life is governed by her tragic fate. It was considered morally provocative, at the time of its release, due to Hardy's suggestions of sexual harassment and adultery. As Tess moves through the seven phases of her life, she is portrayed as an inseparable element of her landscape, and creates an impression of the changes in her life and character through the changes in the season and landscape.

² Clabburn, P 1971, *Working Class Costume from Sketches of Characters by William Johnstone White* 1(1818), Costume Society c/o Department of Textiles, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, p.1

³ Ginsburg, M 1981, *Victorian Dress in Photographs*, B.T. Batsford, London, p.20

⁴ Schafer, R M 1977, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, Vermont, pp.8-9. Schafer further illustrates his notion of an "earwitness" by attributing it to novelists such as Tolstoy, Thomas Hardy, and Thomas Mann – indeed, calling it their special talent, and that their novelistic descriptions "constitute the best guide available" when it comes to reconstructing historical perspectives. Even though Schafer is referring specifically to historical soundscapes, it is more than practical and reasonable to extend this "earwitness" talent to the other senses of touch, smell, taste, and sight – perhaps the term "sensewitness" may be more apt in the context of this paper.

⁵ Hardy, p.124

⁶ Ibid., p.15

⁷ Ibid., p.18

⁸ Ibid., p.20. For reference to her "thin white gown," see p.18.

⁹ Ibid., p.20

¹⁰ Ibid., p.18

¹¹ Ibid., p.37

¹² Crow, D 1971, *The Victorian Woman*, George Allen & Unwin, London, pp.120-121. Crow referred to Dr Edward John Tilt's *Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene* (1852) in his historical and socio-cultural analysis of Victorian dress, which briefly described the social etiquette of skirt-lifting in connection to hygiene.

¹³ Hardy, p.143. The impression of flies and butterflies trapped in the girls' skirts is an allusion to the repressive quality of their clothing, as Hardy hints at the girls (whom he refers to as "pigeons") as being "caged...in an aviary."

¹⁴ Ibid., p.286. Hardy suggests the cumbersomeness of the big skirts, especially during the rainy season, as the field women had to undertake labourious work in the fields irrespective of the weather with their heavy garb “[clinging] about them to wearisomeness.”

¹⁵ Ibid., p.49. Hardy suggests that Tess’ white, muslin frock is her “Sunday best” when she dresses up in it in preparation for a special trip to church (see p.142).

¹⁶ Ibid., p.54

¹⁷ Ibid., p.72

¹⁸ Ibid., p.72

¹⁹ Ibid., p.71

²⁰ Ibid., p.73

²¹ Ibid., p.74

²² Ibid., p.76

²³ Ibid., p.88

²⁴ Crow, *The Victorian Woman*, p.120

²⁵ Hardy, p.88

²⁶ Ibid., p.89

²⁷ Ibid., p.293, p.332

²⁸ Ibid., p.293

²⁹ Ibid., p.90

³⁰ Ibid., p.101

³¹ Ibid., p.103

³² Ibid., p.122

³³ Ibid., p.122

³⁴ Ibid., p.123

³⁵ Ibid., p.142

³⁶ Ibid., p.143

³⁷ Ibid., p.145

³⁸ Ibid., p.72

³⁹ Ibid., p.140

⁴⁰ This intimate bodily contact through clothing, while quite unspectacular from the twenty-first century perspective, would have been provocative in the Victorian era. The sensation of another's clothing suggests the presence of a proximate (nude) body, and in the context of Victorian sensibilities where any thoughts regarding the body bordered on the transgression of sexual mores, the brushing of Tess' petticoats against Angel's leg would have provoked the sensation of sexual stimulation. See Willett, C, Cunningham P 1981, *The History of Underclothes*, Faber and Faber, London, p.92.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.206

⁴² Ibid., p.206

⁴³ Ibid., p.220

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.221

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.229

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.229

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.296

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.296

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.298

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.300

⁵¹ Ibid., p.272

⁵² Ibid., p.276

⁵³ Ibid., p.284

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.280

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.280

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.285

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.285

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.286

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.286

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.286

⁶¹ Crow, *The Victorian Woman*, pp.90-91

⁶² Hardy, p.286

⁶³ Ibid., p.289

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.289

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.333

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.326

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.328

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.325

⁶⁹ Ibid., p.335

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.378

⁷¹ Ibid., p.381

⁷² Ibid., p.391

⁷³ Ibid., p.381

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.388

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.393

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.392

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.393

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.387

⁷⁹ Tess is often referred to as a portion of the landscape – see Hardy, p.280.