

## **??Beauty [?] lay not within the thing but in what the thing symbolised??: Female Clothing and the Senses in the Works of Thomas Hardy**

By [Charlotte Barrett](#) [1]

This essay examines how female clothing plays a vital part in Hardy's conceptualisation of the female body. It uses examples from several of Hardy's novels and poems to demonstrate that across Hardy's work, the female body is regularly described and situated within the narrative through the boundaries and margins of her attire, which provided a means of categorising and connecting women.

[2]1890 Illustration for Womens' CorsetsPrinted in Century Magazine, no.7[Public Domain}, via Wikimedia CommonsClothing acts as an instrument of connection, creating a margin that enables the figure to be both defined and then unified with their environment. Clothes are an extension of the body's surface, and create a barrier between the corporeal frame and its surroundings, thereby altering the margins and boundaries of the human figure. Attire provides a constant reminder of the boundaries and margins of the body: it frames the body and protects it, thereby functioning as a kind of wrapper. Hardy appears fascinated with female dress and the boundary established between the material, visible fabric, and the hidden flesh of the body.

### Female Clothing in Hardy's Novels and Poetry

In *The Return of the Native*, Eustacia Vye is located within the landscape via her clothing. Her dress is not only a means of identification, but also a detail which enables the narrator to visually position Eustacia within the narrative. Clym 'discerned above the ferns a drawn-bonnet of white silk', a perception which enables him to identify 'the head of that he loved' without having seen Eustacia's face. The narrator correlates attire with identity, the hat acting as the visual precursor to the emergence of her body from the landscape: 'her whole form unfolded from the brake'.

The assimilation of Hardy's female protagonists with their surrounding landscape is paralleled by the configuration of female clothing with the female body. For example, in *Return*, Eustacia's clothing becomes an instrument of connection, rendering her a natural object, cloud-like and lacking boundaries of her own:

'The rebellious sadness that was rather too apparent when she sat indoors without a bonnet was cloaked and softened by her outdoor attire, which always had a sort of nebulousness about it, devoid of harsh edges anywhere; so that her face looked from its environment as from a cloud, with no noticeable lines of demarcation between flesh and clothes.'

The narrator situates Eustacia's clothing as part of her body, reading both as the landscape of the female

form. In this instance, clothing creates improvement, acting as a means of camouflaging the perpetual distress visible on Eustacia's countenance, and thereby reinforcing the notion of clothing as a boundary, enclosing the female figure. Hardy highlights the potential amorphous nature of female clothing in the above description; the nebulousness reinforces the otherness of women's attire and alludes to the psychological limitation encountered when attempting to understand and know the minds and thoughts of others, which is symbolised by the camouflage clothing provides.

The significance of women's attire in aiding Hardy's conceptualisation of the female body is further exemplified in his poem 'The Sunshade'. The poem describes a rusty old parasol nestled in the cliff face. Through this observation, the speaker is able to conjure the figure of the woman who once owned it. The sunshade is described using anthropomorphic language. In its state of disrepair, it is depicted as 'a skeleton', and has 'nothing but rusty bones as it lies/ In its coffin of stone, unseen till to-day'(lines 9-10). These lines reinforce observation as a means of obtaining knowledge about the female. The speaker uses the sunshade as metonym as it is the means by which the female figure is represented in the poem. As the speaker speculates: 'Is the fair woman who carried that sunshade/ A skeleton just as her property is' (16-17). In this questioning, the speaker correlates the female to her apparel, and through this equivalence, assumes that the lady was fair because she owned such an item. He also, disturbingly, strips her of all her flesh, an act which implies that for Hardy, clothing is part of the essential, corporeal construction of the female body.

[3]'Ballet Dancers in the Wings' Painting by Edgar Degas[Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons  
Dress is the means by which the female body may be grouped and observed as an organic whole, categorised as women without the need to acknowledge individual traits beyond the observation of attire. The association between clothing and the biological form of women is apparent throughout Hardy's text, but a striking example appears to manifest itself in the poem 'The Ballet'. The speaker observes the dancers blending into one: 'They crush together ? a rustling heap of flesh'(line 1). Whilst the speaker acknowledges that although they appear all alike at first glance, dressed in 'Tinsel livery'(line 7), 'a world of her own has each one underneath'(11), it is the first glance - the act of observation itself - that uses clothing as the means of categorising the female body into an organic whole.

In *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy demonstrates a fascination with clothing and uses it as a means of configuring the female body. Describing the first close encounter between Cythera and Manston as they shelter from the rain, the narrator explains the differing awareness between the two in regards to their clothing:

'Their dresses touched, and remained in contact. His clothes are something exterior to every man; but to a woman her dress is part of her body. Its motions are all present to her intelligence if not to her eyes; no man knows how his coat-tails swing. By the slightest hyperbole it may be said that her dress has sensation. Crease but the very Ultimate Thule of fringe or flounce, and it hurts her as much as pinching her.'

Female attire is once again assimilated with the female body, forming part of the female frontier. Hardy situates clothing as an extension of the women's corporeal frame. Clothing performs the same function as skin, acting as both a cover and an organ covered in nerves, as suggested by women's supposed ability to feel sensation in the outer limits of herself.

### Disguised Behind Dress

However, for Hardy, whilst clothes are part of the physical framework of the female body, as exemplified in the preceding description of Cythera, clothing does not act as a signifier for the character of the individual. Clothing is used as a means of navigating the female frontier ?the physical demarcation created by attire ?and this boundary represents the limit of the observer's knowledge, as attire is the covering layer which disguises the unseen, female body beneath.

In *The Woodlanders*, the narrator describes the fallacious nature of clothing, creating a vision which is determined by fashion rather than the individual woman: 'there can be hardly anything less connected with a women's personality than drapery which she has neither designed, manufactured, cut, sewed, nor even seen, except by a glance of approval'. Seizing upon the deceptive, camouflaging nature of dress, Grace Melbury is first introduced to the reader as being entirely removed from the demarcations and outlines created by her sophisticated town clothes:

'what people therefore saw of her in a cursory view was very little; in truth, mainly something that was not she. The woman herself was a conjectural creature who has little to do with the outlines presented to Sherton eyes'.

The deceptive nature of clothing and its use in directing the male gaze is clearly revealed in Hardy's descriptions of women undressed. For Hardy, the removal of clothes from the female form appears to desexualise the body, rendering the woman as infantile and unrecognisable. This sexless undressing implies that the observation of the female body is removed from voyeurism, and instead is contemplated with curiosity. [4] Illustration Depicting Typical middle-class Victorian Womens'Dress[Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

A striking example showing the desexualised removal of clothes occurs in Hardy's early novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. For Elfride, the removal of her clothes is absolutely necessary; it is the means by which she can save Knight's life, ripping up her undergarments and tying them into a basic rope. When Knight has hauled himself up from the cliff, he is startled by the transformation undressing has wrought upon Elfride's figure: 'He reluctantly relinquished her, and then surveyed her from crown to toe. She seemed as small as an infant. He perceived from whence she had obtained the rope'. Knight 'surveys' the diminished boundaries of Elfride's frame, his gaze commanding the narrative and relaying the information back to the reader. Elfride is effectively naked, clad only in her 'diaphanous exterior robe', an ineffective boundary against wet weather, and therefore sodden through and clinging to her body. Using clothing - or lack of it - Hardy has attracted Knight's gaze, but he does not render the undressed woman as tantalising or attractive. Instead, she is child-like, lacking the womanly curves created by her large garments. It is Elfride's sense of embarrassment as the observed subject that brings the sexual element into the scene; aware of her exposure, she rushes home alone to redress.

### Sound as Signifier

For Hardy, clothing represents more than the visual means of describing the female figure; the sound of dress is also employed to aid the conceptualisation of the female body. In *Return*, the narrator describes Susan Nunsuch as being constructed by clothes, but it is the sound of her attire that is relayed to the reader and forms part of her identity:

'she was a woman nosily constructed: in addition to her enclosing framework of whalebone and lath, she wore pattens summer and winter [?] when Fairway began to jump about with her, the clicking of pattens, the creaking of stays, and her screams of surprise, formed a very audible concert'.

The relationship between the sound of womens' clothing and the locating of the female body within the text is revealed in Hardy's poem 'On a Heath', in which the speaker describes hearing the sound of the dress before seeing the woman:

I could hear a gown-skirt rustling

Before I could see her shape  
Rustling through the heather  
That wore the common drape(1-4)

Sound is situated as signifier and correlated to specific attire. It becomes a means of identifying the type of clothing and thus the sex of the approaching individual, as the speaker specifically claims to hear a gown-skirt rustling. In repeating the onomatopoeic verb 'rustling', the speaker configures sound with vision and creates a reciprocal relationship between the two: the then visible shape described in the same way, using a verb which would normally qualify sound rather than sight. Hardy again associates and assimilates the female figure with the landscape, the ambiguous final line quoted above serving to describe the landscape of the heath and the attire of the individual, a connection through clothing which is stressed again in the use of the rhyming 'shape' and 'drape'.

The depiction of the two sensory elements of sight and sound in Hardy's visualisation of the female form seems to accentuate the sense of touch, which is rendered more pronounced due to its absence. Sensory mapping appears to be involved in interplay; clothing is the point of connection at which sight and sound exchange prominence, but always emphasise the absence of touch. This is understood in the idea that clothing hides the body of the female, the flesh of which cannot be seen or felt.

---

**Source URL (modified on 03/05/2020 - 09:49):**

<http://writersinspire.org/content/%E2%80%98%E2%80%98beauty-%E2%80%A6lay-not-within-thing-what-thing-symbolised%E2%80%99%E2%80%99female-clothing-senses-works-thomas>

**Links**

[1] <http://writersinspire.org/people/charlotte-barrett>

[2] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ACenturyMagazine7\\_1890c\\_.gif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ACenturyMagazine7_1890c_.gif)

[3] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AEdgar\\_Degas\\_-\\_Ballet\\_Dancers\\_in\\_the\\_Wings.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AEdgar_Degas_-_Ballet_Dancers_in_the_Wings.jpg)

[4] [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AVictorian\\_Woman.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AVictorian_Woman.jpeg)