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PORTRAYAL OF A PURE WOMAN IN HARDY'S TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

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Abstract

The current study seeks to examine how a pure woman is portrayed in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. It also briefly discusses Hardy's writing quality, contributions, reputation, and other related topics. In the novel, Hardy portrays Angel's obsession with purity as a key factor shaping Tess's fate. One could argue that without this obsession, the tragedy—especially that of a "pure" woman—might not have occurred. The clash between Angel's idealized image of women and the reality of Tess becomes a pivotal moment in the story. Despite a certain flatness, Angel's character is convincing enough to make his attitude appear natural, both to him and within the novel's psychological setting.

Keywords: reputation, obsession, pure, fate

1. Introduction

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is widely regarded as one of Thomas Hardy's finest novels, perhaps even his best. The novel showcases Hardy's beautifully simple style, which emerges most clearly when he is absorbed in his writing. His vivid descriptions, the idyllic yet realistic characters, such as his apple-sweet women and old men as rich in character as ancient oaks, and the overall sympathetic atmosphere are all present in abundance in *Tess*. These elements, along with Hardy's other best qualities, are most commonly and fully expressed in this novel.

Beyond being Hardy's richest novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* also represents the culmination of a long tradition of Victorian literature that explores, enacts, and critiques the alienation characteristic of modernity. While Victorian novels often undermine readers' expectations, Hardy takes irony and surprise further than his favorite author, the subversive William Makepeace Thackeray. Key aspects of Victorian aesthetics and artistic practice, such as doubleness, multiplicity, and irony, are evident in Hardy's work, which operates at the limits of conservative Victorian norms.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, it is not so much Tess herself who is split into two characters, but rather the attitudes towards her. Angel's struggle to reconcile his image of Tess as an innocent milkmaid with the reality of her past is

one example. His statement to Tess, "You were one person; now you are another," reflects his difficulty in accepting that he might love her despite her past. This double standard, where Angel judges Tess but not himself, is a curious and typical example of the kind of doubling found in the portrayal of women in much of fiction. The sleepwalking scene at Wellbridge, where Angel tries to bury Tess, can be seen as an extension of this doubling—a denial of her sexual nature.

In the novel, the split in attitude towards women is represented by the characters of Alec and Angel. Alec views women primarily as sexual objects, while Angel idealizes women by denying their sexual nature. This duality is mirrored in many Victorian novels where male characters often compete with a rake or a figure with socially unacceptable sexual relationships with women.

Tess is perhaps the most fulfilling of all Hardy's heroines. Unlike others, she is not empty-headed but is instead a fine pagan, full of humanity and imagination. However, like her sisters, Tess is flawed by a lack of will and a fatal indecision at critical moments.

Hardy's fiction is characterized by deep pessimism. His novels suggest that humans are never truly free, as they are weighed down by time, place, and, above all, mysterious forces that control their lives. In Hardy's world, humans are puppets controlled by fate, which is either hostile or indifferent to them. This malign fate, which corrupts any possibility of happiness, leads Hardy's characters toward tragedy. Tess, for example, whom Hardy describes as a "pure woman" in the full title of the novel, endures endless indignities, assaults, and defeats before ultimately surrendering to her destiny and dying for her "sin."

2.Thomas Hardy's Life: Family background

Thomas Hardy was born in southwest England, the son of a mason. His mother encouraged his early interest in reading, and although largely self-taught, he developed a strong foundation in the classics. At sixteen, Hardy became an apprentice to a local architect, and in 1862, he moved to London to work as an architect's assistant.

In 1867, Hardy began writing his first novel, but it was rejected by publishers. Despite this initial setback, he persisted and, in 1871, published his first novel, *Desperate Remedies*. This was followed by *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1874), which enjoyed moderate success. However, it was the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874 that truly launched his literary career. The success of this novel allowed Hardy to leave his job in architecture and focus entirely on writing.

With financial stability finally achieved, Hardy married and entered a productive period (1875-1895) of intense writing. He traveled on the Continent and spent part of each year in London, but most of his time was spent in the countryside of his native Dorset, which he used as the setting for many of his novels, referring to it as "Wessex" after the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Alfred the Great.

After dedicating himself to writing short stories, Hardy returned to novels with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). These works were harshly criticized by literary critics of the time, who accused Hardy of

pessimism and immorality. The hostile reaction led Hardy to abandon fiction and return to poetry, a form he had pursued since his youth.

Over the next thirty years, Hardy published eight collections of poetry, comprising over 800 poems. At the height of his fame, in 1910, he was awarded the Order of Merit, recognizing him as one of the country's leading men of letters. Although his marriage was unhappy, the sudden death of his wife in 1912 plunged Hardy into a period of depression and remorse, inspiring one of his finest poetry collections, Poems of 1912-1913. He remarried in 1914 and continued working tirelessly until his death at the age of eighty-seven. Hardy was buried in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

3. Thomas Hardy's Contribution, Reputation and Writing Career

Hardy's fictional smaller novels and three collections of short stories. The novels that have best endured the rest of time are *Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), the Mayor of Caster Bridge*(1891) and *Jude the Obscure*(1895). In the so-called 'novels of character and environment ' Hardy tells the tragic stories of characters who are powerless to fight against their adverse fate. According to Saxena (2001, p.123):

Hardy's vision is essentially pessimistic. He sees old, time- honored ways of rural life being demolished by new, industrial ways, and shows how the rural populations are sacrificed to progress. There is a frequently a malignant fate or Destiny in his novels that blocks progress for any of characters, swallows ambition, and blinds achievement.

Hardy's characters are outsiders in their own society who fall victim to forces of economic and social change over which they have no control. His own two major novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure(1895)* , are deeply pessimistic, Tess , an intelligent and girl, is driven to her death by a rigid, inflexible, social system. Jude, a working man who is passionate for education, is oppressed and defeated by Victorian narrow-mindedness and a malign destiny. Hardy's indictment of Victorian morals caused a terrible scandal. As Saxena (2001, p.124) opines:

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles(1891) and Jude the Obscure(1895),in particular the pessimism is so strong as to become almost ludicrous at times, and Hardy does have a tendency to let the urgency of what he wants to say obscure the best way of saying it. However, his grip of country life and people, his flair for anecdote and characteristics, and his all-pervading human sympathy are remarkable.

Hardy's novels are set in the countryside of Wessex, the fictional name he gave to the southwestern part of England where he was born. His thorough knowledge and affection for this part of the country is clearly seen in his detailed descriptions of the rural landscapes and the natural environment, which not only provide a background and a setting but become an active force in his stories. His stories are so closely linked to this rural setting that they referred to as 'regional novels'. As Shires (1999, p.79) opines:

The heart of (Hardy's) Wessex, like the territories of most other regional authors, does not coincide with the boundaries of any region a geographer may draw, but there is no doubt that the Dorset of the novels is an individuality. The scenery varies from the clay lowland of the Vale of Blackmore to the chalk uplands o the center,

coastal regions, and the heath country of the southeast. However, there was unity in diversity, for the different geographical tracts were complementary to each other with their different produces from meadow, arable, chalk pasture, woodland, or heath.

Another element that plays a role in crushing the hopes of Hardy's characters is Victorian society, whose hypocritical values straightjacket thoughts, plans and hopes. This is especially true for Hardy's female characters, whose bleak lives and loveless marriages are masterfully exposed.

Most of Hardy's novels are told from the third –person omniscient point of view, which allows the narrator to intervene and comment on the action. Colorful, convincing dialogue and moving descriptions are also characteristic of his arts. Hardy had a great ear for speech and was one of the first English novelist to use regional dialects without condescension .His descriptive genius captured an English countryside that was fast disappearing. His technique of 'long range' to 'close –up' description foreshadowed the cinematic technique of 'zooming in'.

The tragedy of men and women, tormented by the cruelty of life, is also major theme in Hardy's prose and poetry. His reputation as a poet today, however, rests on the beauty of his nature poetry and the moving sadness of the poems he wrote after the death o his wife.

To conclude that Hardy knew both the acclaim and hostility of the Victorian reading public. Although he received many, accolades and various honorary degrees, he was also subjected to harsh criticism for his unrelenting pessimism and his frankness about sexual matters. Today Hardy is admired for his rejection of nineteenth-century materialism and his ability to bring to the novel the dignity of high tragedy.

4.Theme of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891) is a profound and a beautiful study of the frustration of human intention by fantasy and by the harshness of human conventions. Tess and Clare are in part victim of their misperceptions of each other: their story is a particular example of a general human disposition position to believe (erroneously, in Hardy's view) that the world has been created for the benefit of mankind. Tess is a figure of deep pathos, part Erosun fulfilled, part Agape unrecognized.

To quote Schweik ,(1999.p.127)

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is the richest novel of Hardy. Both Victorian and modern, the novel is the culmination of the Victorian texts produced before and during Hardy's career as a novelist. He involves in this novel the tragic construction of the classical playwrights but moulds it into a new shape to merge it with multiplicity, irony, and surprise. Enriching his style with the strands of intellectual formation, he makes his unique contribution to novel genre, starting the transition from the Victorian to the modern.

5. The Story of the Novel

Tess, a poor country girl, discovers that she is descended from the noble d'Urberville family. Hoping to find support from her wealthy relatives, she seeks them out, but instead, she is seduced by Alec d'Urberville and later gives birth to a baby who tragically dies in infancy.

Later, Tess finds work on a dairy farm where she falls in love with Angel Clare. However, on their wedding night, when Tess confesses her past with Alec, Angel is devastated and abandons her to go to Brazil.Left with no other options and driven by her family's needs, Tess reluctantly returns to Alec. When she learns that Angel has come back to England and is ready to forgive her, she is overwhelmed with anger and kills Alec. Tess and Angel then flee, trying to escape the authorities, but Tess is eventually caught at Stonehenge and is hanged for her crime.

6. The Course of Love and Marriage in the Novel

When *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is examined within the broader context of Hardy's novels, particularly regarding the conditions that shape love and marriage, it becomes evident that Tess's fate is largely driven by a fierce psychological determination within the fictional world she inhabits. The psychological conditions of this imaginary world are as harsh and unforgiving as the physical environments of Flintcomb-Ash or Egdon Heath. The men in Tess's life embody starkly opposing attitudes toward women: one views her as a mere sexual object, while the other sees her as an idealized symbol of pastoral innocence and purity. Both men are characterized by their extremes, yet within each lies a conflict that mirrors the broader irreconcilable tension in the novel. Alec's religious conversion and Angel's brief indulgence with a stranger reveal the dual nature of these characters and suggest that this doubling process extends into each other. In this sense, Alec, Angel, and Tess are all victims of the struggle between sensuous and affectionate feelings, but it is Tess who ultimately bears the brunt of this conflict.

The novel reflects a deeper tension between Angel's rational rejection of society's unfair and sexist obsession with purity—an idea hinted at by the novel's subtitle—and Hardy's own irrational and unconscious participation in this very obsession, which shapes the tragic course of Tess's life. This is not to deny Hardy's genuine and powerful sympathy for Tess, but it does acknowledge that this sympathy was, inevitably, ambivalent.

7.Tess as Half –woman and Half- girl

Hardy disrupts the notion of character as a unifying or consistent reference point by fragmenting his central figures through various perspectives and genres. Just as Marlott, Tess's hometown, can be seen from different locations and viewpoints, Tess herself is observed from perspectives that are not only diverse but also conflicting. Tess's identity is complex and multifaceted: she is aristocratic by lineage, bourgeois by education, and a rural proletarian by birth. She navigates between dialect and Standard English, embodying a bilingual existence that reflects her layered and contradictory social position. Hardy deliberately makes her half-woman and half-girl. When we first meet her,

Tess's face supposedly reflects different phases of her youth, "you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then. …Later, her fluctuating moods alter a face that is sometimes pink and flawless, yet pale and tragic at other times.

Hardy claims that she is forever served from her childhood innocence by her experience in the Chase, yet counters his assertion whenever he continues to treat the adult Tess as a childlike innocent.

8.Tess as a Crumby Girl

Through her suitors often perceive her monochromically Tess is never one thing. When Angel can no longer see her as the equally worshipful narrator does, he must stereotype her as soiled. Yet his earlier idealization of Tess as a nature goodness, which she disowned, was just as reductive. Despite the clarity his surname "Clare" evokes, Angel shows himself to be as limited in perception as Alec, who first narrowly admires her as a juicy morsel, a " crumbly girl" (T, v. p. 46).

Unlike these two central suitors, the narrator does not waver in seeing Tess doubly. For example, even after, she becomes a mother and assumes a more handsome womanliness, and even after her erotic attraction to Angel, she does not lose her virginal qualities for the narrator. However, if the narrator is dual, perspective undercuts the single-mindedness of Alec and Angel; it is not exempt from criticism. The presence of the implied author, known to the reader by the sum of all the text's point of view, reveals the narrator's point of view to be overly romantic and egocentric.

As Tess's third suitor and a mixture of the other two, the narrator combines Angel's spirituality and Alec's cynicism. Yet even though he exhibits an erotic sensuousness that resembles Alec's and often adopts the ever-intellectualized pedantic and circumlouctionary style of Angel, this prime suitor is also mocked by an implied author who asks us to recognize that the narrator is an eager as these who male characters are to possess a femininity which remains unpossessed, dispossessed, unclaimed, and above all, unable to be possessed, because valued for the wrong reasons.

9.Tess and the idea of Love at First Sight

Numerous Hardy's critics, among them some of the earliest, have attempted to identify the special features of Hardy's fictive world (Irwin 1990.p.45).One of the features noted most often, and one that throws some light on the psychology in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, is the idea of love at first sight. It recurs with sufficient frequency to seem at times a virtual prerequisite of romance. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, an early novel that seems to prefigure some of the psychological issues in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* more clearly than any other, Stephan Smith falls in love with Elfride the first time he sees her:

It comes to this sole simple thing: that at one time I had never seen you, and I didn't love you; that I saw you, and I did love you. (T, v. p. 66).

Angel and Tess do not fall in love when they first lay eyes on each other at the May-Day dance in Marlott, but Angel's memory of this first sight of Tess is used later as a basis for choosing her when they meet again at Talbothays Diary:

He concluded that he had beheld her before; where he could not tell. A casual encounter during some country ramble it certainly had been, and he was not greatly curious about it. However, the circumstance was sufficient to lead him

*to select Tess in preference to other pretty milkmaids when wished to contemplate contiguous womankind. (*T, v. p. 155).

Love at first sight, or a retrospective appeal to the idea, as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, usually suggests that the two lovers, sometimes against their will, are fated for each other. The psychological basis of the idea is that the lover has in mind a prior, idealized image that they suddenly encountered object appears to match. Angel is in love with an image of his own making. The image is one of rustic innocence and virgin purity. His first comment to himself about Tess is, "What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is" (T, v. p. 156). When walking together in the midsummer dawn to the milking:

*She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman- a whole sex condensed unto one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names. (*T, v. p. 167).

When she says' Call me Tess', he does, but he persists in idealizing her. At the heart of his image of her is an expectation of virginity so strong as to be virtually a demand. After Tess's confession, he told on to the image:

*"Nothing so pure, so sweet, so virginal as Tess had seemed possible all the long while that he adored her, up to an hour ago" (*T, v. p. 301).

the discovery of what is later referred to as Tess's 'un-intact state *(*T, v. p. 435) so alters her appearance in his eyes that she seems to be a different person: "You were one person; now you are another"(T, v. p. 292).Tess, in desperation, asks if he has stopped loving her. He answers that:

" The woman I have been loving is not you"." However, who?" she asks." Another woman in your shape" (T, v. p. 293)

10. Conclusion

The key focus for readers of Hardy's fiction lies in the conflict between sensuous and affectionate feelings within his imagined world. It's crucial, however, not to reduce the interpretation of this conflict solely to biographical terms. While Tess is a product of Hardy's imagination, she also embodies certain aspects of the culture in which Hardy lived. Although Hardy's imagination was likely first shaped by primal relationships, particularly with his mother, it later evolved beyond these personal and provincial beginnings, influenced by a broader cultural matrix. This cultural framework often viewed human beings as dual entities—body and soul—torn between their earthly origins and higher aspirations.

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