

# Analysis of Folk Beliefs and Customs in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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**Abstract:** As a typical countryside novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has a multitude of folklore elements that are intertwined in many plots and play an important role in shaping the characters, developing the storyline, rendering the country color, and setting the tragic atmosphere. Moreover, folklore culture originates from English real country life, and exploring folklore elements embodied in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is also a textual reconstruction of contemporary folklore culture. On this basis, this paper will explore and analyze the folk beliefs and customs which is regarded as the most significant components of folklore culture in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

**Keywords:** Folk beliefs, Folk customs, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

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## 1. Introduction

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, one of Thomas Hardy's most representative works, occupies an absolutely significant place in the treasure trove of world literature. Claude Simon said that "it was *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that established Hardy's position in English literature and even in world literature", and J. Hillis Miller argued that "Hardy's feeling for Tess was strong, perhaps stronger than for any of his other invented personages". Therefore, the research on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is valuable and meaningful.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has been studied from many perspectives, such as natural imagery, tragic fate, eco-feminism, etc. However, there are relatively few studies on the folklore culture and country color of Hardy's novels in the overall research history of Hardy. Charles G. Harper's *The Hardy Country* (1925) is one of the early books to provide a geographical analysis of Thomas Hardy's novels, and the book focuses on analyzing and matching the characters and places in novels with real-life rural locations. *Folkways in Thomas Hardy* (1931) which is written by Ruth A. Firor seeks out the abundant examples of superstitions and the survival of old customs among the Wessex peasantry. In *A Study of Hardy's Novel in the Perspective of Folklore*, Chen Zhen combines anthropology, sociology, history, and other related disciplines to systematically study Hardy's folklore ideology and to clarify the deep relationship between folklore culture and novel creation.

However, all the above works do not focus on one book but on the general study of Hardy's ideas or sentiments about folklore culture. They are directed to all of Hardy's classic works, including *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and other classical works. Therefore, the study of detailed folklore elements in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is still urgently needed.

Folklore is defined as traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and other things that are preserved in the uneducated class of civilized people by the successor of cultural anthropology Ms. Benny. Considering the specific textual content of the novel, this paper will explore and analyze the folklore culture in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* from two major sections - folk beliefs and folk customs.

## 2. Folk Beliefs in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, folk beliefs reflect the core ideas that all things have a spirit in the Southwest Borderlands of England. To a certain extent, folk beliefs can foretell the fate of the characters, promote the development of the plot, and create a mysterious atmosphere. The excavation of folk beliefs is a reflection of the deep aesthetic value of the text and an indispensable part of the exploration of the folklore culture in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

The folk beliefs in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are presented in five main categories, including fortune telling, omens, hauntings, witchcraft, and rituals. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Durbeyfield uses Fortune-Teller which she "both admires and fears" to predicate Tess's fate (p.22) and predicts that Tess is destined to be wealthy. So, Mrs. Durbeyfield starts to persuade Tess to go to the d'Urbervilles' mansion and ask for some benefits. As one of the folk beliefs, fortune-telling indirectly manipulates and leads to Tess's tragic fate. After Tess first comes to the d'Urbervilles' mansion, Tess's hand is stabbed by a basket of roses given by Alec. Like all the cottagers in Blackmoor Vale, Tess is steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions and creates bad premonitions (p.40). The plot of the rose stabbing the hand becomes a tragic omen, suggesting that the rose-giver Alec will cause irreparable and permanent damage to Tess. In addition to perceiving omens through plants, people often have superstitious ideas about animal behavior. When Tess and Angel determine to get married and left Talbothays, a white cock with the rose comb comes and settles on the palings in front of the house with a few yards of them and the notes thrill their ears through (p.222). It is worth noting that the cock crows in the midday, and this phenomenon is considered the most typically unlucky omen in the English countryside. So, the dairy workers immediately say, "That's bad", and Angel immediately expels that cock. Hardy implies the end of Tess and Angel's happy life through the phenomenon of the cock crowing in midday.

English in the countryside is also convinced of the existence of ghosts, spirits, and witchcraft. When Tess is a milkmaid, she lives in a house with three other women. In the

evening, when she sees a scene where each damsel is sitting up whitely in her bed, she feels the whole is like a row of avenging ghosts (p.203). It is not unusual to have such an idea in such a dim environment because ghosts are supposed to be white in the English countryside. On Tess's way back home from Talbothays, she passes through a forest and claims that this forest used to be the home of "green-spangled fairies" and "the witches that had been pricked and ducked" (p.358). In old times, English believed that fairies should be dressed in green and live in the landscape of nature. The latter is because, in the English concept, a witch can not only use witchcraft to avert misfortune but also be the cause of some sort of misfortune. So, if someone is found to be a witch, he or she will be sentenced to death. When testing whether a person is a witch, there are two methods - pricking and drowning. Pricking is a method that lets a needle be inserted into various protruding parts of the body. If it does not bleed, the person is a witch. Drowning means that if a person can keep floating on the water without sinking to the bottom, he or she is a witch.

The last folk belief to be noted is rituals which seem to be the ultimate summary of Tess's tragic life. After killing Alec, Tess and Angel flee to Stonehenge. Tess falls asleep on the altar and then is arrested in the morning. Stonehenge is an ancient place of rituals, and in ancient times the English often sacrificed livestock or even women to the sun to express the hope of regeneration. Therefore, the scene in which Tess is arrested at Stonehenge is quite like a pagan sacrifice to Apollo. It should be noted that Angel's prototype of mythological character is Apollo which has been discussed deeply in *A Study of Hardy's Novel in the Perspective of Folklore*. Three layers of meaning can be understood from this scene. The surface layer is an allegory of Tess's ultimate decision to sacrifice to the sun and stay away from the chaos and suffering of this world. The second layer is that Tess is the sacrifice in Tess and Angel's love because Apollo is the mythological character prototype of Angel. Tess sacrifices herself to the sun, equal to the sacrifice to Angel. In the third layer, after Tess's father discovers the fine lineage of his family at the beginning of the novel, he yells to make some good food and wants to eat some lamb fry (p.5). The lamb is the most common sacrifice in the 19th century, and lamb fry is already signaling that Tess has to become a sacrifice for the dream of the d'Urbervilles' revival and a sacrifice for the extremely unjust moral constraints on women in the 19th century.

From the above, the folk beliefs in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* succeed in either superficially suggesting the direction of the novel's plot, or deeply linking the various plots to present the hidden meanings. To some extent, the folk beliefs deepen the novel's country color and give the novel interesting and colorful background information.

### 3. Folk Customs in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

In addition to the folk beliefs mentioned above, folk customs also occur frequently. Folk customs are imbued with the genes of national culture and therefore have a common universality for all members of the nation, as well as being a fundamental force in regulating people's lives. As Benedict says, "Folk customs play a dominant role in both experience and belief".

When Angel internally hesitates whether he should marry a country woman, Angel keeps silent rather than giving an

affirmative or negative answer (p.158). However, Angel actually has decided to marry Tess in the heart because there is an English proverb "Silence without words is tantamount to consenting to approval." When Mrs. Durbeyfield decides to persuade Tess to go to d'Urbervilles' mansion and ask for help, an old drunk reminds her "But Joan Durbeyfield must mind that she doesn't get green malt in the floor" (p.23). The raw material of beer is mainly barley, and the malt has to be soaked for forty-eight hours. Then after sprouting, being dried, and other complicated procedures, the malt can be used. Green malt means unripe malt and can imply unmarried conception in the country.

In chapter nineteen, as Angel and Tess sit on the hillside and have a conversation with each other, Tess keeps gathering the buds called "lords and ladies" (p.128) and says that picking this kind of flower can remind her of her situation. Lords and ladies, also called cuckoo-pint or wake-robin, are clumps of plants that grow along the edges of hedges. Due to both dark and light colors, lords and ladies are often used to hint at sex. The darker color is the lord, and the lighter is the lady. Lords and ladies still carry an implied deeper meaning - cheat. The flower is so treacherous that it emits a strong odor at the flowering time, and when flies are attracted to rest on the flower it immediately closes. As the flies struggle inside, they naturally do their job of pollinating the flowers. The folklore says that anyone born with the blessing of this flower is tricky to talk to and difficult to win the trust of others. Hardy's usage of this flower undoubtedly achieves a dual role. One is to imply that Tess has been seduced and lost her virginity in the early unfortunate encounter, and the other is to imply that Tess, a pure and kind girl, is deceived by Alec and will be "deceived" and abandoned by Angel again.

After Tess tells Angel about all her previous experiences, Tess finds that Angel used to hang up a clump of mistletoe in their bedroom (p.241). The evergreen mistletoe represents hope and abundance. Unlike the Nordic distaste and alienation for mistletoe, there is a household saying in England - no mistletoe no happiness. It is believed that the red mistletoe fruit symbolizes female fertility and the white fruit is a representation of male fertility. Mistletoe has the same sexual connotation as the lords and ladies and an extra dimension of happiness and hope. Hanging mistletoe over the bed represents Angel's desire for a better life, but there is a stark difference between real life and ideal life.

In chapter twenty-seven, Angel returns home to inform his parents that he is going to marry Tess and returns to the Talbothays, where there are no customary restrictions on rural society (p.172). No customary restriction means that Talbothays does not have the interference of the country landlord with the discipline of the tenant farmers. There is also the unwritten rule of rural society in the book. It is said that a man who lives in a town is not forced to find another place to live because his daughter has an illegitimate child, or his wife has taken up drinking, but in the country, it is often necessary to leave one's present place of residence for this reason.

Moreover, due to the strict hierarchy, the English regards clan heritage as very important, and they believe in the deeds of their ancestors. Although the d'Urbervilles is in a depraved state, Durbeyfield still has the ancient spoon and seal handed down by the ancestors. It is out of the importance of the clan that the ingenious cart cycle plot is derived which makes Tess reenact the horror experiences of her ancestors. The cart in the novel symbolizes misfortune, disaster, and death to the

d'Urbervilles. When Tess and Abraham are delivering the beehives, the old horse Prince is hit and killed by the morning mail cart, which foreshadows the beginning of Tess's tragedy and indirectly causes Tess's tragic life. The second time the cart appears after Tess and Angel's wedding, Crick provides a cart for the newlyweds to leave the dairy farm. After getting on the cart, Tess has a bad feeling and a sense of ominousness that indeed Angel will abandon her mercilessly because of her loss of virginity. The third time Tess vaguely hears the sound of the carriage, Alec takes the opportunity to give her a detailed account of the terrifying d'Urbervilles' cart. A man with the surname d'Urbervilles kidnapped a beautiful woman, and the woman tried to escape from the carriage. In the struggle, he killed her, or perhaps she killed him. In this legend, "a man with the surname d'Urbervilles" can be regarded as Alec d'Urbervilles, while the beautiful woman who was kidnapped is Tess Durbeyfield. Alec kills Tess mentally, while Tess kills Alec physically with a meat cleaver, so the identity of Tess and Alec who "killed" or "be killed" is unclear. The legend of the d'Urbervilles family's cart is passed on from the 16th or 17th century to Tess's 19th century and is re-enacted to symbolize the constant cycle of suffering. The image of the cart keeps recurring as if it were a tragic mystery that Tess cannot get out of from the beginning. And it is worth noting that this mysterious and ominous cart related to the murder can only be heard by the d'Urbervilles. From a psychological point of view, it is the collective unconscious of the family with a strong family heritage. The horror experience of the ancestors is further manifested in Tess and foretells the inevitability of Tess's tragedy. It indicates that the killing of Alec by Tess and the destruction of Tess by Alec is a human tragedy with historical roots and a repetition of the tragic history of her ancestors.

The folk customs are derived from accumulated life experiences and often contain profound philosophies. They are the result of the wisdom of the countless people. The

usage of folk customs in the novels enriches the stories and adds new content and ways of understanding to the novels.

## 4. Conclusion

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a typical novel with a rural setting, and a large number of folklore elements appear in the story. The folk beliefs and customs either enrich the content of the novel, form the structure of the work, embellish and shape the characters, or symbolize or metaphorize the author's subjective intentions. Hardy's beliefs and customs are often tragic, which undoubtedly enhances the tragic atmosphere and gives a deeper and diggable meaning. Although folk beliefs and customs have different roles, they merge into a unified integral with the novel text content and form a folklore chain that can carry profound connotations and transmit a multitude of folklore elements. What's more, both folk beliefs and customs originate from real English life, and exploring the folklore elements embodied in Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a textual reconstruction of the contemporary folklore culture and is an indispensable part of the exploration of English folklore culture in the 19th century.

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