

An Exploration of the Causes of Tess's Tragedy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a novel written by the renowned British author Thomas Hardy, stands as a gem of the 19th-century English literature. The novel describes the bumpy life of Tess, a young woman born into a poor peddler's family, mirroring the impact of the industrial rise on rural life in the 19th century. This paper, taking the female predicament in the Victorian era - limited education, passive marriage, and constrained employment, as its starting point and focusing on Tess's image as a kind, independent, and rebellious character, delves into the multifaceted factors that contributed to her tragic fate, including impoverished familial background, hypocritical social morality, and spiritual oppression from religion. These factors intertwined, forming an invisible force that gradually pushed Tess into the abyss. Despite her resilient defiance, Tess ultimately succumbed to the dictates of fate, becoming a casualty of the progression of the times.

Keywords: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Victorian Women's Status, Tess's Image, Tragedy.

1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an esteemed English poet and novelist, hailing from the Dorset region of England. Born into a rural aristocratic family in 1840, he ventured to London in 1861 to pursue architectural studies. However, his passion lay in literature, philosophy, and theology, leading him to immerse himself in research within these fields. After a brief stint as an architect, he fully committed to literary endeavors. Hardy's literary oeuvre mirrors the profound socio-economic, political, moral, and cultural shifts induced by the capitalist incursion into English rural towns. His works poignantly depict the tragic fate of the populace, particularly women, and unmask the hypocrisy inherent in bourgeois morality, law, and religion, which is fully represented in his masterpiece *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles vividly portrays the life journey of Tess, a destitute peasant girl. Despite her relentless efforts to secure an independent livelihood, she encounters a series of setbacks. Forced into domestic service for an affluent family, she endures shame and loses her innocence after being impregnated by Alec. Throughout her ordeal, Tess faces rampant discrimination and prejudice. Following the demise of her child, she falls deeply in love with Angel Clare, only to be forsaken upon revealing her past. Her father's death plunges her into destitution, and the return of Alec further compounds her misery. Reluctantly, she succumbed to Alec until Angel's sudden reappearance triggers a shocking turn of events that leads to the murder of Alec and Tess's subsequent death sentence.

Upon its release, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* sparked controversy, challenging the Victorian era's moral ethos. The book's subtitle, *A Pure Woman*, ignited fierce opposition from some quarters. They contested how the novel's protagonist, who not only bore a child out of wedlock but was also condemned to death for the homicide of her so-called "lover", could be deemed pure. Nevertheless, Hardy compassionately and meticulously depicts this woman, defying the prevailing moral norms. Hardy employs Tess's tragic narrative to vehemently attack the male-dominated Victorian society. Despite Tess's attempts at resistance and her vocalization

against the systemic oppression of women, she was still trapped in the network of the patriarchal society, ultimately leading to her downfall.

2. Women's Status in Victorian Society

2.1. From the Perspective of Education

In the Victorian era, women faced considerably restricted educational prospects. Although members of the middle and upper classes may have garnered some educational exposure, the vast majority of women were deprived of the opportunity to engage in comprehensive and systematic intellectual pursuits. During this period, society's predominant expectation for women was to embody the virtues of a wife and mother, which, to a significant degree, shaped the educational aspirations and curricula tailored for them. The focus of women's education was primarily directed towards preparing women for their familial responsibilities, aiming at fostering their qualification as spouses and mothers, rather than fostering their individual capabilities (Yang, 2022).

The scope of their educational content was confined, and the quality of education and teaching were substandard, hindering their ability to acquire high-quality knowledge and skills. The primary subjects they studied were primarily centered on rudimentary talents and a limited scope of literary acquaintance. Domestic education, which constituted a pivotal component of female education, was deemed paramount, encompassing household budgeting, servant managing and child rearing. Some educators posited that rigorous academic pursuits in general subjects would influence women's moral fiber and domestic proficiency. Consequently, they advocated for confining women's knowledge to a narrower spectrum, arguing that excessive academic education could potentially undermine their sense of dedication to the family (Gomersall, 2000). Concurrently, home tutors and boarding school educators were generally lacking specialized training and employing archaic teaching methodologies, with many deemed incompetent. Indeed, some senior students struggled with basic spelling, and most failed to derive meaningful knowledge from their educational experiences (Guan, 2012).

As can be seen, in the Victorian era, women's educational prospects were severely restricted, with a focus on domestic skills and limited intellectual pursuits. Middle and upper-class women had some educational exposure, but most lacked systematic learning opportunities. Education was tailored to prepare women for family roles, emphasizing virtues of wife and mother, rather than individual capabilities.

2.2. From the Perspective of Marriage

During the Victorian epoch, males were perceived as the predominant force in society, whereas females were confined to the sphere of familial and domestic pursuits. In marriage, women were molded into the archetype of the "angel in the house", expected to excel in household duties, adhere to fidelity and obedience towards their spouses, and dedicate their entire efforts to the familial unit (Yang, 2022). This patriarchal perspective of matrimony not only constrained women's personal growth and evolution but also propelled them into a passive stance within the marital union, where their happiness and destiny were often tethered to their husbands' decisions and aspirations.

Despite the enactment of laws that granted women certain rights within marriage during that period, they fell short of comprehensively ameliorating women's circumstances. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 authorized husbands to unilaterally accuse their wives of adultery, whereas wives accusing husbands had to fulfill a rigorous set of prerequisites (Guo, 2010). This disparate treatment further entrenched men's dominant status in marriage, rendering it arduous for women to achieve equitable treatment in the face of marital adversity. Additionally, it sanctioned husbands to physically chastise women for transgressions of chastity, thereby aggravating their passive position and introducing a dimension of inequality that culminated in numerous societal tragedies for women.

During the Victorian era, women were expected to be the "angel in the house", excelling in household duties and being obedient to their husbands, focusing all efforts on the family. This limited women's personal growth and put them in a passive position in marriage, where their happiness depended on their husbands' decisions. Laws like the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 further perpetuated inequality and led to societal tragedies for women.

2.3. From the Perspective of Occupation

With the advancing waves of industrialization, family domains had progressively separated from production locales, resulting in the gradual displacement of the traditional domestic handicraft economy by a male-dominated large-scale industrial economy. This transition had given rise to the quintessential familial paradigm, that was "men for the outside, women for the inside" (Guan, 2012). The phrase not only reflects broader cultural beliefs about the inherent roles and responsibilities of each gender, but also highlights how such norms constrained women's participation in public and economic life, relegating them to a secondary status within the family and society at large.

Alfred Tennyson, in a succinct poem, aptly captured the divergent roles and societal division of labor between men and women during the early Victorian era (Zhang, 2009):

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle she.
Man with the head and woman with the heart;
Man to command and woman to obey.

During the Victorian era, even when women managed to secure employment, their opportunities were limited, and they often found themselves relegated to low-paying jobs including roles such as governess, domestic servants, or tailors, which were considered suitable for women within the societal norms of the time. Among these, female teachers who worked within homes, possibly as governesses or private tutors, earned an annual income around 20-30 pounds (Fu, 2017). This low pay highlights the economic disadvantages faced by women during this period and underscores the broader limitations on women's work outside the home. The modest income earned by female teachers reflects not only the gender pay gap of the time but also the limited value placed on education and intellectual labor when performed by women. This economic marginalization was part of a larger system that relegated women to secondary social, economic, and professional status, restricting their opportunities for financial independence and career advancement.

3. Tess's Personality

3.1. A Kind and Honest Woman

Despite her humble origins, Tess possessed a compassionate nature and was consistently amicable towards others. Beyond her dedication and self-sacrifice to her family, her affection for her siblings is equally heartwarming. Even in the final moments of her life, Tess remained deeply concerned about her sister, Eliza, entrusting her care to Angel (Handy, p.410-p.411). This kind of love, able to transcend secular norms, even more highlights her kind nature.

Tess's kindness is also reflected in her sincerity and care for those around her. During her time working at the dairy farm, Tess discovered that she and the other girls around her harbored affection for the same man, Angel. In such a situation, many women might fall into conflict or distance themselves due to competition and jealousy, but Tess did not. Instead of excluding or disparaging the other girls, she spoke good words for them before Angel (Handy, p.143-p.144). She was capable of putting herself in others' shoes, understanding their feelings and needs. Her sincerity and straightforwardness had earned her the trust and respect of others, thereby enabling her to cultivate sincere friendships. "All the time, she could not bear to harm even a fly or a small insect, and her eyes were often brimming with tears upon witnessing a bird imprisoned in a cage. When confronted with birds in their dying throes, Tess perceived their suffering as her own, thus helping them end their lives." (Handy, p.287-p.288). Despite being abandoned by Angel, she did not consider herself the most miserable person in the world compared to those birds. With such a kind-hearted spirit, Tess truly deserves to be called a daughter of nature.

3.2. A Woman with Rebellious Spirit

3.2.1. Rebellion Against Male Chauvinism

During the Victorian era, women were relegated to a subordinate status, often forced to relinquish their own rights and freedoms, as their societal positions were inextricably tethered to the shackles of a patriarchal society. Despite this overwhelming pressure, Tess refused to be constrained by such ideological bonds (Pan, 2012). Throughout her narrative, she exhibited moments of remarkable defiance against the patriarchy.

After the loss of her virginity to Alec, Alec insisted that Tess remain by his side. However, Tess steadfastly asserted

that she had never truly loved him and never would, firmly rejecting his demands (Hardy, p.78-p.80). This act of defiance not only preserved her personal dignity but also served as a potent repudiation of patriarchal ideology, underscoring her unwavering determination to refuse becoming a mere appendage to a man.

Later, when Alec reentered Tess's life and attempted to coerce her into becoming his mistress, Tess responded with a vehement slap across his face using a glove. Alec proclaimed, "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again!" (Hardy, p.343-p.344) Yet, Tess remained undaunted in her resistance, boldly rejecting his advances. When Angel returned, she enacted her ultimate and final rebellion by fatally stabbing Alec with a knife (Hardy, p.396.-p.399). This act transcended personal vengeance; it was a profound rebellion against the pervasive oppression and injustice faced by women in society. Through this extreme measure, Tess fervently declared her rejection of being a subject of oppression and her yearning for liberation.

3.2.2. Rebellion Against Religion

Viewing from the time when this novel was written, the last three decades of the 19th century marked a transition period in Britain from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism. During this period, women were increasingly oppressed by a decadent society, with traditional feudal and religious ideologies weighing heavily on them, like two colossal mountains. Religion ostensibly served as a spiritual tool for the liberation for the masses, yet its true essence was a device employed by the government to maintain societal control (Ren, 2014). Some terrifying texts were painted on walls and doors, admonishing women against transgression. However, Tess, who had just lost her virginity, disdainfully retorted, "I don't believe God said that." (Hardy, p.81-p.82) This was the first time she questioned traditional doctrines, marking the beginning of her rebellion.

According to the edicts of canon law, the sacred privilege of baptizing infants was solemnly vested in priests alone, and only those anointed through this hallowed sacrament were deemed worthy to traverse the celestial gates. Consequently, Tess's unfortunate progeny, branded with the stigma of sin, was cruelly denied the sacred rites of baptism and interment. The profound anguish that engulfed her heart kindled a crisis of faith within her, ultimately leading to her questioning and defying the hypocritical religious doctrines. In a desperate act of love and desperation, she mustered the courage to baptize him herself. Yet, even as she valiantly waged war against these oppressive ideologies, she could not entirely extricate herself from their constricting grasp, foreshadowing her inevitable march towards a tragic destiny.

Alec cunningly lured Tess into a web of deception and subsequently employed Biblical allusions to deflect blame onto her. He even transformed into a preacher advocating virtue, further compounding the hypocrisy. Tess, with profound contempt and disgust, pointed out the hypocrisy of religion in a clear-headed manner, "I can't believe in such sudden things...I don't believe in you - I hate it!" (Hardy, p.318-p.320) She adhered to the belief that religion should be righteous, equitable, and celestial; if it was unequal to the people, it was hypocritical. (Chen, 2006) This was her criterion for evaluating the authenticity of religion, and it was also her rebellion against hypocritical religion.

3.2.3. Rebellion Against Social Morality

During the Victorian era, the patriarchal ideology was entrenched, and women were expected to uphold chastity

until marriage. Consequently, if a woman was seduced, the only way to erase her impurity was to marry that perpetrator. Adhering to the societal norms of that period, marriage to Alec might be her optimal choice. However, Tess adamantly declared to her mother, "It is possible that any woman might have done so, but not I." (Hardy, p.83-p.84) Despite immense pressure from public opinion, she steadfastly refused to believe that a woman who lost her chastity would forever lose everything. With this unwavering conviction, she embarked on a new journey, commencing her life on a dairy farm.

It can be said that Tess's entire life was a struggle against hypocritical social conventions. The entrusting of her sister Eliza to Angel before Tess's demise was her final act of defiance against societal norms. She said to Angel, "I wish you would marry her if you lose me, as you will do shortly." (Hardy, p.410-p.411) According to the church and legal regulations of that era, marriage to a sister of one's deceased wife was prohibited. Yet Tess declared, "That's nothing." She hoped that through her request, Angel and her sister could be united, thus compensating for the fate that prevented her from accompanying Angel. This was not only due to her desire for her sister's happiness, but also a manifestation of her defiance against societal conventions and her unwavering adherence to her own convictions.

3.3. A Woman with Independent Spirit

In the novel, Tess's family was impoverished, comprising an elderly and infirm father alongside youthful siblings. Confronted with such a family situation, Tess refrained from evasion or relying on others; rather, she resolutely assumed the initiative to shoulder the burden of her family. The demise of the old horse served as the final straw that broke the camel's back for the family, ultimately prompting Tess to compromise with her mother and agree to claim kin, hoping to alleviate their financial plight (Hardy, p.28-p.32). Although this choice ultimately spelled misfortune for her, her initial intention and actions were testament to her profound sense of familial duty and unwavering independence.

Another pivotal moment in her life was her decision to seek employment in a dairy farm, further embodying her independent spirit. At the dairy farm, she earned the respect of her colleagues through her diligence and intelligence. She labored tirelessly, unafraid of hardship, not only to sustain herself but also to alleviate the burden on her family. This resilience and self-reliance enabled her to maintain optimism and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, in the societal background of that era, women were often perceived as appendages to men, their fates often determined by men. However, Tess refused to acquiesce to such a fate and courageously pursued her own love and happiness. Unfortunately, Tess was abandoned immediately on the wedding night after she revealed her miserable past. In the subsequent year, Tess did not rely on her nominal husband but actively sought employment to maintain economic independence, challenging and resisting traditional constructs, thereby exemplifying her profound independence.

4. Factors Leading to Tess's Tragedy

4.1. Her Impoverished Family

Tess's original family has exerted profound influences on her, primarily manifesting in two aspects. Firstly, Tess was born into a poverty-stricken rural family with perpetual financial constraints. Due to the lack of sufficient economic

resources, Tess had to confront the hardships of life from a young age, such as doing heavy housework, taking care of younger brothers and sisters, working at neighboring farms, etc.. The fragility of this family was such that the death of a horse could leave them destitute, as if everything was destined to propel Tess to claim kin, foreshadowing her ultimate fate. Secondly, Tess's mother was deeply influenced by patriarchal societal ideologies, her views on marriage and love being conservative and selfish. Rather than providing Tess with proper guidance and support in her marital matters, she viewed Tess as a bargaining chip for marrying a wealthy man, hoping to alleviate the family's financial burden through her daughter's marriage. When Alec wrote to invite Tess for work, her mother was convinced that he had taken a liking to her daughter, exclaiming, "For such a pretty maid as Tess, this is a fine chance!" (Hardy, p.42-p.44) Prior to Tess's coercion by Alec, her mother failed to provide her with adequate education, indirectly leading to the loss of Tess's innocence. Upon hearing Tess's bitterness, her mother did not console her daughter but instead reproached her, saying, "Yet you've not got him to marry you!" (Hardy, p.82-p.84) To a significant extent, this imposition of a marital ideology by her mother placed immense emotional and moral pressure on Tess.

Tess's tragedy possesses profound societal roots. Her family was a mirror, reflecting and encapsulating the societal realities of capitalism during that era, foreshadowing Tess's eventual fate. Had it not been for her family's impoverishment, Tess would not have been compelled to go to claim kin, thus evading the fateful encounter with Alec and the loss of her innocence. Had it not been for her family's impoverishment, Tess would not have been resigned to her fate, ultimately sacrificing herself and succumbing once again to Alec's control. Therefore, it is evident that poverty in the family was a significant factor in her tragedy, and Tess was a woman destroyed by poverty.

4.2. Hypocritical Moral Values

In the society where Tess lived, female chastity was regarded as an utmost virtue. Once lost, it was deemed immoral, even sinful, resulting in social condemnation and exclusion. Tess's plight serves as a prime example of this mindset. After being violated by Alec, Tess was perceived by society as an unchaste woman. This label clung to her throughout her life, becoming the root cause of her tragic fate.

Unfortunately, Angel, the man Tess loved deeply, failed to be her true savior and angel of mercy. Despite being an enlightened intellectual from the liberal bourgeoisie, Angel never broke through the barriers of the old moral concepts he rebelled against or escaped from the shackles of the class concepts he despised (Wang, 2012). His previous mistake was forgiven, yet he was unwilling to understand and forgive Tess's situation, despite her status as a victim. While he advocated for freedom and liberation, he still judged with secular standards after her confession. This man, with an angelic personality, was, in reality, a hypocritical demon wrapped in the guise of an angel. More than once, Angel coldly informed Tess, "The woman I have been loving is not you, but another woman in your shape." (Hardy, p.83-p.84) He awakened Tess's longing for a new life but then cruelly discarded her. This spiritual trauma and persecution were more devastating to Tess than the economic oppression and the rigors of arduous labor, ultimately propelling her, in despair and anguish, back into the arms of Alec. It was this hypocritical bourgeois ethical morality that devastated Tess's

purity and goodness.

It is not so much that Alec's violation of Tess led to her tragic fate as it is the bourgeois moral values represented by Alec that pushed her to the brink. Despite Tess's valiant resistance and arduous struggle, this hypocritical societal morality remained a pervasive influence. When others invoked it to condemn her, the pitiful Tess also measured herself by this standard. She perceived herself as the embodiment of sin, an unchaste woman, thereby forfeiting her entitlement to matrimony or happiness. Even if she could have fled to a remote locale, escaping the scrutiny of the secular world, Tess remained tormented, and the oppressive burden compelled her to reject others' affections, even convinced that she was unworthy of them. Tragically, Tess was deeply bound by traditional social concepts and deeply influenced by them, enduring intense moral anguish for years.

4.3. The Spiritual Oppression from Religious Ideology

The Victorian era witnessed the flourishing of Christian morality, during which the Evangelical Movement attained its zenith. Evangelical congregations propagated their teachings, advocating abstention from carnal desires and adherence to creeds and moral precepts (Hao, 2019). Amidst the Evangelical influence, women's purity garnered significant attention, which became the highest moral standard for measuring women's sexual morality. This archaic mindset constantly haunted Tess, constraining her fate and inexorably propelling her step by step into the abyss.

The terrifying texts painted everywhere, the robes that changed color in ancient ballads due to women's infidelity, and the foreboding omen of a rooster's crow on the day of matrimony seemed to constantly remind Tess of the unworthiness of impure women for happiness, which tortured her spirit.

Alec, that very embodiment of depravity, had metamorphosed into a preacher espousing virtue, a veritable mockery concocted by the capitalist secular mores and ethical edicts. It becomes abundantly clear that the religious institutions, theological doctrines, and ethical standards championed by the bourgeoisie served, to a certain extent, as instruments wielded by the bourgeois rulers to preserve their own interests and induce a state of numbness among the impoverished laborers (Liu, 2015). They engaged in nefarious deeds while masquerading as paragons of moral rectitude, exploiting and oppressing the masses under the guise of religious dogma, thereby extinguishing their innate humanity. Confronted with such malevolent forces, the fragile woman Tess endured unimaginable suffering and helplessness, ultimately resigning herself to the unjust life tragedy that society had imposed upon her.

5. Conclusion

During the Victorian era, women lived under the shackles of society and family, with the limitations of education and employment exacerbating their passive role in marriage and marginal status in society. Tess, as a microcosm of women in that era, profoundly revealed the backdrop of the times and the cruelty of social reality through her tragic fate.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess's character is complex and multifaceted, exhibiting both her kind and independent nature and her spirit of rebellion, making her an inspiring figure. However, she was unable to escape the various social

shackles. Not only did the poverty of her family impose a heavy economic burden on her, but the hypocritical moral and religious views of society also oppressed her spiritually, contributing to this tragedy.

Tess's tragedy is not just an individual tragedy; it is also a tragedy of the era. Through Tess's character, Thomas Hardy powerfully depicts the complexity of human nature and the indomitable spirit of women's resistance, while also expressing his protest against the hypocritical capitalist norms of the time through Tess's tragedy.

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