

(Re)Viewing Maggie and Tess through the Lens of Standpoint Theory

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Abstract

Literary critics admire George Eliot's touching portrayal of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. Many readers prefer to read Maggie's character as a reworking of Eliot's own life. In this article, I compare Maggie with another famous literary heroine, Tess Durbeyfield of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Tess is a "low-born" country girl whose suffering begins as soon as her family discovers that they have noble connections. Both Maggie and Tess go through hardship and humiliation due to their sense of responsibility and commitment to do the best for their families. Looking at these two characters through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, I argue that Maggie and Tess' social locations, imposed gender-roles, and families' expectations are among the primary causes of their tragedy. As members of the oppressed (gender) group, their epistemologies to understand the reality and to make sense of their social relationships contradict with those of the dominant group—masculine.

Keywords: *Maggie, Tess, Femininity, Masculinity, Standpoint Theory, Epistemology*

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As a postmodern method of inquiry, standpoint theory offers insights into how one's views of the world are shaped by where and when s/he is located in the socio-political landscape. In the broadest sense, "standpoint theory argues that the world may be known only in partial perspectives given to us by where we are situated in the world in terms of class, race, gender, geography, sexual identity, and so forth" (Brummett 173). Feminist standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding argue that women's socio-political positions are powerful sites of epistemology as well as methodology for understanding their material and emotional relationships with those around them. Methodologies based on feminist standpoint theory shed light on the struggles of womanhood in patriarchal societies. Such struggles have been delineated in many literary works. For example, referencing to George Eliot and her heroines, Virginia Woolf wrote:

The burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance—the difference of view, the difference of standard. (Woolf 204)

Here, Woolf implies an important aspect of feminist literary criticism, i.e., women's access to the knowledge of their society and culture. The access, however, has never been easy. Rather, this "access to a male-dominated culture may equally be felt to bring with it alienation, repression, division—a silencing of the 'feminine,' a loss of women's inheritance" (Jacobus 27). Women's difference of view that Woolf mentions is a significant point in feminist standpoint theory. Many theorists in this tradition argue that boys and girls experience their social and physical environments in qualitatively different ways, which lead to differences in their personality. For example, Nancy Chodorow concludes that "in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (368). How might this feminine personality relate to what Jacobus characterizes as the "silencing of the feminine" (27)? How can relations based on feminine affections bring alienation

and repression to women? In this article, I engage these questions by focusing on two literary heroines: Maggie and Tess.

I shall argue that the norms and expectations of society in which George Eliot's Maggie grows up do not let her attain the full human potential. Years of self denial teach her to repress her desires to an extent that she cannot restore her internal resources any more. She has to depend on others for their approval, fear their criticisms, and learn to stay away from risks. As Elizabeth Ermarth succinctly describes, "by internalizing crippling norms, by learning to rely on approval, to fear ridicule and to avoid conflict, Maggie grows up fatally weak. In place of a habit of self-actualization she has learned a habit of self-denial which Philip rightly calls a 'long suicide'" (587). I contend that she commits this long suicide due to the pressures of social expectations stemming from her gender roles. Like Maggie, Thomas Hardy's Tess suffers terribly because of her affection for others, her way of interpreting the reality of outside world, and social and familial expectations. It is not my intention to portray the characters of Maggie and Tess as flawless. In fact, they go through many tormenting human impulses. I shall argue that the factors that play crucial parts in their sufferings include family values, gender roles and limitations, i.e., what a girl should and should not do, love as a reward of submission, society's obstinate view about marriage, rigid masculine attitudes toward forgiveness, and a lack of independent exercise of personal delight and agency. Using feminist standpoint theory as a conceptual framework, I argue that Maggie and Tess face grave tragedies because of their gender roles in social contexts where women are deprived of a full growth of humanity. As such, it is Tess and Maggie's unique standpoint in society that not only provides them with a method of analyzing social reality, but also brings them their plight and suffering.

The origin of standpoint theory can be traced in the works of Hegel and Marx. Based on the Marxist thought that explained how the bourgeoisie and the proletariat experienced alienation in different ways, Lukacs elaborated the proletariat standpoint, which was later taken up by scholars in various fields. According to Au, "In the 1970s and 80s critical feminist scholars...sought to use the framework provided by Lukacs' (1971) proletarian standpoint to develop a feminist standpoint to

challenge both masculinist norms and regressive gender politics” (53). One of the central tenets of the standpoint theory is that the epistemologies of the dominant groups are different from, and often contradict with, the epistemologies of the oppressed groups. Human experiences are shaped by various systems of domination that are organized around issues such as gender, race, sexuality, economic class, nationality, language and so on. In other words, persons’ view of the world is determined by their specific social locations and often oppositional to the views of those who are in different social locations. For this, knowledge is always fragmented and our socially located epistemologies limit our ability to understand other people’s commonsense view of the world. In short, standpoint theory is premised on the belief that knowledge and power are inextricably intertwined and that human relationships are not clearly visible and understandable “because of the differential power relations relative to knowledge production and because of the epistemological limits carried with the viewpoint provided by specific social locations” (Au 53).

Although standpoint theory was originally a product of Hegelian dialectics and Marxist thought, feminist standpoint theorists have placed much emphasis on the justification of truth-claims by focusing on the epistemological domains of feminist politics and theories. According to Heckman, “Throughout the theory’s development, feminist stand-point theorists’ quest for truth and politics has been shaped by two central understandings: that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced” (342). These two understandings of the nature and production of knowledge indicate how every human activity is itself an epistemology, and at the same time is subject to different interpretations. This also leads to an understanding that individuals create their own realities through their activities, which inform their own unique ways of understanding the world around them.

Hartsock provides us with a framework to see how women and men create different realities by taking diverse standpoints. In this regard, there is always a class conflict between the ruling and the ruled. Hartsock explains that “A standpoint, however, carries with it the

contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (*The Feminist Standpoint* 107). Additionally, she makes clear that our material life and social locations determine how we understand our relationships with other individuals and the world around us. However, there exists a relation of domination between various social groups because the dominant groups always label their views as “real” and “authentic” and reject or undermine the views of subaltern groups. Thus, feminist standpoint theory sheds light on our understanding of how women’s experience and epistemology are qualitatively different from those of men.

If we look at the tragedy of Maggie and Tess through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, we will be able to see how their material experiences and social locations dictate their activities. First of all, their roles in family provide them with methods of analysis which are fundamentally different from those of their male counterparts. Maggie has to be very careful of her family values because “there were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine,...so that the daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson” (Eliot 47). What is important here is that it is the Dodson females who have to play all roles to uphold their family values and prestige, although the family does not give them power and autonomy in their activities. The Dodson values do not let the family members distinguish between right and wrong from an objective point of view. Maggie’s friendship with Philip, or transformation of the friendship into love, is evil in her family’s eyes. Moreover, being a kin to Dodson family is more important than being a non-kin good person: “There were some Dodsons less like the family than others—that was admitted—but in so far as they were ‘kin,’ they were of necessity better than those who were no ‘kin’” (Eliot 48). Mrs. Tulliver warns Maggie about certain behaviors to be a good Dodson girl. At the same time, she sends her a cautionary message that if she fails to fulfill her responsibilities, nobody will like her. Further, Mrs. Tulliver tells her, “What is to become of you,

if you're so naughty? I'll tell your aunt Glegg and your aunt Pullet when they come next week, and they'll never love you any more" (Eliot 31).

While Maggie has to pay for violating her family values and principles of kinship, Tess' tragedy begins with her endeavor to discover a kinship. She tries to put "two branches of one family...on visiting terms" (Hardy 27). John Durbeyfield, Tess' father, meets a local parson who tells him that the Durbeyfields are descendents of the famous D'Urbervilles. Joan Durbeyfield, Tess' mother, proposes that Tess go to the D'Urbervilles and seek money or work. Although Tess initially does not like the idea, she has to accept it in order to save her family. Thus, family has tremendous influences on both Maggie and Tess. Their stories can be compared with those of ancient girls and women who gave up their chastity in order to survive periods of famine and protect their families. In those times, impoverished parents/husbands sold their daughters/wives into slavery which led them to (forced) prostitution. In this way, "by the middle of the second millennium B.C., prostitution was well established as a likely occupation for the daughters of the poor" (Lerner 134). Although prostitution may seem an extreme analogy to describe Maggie and Tess' sufferings, it clearly shows how these two young women face humiliation and sacrifice their personal delights and agency to protect their families.

Both Maggie and Tess are unable to claim the greatness of soul due to their imposed gender-roles and expectations. Maggie's family does not recognize her genius. The way her mother treats her is indicative of her inferior position in the family. Her unruly hair and physical robustness are among her shortcomings as a Dodson girl. Although she is very clever, by ignoring her genius and not taking her education seriously, her family gives her an impression that she is inferior to Tom. When Maggie goes to visit Tom, the latter says, "Girls can't do Euclid: can they, sir?" Mr. Stelling, Tom's teacher, replies, "They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay. They've a great deal of superficial cleverness: but they couldn't go far into anything. They are quick and shallow" (Eliot 158). Being intelligent and beautiful is a double-edged sword for Maggie. Mr. Tulliver thinks, "It's no mischief much while she is a little un, but an over 'cute woman's no better not a long-tailed

sheep—she'll fetch none the bigger price for that" (Eliot 15). In spite of natural genius, beauty, and responsibility toward family, Maggie is portrayed as a mistake of nature.

Similarly, we see Tess beaten down by both internal and external forces that play the part of fate in her tragedy. Tess shows great responsibility for her family, but at the same time she has to face Alec's evil motive. Although Tess is severely wronged by Alec, she is unable to protest against it. She suffers everything silently, and her growth as a complete human being becomes limited. This limitation of the external growth of self helps develop a soul capable of great feeling and exaltation. Hiding all sorrows in her heart, she starts working in a dairy farm. This suffering makes her feelings very keen and sharp. When Angel stops loving her, she cries, "I thought, Angel, that you loved me—me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so?" (Hardy 228). In her speech we see a certain exaltation and nobility of soul and how she feels the pain in her highly sensitive soul. In this sense, the genius and greatness of soul bring suffering for both Maggie and Tess. This story of suffering relates to one of the foundational claims of feminist standpoint theory that "If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse" (Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power* 232). The vision of happiness and pain that Maggie and Tess possess is qualitatively different from that of the male characters in the novels. The women's standpoint enables them to feel the sufferings caused by both internal and external forces, and the loftiness of their heart offers them a unique way of looking at others who surround their lives. However, the vision of ruling gender—masculine—becomes partial and perverse as it fails to see the agony of Maggie and Tess.

In both *The Mill* and *Tess* we see love as a reward of submission. Tom's love for Maggie is a reward of her submission. Maggie cannot imagine her existence without her brother's love, but Tom enjoys his sister's dependency on him. The narrator describes Maggie's mental condition by saying: "What use was anything if Tom didn't love her?"

(Eliot 40). Tom never realizes the depth of his sister's love for him until they drown at the end of the novel. Sometimes he seems to be affectionate to Maggie but his affection is very shallow and temporary. The narrator reminds us that Tom "was very fond of her sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong" (Eliot 44). In *Tess*, Alec seems to be caring for Tess, but he does everything to fulfill his erotic desires. He does not mind the "foolish thing" of Tess because she is dependent on him. While explaining her reason for coming to the D'Urberville family, Tess says, "It is so very foolish; I fear I cannot tell you." Alec *kindly* replies, "Never mind; I like foolish things. Try again, my dear." In the same conversation, we also see Alec looking at Tess "in a way that made her blush a little" (41). In actuality, Alec does not care for Tess as a human being; he only wants the femininity that exists in her. We notice Alec "giving far more attention to Tess's moonlit person than to any wayside object" (73). Tess's *moonlit person* is more desirable for him than her complete being. He does not truly love her; he only wants to fulfill his sexual desires.

Similarly, Angel's love for Tess is nothing but a reward for her submission. When Angel wants to marry Tess, she proposes that they wait until Angel is "quite settled" in his farm. Angel answers: "To tell the truth, my Tess, I don't like you to be left anywhere away from my influence and sympathy" (Hardy 203). In Angel's eye, Tess is a person whom he can influence to do what he wants her to do, and at the same time he can sympathize her if she does anything against his will. Angel does not want Tess to live a fully independent life. Her individual growth and independence are subject to Angel's "influence and sympathy." The narrator also informs us that Tess catches Angel's "manner and habits, his speech and phrases, his likings and aversions" (Hardy 204). Angel loves Tess as long as she is a passive recipient of his influence and sympathy. However, as soon as she reveals her past, Angel ceases to love her. This revelation seems to contradict with his idealized persona of Tess. He does not want to see a Tess any different from his own vision. Both Alec and Angel exploit Tess' helplessness, one economic and the other emotional. Alec accepts her "foolish things" so long as her

“moonlit person” pleases him, and Angel loves her as long as she is receptive to his influence and sympathy and does not contradict with his own idealized vision of beauty. Thus, both Maggie and Tess receive love as a reward of their submission. When viewed through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, it seems that Maggie and Tess’ vision of love is constructed by their social locations. Their material conditions as well as socially felt need to be loved by men provide them with a unique vision of love. This vision of love is fundamentally different from that of the men whose standpoint is shaped by their own social locations.

Like love, marriage is also used as a tool of convenience for men. In *The Mill*, we do not see any marriage as what Margaret Fuller would call “a union of souls” (1639). Mr. Tulliver explains why he chose his wife, “I picked the mother because she wasn’t o’er ’cute—bein’ a good-looking woman too, an’ come of a rare family for managing—but I picked her from her sisters o’ purpose ’cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn’t a-goin’ to be told the rights o’ things by my own fireside” (Eliot 22). We also see how people prioritize family over personal virtue and righteousness when it comes to marital decision making. When Philip wants to marry Maggie, his father disagrees. The former tries to present Maggie as “a helpless girl, who has too much sense and goodness to share their narrow prejudices” and who “never enter[s] into the family quarrels” (Eliot 443). All these praises are not enough to convince Mr. Wakem who clearly expresses his view that, “We don’t ask what a woman does—we ask whom she belongs to” (443). This is how Mr. Wakem ignores all of Maggie’s good qualities due to her parentage.

We also see marriage of convenience in *Tess*. Angel explains the purpose of his marriage to his father: “In the farming business he would require eyes in the back of his head to see to all matters—some one would be necessary to superintend the domestic labours of his establishment whilst he was afield” (Hardy 162). Angel does not dare to tell his father that he loves Tess and this is why he wants to marry her. Mr. Clare, Angel’s father, replies, “I was going to add that for a pure and saintly woman you will not find one more to your true advantage, and certainly not more to your mother’s mind and my own, than your friend Mercy, whom you used to show a certain interest in” (Hardy 163). Mr.

Clare's diction indicates that he wants a woman for his son's "advantage," and his own religious belief is also very important here because the woman should be "pure and saintly." While his father emphasizes a "pure and saintly" woman who will be an "advantage" for him, Angel needs a good worker for his farm. The important thing for him is the extent to which she can contribute to his economic prosperity. When Angel and his father have these attitudes, Mrs. Clare, Angel's mother, asks him, "Is she [Tess] of a family such as you would care to marry into—a lady, in short?" (163). Her opinion resonates with that of Mr. Wakem of *Tess* who says, "We don't ask what a woman does—we ask whom she belongs to" (Eliot 443). This is how marriage becomes a tool of family convenience rather than a union in the souls. Looking at this issue of marriage from the perspective of standpoint theory, I argue that the male characters in *The Mill* and *Tess* define good brides in terms of their ability to produce subsistence. I support this argument by Hartsock's illustration of mode of production and its role in standpoint theory. Building on Marxist thought, she writes that humans are "what they do in the course of production of subsistence, each means of producing subsistence should be expected to carry with it *both* social relations *and* relations to the world of nature, which express the social understanding contained in that mode of production" (*The Feminist Standpoint* 108). Thus, while men are concerned with division of labor and production of subsistence, both Maggie and Tess cherish marriage as a relationship of love and affection.

With shattered vision of love and marriage, Maggie and Tess are denied forgiveness throughout their life. When Tom learns that the rabbits are dead, he becomes very angry with Maggie and says that he does not love her any more. This breaks Maggie's heart; she begs his forgiveness, but Tom refuses to forgive her. Maggie cries, "I'd forgive you, if *you* forgot anything—I wouldn't mind what you did—I'd forgive you and love you" (Eliot 39). In the beginning of Book Seventh, Maggie comes back to Tom and wants to tell him everything, but Tom rejects her: "You will find no home with me....You don't belong to me" (Eliot 503). One might argue that Maggie is aimless and her sudden falling in love with Stephen does not show socially acceptable development of her

intelligence and wisdom. But, I would counter-argue that this claim ignores the difficult situations Maggie goes through. She cries, “Tom, I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant give way to my feelings. I struggled against them” (Eliot 504). Maggie’s passionate cry bears no fruits as Tom does not forgive her. Like Maggie, Tess faces the same situation when she begs forgiveness. She tells Angel, “I am not that deceitful woman you think me!” Angel replies, “H’m—well. Not deceitful; but not the same. No, not the same” (Hardy 231). Tess forgives Angel for his past, but Angel does not. Tess shares the same greatness of heart with Maggie who tells Tom that she would forgive him if he made the same mistake. However, we see both Tom and Angel as pitiless individuals who are devoid of compassion and ability to forgive others. The following conversation between Tess and Angel shows the latter’s rigidity and lack of empathy.

“Angel!—Angel! I was a child—a child when it happened! I knew nothing of men.’

‘You were more sinned against than sinning, that I admit.’

‘Then will you not forgive me?’

‘I do forgive you. But forgiveness is not all.’

‘And love me?’

To this question he did not answer” (Hardy 232).

In both stories of Maggie and Tess, it is clear that only women forgive men, but not vice versa. The vision available to Maggie and Tess as members of an oppressed group does not let them fulfill their personal delights by exercising their agency. Both of them show the greatness of heart, but Tom and Angel do not compromise with their own vision of love, marriage, and family. Their rigid masculine mentality fails to recognize the affection and grace that Maggie and Tess possess. This can be explained by George Eliot’s own words written to her friend Mrs. Robert Lytton:

We women are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections; and though our affections are perhaps the best gifts we have, we ought also to have our share of the more independent life—some joy in things for their own sake. It is piteous to see the helplessness of some sweet women when their affections are disappointed....They have never contemplated an independent delight

in ideas as an experience which they could confess without being laughed at. (qtd. in Ermarth 595)

A lack of this contemplation of “an independent delight” leads Maggie to a sea of misery. Melancholia becomes her constant companion, and she likes to take the side of rejected lovers in stories. Her self-torturing is clearly audible in Philip’s speech:

And you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dulness all the highest powers of your nature... Stupefaction is not resignation: and it is stupefaction to remain in ignorance—to shut up all the avenues by which the life of your fellow-men might become known to you... You are not resigned: you are only trying to stupefy yourself. (Eliot 340)

We see the same kind of melancholia in Tess as well. She cannot make any choice for her personal delight and happiness. If one compares her with a puppet, then the strings are in the hands of Alec and Angel. How she is oppressed and how she feels melancholic are apparent in Angel’s speech, “I fancy you seem oppressed, Tessy.” Tess replies, “Yes...I tremble at many things. It is all so serious, Angel” (213). Thus, Maggie and Tess are always denied an independent exercise of their personal delights and agency. When viewed from the perspective of feminist standpoint theory, their sufferings relate to their affective relations with others. Most theorists in this tradition believe that boys and girls grow up with different types of relationships with individuals around them. Regarding the contrasts in developing gender identity between girls and boys, Chodorow believes that “because her mother is around, and she has had a genuine relationship to her as a person, a girl’s gender and gender role identification are mediated by and depend upon real affective relations” (374).

Angel is paired, at the end of *Tess*, with Liza-Lu, “a spiritualized image of Tess, slighter than she, but with the same beautiful eyes” (396). We do not know how long Tess’ death will haunt Angel, but at least his life does not stop. He feels sorry, but “as soon as they [he and Liza-Lu] had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on” (398). Maybe one day Tess’ memories will become blurry in his mind and he will be

happy with Liza-Lu, but it is Tess, a woman, who pays all prices. Maggie, too, dies with all her desires unfulfilled. Throughout her entire life, she desperately wants her brother's love. She loves Tom selflessly but never gets his love in return. In addition, the family and society impose various values on Maggie and Tess, assign them particular gender roles, and thus make them vulnerable. They are also deprived of love; if they get any, it is a reward of their submission. Moreover, society's rigid view about marriage brings their tragedy to the climax. Mr. Wakem rejects Maggie, and Angel wants a wife who can be a good worker for his farm. Angel's and Tom's attitude toward forgiveness is another cause of suffering for Tess and Maggie. Both men are too prejudiced and rigid to forgive others, whereas both women are always willing to forgive.

A reading of Maggie and Tess through the lens of feminist standpoint theory enables us to see how their femininity is constructed in sharp contrast with the masculinity of their male counterparts. The activities of Maggie and Tess give them epistemologies to understand the material reality, and their understanding of the reality is shaped by their specific social locations. Their vision of reality and fulfillment of personal and social desires always contradict with those of the men they encounter. As Hartsock explains:

Women and men, then, grow up with personalities affected by different boundary experiences, differently constructed and experienced inner and outer worlds, and preoccupations with different relational issues. This early experience forms an important ground for the female sense of self as connected to the world and the male sense of self as separate, distinct, and even disconnected. (*The Feminist Standpoint* 117)

Thus, individuals in one particular socio-economic location can hardly realize the pain and sufferings of those in a *different* social location. The plight of Maggie and Tess attests to the claim of feminist standpoint theory that material life and class positions structure and influence individuals' ability to understand social relationships. In spite of having greatness of heart, two young women studied in this article are always tormented by external forces such as Maggie's responsibility for her father and Tess' waiting for Angel when he is abroad. In conclusion,

all these factors play their parts in the tragedy of Maggie and Tess mainly because they are females in a social context where women are deprived of a full and independent growth of humanity. By making the characters of Maggie and Tess extremely tragic, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy probably send this message to us.

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