

# The Causes of Tess's Tragedy

Kun Yu

Public Foreign Languages Department, Jilin Normal University

Siping 136000, Jilin, China

E-mail: yukunannie@163.com

## Abstract

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the masterpiece of British famous critical realistic writer Thomas Hardy, describes the misfortune of a poor peasant girl Tess, the cause of which has always been the concern of people. This paper will practically explore Tess's tragic fate as the result of industrialization and patriarchal society, which will help the reader to understand Hardy's *Tess of d'Urbervilles* from a new angle.

**Keywords:** *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess, Industrialization, Patriarchal society

## The Destructive Impact of Industrialization

There have appeared in recent years the thoughtful studies of *Tess* by English critics Douglas Brown and Arnold Kettle, which see Tess as victim of a social disintegration that has been caused by the coming of a social disintegration that has been caused by the coming of industrialization to the countryside.

The tragedies Hardy writes are unfolded in Wessex, the background against which the tragedy happens. Wessex is more fully and ambitiously conceptualized in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* than in any other novel, whose ranges are specifically laid out of the actions of the book.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century England, enormous numbers of country people left for the cities, agricultural laborers were the worst paid, and the worst paid agricultural laborers were in Dorset. The year 1830 saw a march on London of impoverished laborers from all over the south of England from Kent to Dorset. Children younger than six were working in the fields. The poverty of the agricultural laborers, the inflated price of basic foods and the misery that had always accompanied widespread unemployment were close facts to Hardy during his childhood. Mechanization of the sort Hardy symbolized in the threshing machine in *Tess* brought a new sort of farming, streamlined, on a large scale, and technical. But for the laborers there were few benefits. More intensive farming did not create more jobs and the work often became less varied and required only at certain seasons of the year. The widespread poverty provided much of Hardy's concern with the plight of the laborers. Unemployment, being turned out of tied cottages, seasonal labor, new mechanized techniques in farms, new accounting techniques in business, gradations and differences between the employers and the employed, the impact of the towns and educated men on the rural scene: these are the realistic situations readers meet in the Wessex novels described by Hardy which reflect very truly the problems for Dorset laborers right through and beyond the middle years of the century.

In the thirty years between 1870 and 1900, 300,000 agricultural workers left the countryside for cities. Labor on farms became increasingly precarious and laborers moved from one seasonal employment to another. It is a phenomenon readers meet in *Tess* when the dairymaids move on to winter world drawing reeds and grubbing turnips for Farmer Groby at Flintcomb –Ash.

The great social historian Trevelyan wrote, "The greatest single event of the Seventies (1870s), fraught with immeasurable consequences for the future, was the collapse of agriculture" (Trevelyan, 1982: 34). Hardy realized that the collapse of agriculture was inevitable, in the due process of history and economics. There was a rigid social caste system, according to stratum or class, and not entirely on possessions. Human beings were kept coldly in compartments. To some extent class distinction was founded on education and manner of speech and dress in days when schooling and nice clothes were out of the question for laborers' children. Poverty and despair surrounded every village and too many laborers drowned their sorrows in drinking. As regards the Durberfield family, the old horse Prince was the only source of life making and its death plunged the whole family into an economic blind alley. So it was the poverty of the Durbeyfield family that brought Tess across the path of Alec in the first place, and it was Alec's ability to provide for the family that brought Tess to "sell" herself to him at the close of the book. There was always great difficulty of earning enough to ensure physical survival for the Durbeyfields. In her adversity Tess sent her mother 20 pounds to repair the family house. After

John's death, the family was evicted out of their leased house because life hold could not be renewed. They were forced to settle down beside their ancestors' vault.

Hardy wrote *Tess* during what turned out to be nearly the last years of a massive but complex shift in the nation's economic forces, whose effects accorded it the name 'the Great Depression'. Agriculture was especially hard hit. Corn-growing counties suffered and the workers in them were at low economic state in 1888-90. No county was of a less urban culture or economy than Dorset, with its milch-cows and orchards and grain fields, its near total lack of industry. Hardy recognized that an entire way of life crucial to his deepest emotional reactions had been steadily eroded since his birth in 1840. In the Preface to *Tess*, Hardy states that 'the novel embodies the views of life prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century', and not those of an earlier and simple generation' (Hardy, 1840: 11). *Tess* portrays simultaneously the energy of traditional ways and the strength of the forces which are destroying them. The disintegration of agriculture ---- a process that had its roots deep in the past --- had reached its final and tragic stage. The death of the horse, Prince, is a striking symbol of the struggles of the peasantry. It suggests that the means of production on which peasants have been depending is completely defeated. The peasantry disintegrated and the yeoman class of peasants became proletarians. They had to look for a new way out in the capitalist society. Losing the dependence and facing the threat of poverty, Tess had to go out to look for a way out. She became an employee of the d'Urbervilles, representative of bourgeois upstart. So the ruin of Tess by Alec is symbolic of the ruin of the peasantry by the capitalists who have taken over farming. After her seduction Tess sinks lower and lower on the social scale. She hopes to break out of her wage-slavery by marrying Angel but is cruelly frustrated. She goes to Flintcomb-Ash and there becomes a thoroughgoing member of the working class. The scene of threshing is particularly important, a symbol of the dehumanized relationships of the new capitalist farms. In another sense, *Tess* records the disintegration and destruction of the English peasantry and its sphere is the more generalized movement of human destiny during a particular period.

And therefore the bankruptcy of agriculture and the destruction of the peasants are the very root of the tragedy around Tess and in her family.

The deepest contradiction, for Salleh, in capitalism is not the ownership of the means of production that is identified by Marxism, but the psychosexual domination of men over women and therefore over nature. That is the treatment of both women and nature as resources and limitless commons to be exploited and as sources of externalities to be poisoned and discarded.

### **The Hypocrisy of Patriarchy**

Thomas Hardy has a developing conception of tragedy in the process of his novel creation. The development illustrates itself clearly in his four representative tragic novels *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, especially in the four principal characters Eustacia, Henchard, Tess and Jude of the novels. He describes Eustacia as a "tragedy of fate", Henchard as a "tragedy of character", Tess and Jude as "tragedies of society."

When he wrote *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, he became fully aware that the human tragedy resulted far more from society than characters themselves.

Tess is a typical female tragedy, as Jude in *Jude the Obscure* and Henchard are typically male tragedies, considering the convention and the bourgeois morality of her time, which set double moral standards for man and woman. Tess desires to maintain her integrity, yet she is torn between social injustices. Being cornered, she has to rebel against society. Unfortunately her rebellion is requited with a fatal punishment from society. It is obviously a social tragedy. For the first time, Hardy associates tragedy with society, launching a direct criticism of the morality, religion and law of the Victorian society. This is a great development of his understanding of tragedy. Tess is more than the history of a woman's life and death; it is also an indictment of 'Justice,' human and divine, as the Oresteia is its vindication.

The last years of the nineteenth century were the Victorian period. Victorian morality imposed rigid norm on women, which demanded women to be pure. The loss of virginity was a fatal blow to Tess as she was turned against and crushed by the social convention, and consequently, suffered endlessly till she lost hope in retrieving her virginity and was forced to reach her self-fulfillment in her own way. Thus Tess's tragedy took place in such a particular historical and social background.

In the world, Tess, made to transgress codified morality, would inevitably face a pilgrimage leading to tragedy. Men and women are unable to regard each other as anything but a being apart, she is made to conform to a higher moral standard for woman than for man. In the man-dominated society, woman has to suffer the injustices of man-made law, the law by which man and woman are not equally treated in terms of morality. "Then shall the

man be guiltless, but the woman shall bear her iniquity.” This notorious moral injustice takes its root in its society. As Leon Wald-off indicates, the use of double standard in sexual matters is the essential feature of the Victorian society. This is why Tess, being violated by Alec, unfairly suffers from being morally and socially spurned and punished while Alec remains free from any social reprimands. It is obvious that Hardy is protesting against the moral injustice that society makes for woman.

Tess’s tragic fate is closely related to two men: Alec the rake and Angel the saint. Guerard speaks of Tess’ destruction as occurring first because of Alec’s relentlessly seeking his own pleasure but then also because of Angel’s prudery.

According to the Victorian customs, a man could live a dissipating life as he had once done while a woman could not. The double standard for man and woman make it impossible for Angel to forgive Tess. In fact, his unfair standard for Tess is quiet representative, because “the male demand for purity in woman and the use of the double standard in sexual matters are essential features of the social life of the nineteenth century.” Angel is still dominated by the conventional custom and the bourgeois view of morality. Bound up by the bondage, Angel exposes his class prejudice. He taunts Tess that person from different societies has different manners. He blames Tess for her humble status and her family that he thinks is the causes of her committing the disgraceful sin. Just as Hardy commented: With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well – meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings (Hardy, 1979: 221). He is the fundamental cause of Tess’s tragedy.

Alec, with his first seduction of Tess and later relentless pursuit of her, is the direct cause of Tess’s tragedy.

Alec is not a whole man, but only part of man who is the personification of a certain kind of male sexuality. He is fascinated by Tess because there is “something” about her that he cannot understand: Tess seeks love while he does not know the difference between love and lust. Thus he cannot cope with a truly good and morally whole person like Tess, who has more in her than her sexual attractions. The other, higher dimension is a threat to Alec, and he destroys her because he can do nothing else. He is so taken with Tess’s sexuality that he determines to possess her regardless of her inward feelings. The inward Tess remains shut off from him just as the inward Tess was unknown to Angel.

From a feminist perspective, what is significant is Hardy’s continual development of parallels that indicate how, as Mickelson puts it, Angel and Alec “are one and the same man. Their concept of woman reflects society’s view of her and the myths constructed about women” (Stave, 1995: 109). That society, it is necessary to remember, is informed by Christianity and characterized by patriarchy.

Angel and Alec share the assumption that they are entitled to the power to determine Tess’ actions and being; neither man seeks her out as a loving, equal partner. Alec reveals his feelings of superiority initially on the ride in the Chase, when he exclaims, “what am I, to be repulsed so by a mere chit likes you” (Hardy, 1979: 98)? Clearly he assumes a cultural right, by virtue of class and gender, to possess Tess’ body. Later, after he has proposed to Tess, he reveals his motive to be not love but a desire for power when he states: “I was your master once! I will be your master again.” (Hardy, 1979: 355) Angel’s desire for mastery has less to do with Tess’ body, but it nevertheless parallels Alec’s attitude. Even before she has agreed to marry him, he is already presuming to order her to change her last name to d’Urberville. Once she agrees to the match, he tells her he will carry her off “as his property” (Hardy, 1979: 39); his language reveals his sense of the power dynamics at work in their relationship. Even after what may be seen as his night journey in the wilds of South America, what ultimately brings him back to Tess is the memory of her obedience and docility – how she “had hung upon his words as if they were a god’s” (Hardy, 1979: 364). A product of Victorian culture, Angel cannot conceive of a relationship of equality with a woman; in his mind, his gender determines his superiority.

Hardy fuses Angel and Alec yet again when he rhetorically identifies them as figures of death insofar as Tess is concerned. Early on, Tess views Alec as “dust and ashes” (Hardy, 1979: 110), death images which are later echoed when he rises from a tomb in the dark cathedral. Similarly, Angel’s affection causes Tess to flinch “like a plant in too burning a sun” (Hardy, 1979:199); instead of jumping off a sarcophagus, he places Tess on one as he sleepwalks, dreaming she is dead. When he returns from South America, he looks like a skeleton, a figure of death, as he seeks out Tess. Together, both men do of course bring Tess to her death. Neither by himself possesses the power, but at the point where the two intersect, where both make claims upon her at once, the power of the patriarchy becomes greater than Tess’ power, and she is destroyed.

From the beginning to the end of the novel, Tess is kept torn between Alec and Angel, neither of whom could be better than the other. It seems that she now jumps out of the frying pan into the fire and then out of the fire into the frying pan. She seems to be torn between the two men. In fact, she is torn between the evil social force and

the hypocritical religion in characterization of Alec and the conventionality, Christian morality and bourgeois view of class distinction in characterization of Angel. Therefore, Tess is virtually a victim of injustices. As a representative of the peasants of the old and patriarchal society ruined by the rising commercial class represented by Alce, Tess is bound to confront a tragic fate in the unfair capitalist society. In this sense, Tess is torn by society and her tragedy is made inevitable by society, too.

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