

Is Thomas Hardy's 'Tess' A Murderer Or A Victim Of Society's Cruelty And Ruthlessness?

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Abstract

Are criminals born or made? I take this question as the main objective of my presentation. Especially, how innocent women are turned into intolerable, stone-hearted characters. To support my idea, I have taken Thomas Hardy's novel, Tess of the d'Urbervilles. The novel is renowned for its heroine as well as its tragic plot. The novel traces the difficult life of Tess Durbeyfield, whose victimization at the hands of men eventually leads to her horrific downfall. A woman's home life, upbringing, inconsistent affection, physical abuse, and inconsistent discipline could result in criminality. Tess is a tender soul, who loves others immensely and she even shed tears for the death of her horse. She feels remorse and takes the responsibility for the death of her horse, Prince, and she takes the burden of her family on her shoulders at a very young age itself. She crosses many intricate and difficult phases that bring in her a lot of changes in the course of the play and she becomes a coldhearted murderer at the end.

Key Words: Tess Durbeyfield, Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare, Sorrow, love, cruelty.

Introduction

About the author

Thomas Hardy is well-known for his powerfully visual novels, which are concerned with the inexorability of human

destiny. His works unfold against a rural background drawn as elegies for vanishing country ways, but they also provide much-needed comic relief. Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset and the fictitious Wessex, where he sets most of his novels, is clearly inspired by south-west England. Son of a stonemason, and trained as an architect, he wrote in his spare time until the success of *Far From The Madding Crowd* (1874). He could then give up architecture for writing, and marry Emma Gifford, whom he had met in Cornwall in 1870.

Between 1874 and 1895, he wrote over a dozen novels and collections of stories, including *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). After the adverse reception of the savagely bleak *Jude the Obscure* (1895), he turned to poetry, which he continued to write and publish throughout the rest of his life.

By the end of the 19th century, he had attained international reputation and a wide circle of literary friends. His changed circumstances led his and Emma's interests to diverge; in many of his novels, impulsive passion in characters leads to their disaster. The rift between Hardy and his wife increased due to Emma's objection to the unremitting gloom of *Jude the Obscure*, and its pessimistic view of marriage. However, after her death in 1912, Hardy suffered deep remorse; a visit to the Cornish coast where he had met Emma produced a stream of magnificent poems in her memory, published as *Poems of 1912-13*. In 1914, he married his much younger secretary, Florence Dugdale. Hardy died at Max Gate on 11 January. His body was buried at Westminster Abbey in Poet's Corner, while his heart was buried in Stinson, England, near the graves of his ancestors and his first wife, Emma. His second wife was later buried near her husband

Article

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a tragic novel of a young girl named Tess who goes through many struggles in her life and due to her innocence and youth ends up "violated by one man and forsaken by another" (Heap). The novel's protagonist Tess Durbeyfield is a beautiful, loyal young

woman living with her impoverished family in the village of Marlott. Tess takes the responsibility of her family at a very young age and tries to help her family as much as possible by doing all sorts of works. As soon as she leaves school, she lends a hand at haymaking or harvesting on neighbouring farms. She also involves in milking or butter-making processes, which she learnt when her father owned cows; being deft-fingered, it is a kind of work in which she excels.

Tess is compassionate not only to her family, but also towards her horse Prince. The death of her horse is an accident, but Tess takes the blame by stating that she has killed the horse. She tries her level best to save Prince. "In her despair Tess sprang forward and put her hand upon the hole, with the only result that she became splashed from face to skirt with the crimson drops" (Tess of the d'Urbervilles 41). She has mentioned about the horse in many contexts in the novel and whenever she talks about the horse, it brings her remorse and she cries over its death: "'I—killed him!' she answered, her eyes filling with tears as she gave particulars of Prince's death. 'And I don't know what to do for father on account of it!'" (Tess of the d'Urbervilles 56).

Tess does not want to accept the job of tending fowls in the d'Urberville estate. However, she has no choice but to accept as the only means of the family, Prince is no more. She has had an intuition that something wrong may happen, and so she asks her parents whether she can stay with them but she is forced to go. 'I would rather stay here with father and you,' she said. 'But why?' 'I'd rather not tell you why, mother; indeed, I don't quite know why.' (Tess of the d'Urbervilles 60) Tess is disappointed as she is not supported even by her family. This trip turns her whole life. Tess becomes the caretaker of Alec's blind mother's poultry, and she moves to The Slopes to take up the position. While in residence at the d'Urbervilles, Alec seduces and rapes Tess; she could have lived with him to lead a financially stable life, but Tess leaves him.

Tess returns home and gives birth to a son; she names him "Sorrow", the product of the rape, and works as a field worker on nearby farms. Though it is not an expected child,

she showers motherly love towards her baby. When little Sorrow becomes ill, she is scattered and she prays: 'O merciful God, have pity; have pity upon my poor baby!' she cried. 'Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!' (Tess of the d'Urbervilles 137). However, the baby dies, leaving Tess devastated. Tess spends a miserable year at home before deciding to seek work elsewhere.

Tess makes another journey away from home to nearby Talbothays Dairy to become a milkmaid to a good-natured dairyman, Mr.Crick. At Talbothays, Tess has a period of contentment and happiness. She meets a man named Angel Clare, who turns out to be the man from the May Day dance at the beginning of the novel. Tess and Angel slowly fall in love, and eventually, she accepts his proposal of marriage. Still, she is troubled by pangs of conscience and feels she should tell Angel about her past. She writes a confessional note and slips it under his door, but it slides under the carpet and Angel never sees it.

After their wedding, Angel and Tess both confess their indiscretions. Angel tells Tess about an affair he had with an older woman in London, and Tess tells Angel about her past event. Tess forgives Angel, but Angel cannot forgive Tess. Angel's father quotes bible verses stating he's found a perfect woman. "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. She riseth while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household. She girdeth her loins with strength and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; her candle goeth not out by night. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her"(Tess of the d'Urbervilles 385 ,386). Angel's parents have a strong feeling that only a woman who's virtuously good in their house cores and perfect in everything is an ideal wife. Angel Clare has the feeling that Tess is unfit to be his wife so he gives her some money and boards a ship bound for Brazil, where he thinks he might establish a farm. He tells Tess that he will try to accept her past, but warns her not to try to join him until he comes for her.

Tess returns home to find her mother recovering from her illness, but her father, John, dies suddenly from an unknown ailment. The burden of her family's welfare falls on Tess' shoulders. Destitute now and homeless (they have been evicted from their cottage), the Durbeyfields have nowhere to go. Tess knows that she cannot resist Alec's money and the comforts her family can use. Furthermore, Alec insists that Angel will never return and has abandoned her — an idea that Tess has already come to believe herself. Alec reminds her about her family situation, and promises her that if she marries him, he would take the burden of her family “Tess’s heart quivered—he was touching her in a weak place. He had divined her chief anxiety. Since returning home her soul had gone out to those children with an affection that was passionate” (Tess of the d’Urbervilles 512).

In the meantime, Angel returns from Brazil to look for Tess and to begin his own farm in England. When Angel finds Tess' family, Joan informs him that Tess has gone to Sandbourne, a fashionable seaside resort in the south of England. Angel finds Tess there, living as an upper-class lady with Alec d'Urberville. In the meeting with Angel, Tess asks him to leave and not return for her. Angel does leave, resigned that he had judged Tess too harshly and returned too late.

After her meeting with Angel, Tess confronts Alec and accuses him of lying to her about Angel. In a fit of anger and fury, Tess stabs Alec through the heart with a carving knife, killing him.

“My little sisters and brothers and my mother’s needs— they were the things you moved me by ... and you said my husband would never come back—never;! She continued: ‘And he is dying—he looks as if he is dying! ... And my sin will kill him and not kill me! ... torn my life all to pieces ... made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again! ... My own true husband will never, never—O God—I can’t bear this!—I cannot!’ (Tess of the d’Urbervilles 558).

Angel has trouble believing Tess’ story but welcomes her back. The two travel the countryside via back

roads to avoid detection. Their plan is to make for a port and leave the country as soon as possible. They spend a week in a vacant house, reunited in bliss for a short time. They are discovered, however, and the trail ends at Stonehenge, the ancient pagan monument, when the police arrest Tess and take her away. Before she is executed for her crime, Tess has Angel promise to marry her sister Liza Lu once she is gone. Angel agrees and he, along with Liza Lu, witnesses a black flag raised in the city of Wintonchester, signifying that Tess' death sentence has been carried out. The two, Angel and Liza Lu, leave together, and the tragic tale of Tess ends.

Throughout the play Tess suffers at the hands of her family and the society and thus an innocent young girl is transformed into a ruthless murderer. Tess is not only a victim of society, in fact a victim of sex too. Her life is one long series of troubles and sufferings. The act of the rape is the cause of Tess's enormous suffering, which leads into the terrible depression. Who is really guilty of Tess's death? Is Tess a real murderer or a victim? Without doubt, society is guilty of Tess's death. In the novel, Hardy presents a world in which the human spirit is battered down by the forces, not of fate, but of social hierarchy. Tess's eventual death, one of the most famous in literature, is a direct result of human cruelty and ruthlessness.

Our society expects women to be polite, disciplined, ethical, empathetic, compassionate and responsible. The reality is if we treat women with due respect and give her the space she expects, for sure, she will be the greatest treasure to a family and the society. On the other hand, be sure, if you try to touch her self-respect or ego she will show you the hell in earth. Let's not treat women in an unfair, provocative and cruel manner and create victims like Tess.

Works Cited

Tess of the d'Urbervilles By Thomas Hardy: Published by Planet eBook.