

Males, Females and Attractions in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the main characters in one of Hardy major novels. Unlike the traditional critical approaches which focus on the victimisation of the main heroin we argue that it is actually her wrong choices that lead to her downfall although she always has the right option at hand. By juxtaposing Alec and Angel we try uncover a new concept of the mail character in the novel claiming that the one who is usually considered to be antagonistic – Alec, seems to be the better choice after all.*

Key words: Character, plot, morals, tragedy

INTRODUCTION

When *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was published about 121 years ago its reception was rather dubious. Some claimed that it was "in many respects his finest work he has yet produced, and its superiority is largely due to a profound moral earnestness which has not always been conspicuous in his writing" [1, p. 186]. Others, like Mrs. Oliphant in the *Blackwood's* asked "Against whom is he so angry? Against 'the divinities', who are so immoral – who push the vices of the fathers on the children? Against God? – who does not ask us whether we wish to be created; who gives us but one chance, etc." [1, p. 213] and concludes that his "indignant anti-religion becomes occasionally very droll, if not amusing" [1, p. 213]. A famous anecdote has it that a parson even burnt a copy of the book and having learned this Hardy exclaimed that perhaps he did it in his desperation of not being able to burn him.

It was first printed in the *Graphic* from 4 July to 26 December 1891 but the editor had found two episodes, which Hardy described as more especially addressed to adult readers, as disturbing and were first printed elsewhere. This necessitated some changes to the original plot such as the introduction of a mock marriage and the omission of the encounter of the painter of texts in chapter twelve. However, when the book was published as a book the original texts and chronology was restored.

MAIN BODY

Some of the incidents in the novel come from Hardy's own experience. He told a friend that the story about how the father of Tess met Parson Tringham "occurred under my own eyes. I was standing at the street corner of a little town in this county when a tipsy man swaggered past me singing 'I've-got a-great family vault-over at-(etc., as in the novel). I enquired of some bystanders and learnt that all he had sung was quite true and that he represented one of the oldest of our Norman families. The story grew up from this and was supplemented by other facts"¹. The other facts being the death of Prince, the Durbeyfield horse and the spreading blood stain on the ceiling of "The Herons". They both originated in newspaper reports of actual incidents. And Hardy's notebook where he recorded curious facts that impressed him in one way or another contains at least three incidents of night collisions. Other incidents in the plot have also been traced from actual life and from such he managed to amalgamate an excellent string of events to remember. Yet what was his prior concern were the characters he decided to be the core of these events.

Hardy was generally fascinated by female characters and made a point of putting them at the centre of his fictional texts. Here also the novel is subtitled "A Pure Woman" drawing our attention to the central character of the plot even more. Significantly, the title of his first and unpublished novel is *The Poor Man and the Lady* (1867) and this was evidently concerned with a female, too. The fluctuations of the affections of Elfride Swancourt, his first creature of extremities, are the focus of his second published novel, *A*

Pair of Blue Eyes (1873). Almost all of his other prose works before and after *A Laodicean*, with the notable exception of *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), subject women's emotions to a serious scrutiny and study their relationships with men as well as their attitudes to the world at large. Thus Cytherea Graye from *Desperate Remedies* (1871) strives to be independent by finding work as a governess or a companion rather than relying on her brother's resources after their father's death. Bathsheba Everdene from *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) is, arguably, Hardy's first heroine to combine a striving for independence, passion and energy. She was followed by a no less sparkling lady, Eustacia Vye, the *femme fatale* of *The Return of the Native* (1878), and in *The Trumpet-Major* (1880) we have Anne Garland whose choice of a marriage partner is discussed and analyzed at considerable length.

However, no other of these is tragic in the way than Tess is. Most of them have troubles in making the right choices but still they are not doomed to failure. They have the chance that Tess has not. Thus she is different from all other Hardy's female characters so far. Throughout the story we can feel the sympathetic attitude of the author towards her and at the same time we feel her troubled mind which enhances the tragic effect in our minds. Especially in the scene of her seduction she is described in the gentlest terms that implicate the idea of pureness and virginity:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytic philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order.

[Hardy, 1990: 88]

Indeed, Tess's passivity makes her a victim which is enforced by the imagery throughout the narrative – the dying pheasants in the forest after the battue, the cornered animals in the field at harvest time. All the time of the novel she has no repose always moving from one place to another unable to find constant refuge. Even during the days at the farm while Angel courts her she cannot relax always subconsciously thinking about the past that is always haunting her.

There was a major trend in Hardy's criticism. It is considered that he manipulated his characters to taking the wrong decisions. That they were but playthings in the hands of superior beings (cf. the comments of Mrs. Oliphant above). Humans were just victims of merciless doom. However, a more close reading might show totally different view on most of his characters. Scrutinizing Tess's behaviour and destiny shows that she always had a chance but seldom chose the right option and turned from an innocent maid to a murderess to be hanged. The misfortune of her existence comes mainly from her own misjudgement and wrong attachments. She is usually posed between the two main male characters.

On the one and we have Alec. He is presented like a predator that comes forth from the dark triangular door of the tent at their first meeting and his character presupposes promiscuity. His description is focused on his lips which uncover his sensuality.

He had an almost swarthy complexion, with full lips, badly moulded, though red and smooth above which was a well groomed black moustache with curled points, though his age could not be more than three or four and twenty. Despite the touches of barbarism in his contours, there was a singular force in the gentleman's face, and in his bold rolling eyes.

[Hardy, 1990: 57]

On the other hand we have Angel Clare. All the time he seems to be the right choice for him. The pure woman should be destined for the pure man. He has the attraction, he

has the intelligence, the morals and the background. Most of the women in the dairy-farm are attracted to him. The first impressions of him are as "not altogether a distinct figure, but as an appreciative voice, a long regard of fixed, abstract eyes and a mobility of mouth somewhat too small and delicately lined for a man's though with an unexpectedly firm closure of the lower lip now and then" [2, p. 126] and initially he is presented through the eyes of the other dairy maids. It is actually that mythologizing about him that makes him attractive to a great extent – coming from a good, religious family, neither too orthodox in his beliefs nor too rebellious, skilful and with a vision about the future and prospects. He is by no means manly as his antagonist – Alec and he has no predatory instinct to the point of being too sterile. His family milieu has repressed his sexuality and he is looking for a pure woman to marry rather than for an object to satiate his sexual desires as Alex does. Looking at his description it is rather more idealistic than physical and all the time Tess seems to be attracted to him more spiritually rather than physically. It is exactly the opposite of Alec "At first Tess seemed to regard Angel Clare as an intelligence rather than as a man" [2, p. 136] And also his love for Tess is rather more gradual than the sexual attraction Alec feels for her.

The attraction of the other dairy maids is more an infatuation than real love. They do not know Angel intimately, more or less because he is not interested in them in the way he is in Tess. Her love for him is initially like that of the other girls. Her knowledge of his character is very superfluous and develops only because angel chooses to and perhaps he does so because she looks very different from the other dairy maids who seem to be very open while she seems to be very withdrawn.

The description of Tess varies as she goes through her life from: "Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untouched by experience.....Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still" [2, p. 36] to her maturity after giving birth:

Then we can see the oval face of a handsome young woman with deep eyes and long heavy clinging tresses, which seem to clasp in a beseeching way anything they fall against. The cheeks are paler, the teeth more regular, the red lips thinner than is usual in a country – bred girl.

[Hardy, 1990: 104]

We obviously see the development from childhood to womanhood at least bodily. She is quietly attractive but passive in life and seems to be sexually reluctant. I think that the greatest fault of Tess is that she can never overcome her seduction by Alec. All the time she looks on him as an aggressor, while he is completely reformed, at least in his relation to her. On the other side she yawns for Angel while he does not seem to care much for her after he understands the full story about her past. She changes her attitude but only after it is too late and the shift of her feelings is imposed rather than deeply felt. We can judge for the development of her attraction to Angel by the letters she writes him while he lives in Australia. It goes from the desperate:

... I must cry to you in my trouble--I have no one else! ... I think I must die if you do not come soon, or tell me to come to you... please, please, not to be just--only a little kind to me ... If you would come, I could die in your arms! I would be well content to do that if so be you had forgiven me! ... if you will send me one little line, and say, "I am coming soon," I will bide on, Angel--O, so cheerfully! ... think how it do hurt my heart not to see you ever--ever! Ah, if I could only make your dear heart ache one little minute of each day as mine does every day and all day long, it might lead you to show pity to your poor lonely one. ... I would be content, ay, glad, to live with you as your servant, if I may not as your wife; so that I could only be near you, and get glimpses of you, and think of you as mine. ... I long for only one thing in heaven or earth or under the earth, to meet you, my own dear! Come to me--come to me, and save me from what threatens me!

[Hardy, 1990: 349]

And we come to the much more determined and brief letter:

O why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel! I do not deserve it. I have thought it all over carefully, and I can never, never forgive you! You know that I did not intend to wrong you--why have you so wronged me? You are cruel, cruel indeed! I will try to forget you. It is all injustice I have received at your hands!

[Hardy, 1990:336]

We see the great difference in the attitude to Angel from those two letters. We may say that it has been provoked primarily by two things. His own prolonged silence and disinterestedness and second by the change in Alex.

Somehow, Alex is always there when Tess needs him. In the first instance when he sends the Durbeyfields their new horse we can say that his targeting was vicious. Yet as the story develops and he understands the truth about the baby and Tess's marriage we can say that his desire to help her is completely honest. He has reformed, which Tess can never recognize with her heart till the end of the narrative. She goes back to him but because she is forced by the circumstances. It's not for love. It seems that the development of her consciousness has frozen at the time of her seduction. At their first meeting she seems to be dumbfounded by the unknown surroundings and before their sexual intercourse she is distressed by the vile attitude of her fellow labourers. Somehow, unconsciously she tries to find refuge with him. The second part of their intercourse – after the birth – is very schematic, we have no information of their mutual life at all after the moment he takes her from the Kingsbere village till the moment Angel reappears. Alec saves her from the circumstances and her return to him is a sort of passive and reluctant payment for his services. She is determined not to love him as a wife whatever he does.

CONCLUSION

Although at first Angel seems to be the worthier of the two things change drastically as the story advances. His consciousness seems to have stuck when he understands about Tess's past. He seems to be too biased by the Victorian vision of the angel in the house and realizes the damage his behaviour has caused only at the end. His idealistic vision of the world in general hinders him to see the real value of Tess. It is ironic that Alex sees her value while he cannot have her in any other way than sexually, while she is deeply in love with Angel but he cannot realize her real worth until it is too late. Yet, with all this Tess is spiritually and mystically attracted to him. The only time that she seems to be really happy is after she murders Alec and they achieve some days of arcadian bliss. However, these days of happiness are too brief and the wrong decisions she has taken throughout her life lead her to the expected end.

Notes:

- ¹ Quoted in *Thomas Hardy – His Career as a Novelist* by Michael Millgate. For further details see the bibliography at the end of the paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cox, R. *Thomas Hardy. The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1970.
 [2] Hardy, T. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, London: Macmillan, 1990.
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The paper is reviewed.