

Tess – a Major Development in Thomas Hardy's Concept of Female Characters

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Abstract: The paper discusses the controversial publication history of one of Thomas Hardy's most widely read novels – *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The central female character of the novel is in the focus of interest and is explored through juxtaposing her with some of her predecessors in Hardy's own fiction and by discussing the narrative techniques of the author in depicting his heroine.

Key words: Thomas Hardy, narrative technique, sexuality, environment, nature, tragedy

INTRODUCTION

"It is in my opinion that the combination of sexual vigour and moral rigour that makes Tess not just one of the greatest but also one of the strongest women of English literature" [5, p. 85] says Rosemarie Morgan in her survey on *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. How and why did this heroine of Hardy's become one of the strongest in English literature? It is the purpose of the following lines to show.

MAIN BODY

Tess of the D'Urbervilles was Hardy's twelfth published novel. It was written at Max Gate, the house that Hardy constructed himself, and evidence show it was began in the autumn of 1888. It was intended for serial publication in the newspaper of Tillotson and Son of Bolton under the title *Too Late Beloved* (or *Too Late, Beloved*). Yet, when Hardy handed the first portion of the manuscript which included the controversial seduction scene and the midnight home baptism the publisher realized what kind of story they have contracted to publish. Although that he had died six months ago W.F. Tillotson was a leading Congregationalist and Sunday School worker who held strong views as to the tone of all material in his own papers and the family newspapers that were his clients that were reflected by his colleague, the editor William Brimelow. The company suggested that certain scenes and incidents should be removed and the whole story should be reconstructed, which Hardy refused to do. Thus the company replied that they cannot publish the story as it was but suggested that they would pay as previously arranged. However, Hardy proposed that their agreement should be cancelled altogether and the whole affair was thus peacefully settled. On the basis of this first story – *Too Late, Beloved*, Hardy began the composition of *Tess* and was offered to the *Murray's Magazine* in October 1889 where it was refused because of its improper explicitness, and to the *Macmillan's Magazine* where it was returned likewise. According to his biography although he would have much preferred to finish the novel and bring it up in a volume form only there were reasons for which he could not afford it. Thus he preferred to willingly bowdlerize the story so that it would correspond to the requirements of the *Graphic* where it was finally published from July 1891. Readers made no complaints from the cut down version, except from a father of daughters, who, for unknown reason, thought the blood-stain on the ceiling to be indecent. Yet, Hardy never destroyed the cut outs but kept them till they could be inserted back in their proper places and issued in volume form.

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 whole tragedy of Tess's character is derived from the initial incident. The whole is a story about misplaced development. All that later happens in the ramifications of the plot is actually built on the formula of the things that happen because Tess has been initially displaced from an environment that she knows very well. In a way most of Hardy's novels deal with the problem of adapting to changes in the social environment and the failure of the individual to adjust to its new reality. Both society and characters are in constant change in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and her inability to adapt, for one reason or another, is the cause of her tragic misfortune.

Generally in literature we say that there are two types of tragedies – that of old Greek drama, where the characters suffer because of the whims of Gods and the Shakespearian tragedy where the characters suffer because of their own fault. Although that in my opinion Tess has both of these she tends to be closer to the former than to the latter, for we might say that she is the first truly tragic of Hardy's female heroines. She remains passive for almost all of the narrative until the very end when she kills Alec. Till then she only reacts to the environment and to male behaviour. Unlike her notable predecessors Bathsheba Everdane, Eustacia Vye, Charlotte De Stancy who actually play with the males who adore them, Tess can only defend herself from the male aggressors in her world. Her tragedy comes from the fact that although she is noble at heart she is always unfortunate in the limited set of choices she could make. Somehow she is always doomed to failure since her initiation in the world outside her home in the D'Urberville estate till the very end when she is executed. She is destined to be unhappy.

Hardy was generally fascinated by female characters and made a point of putting them at the centre of his fictional texts. 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 Everdane 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

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.

man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytic philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (Chapter 11)

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.

It is her female nature that makes her always hesitate and renders her incapable of making firm commitment to a course of action. This makes her closer to the Shakespearian tragedy. Notice the use of the passive when she tries to decide whether she should accept Angel's proposal or not:

I shall give way-- I shall say yes-- I shall let myself marry him--I cannot help it!" she jealously panted, with her hot face to the pillow that night, on hearing one of the other girls sigh his name in her sleep. "I can't bear to let anybody have him but me! Yet it is a wrong to him, and may kill him when he knows! O my heart--O--O--O! (Chapter 28)

Such hesitation is typical of some previous heroines too. Indecision plays an important role in *A Laodicean*. A great part of the novel is concerned with Paula's prolonged hesitation while taking decisions on a number of important personal (and social) issues. Thus, she wonders whether or not she should marry Somerset, whether she should choose modernity as exemplified by her late father's engineering of the railways or should stick to the traditional, dying ways of the De Stancy family, and whether or not she should restore her castle. This somewhat ironic imbalance is enhanced by the imagery. Early in the novel Paula is described as a "modern flower in a medieval flower-pot" (Chapter 4) which very well depicts her position: she is always poised between alternatives. As Michael Millgate puts it, "much of the novel resolves upon the question of whether Paula will eventually take 'a plunge', make a firm commitment and, if so, to what?" [Millgate, 1971: 169]. Aspects of her representation hint at her difficulty in choosing. Somerset, for instance, views her, during their first encounter, as he would view a curious element in the landscape. She appears to him as a misty outline that poses questions rather than providing answers and this stimulates his imagination to fill in "the meagre outline with most attractive details" (Chapter 2). Her initial appearance at the baptism scene is in stark contrast with the surrounding environment, which may be an indication of the conflict she is experiencing, between the modern origins of her engineer father and the aristocratic past of her castle. This dilemma is expressed through her choice of a partner, too, as she wonders whether to yield to the courting of the young architect or to the descendant of the aristocratic De Stancy family.

Unlike Paula, however, which we almost know from the inside, we know very little of the internal life of Tess. Many critics, including the leading Hardian scholar Michael Millgate and Walter Allen, for instance, confirm that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is not a psychological novel in the sense of George Elliot's understanding of the term. Prof. Millgate states that "the emotional is evoked and recorded in terms of the sensory" [Millgate, 1971:272] by which he means that we are given a clue to the internal life of the character through the surrounding atmosphere, the colouring of the set, the treatment she receives from others, etc. – all external factors that influence the reader in one way or another.

This model of external synchronisation between setting and character has been a well-developed one since *The Return of the Native*, where Egdon Heath is almost a participant, at least, equal to others. Yet, although Eystacia Vye is almost a prisoner in her world in which she is restless day and night, we also intimately know her not only from the external reactions of others but from the internal twinges of her mind from the occasional passages of analysis which are almost lacking in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. By keeping us away from Tess' internal world Hardy has achieved a sense of aloofness with her. We both

know her and at the same time we don't. This is especially true for the later parts of the novel when she returns to Alec only and is still unhappy although very much cared for. With all his faults of a seducer we should admit that he generously loves her and spoils her with all kinds of treats a luxurious life can offer. In spite of all she can never accept him as her man. Neither has she accepted Angel of whom she always thinks that she is unworthy. It is very ironical that both men in her life love her but she can be happy with neither of them

CONCLUSION

The question thus remains: Why is Tess one of the most popular of Hardy's heroines? I guess that the answer is a combination of factors. With her we have a truly tragic female heroine who falls both because of blind fate which is external, but also because of her internal inaptness to adapt to the challenges of changing world outside the village life and the family she knows well. She is attractive to us because of her moral strength – she never actually succumbs spiritually and that makes a strong character who is worthy of the long lasting interest she gets.

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The paper is reviewed.