

Gender and sexuality in tess of the durbervilles



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When dUrberville got back to the tent he sat down astride on a chair, reflecting, with a pleased gleam in his face. Then he broke into a loud laugh.

“ Well - I’m damned! What a funny thing! Ha-ha-ha! And what a crumby girl!”[1]

Already, as he sits down astride a chair, before he seduces Tess, Alec d’Urberville has decided both his own future and that of Tess. It is in his humorous reaction to Tess’s insecurity, and her shyness of himself, that we see him adopt the role of perpetrator, and Tess become his intended victim. D. H. Lawrence, in his Study of Thomas Hardy, speaks of Alec d’Urberville having ‘ power’ over Tess, and drawing from ‘ the depth of her being.’[2]These stereotypical gender roles - where the man takes away from the woman - are reversed later in the book when Tess becomes his murderess.

When Tess meets Angel Clare and falls in love we see from the start that although from the outside the couple seem a perfect match, it is their inner qualities which clash and cannot be reconciled. Tess has an embittered resilience, old for her years, while Clare, though bodily handsome, is emotionally immature, his sexuality being his weakness. The name Angel Clare is already imbued with connotations concerning femininity and purity; this is irony on the part of Hardy - to ascribe Tess’s lover a name that is the antithesis to her own predicament. That is to say, the word ‘ angel’ is traditionally associated with purity, chastity, and heavenliness; qualities which Tess cannot hope to regain after her experience with Alec d’Urberville.

As D. H. Lawrence comments, 'Tess sets out, not as any positive thing, containing all purpose, but as the acquiescent complement to the male. The female in her has become inert.' [3] However, towards the end of the book, once Tess has committed the crime it is her who becomes the stronger power in her relationship with Angel Clare. For example, when they are hiding away for days alone, it is Tess who puts into words the reasons why they do not leave:

"Why should we put an end to all that's sweet and lovely!" she deprecated. "What must come will come." And, looking through the shutter-chink: "All is trouble outside there: inside here content." He peeped out also. It was quite true: within was affection, union, error forgiven: outside was the inexorable. [4]

It is Tess who first looks to the outside, followed by Clare. Furthermore, now Tess has freed herself from the 'power' that d'Urberville held over her, what she says is 'true': that is, true to her relationship with Clare. Yet outside of their understanding she cannot be vindicated, and thus the outside is 'inexorable.' Important here is 'error forgiven.' For not only does Hardy refer to Tess's errors of concealing her history, and to Alec d'Urberville's errors as a man, but also to Angel Clare's inability to accept Tess when she needed him to. The sexual identity of Angel Clare thus falls into the more neutral margin between the overtly feminine Tess and the brutal masculinity of d'Urberville.

As D. H. Lawrence reminds us, it was not necessarily Clare's fault that he could not accept her in marriage, but rather the result of years of Christian

teaching, which caused him to be dissuaded by the idea of finding sanctity in a woman.[5] For Hardy, the man's world is essentially flawed; man is blinkered by the presence of law and formal religion into believing only in himself and not in the 'sanctity' of womanhood. Thus, in Tess, the true meaning of marriage is never found. If Tess and Clare had more confidence in themselves; in their capacity as a man and a woman to believe in each other then they might have ultimately been saved. If Clare could have seen beyond Tess's defiling, and Tess could have appealed to Clare's parents at the vital time (instead of turning round and walking back up the road[6]) - the potential for the union between man and woman might have been explored. But for Hardy, this is not possible as his characters - as emotional, feeling beings - are essentially unfitted to the cosmos of which they are a part. As Professor Philip Davis says of Hardy's vision, 'no human being can fully ever bear a felt consciousness of the human situation. And yet no human being can for ever evade it.'[7]

For Angel Clare, it is Time that is to blame for his own shortcomings: 'In the incoherent multitude of his emotions he knelt down at the bedside wet-eyed. "O Tess-if you had only told me sooner I would have forgiven you!"[8] Although he feels bitterly sad that he could not have forgiven Tess, he at the same time recognises this as a weakness of his own sex: 'Women may be bad, but they are not so bad as men in these things!'[9] Self-reproach comes for Tess too when she cuts off her hair in an attempt to diminish the appeal of her sexuality :

Inside this exterior, over which the eye might have roved as over a thing scarcely percipient, almost inorganic, there was the record of a pulsing life

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which had learnt too well, for its years, of the dust and ashes of things, of the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love.[10]

She is no longer 'fair' but 'inorganic', unfitted: she belongs neither to the d'Urberville's world of 'lust' or Clare's world of 'love', already condemned to knowing 'too well The dust and ashes of things.' Her sexuality - 'pulsing life' - becomes no more than a 'record', meaning that her spirit and desires already belong to the past, although bodily she still exists.

In conclusion, gender and sexuality in Tess is instrumental in Hardy's expression of his vision; where human beings, for all their capacity to feel, are fated to feel at the wrong time, in the wrong place. He presents a stereotypical struggle of power - fuelled by desire - between Tess, Alec d'Urberville, and Angel Clare, turning that struggle on its head, so that for all the dressing up and dressing down, the changes in characters' vocations, the changes in place - the only survivor is Clare, albeit 'worn and unhandsome.'