

**Tess: a bold
examination of the
double standard in
victorian culture**



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Thomas Hardy's *Tess* portrays a central character who is at the mercy of both circumstance and fate. Tess, by Victorian definition, is a fallen woman and, as such, not accountable for her own fate. Numerous critics — Rosemary Morgan, Norman Page, and Terrence Wright among others — have argued that Tess is to be forgiven or, at the very least, exonerated for her weaknesses, as she is an unfortunate “victim” of nature. As Tess is sexually vital and naive, she is almost expected, at least according to the beliefs of Victorian culture, to be a victim. All such statements stem from the Victorian double-standard, an unfortunate belief and practice relating to the inequality found in relationships of men and women. To understand the Victorian double standard is to understand entirely the power and purpose of Hardy's *Tess* and its protagonist of the same name: “There is no denunciation, in his entire oeuvre, as unequivocal as his denunciation of the sexual double-standard in *Tess*” (Morgan 84). If Hardy's *Tess* is the story of a woman whose “violation by one man and the betrayal of another” (Kramer 149) ultimately kills her, then her tragic demise is entirely the result of the persistent and prevalent double standard found in the Victorian Era. Hardy's *Tess* examines the Victorian double standard, condemns a society that could and would not accept Tess's sexuality, and reveals the tragic consequences of such societal inequalities. Hardy's greatest achievement in writing *Tess*, “a novel in which the accidental is perhaps more preponderant than in any other Hardy” (Van Ghent qtd. in Guerard), stems from his bold decision to create a female character who, by her very nature and existence calls into question the Victorian double standard toward women. And, in many ways, the character of Tess represents the many different kinds of women that Victorian authors (but most notably Hardy) were exploring in fiction: “Tess brings together for <https://assignbuster.com/tess-a-bold-examination-of-the-double-standard-in-victorian-culture/>

the first time the ‘types of women’... the woman compromised and doomed by her own sexuality, either as victim or femme fatale and the young woman poised at the moment of marriageability” (Boumelha 117). In addition, Tess has an education, economic foundation, and D’Urberville heritage. Thus, she represents a cross-section of the social and economic landscape of the Victorian Age. Owing to his previous successes as an author, Hardy was able to introduce such a character in ‘the context of an increasing questioning, both in fiction and in public discussion, of sex roles and of the double standard” (Boumelha 119). Tess was criticized as simply a “moral argument” on the part of Hardy, a charge that was undoubtedly intensified by his suggestion that Tess include the subtitle, “A Pure Woman” (Boumelha 119). Regardless of Hardy’s intentions however, his work struck a chord in an age known for its stifling customs and practices. Hardy’s text possessed an undeniable urge to condemn and destroy a flawed societal and cultural hierarchy, one in which women suffered immensely. Because of this social and cultural backdrop in which Hardy wrote, the purpose and theme of Tess is all the more powerful and provocative. Hardy must have wondered what exactly the reaction to his work would be. Would Victorian readers ultimately view Tess as the story of a woman who “does not have the moral strength to make the choice she knows she ought” (Wright 12) and is doomed to fall? Or, would Victorian readers see Tess as the tale of a woman and her sexuality, both broken and killed by the overwhelming and undeniable force that “exemplifies the ‘double standard’ that operated so widely in Victorian society and literature” (Williams 148)? Unquestionably, Hardy’s work suggests the latter as textual and scholarly evidence support such an assumption. Much is known about the Victorian culture, particularly its <https://assignbuster.com/tess-a-bold-examination-of-the-double-standard-in-victorian-culture/>

treatment of women and views on sexuality. Consistent throughout the culture is a persistent view that women are second-class citizens, citizens whose “ dress, speech, and deportment were monitored and corrected (Green 8). Victorian society’s views on women prominently denote “ the polarization of women into the chaste and the depraved, the virgin and the whore” (Boumelha 13). Housewives and younger women were expected to be virgins and innocent, all the while prostitution flourished in the era. What women were being asked to do in the home – essentially the role of a live-in servant who yielded to the husband’s sexual requests and to produce and care for children – and what they were being forced into doing at the numerous brothels (particularly in the 1880s) served as polar opposites in the era. Yet, due to the double standard so powerfully and potent wielded by men of the era, this discrepancy was allowed to exist. In *One Rare Fair Woman: Thomas Hardy’s Letters to Florence Henniker*, Hardy wrote of the double standard and era in which he lived: It was a morality which fostered prurience and hypocrisy. From the stronghold of the chaste, monogamous family it enabled the individual to fulminate against all vicious living while clandestinely he sowed his wild oats. It encouraged wives to become sexual ninnyes while their husbands contracted venereal disease. It hounded “ fallen” women to become whores in the name of God. (qtd. in Boumelha 11) It is such a framework that Hardy wrote *Tess*. Of course, Hardy’s repugnance of and reaction to the era was not his alone; others joined in the debate questioning the hypocrisy inherent in Victorian culture. Political discussion in the 1880s and 1890s included the “ Matrimonial Causes Act and the subsequent detailed reporting of divorce cases, the Campaign for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, and the issue of child

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prostitution” (Boumelha 12). Reaction to the double standard spurred discussion and dialogue about female sexuality. This presented Hardy with an opportunity, one in which he could experiment with a female protagonist set in the Victorian world. Hardy’s “own knowledge about the exploitation of village girls” (Williams 29) intensified his desire to write Tess and to project, in no uncertain terms, the sexuality of its protagonist. Hardy’s bold and passionate text consistently assaulted the Victorian double standard much in the same way the double standard assaulted her. Ultimately, Victorian conventions about gender and sexuality destroyed Tess, a tragic conclusion that leaves little doubt as to the nature of Hardy’s views on his society. Perhaps one of the most striking features about Hardy’s Tess is the sexual vitality emanating from the character Tess. Hardy presents the reader with not only a beautiful woman but one that has a mind and spirit as well. This depiction certainly went against conventional Victorian thinking about women: What Hardy denounces, in his creation of Tess, is the popular belief handed down to us today in the form of the ‘dumb blonde’ that a voluptuous woman, a sexy woman is intellectually vapid or morally ‘loose,’ or as many Victorians believed, diseased in body and mind... Tess expresses a fully developed sexual nature as sensitive to the needs of her impassioned lover as to her own autoerotic powers and desires. (Morgan 85) Hardy chronicles in Tess the breakdown, at the hands of Victorian society and convention, of female sexuality. The beauty of Tess is no match for the sexually predatory nature of men that was allowed and even fostered in Victorian culture. In Tess’s first sexual encounter, her beauty is to be had by Alec, apparently in his estimation by any means possible. Sadly, the sexual conquest of Tess is fueled by the power afforded to males (not surprisingly depraved and

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despicable men were as welcome to “ the club” as decent and honest ones were) of the era. Another step in the spiritual and physical breakdown of Tess is her relationship with Angel Clare. While peaceful and, in many ways, idyllic at first, the relationship buckles under the first strain. While Tess is hesitant to admit her prior relationship (if it can be called as such) with Alec, she eventually does, in hopes it will bring her closer to Angel and to this new relationship. Her admission – an admission of sexuality and experience – shatters the peace and tranquility of their relationship. Of course, Angel Clare also has a sexual history and, while he admits it as such, is adamant that it is Tess’s sexual history and not his own that will prevent them from ever being together. Altogether the moment is entirely indicative of the Victorian Age and culture; Hardy’s indictment of the destructive inequalities of his age is undeniably evident. In Hardy’s work, the double standard reared its ugly head whenever convenient and allowed those males who hid behind it blameless and causeless in all acts of immorality or indiscretion. Angel Clare saw absolutely nothing wrong in judging Tess’s sexuality and sexual history. In Victorian society his abandonment of Tess is entirely justified and expected. What Tess’s betrayal by Angel does is set off an unstoppable tragic spiraling. The murder of Alec – perhaps Tess’s reclamation of her virginity and innocence so she can bring “ prized commodities” to Angel – eventually brings death to Tess. The novel’s ending is perhaps the most powerful indictment of the Victorian double standard. In contrast to the objective tone at times on display in the novel, the passionate anger of Hardy’s words boils over and envelops the novel’s final scene. Norman Page’s *Thomas Hardy: The Novels* examines the novel’s tragic conclusion in light of Hardy’s task and purpose. Hardy’s task is to confront his readers with <https://assignbuster.com/tess-a-bold-examination-of-the-double-standard-in-victorian-culture/>

something almost unbearably painful: the death by hanging, or judicial murder, of his heroine, who from any reasonable and humane point of view is herself a victim rather than a wrongdoer. Before the end of the chapter the narrator will have exchanged this objectivity [relating to Hardy's depiction of the murder of Alec] for a very different tone, angry and ironic, and the swing from the sedate opening to the provocative and impassioned final paragraph is very powerful. (53) The reader can be left with nothing but disbelief and anger as the irony of the novel's final lines impart the words "justice was done." Perhaps, if it is at all possible to amplify the sense of injustice at the novel's conclusion, Hardy allows the reader to imagine what the lasting impact of Tess's death will be: "The two speechless gazers [Angel and Liza-Lu] bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on" (Tess 384). It would seem Hardy's conclusion contradicts much of what he had accomplished (at least in terms of attacking the double standard) in Tess. Certainly there is no punishment in allowing Angel Clare to walk off with Tess's sister, Liza-Lu. Surely no others mourn for Tess, let alone entertain the idea that Tess's demise has been brought upon by the misuse, abuse, or defilement of her sexuality. Perhaps, however, Hardy's conclusion is indicative of how deep and pervasive he felt the double standard truly was. Tess is executed and clearly justice has not been served. Even the tragic death of Tess, Hardy would seem to suggest, is not enough to change the ugliness of the inequalities that comfortably settled into Victorian life.

Seemingly, in a description of the prison where Tess is hanged, Hardy's captures the essence of the Victorian double standard: "Yet it was with this <https://assignbuster.com/tess-a-bold-examination-of-the-double-standard-in-victorian-culture/>

blot, and not with the beauty that the two gazers were concerned” (Tess 384). While the description is implicitly made about the view of the city taken in by Angel Clare and Liza-Lu, it could just as easily apply to the two men in Tess’s life, Alec and Angel. These two men both chose to see the “blot” (her sexuality) in Tess rather than her beauty (physically, spiritual, or otherwise). To each man, the blot they see is not anything in Tess but rather something placed on Tess by Victorian society; the hypocrisy of the age has blindly all men of the era. Rather than accepting Tess for who and what she is, each man chooses to treat her as society would have had it: unfairly and unjustly. The glare of the Victorian double standard was, sadly, too strong for either of these two men to see through. That is the tragedy of Tess.

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Hardy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. A comprehensive examination of the life and works of Thomas Hardy. One chapter in particular details the radical and bold suggestions presented in Tess. The chapter discusses Tess as a response to the “ache of modernism” as well how the novel boldly challenged not only the conventions of the Victorian novel but of Victorian society itself. Mallet, Phillip, ed. *The Achievement of Thomas Hardy*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000. A collection of essays aimed at discussion of Hardy’s career as a writer and the contributions of his works as, both literary and social. Numerous references are made to Tess, all examining the work’s place in Hardy’s career and in literature itself. Morgan, Rosemary. *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Morgan’s text discusses and analyzes the works of Hardy as well as various interpretative approaches to them. The underlying suggestion of this text is that beneath the dark surface of Hardy’s works lie significant accusations leveled at Victorian society. Page, Norman. *Thomas Hardy: The Novels*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. An intensive examination primarily of four of Hardy’s works, including Tess. One chapter discusses the gender dynamic found in Tess. This chapter details different aspects of male-female relationships, both in society and literature, during the Victorian Age. Sanders, Valerie. *The Private Lives of Victorian Women*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989. An examination of women’s autobiographies from the Victorian Age. The text discusses the problematic nature of such an examination and yet the far-reaching implication of doing so. No references are made specifically to Thomas Hardy, but the analysis found in the text is certainly applicable to the study of Tess. William, Merryn. *Hardy*. 1976. Sec. ed. New York: Longman, 1993. An introduction to the life and work of Thomas Hardy. <https://assignbuster.com/tess-a-bold-examination-of-the-double-standard-in-victorian-culture/>

It explores the climate in which Hardy lived as well his contributions to Victorian literature. The text offers biographical information about Hardy as a means of understanding the work *Tess*. Wright, Terrence. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1987. The text offers various critical approaches to Hardy's *Tess*. It explores various components and elements of the novel, in particular the nature and growth of the character Tess. It explores both the novel's strengths and weaknesses.