Morality and gender in tess of the d’urbervilles essay sample

Experience, Human Nature

Introduction

By the end of the Victorian era in which Hardy was writing, women were attempting to redefine their place in society. Women were trying to leave the domestic sphere for entrance into the workplace, university, and the realm of the masculine. They were fighting for equality in a society in which they held the status of both slaves and goddesses, chained to the pedestal upon which they stood. Hardy was an avid supporter of this alteration. He used his fiction in an attempt to aid in a redefinition of femininity. In spite of his attempts at redefinition, his male characters, and perhaps even Hardy himself, are continually caught up in this system of male dominated language and ideology. His characters often float “ about uneasily, restlessly, peculiarly unattached, seeking some ideological structure in which to live” (Wotton 35).

Among the many virtues projected onto the body of woman through the anima was that of purity. In regards to the female form, under the dominant patriarchal biblical-logos purity became synonymous with chastity–the communal word being virgin. Thus, any woman who had carnal knowledge prior to a legal union under God and man, could not possibly be pure. “ Thou shall not,” however, seemed only to apply to women in Victorian society. Man was not only expected, but on some level required to be a sexual being in order to maintain the title of masculine.

Pure women, then, were expected to suffer from a sort of “ sexual anesthesia” and were educated to believe that their only “ superiority to man lay in their greater spirituality and passionlessness” (Showalter 21).

Thus, after basic biology the divisor between the sexes was sexuality. In terms of domination “ the focus of the moral formulae on chastity oriented man’s attack against women” (Higonnet 17). Hardy, aware of the sexual restrictions and constrictions placed upon women by the cult of virginity, set out to redefine the notion of purity through the character of Tess–this, however, proved to be an impossible task. This paper argues that in defining Tess as a pure woman, Hardy is taking the glove to Victorian sexual mores and conventional morality and openly challenging them to a duel.

Discussion

From Tess’s introduction, Hardy attempts to establish her purity. Initially, however, his descriptions of her follow the traditional standards for the pure woman. In our first encounter with Tess we find her to be the very embodiment of the stereotypical, generic notion of idealized femininity. She is a “ mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience. . . phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still” (Tess 8). Tess is portrayed as a fresh, innocent, naive country girl. She is ruled by emotion rather than intellect, placing her in accordance with Victorian expectations for women. We learn that Tess is a dutiful daughter willing to sacrifice nearly anything for her family.

This traditional purity, however, is quickly jeopardized. Due to economic hardship, Tess is sent to claim kin to the neighboring d’Urberville family in Tantridge. It is here that she first encounters Alec, a worldly, promiscuous, Victorian gentleman. After surveying her physical body, Alec attempts to

define Tess through his very adult, masculine gaze. He construes her as a woman, rather than the adolescent she is, and treats her as a sexual object, a role that Tess had not yet been called upon to play. He sees her as a mere country girl whose virtue, or possible lack thereof, is his for the taking. It is here that Tess is first truly objectified. Alec is active in his seduction of Tess, he imposes a sense of sexuality that she is not prepared for and as a result she acquiesces to many of his initial requests.

Thus, her sexual purity is proven as Tess is only vaguely aware of his meaning when he “ spoke in a way that made her blush a little” (Tess 29) . When Alec attempts to feed her strawberries Tess refuses, insisting: “ I would rather take it in my own hand” (Tess 29). Alec, however, dismisses her resistance and effectively silences her, leading her to give into his requests. In Tess. Hardy uses “ silence as a feminine form of speech, whose multiple moral and sexual meanings underscore its significance as a way for Tess to voice herself” (Higonnet 21). Thus, her silence often speaks for itself. Tess is beholden to Alec’s good graces in the hopes that he will help her family. She somewhat unwittingly allows herself to comply with Alec’s assumptions of her. She allows herself to be molded by his will.

Tess’s own mother, whose moral fiber is not as strong as her daughter’s, is shocked when she learns of the events transpired and that Tess had not gotten Alec to marry her by using the pregnancy as her “ trump card.” She even reproaches Tess accusing her of being incredibly selfish: “ Why didn’t you think of doing something for your family instead o’ thinking only of yourself” (Tess 63). Joan tell Tess that any other woman would have gotten

him to marry her. It is precisely this moral difference in Tess that allows her to stay pure. Indeed, “ Hardy’s effort to singularize his heroine led him to differentiate her voice from stereotypes of the feminine” (Higonnet 17). Tess’s deeds are meant to redefine the accepted social and moral code. Her resistance to play her trump card further serves to set Tess apart from the norm. Tess tries to establish an autonomous self, one who is defined by her own will and beliefs.

Yet it would seem that no mater how hard she tries, Tess cannot escape entrapment and subsequent definition by the masculine gaze. Indeed in Tess “ the gaze never innocently alights on its object. Rather, it constructs its object through a process of colonization, delimination, configuration and inscription” (Showalter 7). From Alec’s inscribed sexuality to Angel’s configuration of Tess as a virgin-goddess, Tess’s chances of forming and preserving any self identity are miniscule. She is colonized, her physical self and spiritual being appropriated by the masculine gaze. At every turn the assumption of the gaze is meant to become the truth and meaning of Tess. Her “ essential nature is always conditional upon who is doing the seeing” (Wotton 38).

The fact that through most of the novel Tess remains plastic may stem from Nancy Chodorow’s notion that in regards to the formation of a feminine self, “ in any given society feminine personality comes to define itself in relation, and connection to other people” (Gilligan 7). In an effort to please and remain connected to the people in her life whom she loves, she attempts to adhere to the character they’ve created for her. When Angel constructs Tess

as a virginal daughter of nature Tess tries to adhere to his perception of her. When out of guilt she protests, her words are inscribed with modesty and naivete by Angel. Tess’s meaning is not revealed to him, for he fails to listen. Thus, Tess remains silent as to her past. She is unable to communicate the truth of her situation because Angel silences her wby rejecting her words and interpreting them through stereotypical codes” (Higonnet 22). She does not wish to disillusion him for fear of losing her connection to him.

Though it would appear that Tess’s silence in regards to her past is a deliberate attempt to deceive, Gilligan notes that:

Women’s moral weakness, manifest in apparent diffusion and confusion of judgement, is thus inseparable from women’s moral strength: an overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities. (Gilligan 17)

It is in concern for Angel’s happiness first and foremost that she remains silent and later attempts, but fails, to reveal her past to him. It is due to her strong moral sense that she ultimately tells him of her past in spite of her mother’s warnings to keep her silence.

It is, however, only after Angel confesses a sin of the same carnal variety that Tess shares her past. Naive as she is, she expects that Angel will forgive her as she has forgiven him. Again, the different moral perspectives of man and woman become manifest. Tess is incredulous that he would fail to forgive her, she shouts at him: “ having begun to love you, I love you forever —in all changes, in all disgraces, because you are yourself” (Tess 178). To

which Angel simply responds, “ the woman I have been loving is not you . . . but another woman in your shape” (Tess 179).

Angel has been in love with an idealized perception of Tess, his own definition of her, his own projected anima. In spite of his personal claims of heterodoxy, Angel applies traditional standards of morality to Tess’s past and thus he cannot forgive her. He fails to see the uniqueness of her situation, and though he admits that she was “ more sinned against than sinning” (Tess 182), he will not forgive her. His ideal perception of her has been shattered and under Victorian social mores; since Tess “ is not sexless, he constructs her as all sex” (Ingham 83).

Though initially Angel is proved more manly by his past, his manhood is fractured when his anima is crushed by Tess’s admissions. He deals with his fractured masculinity through sleepwalking. While sleepwalking he carries Tess to a church and places her in a coffin in lamentation of his pure wife’s death. Tess, as he loved her, is no more. Seeing Angel as superior and longing for his approval, Tess allows him to punish her through separation. Tess’s obedience to Angel’s terms of separation prove to the reader that Tess is not artful, and that she is all too willing to suffer for her sins by entering into what will become a life of hard physical labor and poverty without reproach to Angel for his hardness.

Angel, though having committed the same carnal sin, flies on the wings of “ the tyrannous wind of his imaginative ascendancy” (Tess 192), his staunch adherence to traditional morality, away from his wife to start anew in Brazil.

Hardy notes that “ with all Angel’s attempted independence of judgement . . . he was yet a slave to custom and conventionality” (Tess 208). It is this conventionality to which Hardy is utterly opposed. Hardy notes that Tess “ was deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency … in considering what Tess was not, Angel overlooked what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire” (Tess 208).

Hardy suggests that one incident of moral folly does not make one unworthy of praise, nor does is necessarily affect the purity of character that is apparent in Tess. Angel, like most Victorian men, fails to make allowance for indiscretions to which they themselves were party at one point or another. Angel’s name is a misnomer, for he becomes a villain on a much deeper level than Alec: in abandoning Tess he violates a morality which is spiritual, rather than physical. In punishing Tess, Angel is fallen, and Tess is exalted, her moral sense in proved. Gilligan notes that true morality is:

the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice. To the extent that women perceive themselves as having no choice they correspondingly excuse themselves of the responsibility that decision entails. Childlike in the vulnerability of their dependence and consequent fear of abandonment, they claim to wish only to please, but in return for their goodness they expect to be loved and cared for. This then is an altruism always at risk, for it presupposes an innocence constantly in danger

of being compromised by an awareness of the trade-off that has been made. (Gilligan 67)

In choosing to accept punishment for her encounter with Alec, Tess is exhibiting true morality. In accepting Angel’s terms of punishment, she vows to “ be good” in the belief that once her debt is paid, he would return his love for her fully. Her seeming selflessness, dependent upon the belief that he would return, is shattered by Angel’s hard-heartedness. Tess is proved pure once again by her martyrdom to Angel’s moral code. Yet, even Tess has her breaking point, and once Alec makes her painfully aware that the trade-off is not to be completed by her absent husband, she returns to him.

Hardy does, however, make sure that the reader understands that had it not been for severe familial financial hardships, Tess would have remained long suffering until her husband’s return. She finally breaks with her husband’s and society’ s moral codes and falls once again into a liaison with Alec in order to save her family. When Angel finally does return, Tess tells him that Alec “ had been a husband to me; you never had!” (Tess 299). The burden of her moral decline into cohabitation with Alec is placed on Angel, and for the first time in the novel, he exhibits true morality and owns up to his responsibility admitting, “ Ah, it is my fault!” (Teas 299).

Tess’s moral sense is shattered by Angel’s return. In an effort to escape from what she now views as folly, she murders Alec. In Tess’s mind, she and Angel will never be able to love each other fully with the shadow of Alec hanging over them. In order to prove to Angel that she loves him and not

her seducer she kills Alec, explaining to Angel, WI was unable to bear your not loving me! Say you do now , dear, dear husband . . . now that I’ve killed him!” (Tess 304) . The idea that Alec’s death was necessary for their union is one that Tess had initially gotten from Angel prior to his abandonment of her, he explains to her, “ How can we live together while that man lives? — he being your husband in nature, and not I? If he were dead it might be different …” (Tess 190)

Ironically, it is only after Alec’s death, that Angel fully accepts Tess as his own. Indeed, it is the first time in their married life that they live as man and wife. Alec’s life becomes the first to be sacrificed to traditional morality. Tess’s is soon to follow.

Tess is fully aware that she will be punished for the murder of Alec. Her impending doom becomes a kind of comfort to her during her short time as Angel’s wife. She explains to Angel, WI do not wish to outlive your present feeling for me” (Tess 308) . She knows that Angel’s heterodoxy will be short lived and begs him to marry her sister Liza-Lu, once she, herself, is dead. Tess sees Liza-Lu as a perfect replica of herself, without a compromised virtue. She encourages Angel to “ train her and teach her . . . and bring her up for [his] own self” (Tess 311). She longs for Angel to indoctrinate her sister into conventional morality before her scenario is played out again. When Tess is found by the police, she is sprawled on an altar, offered as a sacrifice to moral codes. Tess is led away to her death, and Angel to Liza-Lu.

Patricia Ingham notes that it is not until the end of the novel that Tess finally and completely initiates choice, hence true autonomy. She writes of Tess that though she chooses her “ place of surrender. . . the death on the gallows that supervenes reveals the hollowness of her autonomy” (Ingham 87). For Ingham, it is in the last section of the novel that Tess becomes a truly fallen women and as such:

like all fallen women she dies; all she has really been able to choose is the particular form of her death. Murder and execution as the only available expression of autonomy speak for themselves as to the real limits and agency of the fallen woman. (Ingham 88)

Ironically, in choosing death, Tess may for the first time since her encounter with Alec actually find her “ own self” once again. The suggestion being that a woman can only own her self in death.

Though Tess may be allowed to maintain purity throughout the novel, at its closure she is still driven toward a predetermined end and a moral inevitability: the fallen are punished for their sins. Tess pays with her life for all of her moral failings. Thus, though conventional morality is challenged by Hardy, it ultimately prevails. Tess’s spiritual purity is not accepted as a new feminine model and her physically pure sister is offered as a substitute and ultimately a standard.

Conclusion

As much as Hardy wanted to challenge the traditional gender discourse of Victorian era, he was a bit shocked that his readers would literally fight “ across the dinner table over Tess’s character” (Tess 335-6) . Hardy was aware that Victorian society tended to “ perceive and think and speak about women. . . in extreme and crude forms as . . . virgin and whore” (Poole 342) . He also was aware that “ the middle distance between these words turns out to be the frontier” (Poole 342). It has been noted that “ the trouble and excitement Hardy’s women cause is in their refusal to be accommodated by these men’s words as they cross and re-cross that middle distance . . . the threat they pose is their ability to suggest that this middle-distance frontier is a no man’s land which exists in man’s minds and men’s words” (Poole 342).

Tess, unlike the male characters in the novel, is not limited. She is given a freedom that allows her moral nature to remain plastic. Her malleability actually serves to raise her intellectual and spiritual perception to a plateau which the male Victorian mindset was unable to traverse. Hardy marveled at the row he’d caused and noted in his autobiography, “ How strange that one may write a book without knowing what one puts into it, or rather, what the reader puts into it. Well, if this sort of thing continues, no more novel-writing for me” (Tess 336).

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