

Cruelty: a comparison between great expectations and tess of the d'urbervilles

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



A key theme in both Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*[1] and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*[2] is cruelty. Both authors treat this cruelty in such a way as to expose the flaws of a society in which the powerful, either in terms of class, physical strength, or otherwise, prey on those without power. Both novels are examples of bildungsroman's which focus on young characters, such as Pip and Tess, coming of age and growing into adults. As bildungsroman's, the theme of cruelty becomes ever more prominent, as it is also used to highlight the effects of cruelty on the development and maturing of these children.

One of the principle factors which influenced the distribution of power in the early nineteenth century was social class, a dividing force which remained even through the increasing forces of industrial modernity. In *Great Expectations*, the dominant example of the upper classes' cruel treatment of the lower classes is perhaps seen between the characters of Compeyson and Magwitch. The cruelty of Compeyson, who corners Magwitch into acting as his "black slave"[3], culminates in his denial of guilt and accusations of Magwitch when the two are arrested for their illegal activities. He uses Magwitch, who is labelled by Compeyson's defence counsellor as "ill bought up"[4], as a scapegoat for his own wrongdoing. The depiction of this powerful and rich man's cruelty against a disproportionately poor and powerless man not only condemns Compeyson as a figurehead of the upper classes, but also expands into a condemnation of society as a whole. The means through which this is achieved is the portrayal of Compeyson as not only scapegoating Magwitch, but of him actually being legally afforded to do so. His reduced sentence is due not to any true evidence in his favour, but

simply due to the observation that he is a man who has been “ well bought up”[5] as a member of society’s wealthy. It is on this basis alone that the guilty Compeyson is “ recommended to mercy on account of good character and bad company”[6], while the far less guilty in comparison Magwitch has “ been done everything to, pretty well - except hanged”[7]. Dickens’s depiction of the benefit of the upper classes at the expense of the lower classes successfully reflects the cruelty of judicial corruption and gaping wealth gaps between the rich and the poor which was rife during the industrial revolution in early nineteenth century England. As the poor were exploited through hard labour and threat of cruelty, the rich took advantage of their position within the system of capitalism in order to increase their own economic gain. Kenneth Harris supports and highlights this as he argues that “ the Industrial revolution...had released forces of greed, cruelty and selfishness which had rendered society ugly in aspect and materialistic in outlook”[8].

Hardy’s novel is similarly heavy with the theme of the lower classes being cruelly exploited for the profit of the upper classes, albeit in a different manner. Unlike Great Expectations’ Compeyson, who uses Magwitch’s unrewarded criminal labour for his own financial profit in the true spirit of the industrial revolution, Tess of the d’Urbervilles’ Alec d’Urberville uses Tess’s body for his own sexual and physical profit. Kevin Swafford supports this idea of class based division and cruelty as he argues that “ because of the very nature of the social structure and relations created within the narrative, Tess is essentially conceived and treated as property or potential exchange

value"[9]. Indeed, the social structure he refers to is that of Capitalism with the same wealth gap present as in the setting of *Great Expectations*.

However, in addition to a portrayal of the cruelty of those with power to those without it, Hardy also portrays a society in which the powerless will be cruel to others who are powerless in order to gain the power they lack.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, we see Tess's own father forcing Tess into the firing line of the spoilt and narcissistic Alec's mindless desire, in the hope of gaining a title of recognition. Similarly, *Great Expectations* shows Pip, who is for the most part the moral centre of the novel, as showing signs of the capability to be cruel in order to fight his way up to the peak of the contemporary capitalist system, as he breaks Biddy's heart and begins to treat Joe as if he is below him. In this sense, both novels reflect the developments of the industrial revolution. The social structure, although still defined largely by a wide class gap, began to lose its rigidity as it became possible for people to migrate between classes through means other than blood and birth right.

In the case of *Great Expectations*, another group which is shown to inflict cruelty on a less powerful group is the adult on the child. As a bildungsroman, the novel focusses largely on the impact of a cruel, unjust society on the growing up and coming of age of the societies youngest members. In *Great Expectations*, Pip and Estella are the key examples of children who are victims of the cruelty of adults who abuse their power. The former is shown to have grown up in the shadow of his cruel sister's violence, who takes her anger and discontentment out on her physically

smaller and weaker brother. The young Pip himself refers to her as his “ all-powerful sister”[10], delineating his defencelessness in the face of her intimidation. The latter suffers a different kind of cruelty, as it is psychological rather than physical. Miss Havisham adopts a poor, innocent child and skews her perception of the world, of other people, and of her own emotions. Estella herself highlights the way in which her defencelessness and innocence are taken advantage of as she tells Pip that “[he] had not [his] little wits sharpened by their intriguing against [him], suppressed and defenceless - [she] did”[11]. Nicolas Tredell supports the presence of adults using their power to inflict cruelty as he labels the novel as one which is “ concerned with the interaction of painful and vivid individual experience with particular kinds of social order in which adults have largely unchecked power over children”[12]. Indeed, Dickens uses these child-guardian dynamics of his characters to draw attention to the rampant exploitation of children and lack of concern over blatant child abuse in early nineteenth century England.

Meanwhile, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the young Tess is taken advantage of less due to her physical defenselessness, but rather more due to her mental innocence. James Gibson highlights Alec's exploitation of Tess's childlike naivety as he argues that “ he takes advantage of Tess's innocence and vulnerability, and such a relationship is seen by Hardy as wholly deplorable”[13]. Indeed, Hardy portrays Alec as a mindlessly cruel character, who allows his basal sexual desires to overrule his morality, while contrastingly portraying Tess as a far more humanized character as we see her suffering and understand the roots of her final act of violence. This is

particularly evident as Hardy questions “ why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a course pattern as it was doomed to receive”. This epitomizes the cruelty of Alec’s destruction of Tess’s virginity and innocence, as the “ blank as snow” canvas is horribly marred by her sexual assault. Therefore, Gibson’s observation that Hardy views the persecution of the weak by the powerful as unjust and condemnable carries substantial weight in light of the clear emergence of Tess as a sympathetic character at least and a blameless victim at most.

It is tempting to argue that, in contrast to the surface appearance of the powerless being prayed on by the cruelty of the powerful, the powerless are sometimes shown to fight back against their aggressors or abusers and gain the upper hand. In Hardy’s novel, Tess successfully inflicts an even greater brutality onto her rapist than he had inflicted on her. Similarly, Miss Havisham sets out on a similar course of revenge as she rears Estella to help her break hearts just as hers was once broken. However, unlike Tess who wreaks vengeance on the same man who hurt her, Havisham generalizes her brother and ex-lover’s cruelty towards her as the entire male gender’s cruelty. To this end, she achieves her goal to an extent, as she breaks Pip’s heart who tells her that he “ is as unhappy as [she] can ever have meant [him] to be”[14]. However, ultimately both characters receive equally horrific punishments for their revenge against those who wronged them. Sara Thornton highlights this fact in the case of Miss Havisham as she suggests that “ it is Miss Havisham’s devouring and cruel qualities which link her to

other fiery and dangerous women destined for destruction in Dickens...their 'fire' comes from the same self-consuming fire of revenge which slowly burns in Miss Havisham"[15]. Indeed, her fixation of vengeance ultimately leads indirectly to her death, as she begs for Pip's forgiveness and accidentally sets herself on fire in the process. This can be seen as symbolic of the self-destructive nature of seeking justice against cruelty. Similarly, Tess's violent stand against Alec is followed by her subsequent execution by hanging as her life is taken as payment for his. The message here is clear; the victim cannot hope to gain the upper hand over the cruelty of their abuser without having to accept unforgivingly harsh consequences without any allowances for the suffering which led them to vengeance. Joseph Carroll highlights the unfairness of this as he states that "When Tess of the d'Urbervilles is hanged for stabbing her rapist to death, Hardy explicitly protests against some cosmic principle of injustice"[16]. Yvonne Kozlovsky underpins this injustice as she argues that "the idea that Tess was a victim of injustice was anathema to Britain's conservative, moralistic censors: as a member of the lower classes, they thought, death became her"[17]. This assertion brings us back to the aforementioned point of injustice amongst social classes. Tess is a working class female, rendering her suffering far less important than that of her upper class, male rapist.

Furthermore, in *Great Expectations*, Dickens portrays the occurrence of human cruelty as a cycle, with victims of cruelty and abuse eventually developing to become perpetrators themselves. The primary example of this cycle of cruelty can be seen through the character of Miss Havisham, a

woman so damaged by her abandonment and defraudment at the hands of the man she loved that she all but dedicates her life to inflicting the same cruelty onto the entirety of the male gender. However, the true victim of Miss Havisham's cruelty is her adopted daughter Estella, who is forced to endure emotional and psychological abuse in order to mould her into the perfect tool for revenge. Indeed, Havisham herself tells Pip that she " stole her heart away, and put ice in its place". Here, the repercussions of cruelty against children for their development and coming of age are clearly underlined. Every aspect of Estella's psychological and emotional development is warped by her cruel upbringing, including her empathy, her morality and her capability to love. Estella admits to Pip that " it seems...that there are sentiments, fancies...which [she is] not able to comprehend...it is in the nature formed within [her]"[18]. Indeed, the nature she speaks of has been formed under the corrupt guidance of Miss Havisham. Dickens also presents an alternative effect of cruelty on children, through the character of Pip. The novel follows Pip as he falls in love with a girl who has shown him nothing but emotional coldness and cruelty. Rather than falling in love with her in spite of this, he seems to be drawn to her specifically because of her poor treatment of him. The implication here is that people who have been victims of cruelty in childhood grow up to see submission to victimhood as the norm. Joe too was violently mistreated as a child, and as a result marries a woman who continues this abuse against him. This is highlighted as Pip laments that "[he] wished Joe had been rather more genteely bought up, and then [he] should have been so too"[19]. In other words, had Joe been able to

recognise Mrs. Joe's cruelty for what it truly was, then he would have been inclined to intervene not only for himself, but for Pip.

Similarly, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess begins as a character who embodies purity and innocence. However, her rape at the hands of Alec d'Urberville not only serves as a defilement of her physical, virginal innocence, but also of her psychological innocence. When juxtaposed against her originally established moral purity, the brutality of her murder of Alec appears at best unfitting with her nature. The implication here is the idea that cruelty can change a person's view of the line between what is and what is not moral behaviour, leading them to behave as cruelly as the person who inflicted suffering on them in the first place. As Alec's body is discovered, the description of the way in which "the point of the blade had touched the heart of the victim" can be deemed as being symbolic. Alec caused her to lose Angel, breaking her heart in the process, and in retaliation she literally breaks his, through penetrating it with a knife. Here, it can also be noted that her violent penetration of his body with a kitchen knife is akin to his phallic penetration of her earlier in the novel. Samarian Kumar Paul A. N. Prasad underpins the true ramifications of the rape for Tess's morality and former kindness as he argues that "she is much changed from the innocent girl... Now her actions are totally mechanical and her feelings and emotions are dead with the death of her chastity"[20]. This is reminiscent of Estella's deadened emotions resulting from Havisham's manipulative cruelty.

In conclusion, the theme of cruelty in both *Great Expectations* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is treated largely as an act which those with power inflict on

those without it. This cruelty comes in the form of exploitation or abuse in order to fulfil some own personal profit, desire or relief. Whether it be adult against child, experienced against innocent or rich against poor, the weak are cruelly destroyed by those who are able to dominate them in some way. Hardy and Dickens both construct a reflection of the nineteenth century society's industrial modernisation. As society changes, these changes are catalysed at the expense of the powerless who are used as footholds for others to climb the ladder of Capitalism. Both novels are also bildungsroman's, which focus on the coming of age of children in a corrupt and cruel society, and the ramifications of this for their emotional and psychological development, often rendering them practisers of either cruelty or victimhood.

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