

# Gender inequality in tess of the d'urbervilles

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Set in the Victorian age, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a poignant tale of a common country girl who experiences cruelty from two very different men. Thomas Hardy is often portrayed as being pessimistic and rather realistic in illustrating the double-standards and hypocrisy of his age. The novel encompasses many themes, such as hypocrisy, fatalism, and the relationships between man and woman. In this essay, the topic of whether Tess was a victim of male cruelty, her own conscience, or other factors will be discussed.

To begin with, Tess is undoubtedly a victim of male cruelty. It is not only one man that victimize her, but several. For example: When Alec saves Tess from the returning workers at Trantridge and they ride into The Chase, Alec takes advantage of the situation that he has put them both into and states all the good thing that he has done for Tess' family [like buying the Durbeyfields a new horse and giving the Durbeyfield children some toys]; thereby seducing Tess. This is why one the workers said: " Out of the frying pan into the fire!" Alec also takes advantage of Tess on several other occasions such as the time when Tess' family was evicted after Mr. Durbeyfield dies, or when Tess was working for Farmer Groby. Alec also blames Tess for his loss of faith after his conversion. This shows that Tess is continuously suffering at the hands of male cruelty from just one man - let alone the many others. Hence, Hardy portrays Tess as a young woman whose fate has been inter-twined with cruelty at the hands of her male counterparts.

Secondly, Tess also faces cruelty from Angel Clare. This is evident from the way Angel left Tess for her past misconduct - even though he was equally responsible for committing a similar crime. He even has the nerve to ask Izz

Huett to accompany him to Brazil, so that she could act as his wife, and she tells him about Tess saying: " She would have laid down her life for ' ee. I could do no more." This shows Angel's unnecessary and emotion-based judgments imposed on Tess, causing her much distress. Also, after Angel comes back from Brazil - as a ' changed man' - he seeks Tess out and interrogates her mother about Tess' whereabouts; expecting Tess to forgive him. This shows that even men who were brought up in virtuous surroundings, such as Angel, caused terrible injustices and sufferings on Tess. Hardy portrays the difficult position of women in the 19th century, and exposes Victorian double standards.

Addressing the second part of the question, Tess may also be a victim of her own conscience and decisions. Tess is filled with pride - which is the main factor that causes the novel to be classed as a Greek tragedy. The novel states: " Pride, too, entered into her submission - which perhaps was a symptom of that reckless acquiescence in chance too apparent in the whole d'Urbervilles family." On many occasions in the novel, Tess makes several of her decisions based on pride. For example, she is too proud to ask help from Alec or Angel because she does not want to be viewed as helpless or dependant. Also, when Angel chooses to leave her, she doesn't even argue with him sufficiently, let alone cry or plead with him. Hardy states in the novel: " If Tess had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically...he [Angel] would probably not have withstood her." This pride within Tess is one of the main causes for her downfall. Therefore, Hardy coils Tess in her own faults - like pride and her indecisiveness - with male cruelty, which leads to her mortal ending.

As aforesaid, Tess' indecisiveness also victimizes her. On many incidents, Tess fails to make a decision or at least an appropriate one. For example, Tess falls asleep on certain climaxes in the story - when she was riding Prince [which led to his death] and when she was in the forest with Alec. This is definitely not the right stance to take in either situation. Some critics may argue that Tess was a naïve country girl who couldn't possibly have foreseen the consequences of her actions. Others may argue that she was tired and that is why she decided to sleep. However, it doesn't make sense to fall asleep on either occasion because they were extremely dangerous situations - it doesn't make sense to fall asleep whilst conducting a horse, nor is it a soothing practice to fall asleep in the middle of nowhere. Both instances would be restless, and filled with anxiety and paranoia. Other instances in which Tess is indecisive is that she has ambivalent feelings towards Alec as well as Angel. She believes that Alec would be her biological husband and that Angel doesn't deserve to have an impure woman such as herself. But she dislikes Alec - for her own reasons - and loves Angel. This causes problems throughout her youth and leads to her hanging. In this way, Hardy incites Tess' naivety, recklessness, and - in a sense - a lack of responsibility.

In addition, Tess also makes many incorrect decisions. For example, when Tess' mother advises Tess not to tell Angel about her past wrongdoing, saying: " Many a woman... have had a Trouble in their time; and why should you trumpet yours when others don't trumpet theirs?" She does not take her mother's advice and tells Angel about her relations with Alec - which then causes Angel to flee from Tess. Then, later in the novel, when Angel seeks Tess out, she cannot decide whether or not to go with him. Any logical

person would have settled with Alec and not given a second thought about Angel. But Tess decides to leave Alec and flee with Angel – which is a brash and emotionally-induced stance to take. Critics may argue that Tess was in love with Angel and had no love for Alec, and that was why she decided to leave Alec. In defiance to this, Angel abandoned Tess and fled from her for a crime that she deeply regretted and constantly asked forgiveness for. On the other hand, Alec treated her well and wanted to liberate her by sheltering her and her family. If anything, Tess was more indebted to Alec as opposed to Angel who left her with the bare minimal to survive on. Hence, it doesn't make sense for Tess to still harbor love for Angel, even though Alec has treated her better. Hardy again emphasizes Tess' recklessness and lack of responsibility.

Aside from this, Tess also falls prey to other factors. Firstly, Tess' life is wrapped in a series of coincidental occurrences. She says: “ My life looks as if it had been wasted for want of chances! When I see what you know, what you have read, and seen, and thought, I feel what a nothing I am!” For example, in the first part of the novel, Tess is at the spring dance along with her country fellows and Angel wishes to join them. However, unexpectedly Angel coincidentally doesn't dance with Tess. Hardy uses this occurrence to foreshadow the disorder between Angel and Tess in later life. Another pure example of fatality in the novel is that Tess becomes pregnant on the first sexual encounter with Alec. Critics may argue that Tess and Alec may have had a more intense relationship before they broke away. However, this wouldn't be a fair argument to make since the sexual encounter is only mentioned once – hence the reader can only recall one encounter. Hardy

uses this to portray Tess' unlucky fate from the very stage in the novel. Also the baby dies - again a completely coincidental happening. Lastly, when Tess tries to tell Angel for the last time about her relationship- with Alec, and resorts to writing a note, the note falls between the floor and the carpet - meaning Angel never got to see the note and leads to her short-lived happiness of his unapparent acceptance. All of these occurrences show that luck isn't on Tess' side and leads to her downfall.

Another factor which contributes to Tess' victimization is the very strict norms of Victorian society. It was because of the shame that Sorrow would bring on the Durbeyfield family that John Durbeyfield resorted to disallowing Parson Tringham from baptizing the poor child. It was because of the response of the society that Parson Tringham refused to bury Sorrow in a Christian graveyard - even though he agreed that Tess' baptism of Sorrow would be accepted in the eyes of the Christian God. Angel's parents were a major obstacle that Angel had to overcome in order to marry Tess - because Tess isn't a woman of noble ranking or of high education. Angel leaves Tess because she had a previous sexual relationship - which was not acceptable in Victorian society - whereas Angel committed the exact same crime! Hardy makes clear the hypocrisy and the double-standards of the era, the blind eye of the Church towards those in need of support and, how the society exploited some members of its sphere.

So, to conclude, Tess of the d'Urbervilles is entangled with many factors which cause Tess suffering and remorse. Although male cruelty does play a major part in Tess' suffering, the decisions of her own conscience and the

roads that she takes; plays a larger role in her mortal destruction. There are also many other factors that collectively lead to her end.