

Tess-the victorian woman



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Intelligent, strikingly attractive, and distinguished by her deep moral sensitivity and passionate intensity, Tess is indisputably the central character of the novel that bears her name. But she is also more than a distinctive individual: Hardy makes her into somewhat of a mythic heroine. Other characters often refer to Tess in mythical terms, as when Angel calls her a “ Daughter of Nature” in Chapter XVIII, or refers to her by the Greek mythological names “ Artemis” and “ Demeter” in Chapter XX.

The narrator himself sometimes describes Tess as more than an individual woman, but as something closer to a mythical incarnation of womanhood. In Chapter XIV, he says that her eyes are “ neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all these shades together,” like “ an almost standard woman. ” Tess’s story may thus be a “ standard” story, representing a deeper and larger experience than that of a single individual. In part, Tess represents the changing role of the agricultural workers in England in the late nineteenth century.

Possessing an education that her unschooled parents lack, since she has passed the Sixth Standard of the National Schools, Tess does not quite fit into the folk culture of her predecessors, but financial constraints keep her from rising to a higher station in life. She belongs in that higher world, however, as we discover on the first page of the novel with the news that the Durbeyfields are the surviving members of the noble and ancient family of the d’Urbervilles.

There is aristocracy in Tess’s blood, visible in her graceful beauty—yet she is forced to work as a farmhand and milkmaid. When she tries to express her

joy by singing lower-class folk ballads at the beginning of the third part of the novel, they do not satisfy her—she seems not quite comfortable with those popular songs. But, on the other hand, her diction, while more polished than her mother's, is not quite up to the level of Alec's or Angel's. She is in between, both socially and culturally. Thus, Tess is a symbol of unclear and unstable notions of class in nineteenth-century

Britain, where old family lines retained their earlier glamour, but where cold economic realities made sheer wealth more important than inner nobility. Beyond her social symbolism, Tess represents fallen humanity in a religious sense, as the frequent biblical allusions in the novel remind us. Just as Tess's clan was once glorious and powerful but is now sadly diminished, so too did the early glory of the first humans, Adam and Eve, fade with their expulsion from Eden, making humans sad shadows of what they once were.

Tess thus represents what is known in Christian theology as original sin, the degraded state in which all humans live, even when—like Tess herself after killing Prince or yielding to Alec—they are not wholly or directly responsible for the sins for which they are punished. This torment represents the most universal side of Tess: she is the myth of the human who suffers for crimes that are not her own and lives a life more degraded than she deserves. Tess as a Typical Victorian Woman Tess d'Urbervilles is a victim of external and uncomprehended forces, or to speak more clearly, of fate.

Passive and yielding, unsuspicious and fundamentally pure, she suffers a weakness of will and reason, struggling against a fate that is too strong for her. Tess is the easiest victim of circumstance, society and male idealism,

who fights the hardest fight yet is destroyed by her ravaging self-destructive sense of guilt, life denial and the cruelty of two men. James Hazen sees Tess as “ the martyrdom of the natural self under the pressures of Victorian social and moral attitudes as embodied in Angel Clare.”(Hazen, 329).

The bourgeois hypocrisy and the male dominance incarnated in Angel and Alec co-operate in driving Tess to destruction. In the conventional world with a severe view on virginity and chastity, the sense of self-guilt and self-reproach haunts her through her life journey. After sexual violation, the rigid society gives her no chance for regeneration. As Hardy suggests in the novel, patriarchal society, the habitat of the heroine, is the root of her tragedy, shaping her miserable fate.

He sympathizes with Tess by arguing that “ most of her misery had been generated by her conventional aspect. ” (Hardy, 96). He indicates that Tess is the example of the destructive effect of society’s pressures and conventions upon a naturally pure and unstained country girl and that Alec and Angel are personifications of destructive attitudes towards women. Tess is designated as a “ fallen” woman who is disdained and refused by the social community. Her deviation from the well accepted ethical restrictions for women decides her tragic destination.

This is the inevitability of her tragedy. This raises the very question that who made her fall. It was the custom of the Victorian male writers to portray the women characters either as the star of calamity, or as an angel. But in this novel we never come across such a one-sided presentation of women. The much realistic representation of Tess stresses the fact that the inevitable

tragedy of Tess resulted not from Alec, Angel, or any other individual, but from her own self-redundant attitude. And this self- redundancy was not a necessary quality of Tess as a biological woman.

It was the society of the time with its male dominance and conventional sidelining that made such a generation of women- all submissive, all obedient. Here in this novel Tess is made to take many decisions which have life-reversing potential. She finds herself alone to face the many questions of existence. Certainly she faces them, but without a trust in her own decisions. This lack of self confidence seems to be her tragic flaw. This also points not to Tess the individual, but to the social norms and restrictions to which she was trained to fit.

I do not intent to make generalizations about a whole society based on one Tess. But it is a fact that I have seen the same society in Wuthering Heights and Madame Bovary. I have met Tess in both these novels n different names- Catherine and Emma. So I conclude asserting that Hardy's novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles is the realistic depiction of the Victorian society in general, and Tess, the typical Victorian woman, who had to compromise her life in order to make herself fit for her times.