

Thomas Hardy's, Tess of the d'Urbervilles



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As what now seems to be the throwback of a bygone era, religion was a massive issue at the time both of the novels I am looking at were written. There was much controversy surrounding the great 'catholic question' as well as many other doubts that were beginning to eat away at what was once such a dominant force. Religion in both *Middlemarch* and *Tess* is reflective of its situation at the time.

But in both novels religion is treated very differently, used in diverse ways, in both the advancement of plot, but also where the authors own views on religion are concerned. In order to convey their views religion is not just used in its own form, but it is also represented through the characters, and in turn the characters are actually embodied by the religious route they choose, and the religion they follow. As a way of advancing plot lines religion is also employed, through deciding the fate of characters, or in terms of the whole society at the time.

Both novels authors had specific views on the subject, and these are apparent when reading the novels, as they use them almost as a map to convey their own feelings, so to look at the treatment, it all depends how the authors see religion should be treated in the first place. From the very start of *Middlemarch* it is apparent of the route Eliot plans to take in her treatment of religion. Her doubt of it is inherent from the beginning, and we read the prelude to hear of Saint Theresa. From this we can establish Eliot does not see religion as being such a potent force as it once was.

The Saint benefited from the 'coherent social faith and order' of the Christian society around her which dominated out right at the time. Eliot

however obviously realised that such blind faith was no longer afforded to the church or its backers, as she was part of a growing number of thinkers who thought that Christianity no longer had such an influence or clear understanding of life. While political and economic change swept across England in the 19th century, most people remained steadfastly dedicated to the strict codes of behaviour dictated by the Church.

Above all else, women were expected to marry well. They were to bear children and stay close to home. Men were expected to be the sole wage earner and head of household. Unwavering commitment to the Church and its teachings was considered the highest of virtues. So Eliot, we see, was part of a large trend, a worry to the church, a loss of faith, which encompassed many middle class intellectuals of Victorian England. This was a loss of faith aided by the new respect for scientific thought towards life, which were becoming more and more prominent as society branched out under the empire.

These years of religious confusion surrounding her are reflected in her novel, in which the author seems to struggle in her orthodox belief. Scientific thinkers, such as Charles Darwin has always been about, but now people were taking notice and listening, in what Hutton called the 'great wave of scepticism', in his theories of evolution. Eliot takes this upon herself in *Middlemarch*, creating her own version of evolution, where society is brought forward by thinkers such as Lydgate and Dorothea, who directly do not meet their aspirations, but in general advance society as a whole.

This is typical of Middlemarch, as it is such a web of relationships that one person's forward thinking can inspire those around them, which is a distinctly Christian view, in that by acting positively you can help those around you as well. It was not just this lack of faith though that was a problem for religion at the time, but also as to which particular type to subscribe to. There was a split and new evolution of religion in England, which saw the minority Roman Catholics treated unfairly as opposed to those of the Protestant Church of England, such as the landed gentry of Chettam and Brooke.

The religion at the time was Evangelicalism, a form of religion, which allowed people to sin, and as long as they repented they would not be doomed to the fearful kingdom of Hell. This however did not seem to be nearly enough for Eliot, who talks negatively of the lack of lenience shown towards any sensuous indulgence by the church, ' the Vincys had the readiness to enjoy, the rejection of all anxiety, and the belief in life as a merry lot, which made a house exceptional in most county towns at that time, when Evangelicalism had cast a certain suspicion as of a plague-infection over the few amusements which had survived in the provinces.

Her use of religion is also used to depict how the different characters see it. It is typical of Bulstrode, who was once a steadfast non-conformist that he is now a member of the established Anglican Church. Farebrother's liberal, humane approach to religion makes him a favourite character in the book. He and the Garths have been called a " moral centre" of the novel as they are shown to be clear about their principles, their limitations and are modest and warm-hearted.

Critics have pointed out that they are among the least altered by the events in the novel. Lydgate and the vicar being scholars they could be friends, but their aims in life are very different. George Eliot herself was deeply interested in the ethical meaning of religion and in this part of the book; she dwells on the different approaches to religion of Farebrother, Bulstrode, Tyke and others. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles we get another very strong view of religion from Hardy.

Whilst the book was written a little after Middlemarch and set 50 years after, the general religious background in the country was still the same. One of the most important chapters religiously is chapter forty-five. Hardy takes a very critical view of religion in this chapter. He does not present Alec as atypical within Christian history. As Tess notes, the religion has a tradition of holding up its greatest sinners as its greatest saints, yet the evidence that Alec has truly mended his ways seems incredibly doubtful.

Furthermore, Hardy presents Alec's attempt to save Tess's soul as intensely hypocritical. Hardy even connects Alec's religious conversion to the style of religion promoted by Reverend Clare, previously derided by Angel as archaic and dogmatic. Perhaps the most grotesque portrayal of religion in the chapter is the Cross-in-Hand; while both Alec and Tess assume that this landmark is a Christian cross, it in fact represents grotesque violence. The Cross-in-Hand thus symbolizes the lack of authenticity within Alec's conversion.

This relic that Alec asks Tess to swear upon seems to represent Christian teachings, but in fact symbolizes violence and suffering akin to that Alec has

inflicted upon Tess. The full rejection of religion by Alec d'Urberville that Hardy has foreshadowed arrives, revealing the superficiality of his religious conversion. Alec rejects Christianity as easily as he would reject a style of clothing; he signals this change of belief not by any overt behaviour, but rather by adopting a more stylish appearance and rejecting the austere dress of a fundamentalist preacher.

In contrast, while Alec shows a weakness and adaptability in his beliefs, Tess demonstrates her core of strength and fortitude. Another part where Hardy takes a swipe at religion is the hammed up death of Sorrow, Tess's illegitimate baby. Although the local parson shows his humanity by assuring her that she has saved her baby from Hell, he won't officiate at Sorrow's funeral simply because Tess' father insulted him by not letting him baptise the baby. The parson seems more concerned with saving face than with tending to Sorrow's soul.

Because the parson will not officiate at the funeral service, poor, innocent Sorrow must be buried with suicides, criminals, and other social outcasts. The fate of this helpless baby may make you join with Hardy in questioning a society and a religion that treat a baby as if he were an evil individual. Such lack of sympathy makes us look critically at institutions that profess to be for human good but that have little to do with human needs or feelings.

So we see how the two separate incidences canvas the growing disease of not only Hardy, but from a society in change, where religion is no longer on the untouchable pedestal it once was. It is still an indomitable force nonetheless, but it is beginning to come under scrutiny. It is also a criticism

of Hardy that religion has been ruined by the people who wield it, such as Alec using it for purely selfish reasons making a mockery out of it, and also the local parson being overly strict with the laws and not showing any human compassion.

Both authors have a strict stance on religion, and both utilise it to a large effect in their novels. Hardy seems far more damning of religion than Eliot, who although faltering in her faith still tries to upkeep some of the faith that is slowly being waned by the scientists and critics at the time. In neither book does it dominate though, something that shows it is no longer the all important force it once was even then.