

Appearance and environment as character in tess of the durbervilles essays exampl...

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Uri Margolin's assertion that "an individual's appearance, gestures, mannerism, dress, and natural and human-made environment are indicators for inferences about his or her mental and moral features" essentially claims that readers pick up on who a character is through their outside features as described in the prose (2012, p. 77). However, this assertion ignores the possibility of contrasts, societal pressures, and other factors that can provide needed context for further understanding of their true character. Tess in *Tess of the d'Urburvilles*, for instance, is a quintessential contradiction – somewhere between rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, strong and weak, etc. While reader expectations are given throughout the book by her appearance and behavior, this mixed-class status gives her the potential to act outside her surface being, thus subverting Margolin's assertion.

Tess Durbeyfield, on the outside, is the spitting image of the mythic, idealized image of woman. She is incredibly attractive, passionate, kind and outgoing. Angel refers to her as a "daughter of Nature," or refers her to Greek figures like Artemis and Demeter (Hardy 177). Tess is described as having eyes that are "neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all these shades together," something akin to "an almost standard woman" (Hardy 133). By tying her to these broader, more mythological definitions of womanhood, however, Tess defies the individual expectations of her from other characters (and the readers themselves). As Herman writes, "Appearances can be deceptive. Indeed, many novels and plays are concerned with the problem of deception or disguise, with discriminating between an appearance that is a true sign of inner value and one that is not" (66). By deceiving the reader, other characters, and herself about who she is, Tess is

a perfect example of a character whose appearance does not define her. One of the most important ways in which Tess constantly surprises and shifts the audience's perception of her character is her constant shifting between class. Tess, as a character, is representative of how class distinctions became confused and unclear in 19th century England; she has the education and societal training of an upper-class aristocrat, but the poverty and manual labor skills of a farmer. To that end, she does not seem to fit in with her lower-class folk peers and family, but also cannot quite exert the same level of elitism that the upper-class characters she meets seem to expect. Her ancestry as a member of the noble d'Urberville family is an indicator of this - while she has regal blood, her life is still one of hard work and humble aspirations. The folk songs of her community do not give her fulfillment, while her diction is only sophisticated to a point - she cannot fit in with Alec or Angel in her speech.

Tess' status as a woman, and the various expectations that are placed on her, are at least partially responsible for this whiplash effect of her societal perception. Tess is shown to be quite brave by enduring the victimizing of Alec and the humiliation of interacting with upper-class culture in order to get the money necessary to buy her family a new horse; she is also virtuous for taking responsibility for the horse's death being her fault. However, this virtue is unrewarded, as Alec quickly rapes her, showing just how little upper-class society (and men) care about her. As a woman, Tess is repeatedly mistreated by men around her, from the assault by Alec to the unfair social pressures placed on her by Angel (shunning her because she had been a victim of rape, and therefore not a virgin). In many ways, this

midjudging of Tess occurs because of this subversion of Milcourt's assertion that outside appearances dictate a character's mental state; it involves a reduction of Tess into simple, easily-digestible ideas of what a woman should be, something that cannot be done to Tess. Tess herself is as much of an enigma as anything; every time she tries to talk about her past, Angel pays it no mind, as he believes nothing of import could have happened to her before because of how she seems. Because of Tess' beauty and femininity, she is discounted as being weak, unworthy of protection, or hysterical.

Such as it happens to Angel and Alec, Tess' own enigmatic nature intrigues and mystifies the reader as well. While Tess' outside appearance is constantly referred to, she finds herself behaving very un-ladylike, and having to deal with things that one would not expect of a demure young beauty like her. The rape itself is barely referred to, leaving the reader to intimate what happened between her and Alec; in the meantime, the narrator himself is endlessly sympathetic towards her, asking the reader, "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive?" (Hardy 107). Later, when it is revealed that Tess has murdered Alec and wishes to run away with Angel, whom she has now forgiven, the reader has little clue about who has actually murdered Alec until Tess herself confesses it. Even after the fact, the murder seems very unlike Tess; to this point, she has mostly endured the horrors that society has inflicted upon her, stopping only to confront Angel about her anger at his rejection of her in the form of a letter. Because of this inability to take such dramatic, horrifying action, the act of murdering Alec comes as a

surprise, and certainly one that is not foreshadowed by the description of the character up to that point. To that end, actions like these lend some doubt to Milcourt's assertion that external descriptions of a character infer a character's mental state or mindset.

In conclusion, Tess of Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a character that cannot be neatly pinned down in her morality or mental state by the description of physical features and environment, as Milcourt claims. Tess, both by readers and the other characters, is thought to be a demure, beautiful, educated young girl, who elicits sympathy because of the traumas she has endured. However, despite how victimized she becomes over the course of the book, she appears to be fine, an expectation that is subverted the moment she chooses to forgive Angel and kill Alec. This final act is the last in a series of moves she makes to defy people's expectations of her, whether she be a farmhand, a noble, a virgin or a wife. All along the way, Tess constantly keeps people guessing as to her true nature, as what she does is not necessarily who she is as a character.

Works Cited

Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891.

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