

# Existential failure in thomas hardy's tess of the d'urbervilles



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When wilt thou awake, O Mother, wake and see  
As one who, held in trance,  
has laboured long  
By vacant rote and prepossession strong  
The coils that  
thou hast wrought unwittingly; Wherein have place, unrealized by thee, Fair  
growths, foul cankers, right enmeshed with wrong, Strange orchestras of  
victim-shriek and song, And curious blends of ache and ecstasy? (Hardy, “  
The Sleep-Worker”)

Inherent in the ruthless progress of society, there paradoxically lies a growing moral deterioration. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy “faithfully present[s]” Tess as a paragon of virtue, utilizing her as an instrument of criticism against a society too debauched to sustain the existence “of its finest individuals” (Wickens 104). Unwilling to compromise her strict adherence to personal morals, Tess suffers immensely; her ultimate inability to exist on this “blighted” (21) star exposes the regression of a hypocritically sanctimonious society, whose degraded values catalyze her destruction. Innocently unaware of “cruel Nature’s law[,]” (115) Tess is violated by the response which her sexuality arouses in Alec. Yet, although it is nature which induces Tess to lose her virginity, it is society which renders this loss a sin. Tess’s change from “a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience” (8) to one stained by a “corporeal blight” (98) elicits a severe social condemnation. Ironically, in its attempt to deny the natural instincts of mankind, social selection takes on the characteristic ethical absence of natural selection, “ensuring that the social relations among people will continue the natural relations among species” (Wickens 98). In “failing to distinguish itself ethically from [a nescient] [N]ature[,]” (Wickens 97) society thus neglects to fulfill its condition as a conscious entity. Moreover, by forsaking the responsibility of examining the moral ramifications behind Tess’s rape, society essentially

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ignores the underlying intent of the doctrine upon which it bases its denunciation. Underlying the social law which damns Tess, there lies a deeply entrenched and tremendously debased patriarchal interpretation of Christianity. Wanting to embody ideal Christianity without the responsibility of fulfilling Christian ideals, society ignores the compassion and forgiveness which this creed originally dictated. Rationalizing that it must be in accordance with the spirit of Christianity because it masquerades in the name of Christianity, society equates virtue and righteousness with those who best survive within the context of its corrupted standards. A soiled ideology is spawned, effectively excommunicating Tess and precluding her acceptance by society. Circumventing ethical considerations, society self-righteously justifies and insidiously champions the survival of the fittest and the exploitation of the weakest, thereby perpetuating the law, “once victim, always victim” (261). Having removed any moral considerations, it inaccurately judges morality by the physical outcome of circumstances. This depraved criteria of judgement renders society incapable of seeing that “[t]he beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in aims and impulses; its true history lay not among things done, but among things willed” (267). Society, with its perverted sense of justice, ostracizes Tess for her loss of physical purity, although her moral purity is absolute. Its conception of righteousness fosters an attitude which is both stifling and degrading towards those who are physically weaker, including women; society “worships the false idol of chastity[, remaining blindly]. . . committed to a set of attitudes towards the ‘fallen’ woman[,]” (Hazen 780). This mind-set engenders a fertile field for the development of the double standard, which decrees that those who function best within society’s perverse

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framework are entitled to greater leniency in all respects, whether socially, morally, or sexually; Tess's unjust and undeserved victimization is juxtaposed with the priggish hypocrisy of Angel, who is condoned for "just the same" (177) action. In addition, Alec, the true violator of a moral law, remains unpunished. Hardy satirically exposes the gross injustice of the double standard and society in general by portraying the intense ludicrousness of Alec's attempt, albeit temporary, to achieve salvation through ideological conversion. Only in an extremely sick society, Hardy suggests, could a rapist become a priest." "[S]ick with evil[,]'" (Hazen 780) a society demands conformity to its degraded ideology. It suppresses individual values of morality, thus negating "the possibilities of human existence" (Howe 421). Rejecting meliorism, Hardy pessimistically states, "We may wonder whether, at the acme and summit of the human progress, these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the social machinery that which now jolts us round and along; but such completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible" (31). Society annuls its adaptation to new moral conditions instigated by the choices of its individual members. With this moral paralysis, it effectively ceases to confront the choice of judgement and attempts to forfeit responsibility for itself. With a loss of active awareness, there is a loss of meaning. Confronting the ethical void in the world around her and a schism in the world within, Tess chooses to create meaning through consciously making decisions. Essentially, her actions constitute a ". . . basic endeavor to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence.' Even without a sense of cosmic purpose, [Tess] maintains her desire for human order and ethical awareness" (Wickens 96). Tess responds to the <https://assignbuster.com/existential-failure-in-thomas-hardys-tess-of-the-durbervilles/>

moral void around her by formulating her own beliefs. When confronted with words condemning the impure woman, Tess responds, “ I don’t believe God said such things!” (63). She forges a personal interpretation of religion as well as a personal system of values and consequently rejects the social order which opposes her very being. Faced with ostracization, deracination, and demoralization to a dehumanizing extent, Tess rallies and resists by becoming determined to “ taste anew sweet independence at any price” (71). However, “ Tess demands nothing that can be regarded as the consequence of deracination or an overwrought will. . . she is spontaneously committed to the most fundamental needs of human existence. Indeed, she provides a standard of what is right and essential for human beings to demand from life” (Howe 409). Despite her suffering, Tess bears herself with immense dignity, remaining consciously true to her ideals. Actively challenging society’s morals by upholding her own set of values, Tess possesses the courage and faith that allows her to reach a “ purity of spirit even as she fails to satisfy the standards of the world” (Howe, 408). The grandness of Tess’s achievement is a stark contrast to the apparent insignificance of her being. “ She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides Tess was only a passing thought” (71). Even as she spiritually transcends the decadence of society, Tess lacks the power to amend its values. Her relationships with Alec and Angel, “ mediators of attitudes, habits, and values current in their society[,]” (Hazen 780) illustrate this. Like the society that they represent, Angel and Alec “ share an incapacity to value the splendor of feeling which radiates from Tess. Each represents a deformation of masculinity, one high and the other low; they cannot

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appreciate, they cannot even see the richness of life that Tess embodies” (Howe 415). “[F]inding no adequate response for her needs either in heaven or in earth, in the social world or the natural one, . . . [Tess] lacks the support necessary for going on” (Hyman 118). Physically worn and psychologically exhausted from the incessant struggle to maintain her purity in a corrupt world, Tess comes to the realization that the only way to achieve wholeness is to descend to society’s level and make a physical escape. In order to “taste anew sweet independence[,]” (71) Tess must sacrifice her life and thus liberate herself from his “blighted” (21) world. Her inevitable self-destruction gives rise to a sense of existential despair as it starkly exposes the decay of a society that offers death as the only way to maintain personal purity. Moreover, this “society [which] denies [Tess] the circumstances to be fully human[,]” (Wickens 102) is corrupt to the extent that it not only obliterates her existence, but even negates the significance of her self-sacrifice. Consequently, although “Tess’s suffering produces a[n]. . . immediate regeneration” (Hazen 780) through its liberating influence on Angel, this regeneration is limited to the rectification of Angel’s current viewpoint; the “hard logical deposit [which] had blocked his acceptance of the Church. . . [as well as] his acceptance of Tess” (189) remains uneroded. In essence, the system upon which he bases his conceptions (logos) does not change, for, as Hardy states, “Angel. . . would have inevitably thrown [Tess’s] fall in her face” (388). Thus, despite Tess’s great sacrifice, neither Angel nor society achieves a “recognition of the necessity for moving beyond the logical attitudes and metaphysical responses toward a more conscious awareness of the objective reality. . . [W]hat [Hardy] reveals is that while such a necessity can be grasped intellectually it cannot be

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achieved by the intellect alone. Nor can it be achieved by one individual, [but rather by. . .] mutuality and interdependence: only another human being can fill the needs no longer fulfilled by a belief in Divine Providence or the beneficence of nature. What Hardy is best at doing he does here with Tess; he creates the sense of an universe bereft of meaning and the human yearning for a response that is not forthcoming" (Hyman, 118). On a cosmic level, Tess fades as " a transient impression half-forgotten" (31). Society will merely justify Tess's death with the same standards that is used to denounce her. Angel's union with Liza-Lu does not compensate for society's extirpation of Tess, because Liza Lu is only " a spiritualized image of Tess," (313) sharing her blood but lacking her substance. Fecundity [therefore]. . . becomes for Hardy part of an ulterior plot,. . . malign and entrapping, because it is designed without the needs of individual life in mind" (Beer 453). With the destruction of the individual, the evolution of mankind seems to become reduced to mere propagation, indicating an immense regression which belies the supposed development of society. Spiritually actualizing against the background of society's regression, "[Tess] comes to seem. . . the potential of what life could be, just as what happens to her signifies what life too often becomes" (Howe 421). With Tess's death, the momentum and significance created by her conscious adherence to personal ideals is lost, and Hardy admonishes society, " O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (238). Yet, even if society realizes the significance of Tess's struggles as it eventually does Christ's, this would not be enough; a mere cognizance would not suffice to impart Tess's momentum unto society and catalyze it to take responsibility for the

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formulation of personal judgements and actions. Society's inability to advance towards self-actualization despite catalytic acts of momentous individual sacrifice reflects an existentialist failure to create and preserve meaning, thus threatening to reduce humanity to a state of sub-existence. So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around, That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.  
(Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush")

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