

Thomas hardy – tess of the d'urbervilles



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' I have not been able to put on paper all that she is, or was, to me,' wrote Thomas Hardy of Tess. ' Tess of the d'Urbervilles' was published in 1891, amid a whirlwind of controversy, under its subtitle ' A Pure Woman'. ' Tess' was Hardy's 14th novel and deals with the life of Tess Durbeyfield, a country-born girl and the ordeals she faces throughout her life. The novel deals with such issues as family status, morality, religion, illegitimacy and, eventually, justice.

Earlier in his life, Thomas Hardy witnessed the public execution of a woman found guilty of murdering her husband. This event had a huge impact on Hardy for it made him realise just how unfair his society was in matters of gender and social status. Victorian society believed that women were ' inferior' and incapable of strong emotion and passion. Through Tess, Hardy shows women as rounded, 3-dimensional characters, giving us a perfect overview of their psyche, emotions and opinions. The works of Thomas Hardy are noted for their tragic content.

Throughout the course of history, tragedy has infiltrated all areas of the arts and literature. Tragic theatre was popular in ancient Greece, which is where the word itself comes from (literally meaning ' goat-song'). Such famous Greek tragedies include ' Oedipus' and ' Antigone'. Since then, tragedy has appeared in all areas, including opera (almost all operas in fact!), theatre (of which some the most famous are credited to William Shakespeare) and, of course, literature.

The nature of tragedy in a fictional work can be created by two separate influencing factors. One is the weaknesses and eventual downfall of a

character, as is the case in 'Othello', for example. Othello's consuming jealousy leads to the death of his wife and his own death by suicide. The other is the creating of scenarios by outside forces and circumstance.

Some may refer to this as fate. In the case of Tess, we are dealing with the latter. Another key element in tragedy is an overall sense of completion, signifying the end of a 'dynasty'. For instance, in Hamlet, Hamlet dies with the words 'the rest is silence' and then Fortinbras walks in to claim his new position. In Tess, her execution marks the end her dynasty and the joining of Angel and Liza-Lu is the beginning of another.

However, in the previous chapter we see that Tess is found at Stonehenge. Angel presses her to escape, even though he knows how futile that would be. Tess does not fight back against the policemen, but simply says 'I am ready' before being taken away. This act alone tells us that Tess is not the one that should be punished and in punishing her we create her as victim of an immoral society. In classing Tess as a tragic heroine, we must elaborate on the reasons for our classification. In tragedy, the tragic elements are not necessarily tragic on their own but the nature and direction of said event leads us to class it as tragic.

An example found in the novel would be Alec's 'violation' of Tess. On its own, sex would not be classed as a 'bad deed'. However, as this was not given consent, the act is classed as rape. The fact that Tess is a righteous and pure young lady makes her appear more of a victim. We can tell that inevitably she will be with child and so shunned from society for the intolerable act of sex out of wedlock.

Alec, however, walks away 'free' and with no lasting effects to him. Tess feels that, as the oldest child, she has a great responsibility for her family. When the horse dies in an accident, Tess feels duty-bound to go to Mrs d'Urberville's home to claim kin as she believes that she is to blame. When Jack Durbeyfield is taken ill, Tess returns home to care for him and work the field. Her devotion to her family and sense of responsibility for them are admirable qualities and not ones on which we can condemn her. Hardy presents Tess as a very moral person from the very beginning of the novel, and in displaying her as a genuinely good person so tragedy is also created.

If the same events were to happen to a person of a nature that would 'welcome' them the same tragic effect would not be reached. Similarly, if Hardy did not help us to build up a fondness for Tess, the sympathy and, furthermore, tragedy would not be created. Throughout the novel, what sometimes appear to be extremely direct and determined developments actually hinge on improbable coincidences; Hardy uses this technique to convey the sense that the universe itself, in the guise of Fate, is against Tess, that her tragedy is predestined. We see that Tess is guided by her morality and desire to do what is right. This is the reason she goes against her mother's advice and tells Angel about her past with Alec. At this point, Angel's name seems ironic.

He had told Tess about his earlier affair with an 'older woman' and she had forgiven him but when she confesses to something that was neither her fault nor controlled by her, he does not 'forgive' her. Tess has previously slipped a note under Angel's door but, Tess concludes, it must have gone under the carpet. Had Angel received Tess's note before they were married, the course

of the story might have gone differently, but it happens to slip under the carpet, and another chance for Tess's tragedy to be averted is lost.

Furthermore, Angel is an intelligent and Christian man who refuses to forgive, thus going against the Christian ideas of forgiveness. Angel's father and brothers are all clergymen and so because of the family situation we expect Angel to be more observant of the Christian philosophies. In showing this 'flaw' in Angel's personality, Hardy is telling us that no one is entirely perfect and so when we ourselves are flawed, we cannot expect of others to be completely flawless.

This might seem like simple (and possibly even unbelievable) coincidence, except that the universe expresses its hostility toward Tess through the form of the omens that plague her throughout the book. The cock crowing in the afternoon is not what dooms Tess to ill fortune; it simply announces the already-ordained doom, to Tess and to the world. Later in the novel when Alec and Tess meet, he proposes to her. When she rejects him, he shouts 'I have not a sense of what is morally right any weight with you!' This is extremely ironic, as we know that Tess is a virtuous woman and that Alec is the one with no sense of morality. Throughout the novel, certain characters are used to reflect issues in 19th century society.

For example, Sorrow, Tess's illegitimate son, is used to show the attitudes of society on illegitimacy and unmarried sex. Tess believes that Sorrow's illness is the result of being an illegitimate child and, knowing that he is dying, baptises the baby herself so that he may be 'fit' to go to heaven. The name itself is symbolic, as Sorrow is the physical entity 'born out of the cause of Tess's own sorrow'. The presentation of Alec as, to put it bluntly, an arrogant

and immoral rapist reflects society's attitude towards women. Tess is condemned, although she is innocent, because of her gender while the immoral Alec walks free, regardless of his crime. This novel also emphasises the ideas of marriage in the 19th century.

After her confession, Tess expects Angel to divorce her but at hearing her suggestion he replies ' How can you be so simple! How can I divorce you? ' echoing the 19th century ideas that divorce was an unforgivable thing. In the novel, there are many biblical and mythological references, either in dialogue or as part of Hardy's narration. This emphasises (more so when said by a character) the importance and influence of religion in the 19th century. In conclusion, Hardy's presentation of Tess as a tragic heroine is extremely powerful and thought provoking. At the time of publication, this novel was uncommonly controversial and still is to some extent, although possibly not for the same reasons.

Hardy wrote with a 3-D view of the world, creating rounded characters (unlike many writers of the time such as Jane Austen or George Meredith). This book has been made into several films and television adaptations, although none convey the same emotion and passion as the original novel. I only hope that this text remains as popular as ever for many years to come.