

Analysis of social critiques in tess of the d'urbervilles



Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* provides social commentary on many issues prevalent in Victorian society. In particular, Hardy uses Tess' submission to her parents, Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare, and society as a whole to examine the sexual double standard prevalent in Victorian society. Tess is a strong character, enduring many hardships in her life; however, this double standard seals Tess's fate as the society she lives in prevents her from successfully rising above her oppressors. Hardy also uses Tess's submission and subsequent destruction to parallel other aspects of the society he critiques, such as the fall of the rural society Tess represents. The first source of Tess' oppression is her parents, John and Joan Durbeyfield, who dream of reaching beyond their status as a working class individuals to create an easier life for themselves. The opportunity to receive financial assistance from the aristocratic d'Urberville family sets Tess' fate into motion. Blinded by their greed, John and Joan send their daughter to marry into the d'Urberville family without a second thought. After her encounter with Alec, Tess returns home only to be rebuked by her family for allowing herself to be seduced by the d'Urberville. The hypocrisy of the Durbeyfield family's response causes Tess to exclaim, " Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had a chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!" (82). This cry for help goes for naught. When Tess again returns home after her separation from Angel her parents react with anger, sighting the humiliation Tess has caused them. The Durbeyfield's place their daughter's needs far below their own, keeping her submissive by exploiting her whenever she can offer them anything and otherwise ignoring her. The second and most

<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-social-critiques-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles/>

prominent force keeping Tess submissive is Alec d'Urberville. Beginning with her rape, Alec supplies physical and mental oppression of Tess. With his reappearance in Phase Six Alec continues this oppression blaming what happened in the woods on Tess and making her swear not to seduce him again. When Alec questions Tess on her religious views, he quickly dismisses her answer as the opinions of her husband. In these conversations, Alec abuses his position as a man relying on the subordinate position of women in society as means for his poor treatment of Tess. This trend escalates in the following chapter as Alec's language towards Tess becomes more and more harsh he shouts, "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again" (336). The reference to Tess as a slave solidifies her position as a subordinate to Alec and all other men. It is also at this point that Tess herself admits her submission to society claiming, "Once a victim, always victim—that's the law!" (336). Through the power of the dominant male character of Alec, Tess submits and accepts her place in society as a victim. Even after his sexual conquest of Tess is complete, Alec abuses his power, treating Tess like a possession instead of a human. Unlike the Durbeyfields and Alec, Angel Clare has a much more indirect role on the submission of Tess. Up until their separation, Angel is one of the few positive influences on Tess in the entire novel. Even after Tess tells him about her past, Angel tries not to hurt Tess. Although his inflexible morals and desertion to Brazil may cause more hardship for Tess than any other single event, Angel's actions never lead to the submission of the heroine. However, Tess' relationship with Angel provides important insight into how other parties, as well as the social beliefs of the time, have shaped her into a character submissive to any authority she may encounter. This concept is <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-social-critiques-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles/>

illustrated as Angel sleepwalks while carrying Tess across a river and places her in an empty coffin. Although Angel's actions put both he and Tess in great danger as they cross the river, Tess is completely submissive to her husband. This unquestioning submission provides further evidence that Tess is a blameless character and her tragedy is representative of all woman of the era. Based on her position in society as a woman, there seems to be little Tess can do to avoid submitting to men. The double standard of the time used to judge men and women gives Tess no chance at rise above the oppression that rules her life. This idea is discussed by Mary Jacobus as she states, " A sustained campaign of rehabilitation makes Tess's so blatant a case of double standard of sexual morality applied to men and women, and Tess herself is so blameless, the tragedy of the ordinary becomes the tragedy of the exceptional- blackening both man and fate in the process." This indictment of men as the source of Tess's tragedy and the idea Tess is blameless suggest the submission of Tess is used by Hardy to shed light on the plight of woman during the Victorian Era. Hardy's greatest critique regarding the submission of women is not men, represented by John Durbeyfield, Alec d'Urberville, and Angel Clare, but the society that condones their actions. Through the conflict between Tess and the men in her life Hardy discusses a wide variety of problems with Victorian society. Besides his literal critique of the position of women in society, Hardy uses the conflict between Tess and other characters to represent other problems of the time. On such example is discussed in the introduction to the novel by Lisa Alther stating that " Tess's life is one of endless toil, and no other novelist writes so convincingly about the grueling demands of farm labor... Alec's violation of Tess parallels the violation of her region's age-old way of life by city-based

<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-social-critiques-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles/>

industrialists, who were introducing mechanized farming (such as the threshing machine Tess feeds at Flintcomb-Ash), buying up family farms, and transforming agriculture.” The submission of Tess to Alec represents not only the sexual double standard of the time, but in a more figurative sense the fall of family farms and the rise of the industrial revolution. Hardy suggests that just as it is impossible for Tess to avoid Alec’s advances rural agriculture cannot survive with the advance of mechanization. The appearance of the threshing machine in the field after Alec tells Tess he will again be her master suggests that, like Tess, the land is submissive to this new form of agriculture. Although generally submissive, there are points throughout the novel in which Tess struggles against her oppressors. Tess’s strength contradicts the expected role of women of the time. The baptism of Sorrow is the first evidence of Tess’s rejection of social norms. Tess rejects the idea that she and her baby are outcasts with this symbolic act. With her stand against society Hardy describes Tess, “ Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging strait down her back to her waist” (94). This vivid description of Tess suggests that within her there is power; although this power is suppressed by society, it is occasionally presented to the world. When Alec approaches Tess in the field after his return to the novel she, “... passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face” (336). This violence towards a man strongly contradicts the views a Victorian woman and represents the struggle of all women to fight back against the double standard that controls them. Tess’ struggle to fight back against Alec reaches a climax with his murder. Her subsequent execution portrays Tess as a martyr for the plight of woman and her death frees her from the

<https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-social-critiques-in-tess-of-the-durbervilles/>

submissive position society forces her into. Throughout the novel Tess is used as a pawn by others, exploited because of her economic value, sexuality, and her inferior position in society as a woman. Subservient to the idea of an ideal Victorian woman and the men in her life, she is used as a representative of the plight of all women. Hardy's idea of the sexual double standard in Tess's society is seen in each of her relationships. This inescapable inequality is the root of Tess's unfortunate fate. Despite her attempts, only death can bring her freedom and happiness. Hardy's extension of Tess' subservience to metaphorically illustrate the fall England's rural past and the danger of the industrial revolution represented by Alec serves as a warning to all of society of what the future may hold. The critique of Victorian society in Tess of the d'Urbervilles champions the rights of women. 1. Jacobus, Mary, Tess: The Making of a Pure Woman; in: Harold Bloom (ed.): Modern Critical Interpretations; p. 492. Lisa Alther. Introduction to Tess of the d'Urbervilles. New York: New American Library, 1999