

Tess of d'urbervilles: an example of an unconventional heroine



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Thomas Hardy's tendentious Victorian novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy uses a format akin to that of a tragic hero to critique the double standards of Victorian society. His heroine, Tess, challenges Victorian standards by maintaining her innate purity and refusing to be defined by society even after committing acts that ought to both taint and define her. Unlike a tragic hero, Tess' downfall is not due to a flaw in her character but rather in society's ability to perceive her character.

Tess embodies nigh on every characteristic that the ideal Victorian woman ought to be; that is: modest, selfless, loyal, dutiful, pure and beautiful. These traits are exemplified throughout the novel. Tess' beauty is unquestioned; being referenced as her "trump card". Her selflessness and duty are exemplified in her compliance with her parent's wishes to "claim kin", despite not knowing "what good will come of it". Tess is also cautious to pursue her "love" of Angel out of modesty but, once married to him, is loyal even after acknowledging that he has "punished" her unfairly. On a characteristic level, Tess is "pure", "kind" and exemplifies the model Victorian maiden. Despite this, Tess is "doomed" and on her "beautiful feminine tissue" is "traced a coarse pattern". This challenges the idea of conventional heroism as, despite fulfilling the abstract ideal, Tess is condemned and ultimately "the woman pays".

Throughout the novel, various members of society attempt to classify and reduce Tess' complexity. Alec refers to Tess as "temptress" and a "mere chit", whereas Angel deems her a "goddess". She is also referred to as "simple", a "peasant" and her capacity for complexity and independent thought is dismissed by Alec as her "mind [being] enslaved to [Angel's]".

These assertions aim to define Tess based either on her actions, her situation or whom the men in her life wish her to be, as was customary for women of the time to comply with. Tess subverts this idea by demanding to be acknowledged as an individual. She beseeches Angel to “ call [her] Tess” and challenges her classification as a “ peasant” by being a “ peasant by position but not by nature”. Tess uses her quiet strength to consistently assert her independence which acts as a quiet yet powerful protest to the conventions of the time.

However, it is not only other characters but also society's perception of Tess' own actions that attempt to challenge her purity and identity. After being raped by Alec D'Urberville, and thus falling pregnant, she challenges both her and her illegitimate child's right to dignity by questioning the “ liturgical reasons” that prohibit her child from being baptised. This action is a direct challenge to the Victorian society to acknowledge her as a human being over and above her circumstances. Tess again challenges the impact of her actions on her status by accusing Angel of being “ unjust” in his treatment of her despite her premarital affairs - to be conventionally warranting disgrace - and finally in murdering Alec “ for [Angel]” as Tess feels justified in the action. Tess' rape, infidelity (for the sake of her family) and, ultimately, her murder of Alec, ought to condemn Tess and yet she refuses to ignore the injustices dealt her despite accepting her execution. Tess does not allow her actions to define her character even after Angel insists “ you were one woman, now you are another”.

Although Tess chooses not to be defined by her actions she is ultimately punished for them. It is here that Hardy challenges the idea of a tragic hero <https://assignbuster.com/tess-of-durbervilles-an-example-of-an-unconventional-heroine/>

as it is not Tess' character that leads to her downfall but rather society's perception of it. Tess' illegitimate child taints her ability to be a "truly Christian wife" and is the result of an action for which Angel claims "forgiveness does not apply". These standards are born out of Angel being a "slave to custom and conventionality" and not by Tess' own fault. Despite this, both Angel and society's condemnation of Tess forces her into a place of fear and shame. As a result, Tess is forced to work long hours in cold weather at Flintcombe Ash to support her family and is frequently harassed by Alec who, too, is obsessed with making Tess a "moral woman". The fact that "outside of humanity [Tess] had no present fear" only emphasises that it was society that caused her downfall. In the words of King Lear, Tess is more "sinned against than sinning" and is ultimately executed for her murder of Alec.

Tess' personality ought to qualify her to be the perfect Victorian woman and yet she is condemned in the eyes of society and "doomed" to a life of hardship. This dichotomy is an unconventional take on a traditional Victorian heroine and is, consequently, a powerful tool in critiquing the standards of feminine perfection at the time.