

Tess of the
d'urbervilles by
thomas hardy



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" In her relations with both Alec and Angel, Tess is the victim of her own conscience rather than of male cruelty and censure". Comment on this view of Hardy's portrayal of Tess and her fate in Tess Of The D'Urbervilles.

This essay is written in response to the quote above. Since the statement is from the author, Thomas Hardy, I believe that it is necessary to look at his past and outlook on life in general first. By doing this I hope to understand where Hardy's controversy has originated, and then move on to form my own argument, based on my personal belief, and proceed to deliver evidence from the book.

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840, and died in 1928. Hardy was encouraged to write by two female figures in his life, his mother, and then later his wife. Despite his talent in the portrayal of characters in perhaps a realistic sense, his works were found to be ' pessimistic'. The book " Tess of the D'Urbervilles" was first released as a serialised edition in 1891, a time when ' realism became the dominant form of the 19th century'. I think that as this was the realist era, we must ask ourselves if Hardy was indeed being pessimistic, or if he was falling victim to the fashion of realism, and speaking the truth.

I would like to look at the word realist, according to the ' York Notes advanced': " a realist author represents the world as it is rather than as it should be", and " draws on characters from all levels of society, but often from lowest classes, represents their speech and manners accurately".

I therefor object to the theory posted by others that Hardy's books are pessimistic, as the above description of a ' realist' perfectly describes

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Hardy's works in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", which is also contradictory to the belief of "York Notes Advanced". Another summary of the word realist is derived from the 'Collins gem English dictionary', where a realist is described as someone who is "seeing and accepting things as they really are". Due to the realistic nature of the book, I am inclined to support Hardy's view of Tess falling victim to her own conscience rather to that of male cruelty and censure. Throughout the novel is a sense of verisimilitude.

I also wish to take into consideration that Hardy was encouraged to write by two females, is it possible that since he was pressured by two females that Hardy would consider the female sex to be dominant, or perhaps dominant enough to make their own decisions? Therefore not being as weak so as to fall victim to the male sex? I think that it would be just as naïve to believe that women like Tess's character are incapable of making sensible decisions as it is to believe that Hardy writes from a pessimistic view.

Hardy once wrote regarding his book "the novel embodies the views of life prevalent at the end of the 19th century, and not those of an earlier simpler generation". If this does not support the ideology of realism being a key factor in the writing of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" then I believe that I can find no better.

He also claims, regarding Tess, "I have never been able to put on paper all that she is, or was to me". I feel that this asserts my belief that he was partial to the character of Tess, and would therefore not be un-necessarily bitter towards her character, as his statement suggests.

Despite my previous support for Hardy's view, I feel that he has not made up his mind on the matter. I feel that he does not stand by his statement that " Tess is a victim to her own conscience rather than of male cruelty and censure". I am quite adamant in protesting that he is undecided as I discovered another quote given by Hardy which is certainly contradictory. Hardy quotes about Tess's fate " I regarded her then as being in the hands of circumstances, not morally responsible, a mere corpse drifting with the current". This statement promotes the thinking that if she is not morally responsible, then neither should she be, or is she, victim to her own conscience.

I turn now to the novel to gain support, for either side of the battle, in hope of finding key factors to obtain evidence. I believe that the whole tragedy was sparked by the anomaly of Tess's social position. Had she not had the D'Urberville blood the whole situation would not have proceeded.

The social status of women of the 19th century was somewhat different to that of women nowadays. We learn that it is not proper to have sexual relationships before marriage, through the persistent encouragement of Tess's mother to keep quiet about Tess's incident with Alec. We are still uncertain as to whether Tess was seduced or if indeed it was rape. Even though it was against Tess's will, it was still frowned upon. Even more taboo of the times was having a child illegitimately. Of course as a result of her rape Tess gives birth to the child out of wedlock.

It is easy to say so far that Tess has a profound defamiliarisation with the world at this point. Maybe if society was not so patriarchal she would not

have been rejected by Angel. This is somewhat hypocritical of him as he has committed the same offence and though he objects to the ways of God and high society, he still cannot forgive her. It can be said that if the situation were to arise nowadays that Angel would be more likely to have the blame as opposed to Tess. Morals have changed with today's society.

This estrangement faced by Tess is also perpetual throughout the novel, with her constant, unsettled travelling which was not typical of the era. She becomes an itinerant character. This constant wandering creates a theme of isolation. Isolated is a strange word, it immediately creates the image of being alone, this was obviously not the case in Tess's circumstances as she was pestered throughout her travels by many men. I feel that her beauty sparked the attention, and so it is easy to understand how feminists may see the novel as entirely misogynistic. So I think that the meaning of isolation in this essay is meant to convey the loneliness of knowing that the people around you do not want you for your own self, but purely for the image.

Angel falls for Tess solely for this cause. Perhaps not as shallow as to base it purely on looks, but certainly for the image. He perceives Tess to be a 'daughter of the soil' almost like a Goddess, and so perceives her as perfection, This is ironic as if when knew the truth his perception changed completely. She is objectified by Angel just as much as she was with Alec, after all, both try to turn her into something she is not.

Both men are melodramatic characters throughout the play, playing the roles of the villain and the hero. Both play each role, Alec once the villain for

his misuse of trust transforms into the church going man who houses her.

Angel seems the perfect husband but then abandons her,

After considering the plot of the novel above it is easy to understand how Tess could become distressed, and eventually blame herself. Firstly, had she not been a D'Urberville she would not have felt the need to go to Alec in the first place. It was her family's hope of finding money from a relative that pushed her into going (and her guilt of course from killing their horse and only source of income). Here Tess becomes a symbol of falling English peasantry, believing herself responsible for the fall,

Secondly, she fled with Alec away from her fellow villagers on the night of her rape/seduction, even though Alec's heretic personality was made clear to her when she first met him. When Tess finally decides to flee from Alec she is faced with a man who writes religious messages, these hit her conscience and she feels guilt. We see that Tess is guilt ridden throughout Chapter 15. The lines " If before going to the D'Urbervilles' she had vigorously moved under the guidance of sundry gnomonic texts and phrases known to her and the world in general, no doubt she would never have been imposed on" support this theory.

Her baby Sorrow falls ill and dies. Tess feels guilty for not baptising him. She is forced to bury the baby herself as the parson refuses to bury a child out of wedlock. Tess can only blame herself for letting herself fall pregnant. Also had she married Alec and told him that she was pregnant (as he later condemns her for), there might have been a chance of the baby being buried in a church properly.

There are two references in chapter 20 given to us by the narrator. The first reference is this "as if they were Adam and Eve". Of course we all know the story of Adam and Eve where Eve had undoubtedly sinned against her God. This is similar to Tess's scenario where she feels she has sinned against her God. Adam being Angel, Eve being Tess, and Alec being the snake. The image of good and evil are presented here. The second reference is to that of Mary Magdalene. This reference represents Tess in Angel's eyes, which supports my theory of his idealisation of her.

Tess may also presume that if it were not for her good looks, that perhaps Angel and Alec might not have wanted to associate themselves with her in the first place. She obviously feels that this is a factor that leads to her destruction, as after she is spurned by Angel she endeavours to hide her aesthetic face and body by making a feeble attempt to dispose of her pretty features.

It is easy to see throughout the novel that Tess is perpetually ashamed and guilty. However, we have not yet discussed if Tess is victimised by her conscience or if it is the male dominance in the novel which is reprehensible.

By saying that Tess is feeling guilty and ashamed does not mean that Tess is in fact to blame for her fate in the book. Of course anyone can feel guilty, but it does not determine their fate unless they act upon it. To certify that Tess is to credit for her dire end we must study the actions she did as a result of her guilt.

Let's take her first occurrence with Alec. Had Tess not been so distraught at her thinking that she was the reason Prince's death, her own judgement

might have conquered her family's urges to make contact with Alec's mother. If this had been the case, then possibly all future event would have been avoided.

Again, Tess was told by her mother never to tell about her incident with Alec. It is her conscience and her conscience only which eventually collapses and lets the story slip. Tess was under no pressure nor obligation to do so, it was an action of her own will. Obviously had she kept quiet and had never told Angel a thing, Angel would still have idealised her. Having told Angel, his views of her are totally transformed, he decides to leave her.

Having read this, it is clear that Tess is the victim of her own conscience. She is probably too complex a character for her own times. Many women of the same era would not have shared these same experiences, and emotions. They perhaps were not under the same pressure that Tess felt herself. I believe that it was probably Tess' knowledge, conscience and intelligence that led her to all her decisions.

She did not take the easy option and lie, as she could well have done, instead she contemplated and was faced by her actions. Examples of this are frequently found throughout the book, e. g Dick tells a story, which affects Tess deeply, Angel takes Tess to live with him in a D'Urberville house. Unlike other women Tess reads these distractions as an ill warning, and is perturbed by these.

I would like to conclude this essay by saying that, yes, Tess is a victim to her own conscience, but it does not mean that the acts committed by the males in the novel did not contribute to her fate. After all, even Alec felt guilt and

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turned to religion. If this is not evidence of guilt, then what is? Angel returned to Tess, feeling that he had wronged her, again showing that he had mistreated her. The combination of her mistreatment and self-dismay eventually led to her dissolution.