A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHARACTER OF THOMAS HARDY'S TESS

Naveen K MEHTA[1]

Abstract

Tess Durbeyfield is the heroine of the novel. According to the concept of Greek Tragedy a hero or a heroine should be great figure by birth or achievement. But Hardy created his heroes and heroines from ordinary Wessex men and women. In tragic grandeur and sublimity she stands in front rank. The simplicity of her nature, the nobility of her soul, the capacity to suffer, the spirit of effacement, and her purity all make her one of the sublimest heroines of English Literature. Tess is the simple sincere and passionately faithful and as different as possible from those fickle and elusive young women was display, in some of his other tales affections as veering as weather-cocks. Her stoicism and her devotion to her husband win the admiration and sympathy of many generations of readers. She has dominated the novel not by the aggressiveness of her character but by her sweet and tender humility. The present paper is an attempt to explore the different shades of Tess' vivacious character.

Keywords: Heroine, Fate, Chance, Pure, Family.

Introduction

Hardy has divided Tess not into chapters but into 'phases' which gives a simple identity to a series of complex and diverse events. "They are an abstract of the individual, human experiences, almost like the contents page of scientific treaties."[1] The second chapter provides an introduction to Tess, who is one of the dancing maidens. Not much is made of her yet, but attention is drawn to her freshness, her innocent eyes, the phases of childhood that yet linger over the 'bouncing handsome womanliness' that is hers at the age of sixteen. She was a fine handsome girl not handsomer than some others.

The various phases of the book are concerned with a key time in 'Tess' life. The first phase 'The Maiden' introduces us to the atmosphere, the background of the story. 'Maiden No More' implies the society's moral attitude, its arbitrary category. The third phase 'The Rally' demonstrates the strength of human spirit––an archetype of the 'Rally' from misfortune. 'The Consequences' has comparatively little action the focus is set on 'Tess' marriage to Angel, but we have been warned by its little, so followed by a phase "The Women Plays'.

Theme of the Novel

The most important theme of the novel according to Laird is the proposition that: "The heroines' intentions, rather than her actions should be the criterion for judging her purity and innocence."[2] Tess was the eldest daughter of Jack and Joan Durbeyfield. Jack was a haggler with a large family to support. On account of his irresponsible nature, his family was always in financial straits. Tess

[1] Dr., Associate Professor & Head of Communication Skills Department, Mahakal Institute of Technology, Ujjain (MP) India

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

was sixteen years old. Her name was Teressa Durbeyfield but she was always called Tess. She was a youthful and energetic girl who looked exquisitely beautiful and charming when happy and ordinary when she was grave. She was sweet natured. She had studied up to sixth class in village school. She was taught by a lady teacher who had her training in London. She spoke cultured language when she was out and the local dialect when she was with her family and local labourers. She had also imbibed the modern outlook from her teacher. Thus, there was a wide gap—generation gap between her and her parents.

Tess as a Beautiful Young Heroine

Tess possesses extremely attractive eyes and a fluty voice and she is-"a mere vessel of emotion."[3] The first impression she puts upon Angel is that—"Owing to her backwardness, he had not observed her.....He wished he had asked her, he wished that he had inquired her name, she was so modest expressive." Indeed, her eyes and her lips—as also her dark brown hair are the most beautiful and maddening. The novelist is all praises about her lips and in a poetic language we are told, "yet when all was thought and felt about her features in general, it was her mouth which turned out to be the magnetic pole thereof. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before and cheeks perhaps as fair; proves as arched, a chin and a throat almost as sharply; her mouth he had seen nothing at all to equal on the face of earth. To a young man with the least fire in him, that little upward life in the middle of her top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening,"

To Angel Clare she is poetry: "she is brim full of poetry actualized poetry; if I may use the expression. She lives what paper poets only wrote..."[4] It is her 'fluty voice' which first attracts Angel's attention towards her and the attractiveness of her eyes which so tormented Alec that give Tess that eternal, poetic beauty she has been bestowed by her creator. Her personality is contrasted with qualities of pride and independence of spirit with a passivity and submissiveness towards other people and her fats.

Tess as a Responsible Member of Family

Tess was a young girl. But her domestic circumstances combined with her father's vanity and irresponsibility made think hard about her family. She had three brothers and three sisters besides herself. Her father was not keeping good health and the doctor advised him to abstain from wine taking but he persisted, Tess resented this. All her action before and after her misadventure at Trantridge was guided by her senses of responsibility her duty towards her family. If it had not been for this noble trait in her nature she might never have gone to Trantridge. What was to all appearances an accident was not so to conscientious Tess. She took upon herself responsibility of the death of the horse 'Prince'. It

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

was again her sense of responsibility which prompted her to go to Casterbridge very early in the morning with the beehives. After the death of the horse, the bread winner of the family, her sense of guilt and self reproachment pushed her into vicious circumstances which claimed her maidenhood---the parents made fancy and ambitious plans for their daughter which ultimately resulted in her ruin. Throughout the novel, we find Tess putting the needs and requirements of the family above her personal needs and views. She had refused to go to Trantridge to claim kinship according to the plans of her mother. She ultimately agreed for the sake of the welfare of the family. She had readily, later, parted with what little money she had to meet the demand made by her mother to change the thatch of the house, she walked into the trap of Alec, second time, after her separation from her husband and after waiting for a long time for his return from Brazil. This time she agreed because her family had been uprooted from Marlott after the death of her father and had no means of subsistence. Thus, she sacrificed herself for her family. This strain of self effacement could be seen at every stage in her short but noble life. While at Talbothays she did her best to recommend her three friends, Marian, Izz and Retty, to Angel in preference to her own self.

Tess as A Loveable Heroine

Tess was a lovable heroine. There was something in her nature which compelled attention, admiration and respect. Though she was a mere girl of sixteen, her parents could not afford to ignore her. When her father was told about his proud lineage and he went to a public house to enjoy his distinction and she resented his father's conduct her mother was rather apologetic when her parents did not return even after her brother Abraham had been sent to call them home she went herself. Her mere appearance at the inn was sufficient to them to start homeward. She did not have to say anything. At Trantridge Alec also realized that Tess was a girl—"mighty sensitive for a cottage girl,"—who would stand no nonsense. During her ride with Alec when she was returning from Trantridge she flared up when Alec made some light remarks against women in general. Poor Alec had to apologies. She was not a frivolous type of girl. It was the seriousness of her temperament which had actually attracted Angel's attention towards her a Talbothays Dairy. Beside the seriousness of her temperament, we are touched by her sentimentality. She was passionately in love with Angel. The money that he gave her became 'relics' to her and she spent it most unwillingly. When working at Flintcomb Ash farm, she ones blew a passionate kiss in the direction of South America where her dearest husband had gone.

Tess: Purest of Pure

Tess was a simple country-side heroine but she was not vain or proud. When she talked or thought about the serious problem of life she became

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

philosophical and fatalistic. She was very self-respecting. She did not remain at her home because she could not tolerate the light vein in which her relationship with her dear husband, Angel Care, was taken by her own father. But she did not harbor any ill feeling for her parents. She suffered great difficulties, physical and financial, after Angel's departure for Brazil, but she did not either inform her own parents or apply to Angel's father although Angel had advised her to do so.

Tess was a true heroine (girl). She never hesitated in expressing her dislike for Alec D'Urberville. She was grateful to him on many occasions for helping her family but she could never love him and did not hesitate to tell this to him on more than one occasion and in no unmistakable words. She loved Angel, dearly, passionately and truly she was true and honest in her love. She adores him, worship him and he always finds her looking towards him as if, he were God. Izz puts the matter neatly when she says that Tess could lay down her life for him and none can do more than that, In all her thoughts and deeds, she is faithful and sincere to him. She never does anything that may bring the least blame or reproach upon him. It is for this reason that she does not disclose her true position to her parents and does not apply to his parents, even though Clare had asked her to do so in case of need. She cannot tolerate insult to him and is stung to quick when Alec calls him a foul name. She stabs him to save the honor of her husband and later willingly and gladly surrendered to the police to be hanged to death.

And the end brings some of the promises it had made. In a brief period of 'fulfillment' the two lovers met again. They have found 'rest at last'. Two souls after a dreary journey in the world reach the stage of perfection. The harmony that the soul finds is everlasting. Tess is satisfied, that the one man who loved her sincerely had at last— "believed in her as pure."[5]

Tess as a Dutiful Wife

As a wife she is not only loving, but also trusting and obedient. She hangs upon every word he utters, as if it were divinely inspired. Whatever he says or does is best for her, for he can do no wrong. She has full faith in him and trusts him with her life. When in the sleep walking scene Clare takes her down the stairs or across the bridge there is imminent danger of death, but she does not wake him up, for she prefers death in his arms to a life without him. She obeys his instructions literally. She does not reproach him or complain of ill-treatment. Silently she bears all as deserved punishment. She goes through a terrible ordeal, she suffers the tortures of hell, but her faith in her dear husband does not shake, not her love for him lesson even a little bit. It is once and only once, when driven to desperation that a rebellious sense of injustice rises within her and she writes her pathetic complaint to him. But it does not express her real feeling: it is merely the poignant outburst of a wounded heart.

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

Tess: A Tale of Suffering

Her capacity to suffer was really great. The more she suffered the nobler she appeared. Her whole life is an epic of suffering and sacrifice. She suffered uncomplainingly at her parents; she suffered moral wrong and mental torture at Trantridge and that too far no fault of hers. She suffered at the hands of her own dear husband and she derived divine pleasure out of this suffering. She suffered great physical and mental agony, social shame and what not yet her capacity to suffer was unsuitable. And to think that she bore her punishment gladly puts her in the front rank of the tragic heroines comparable only to ones created by Shakespeare. She suffered because she was the victims of the vanity of her parents, consequent upon the discovery of their aristocratic and distinguished ancestry.

Tess is very kind and loving. We know how she grieved and blamed herself for the death of her horse, Prince. When she took leave, a second time, from Talbothays Dairy, she affectionately touched her favorite cows to bid goodbye. She was deeply attached to her younger brothers and sisters. She always felt the agony of love which her fellow maids at dairy felt for Angel. She therefore recommended their cases in preference to her oneself.

Tess was the product of region and so she was not entirely from the local superstition. While she was returning from Trantridge after her exploratory visit, a rose thorn pricked her chin she winced not so much from pain as form the superstition that it was ominous. Again when she was leaving the Church after marriage, she became superstitious about the carriage. Next when they were taking leave from Talbothays Dairy the cock crowing made her apprehensive. Thus, she had own share of superstitions.

Just as she has inherited her, "luxuriance of aspect" from her mother, she has inherited slight 'incautiousness' of character from her D'Urberville ancestors. The two combined lead to her undoing. The first causes Alec's eyes to rivet themselves upon her and the second causes her to field to great external pressure. Decrepit families imply decrepit Wills and Tess courage repeatedly fails at the last moment. She fails sleep at critical junctions. This weakness results in the death of the horse Prince and in her own undoing on that fatal night. "She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in nature."[6]

This experience gives her moral support to face the arbitrary law of society. But her fate brings her again and again to be teased by it. The same man who had recognized her at the inn with Angel happened to be her employer. "Tess between the Amazons and farmer like a bird caught in a clap-net, returned no answer no answer, continuing to pull the straw."[7]

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

Character of Tess

About the character of Tess, C. Duffin remarks, "Among Hardy's women Tess Durbeyfield claims attention first, not only by reason of her popularity, but more especially in that her creator distinguished her by the appellation of a 'pure woman'. Later of Hardy has called her an 'almost standard woman". Both the epithets are perfectly justified, for even as the 'logical' Clare admits, she if more sinned against than sinning."[8] Purity is of the mind and spirit and in a spiritual sense the epithet 'pure' may be freely applied to her. The whole tendency of her life, of her words, thought and deeds, is moral. Her conduct throughout is impeccable even when considered form the point of view of the highest morality. Even the last phase of her life with Alec is not the consequence of any decay in her morals, but results from a noble self-sacrifice mentally and morally she is stainless. Only she regards her body too insignificant to permit it to stand in the way of the happiness of the dear children and so allows it to drift liken corpse on a current. "She is as moral as any prude. Her behaviour, her thoughts, her desires, on all perilous occasions—with D'Urberville, early and late: with Clare; with her other admirers—are unimpeachable, considered form the most critical code and point of view."[9] "Tess of the D'Urbervilles seems to me beyond doubt the greatest of the Wessex novel.... Tess herself is the most sublime figure in Hardy combining with a nobility that elevates the whole conception of human nature."[10]

What matters in Tess of D'Urbervilles what pulses most strongly and going our deepest imaginative complicity, is the figure of Tess herself. Tess as she is, a heroine made of real through the craft of art and not Tess as represent the idea. Marvellously high spirited and resilient, Tess embodies a moral poise beyond the reach of most morality. For Hardy she embodies qualities of affection and trust, the powers of the survival and suffering, which a woman brings to the human enterprise. And Tess of the D'Urbervilles is declared by Hardy to be 'pure woman'. In this novel, Hardy has produced a tragic masterpiece. And, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles has no superior among Hardy's novels and it must take its place among the three of four greatest works of fiction the nineteenth century produced in England."[11]

Concluding Remarks

Hardy has written a realistic tale in Tess. Whether Tess is pure woman or not might have been an unanswered question to the Victorians. But the modern man accepts Tess as a basically pure woman.

Thus, we find that Tess vindicated her innocence and purity by her suffering and sacrifice. She achieved in death what she was denied in life an abiding love, respect and admiration of her dearest Angel who was not even half

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

as angelic as Tess was. Tess' purity is in her heart, in her mind and in her soul and who can be more pure than this unfortunate innocent village girl?

This massive novel of pain and suffering shows how innocent souls can be crushed under the juggernaut of social injustice. The character of Tess passes through the ordeal of pain and suffering and in her suffering she achieves that tragic grandeur which does not leave her even when she is hanged for manslaughter.

Tess presence dominates the novel is not to overlook her extraordinary passivity. As a creature of flesh and blood, she is rendered more fully than any other character in Hardy's fiction –

> Indeed, beside her, such allegedly 'physical' characters as Tom Jones or Hetty Sorrel seem relatively unrealized; when we read for instance (in chapter 27), that 'her arm, from her dabbling in the curds, was as cold and damp to his mouth as a new-gathered mushroom and tasted of whey, we encounter writing an extraordinary sensuousness and even eroticism, not easy to parallel in nineteenth century fiction, through Lawrence was to achieve similar effects twenty years later in Sons and Lovers. Yet, as a mind or a consciousness, Tess makes remarkably little impact: one sees why Henry James spoke so patronizingly of this, without altogether solving, a version of the problem James had set himself a decade earlier in The Portrait of a Lady—that of making a 'mere....girl' a rich enough centre of interest for a novel. Hardy's novel, of course, draws its strength from other directions; but the personality of Tess, as distinct from her surroundings or experiences of her representative quality, is of a distinctly limited depth and complexity: she speaks much less than most fictional heroines and even when she is driven to express her feeling they seem to spring spontaneously from instinct and intuition rather than resulting from inner conflict and mental drama. The reiterated imagery of the shy and vulnerable wild creature perhaps offers an unintended clue to Tess' limitations as protagonist.[12]

Whatever else we call her, Tess remains the most lovable of Hardy's heroine. All women adore her, and some men. What she might have made of life, what life might have made of her, had circumstances and Clare been kind, is beyond dreaming.

References

[1]Bruce Hugman, Tess of the D'Urbervilles (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p.49

[2]J.T. Laird, The Shaping of Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 39

[3]Tomas Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1963), p. 25.

[4]Ibid., p. 43

[5]Ibid., p. 432

[6]Ibid., p. 315

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)

[7]Ibid., p. 328
[8]H.C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy, 3rd ed. (1916; rpt. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 218
[9]Ibid., p. 219
[10] Ibid., p. 58
[11] Ibid., p. 58
[12]Norman Page, Thomas Hardy (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1977), p. 42.

BDD-A8132 © 2014 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.19 (2026-09-15 01:09:02 UTC)