

# An Analysis of Tess of the D'Urbervilles from the Tragedy of Tess

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 9

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Impact Factor: 4.110

Received: 28.11.2020

Accepted: 10.12.2020

Published: 22.12.2020

Citation:

Chen, Desheng, and  
Xuewei Shi. "An  
Analysis of Tess of the  
D'Urbervilles from  
the Tragedy of Tess."  
*Shanlax International  
Journal of English*,  
vol. 9, no. S1, 2020,  
pp. 21–25.

DOI:

[https://doi.  
org/10.34293/english.  
v9iS1-Dec2020.3607](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v9iS1-Dec2020.3607)

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## Abstract

*Thomas Hardy was a very famous and the last important novelist of the Victorian age in England, his novels and poems have a great influence in the literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tess of the D'Urbervilles is the most influential one among his works. This novel describes a miserable and hard life of one beautiful and pure girl named Tess after being seduced. The article reveals the society environment, the peasant poverty family, the inequality of gender and the false moral value at that time by describing Tess' life. Tess' tragic life is caused by many factors and it's the result of the burden of society. Except this, her own weakness in character cannot be separated from her tragedy, because she obviously has the dual nature — resistance and compromise, which seems like the nature of many women. As a poor peasant girl, Tess once tried to fight with destiny, but she failed. In the end, she turned out to be a murderer and also the victim of society like all other things which disobey the rules at that time. Eventually, she was separated from her lover and hanged. A beautiful and pure girl came to such a miserable life and tragic ending.*

**Keywords:** Tess Tragedy, Social Environment, Family Poverty, False Moral Value, Character, Inequality of Gender

## Introduction

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is a very popular novel written by Thomas Hardy and it has great influence in the world. It was written in Victoria times, which decided that critics in that times would hold different views on this novel, some of them even held negative point in this novel. However, with the time going by, many and many people are aware of the significance of the novel and it attracts more and more scholars to research it. From the one hundred years ago to the present, there are many studies about Thomas Hardy and Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

In 1891, Tess of the D'Urbervilles was published and aroused great reputation around the world. Even before it was published, it also got much attention. In the preface of this novel, we can see the principal contradiction lies in the protagonist for whether she is pure or the obvious satire about the society. And in those comments from

that time to nowadays, many readers and scholars thought the perfect description of Tess is the most shining part of this novel. About Tess, the causes of her tragic life is always the main point for people's research. People analyze the causes from different views and it will be endless.

### **Brief Information About Thomas Hardy and his Work**

#### **Thomas Hardy and his Works**

Thomas Hardy was the last and great novelist of the Victorian Times. Hardy was born in an idyllic county of the southwest of England in 1840. His father was a stonemason and mother loved music and attached importance to the education. Actually, Hardy didn't receive college education but self-taught most of time. At first, he was an apprentice of architect. Later, he found that his real interest lied in writing not constructing. With the publication of "A Pair of Blue Eyes", Hardy formally decided to abandon the construction industry and concentrate on writing. In 1874, "Far from the madding crowd" was serialized in the Cornhill magazine and published in November. It was a great success. The experience of living close with the laboring people in the countryside had influenced his writing a lot. He lived to be 90 years old and witnessed the First and Second Industrial Revolution, the First World War and other important historical social changes in that time. His life spanned the dawn and dusk of the Victorian era. He was the night watchman of the English countryside, but in his later years he was criticized as a backward writer. Hardy was destined to see the confessions and legacy of the ancestors wiped out. And the changes of society always can make great people in every eras, Hardy is one of the representative of them.

He was a poet, novelist and also remembered for his fiction. The most famous and significant is his novels which are closely related with the local county tradition and natural scenery. He divided these novels into three categories: novels of character with environment, novels of romance and fantasy, and novels with delicate structure. Among them, the first category is the most important. The novels that fall into this category include "Under the Greenwood Tree," "A Pair of Blue Eyes," "The Return of the Native", "The Mayor of Casterbridge", "The Woodlanders", "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude the obscure". They are generally regarded as the most mature works in Hardy's thoughts and arts. Among them "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude the obscure" was viewed as the most touching tragedies. The former wrote the poor and beautiful milkmaid Tess, who came from a poverty family, and suffered physical and mental suffering later. She lost her sincere love of Angel Clare, and she was in despair. In the latter novel, a poor and orphaned child, Jude, self-taught to study at a higher education institution, but there is no way to get started. He and his like-minded female cousin both freed themselves from their legal spouses. At last, they are isolated from the society and be homeless.

#### **Thomas Hardy's Writing Ideas**

During the Victorian era (1851-1901), the technology and capitalism is thriving, However, Hardy felt the glory and shadow of an empire. Through the industrial revolution and colonial expansion, the Victorian people are encouraged and feel excited with the quick economic development. When Britain's territory reached 36 million square kilometers, the economy accounted for 70% of the world's total, and trade exports exceeded the sum of other countries in the world, Hardy saw the disintegration of rural society during the big industrial era, the polarization of the rich and the poor, and the disaster of social morality.

As a realist writer, Hardy spared no efforts to reflect the impact of industrial civilization on the rural system. Hardy writes the fate of characters under the influence of society development. He can't be in line with the golden era of advanced capitalism. He asks for people morality but is not a conservative moralist. On the contrary, he is quite a bit skeptical about the morality in

Victoria Times. The people in Victorian era were morally conservative. Hardy's sense of morality lies in the sympathy towards the vulnerable and expose to the hypocrisy. Hardy began to criticize the hypocrisy of the Christian morality and the stiff dogmatic around 1864. He questioned Christianity and showed a rebellious tendency compared with youth. The first is reflected in the writer's affirmation and praise of the humanitarianism. In his own literary creation, Hardy opposes repression and humiliation of human nature, chanting people's nature, inner feelings and love. This is completely inconsistent with the conservative Christianity at that time. Second, it is reflected in the writer's direct criticism for God and Christian ethical spirit. This tendency was most intense in the "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" and "Jude, the Obscure", which was why he was controversial at the time.

Woolf thinks that Thomas Hardy is the greatest tragic master in British fiction. A strong pessimism is in Hardy's novels. In Hardy's work, no matter how hard people try and resist, they can't escape from the destiny of tragedy. His novels also reflect the fatalistic view on the arrangement of the plot structure. Each step leading to the tragedy of the protagonists seems to be an inevitable event. Sometimes the author also uses the mysterious omens, curses, and chilling of the environment to indicate the inevitability of the tragedy. In the discovery of the reasons of tragedy, Hardy discovered the highest level of tragedy that the valuable things are stifled by an unavoidable environment. Novels hurt people impress people a lot. The reason why tragedy is inevitable is because the environment force is overwhelming. Thus in the revolt with the environment, the courage of people is very precious. They did not surrender to the catastrophic event because they did not give up their pursuit. Hardy affirms people's feelings, pursuits, and resistance to adversity but does not view their endings optimistically. The opinion of moving resistance but useless permeates in his works.

After writing the poem and novel, his epic came to another peak in that time. But his pessimism and criticism have irritated somebody. Then Hardy was listed by Eliot as an outdated writer and criticism was so harsh that he stopped to write novels. However, time always gives an equal judgement. There is no doubt that he is the conscience of the Victorian Times and his works affect us a lot.

### **Information About the Tess of the D'urbervilles and the Sufferings of Tess Tess of the D'Urbervilles**

As a writer who has spanned two centuries, Hardy mainly writes novels in the early and medium writing. He inherits the literature tradition of the Victorian Times. What's more, he is a pioneer of realistic literature of 20th century in the British. The most familiar Tess of the D'Urbervilles is a symbol of his most significant realistic writing at the end of 19th century. In China, "Tess of D'Urbervilles" is the most famous after Zhang Ruogu translated it and published it in Shanghai Press.

Hardy created a classic female protagonist in the Tess of the D'Urberville, which was very typical in his environment and characters novels. Tess was a beautiful, pure, brave, diligent, innocent and poor girl living in countryside. She hoped to make money by her work, dared to change stereotypes, but destiny wasn't fair to her and she was hanged at last after suffering too much. Though Tess lost her virginity and committed a crime of murder, Hardy debated for her and considered Tess as a real pure woman. Although she was seduced by Alec, but it was not her own will and she was still more pure than last hypocritical people.

One evening in late May, a priest told Jack Durbeyfield that he was the descendant of the ancient and knightly family of the D'Urbervilles. This sudden news made this poor country hawker feel excited. He whimsically hoped his 17-year-old daughter Tess could claim kin and imagined they could get out of the financial dilemma by this noble surname. And their horse Prince also died this

time when Tess delivered hives, which made their situation worse. Then they found a great relative living at Trantridge.

Actually, the wealthy family was not real relatives with this ancient family of warriors. Her family made much money with usury and moved here from the north. The noble family name was also found in the museum. Tess came to their home with mixed feelings. Alec, the son of the wealthy family, was a dude. After noticing Tess was beautiful, he let Tess raise chicken in their family. Three months later, Alec raped her. Tess was extremely contemptuous and disgusted with Alec. She returned to her parents with the breaking heart and the defiled body. Soon she found she was pregnant, the baby was born, but the illegitimate son died after a short time. She was ridiculed and accused of this suffering. The painful Tess was determined to change the living environment and went to a milk factory in the south.

### **The Sufferings of Tess**

Tess' tragedy starts her poverty and vain family. Her father is a hawker but he is not diligent but lazy and bibulous. Family burden is too heavy for the eldest girl of the children. Her parents hope the family situation can change by clinging to wealthy relatives. Then she comes to Alec's home. And the tragedy begins. At first, she was seduced by Alec. Then she returns to home but found she was pregnant. Later her illegitimate son died and the pastor isn't willing to pray for the poor child. And the second suffering is when she picks up off ground again and falls in love with Angel Claire. But at the first night of their marriage, after Angel knows her loss of virginity, he leaves her without hesitation. Tess was hit heavily again. Then under the torment of labor work and heavy heart trauma, her family is also in extreme financial difficulties. At this time Alec wins her back to him again. This is her third suffering. There was almost no hope for her. However, the fate always plays jokes with her. In despair, Claire went back from Brazil, his return gives Tess a critical strike, and Tess killed Alec with the mixed emotion of angry, despair and regret. Her love with Angel and hate for Alec makes her become a murder. This is her final tragedy and the God ends his sport with Tess.

Tess was so pure that he don't know how to protect herself well from the complex world, she never uses tears to earn sympathy. But the environment in that time is incompatible with such a pure girl. Tess never stops resisting, but she can never win the trend of the times, the mainstream value. She is destined to be a victim.

### **Causes of Tess Tragedy**

#### **Society Causes her Tragedy**

In Victorian Times, the capitalism is thriving. And the traditional agriculture was shocked by the new industry. With the great social change, many social contradiction turns up. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Hardy described many complex social contradictions. Tess' tragedy was the consequence of the social conflicts.

The economic situation is the foundation of all other things. In Victorian Times, the United Kingdom rapidly transformed into a capitalist industrial country. However, the social change hasn't brought benefits to the normal people. The free competition leads many farmers into workers, but the wages and environment for farmers are not favorable. And the massive machine production also squeezes the market of small-business owners. Many women and children have to be workers to make money for their family. For example, Tess' father is a hawker, they don't have lands for their own, and the horse-princess is their only property, when the horse dies, there is only desperation left for them, which leads Tess to go to Alec's home and be seduced by Alec. And Tess also turns from a farmer into a worker, she is forced to be a woman raising chicken in Alec' house, a milker in a milk farm. But the living environment and working environment are not stable and standard.

In Alec's home, because she is a worker, her status is inferior to him, so she is in danger. And the work of being a milker is seasonal work, so she can't always make money by it. So it's because the social change make farmers turns into workers and lead then in poverty. The unequal legal system is another accomplice of Tess tragedy. Secular prejudice is another social cause that leads to Tess tragedy.

### **Family Causes her Tragedy**

Family poverty is the main financial cause of Tess tragedy. Her father is a hawker which is disrespected by the farmers also the wealthy people. But the family burden is very heavy, and the poor couple has seven children. It's because the family poverty that urges Tess goes to Alec's home, and leads Tess in danger of being seduced. After her father died, her family was homeless, which leads to Alec find the right time to control her again. It's easy to find that family poverty is the root economic cause of her sufferings.

The parents' ignorance is another important cause of Tess tragedy. Their ignorance was first manifested in the hope that they could change their living conditions with helpless ancestors, and decided that Tess, who had no knowledge of the world, would go to strange unprotected places to find wealthy relatives to help them, leading her to fall into the evil clutches. Secondly, after Tess was harmed, her mother thought that Tess should marry Alec to ensure her future life without considering Tess own willing. Finally, after Tess' child's death, her father refused to allow the priest to enter the house to baptize the child. Tess can only baptize the illegitimate child herself with her young sisters and brothers. In fact, the child has no fault. Her father's attitude towards her child hurts her too much. The attitudes of the people around them and the thoughts of their parents forced Tess to suffer both physical and mental torture. Kind and responsible Tess could not refuse parental pressure, but her parents were so ignorant that indirectly led her to death.

### **Love Between her and Angel Causes her Tragedy**

Love is an indispensable theme in human history, and it is also a shining part of literary creation. In human history and many literary works, it is not difficult to see that women have sacrifice and dedication in the face of love. Shakespeare once said that fragile, your name is a woman. In fact, women are very resilient organisms. In front of their loved ones, they can be delicate, but under the pressure of life, they can be tough and unyielding.

### **Conclusion**

Thomas Hardy had a very outstanding contribution to the writing of the lives of the normal people during the social transition. He is a very great author. In "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Tess' tragedy is due to many aspects. Objective causes include social situation, family poverty, and the love between her and Angel. Subjective reasons include Tess' character and Hardy's fatalism. Therefore, this novel is the complete reflection of Hardy fatalism, and it is also the peak of Hardy description of women. There are many unfinished texts in this paper, and the level of depth is still not enough. It is necessary for people to pay more attention to the lives of women. What's more, it is hoped that there will be less and less uncontrollable factors like those in the Tess of the D'Urbervilles will reflect or control women's lives.

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