

**Thomas Hardy's Tess:
A Seductive Eve or a Blemished Woman?**
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Abstract

Despite the fact that the character of Tess Durbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles has aroused bitter criticism from many critics and readers, she is considered as one of the most fascinating and charming fictional femme fatales. Notwithstanding her inadequacies, Hardy remains emotionally committed to her to the last page of the book and never withdraws his inherent sympathy for her. Invested with tremendous strength, irresistible physical attraction and sensuality, she is an epitome of human frailties. Hardy presents her as an amalgamation of diverse impulses which complicates her situation. This paper aims at focusing on those aspects in her constitution which perplex readers as well as critics; hence making it difficult for them to determine whether she can be termed as 'Seductive Eve' or she was just a passive victim of circumstantial conspiracies/compulsions.

Keywords: Seductive Eve; instincts ; sensuality; sexuality; passion; delight; coquette; *femme fatale*; Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

Introduction

Hardy shows a split in the delineation of his female protagonists. This split occurs either within human psyche between one's social norms and instinctual inclinations, or it is externalized in the representation of characters. They either adopt a socially approved course and become an epitome of social propriety, or listen to instinctual drives and serve as models for 'instincts-led' women. This conflict is not just an auxiliary or secondary connotation but rather one of the core issues in Hardy's art and the very foundation of this paper. Tess of the D'Urbervilles stands at the forefront of those women who can be termed as 'Seductive Eves'.

Hardy has created a gallery of interesting and irresistible women. They are guided by instincts which save them from being altogether bad. They are "Undines of the earth"¹ and "untamed children of Nature".² According to Havelock's review, "Mr. Hardy's heroines are

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characterized by a yielding to circumstance that is limited by the play of instinct".³ To Hardy's discreet and devoted mind, Tess "has not earned but, rather, learned guilt and sorrow".⁴ It is a matter of relative morality and individual's temperament whether the reader considers her lapses as outcome of circumstances and natural drives or condemns her as an adulteress and murderess. In the light of diverse critical opinions, it can be inferred: "Ultimately, Tess is a victim of an ambivalent attitude towards woman that is traceable both to Hardy and to the culture in which he lived."⁵

Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Captivating *femme fatale*

Tess of the D'Urbervilles, with whom Hardy himself falls in love over and over again, is one of those females in whose mental constitution the two opposite forces are at work. The tragedy of her being lies in the co-existence of social norms and instinctual drives simultaneously. The sensuality of her nature is over-emphasized in the depiction of her portrayal, and she is shown as a being prone to self-delight, though she understands the notion expressed by Friar Laurence "These violent delights have violent ends".⁶ She is depicted as a blend of moral and immoral impulses. Her passion is to live a life of sensations like Hardy's other strong women. A thorough analysis of Tess's character reveals contradictions inherent in her existence – claiming her right to be considered as an individual in a society which is bent upon reducing woman's status to a mere commodity. She does not want to be a passing thought to this world, rather wishes to live life to the fullest.

*"Even to friends she was no more than a frequently passing thought. If she made herself miserable the livelong night and day it was only this much to them- 'Ah, she makes herself unhappy.' If she tried to be cheerful, to dismiss all care, to take pleasure in the daylight, the flowers, the baby, she could only be this idea to them- 'Ah, she bears it very well.'"*⁷

Tess loses her heart more than once as the heat of passion sweeps her off her feet till her instinctive actions bring devastating consequences. She is sent to Alec by her parents to claim kinship where she loses her virginity and comes back as a fallen woman, though she does not consider her offence to be unpardonable and cherishes a hope to be able to start anew after the birth of a baby. "Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? She would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil by-gones".⁸ She doesn't seem to regret over her fall from a pedestal of an ideal woman. Hardy is determined not only to restore her but to prove her to be *femme fatale*.

Tess seems to be ambivalent on the question of morality and her responses are usually instinctive: Alec reproaches her for trifling with his feelings and asks her whether he should treat her as a lover or not. She is uncertain as expected “I don’t know – I wish – how can I say yes or no when –”.⁹ This word ‘when’ leaves room for Alec to make advances as woman’s silence or ambivalence can be taken either way – affirmative or negative. Tess could have been certain that she does not want to be Alec’s beloved as no woman is obliged to please a man. Alec is encouraged to wrap his arm round her waist in their ride in The Chase only when he sees the weakness on her part. Can a sleep be so sound that physical proximity of a man could not shake it? Or is it that “it was to be”¹⁰ because in the woods where Alec seduces her, her instinctual desire gets the better of her conscious self. She herself confesses to her weakness when she is driven homeward by Alec: “This is quite true. If I had gone for love o’ you, if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now!...My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all”.¹¹ When Alec imprints a kiss on Tess’s lips after her seduction, she seems to be unaware of it once again.

Tess is made to realize her mistake by an artisan whom she meets after parting with Alec. He paints words on the wall “THOU, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT”¹² for ‘dangerous young females’ like Tess so that they should be on guard against their instincts and the evil. She regards these inscriptions contemptuously saying “Pooh-I don’t believe God said such things!”.¹³ She is ‘temporarily blinded’ by Alec’s passion for her and ‘surrenders awhile’ for which she will pay for the rest of her life. She preserves the consequence of her offence without inhibition. Her instincts force her to unbutton her frock in front of field workers to feed her child who turn their faces away thinking it to be improper after which she decides “to taste anew sweet independence at any price”.¹⁴ “Freedom and happiness, union and ecstasy: these are the goals toward which Tess’s experiences and her own natural impulse for joy have led her”.¹⁵ Hyman is not the only one who alludes to her ‘impulse for joy’ because many other critics also insinuate to “Tess’s youth surging up and bringing with it “the invincible instinct towards self-delight”.¹⁶ Keeping in view her sexuality, critics differ on whether Tess is seduced or raped by Alec. Her sexuality zooms & speaks in her actions more than her words and language: her breast feeding to a new born, illegitimate child, whom she would baptize herself later, in front of other peasant workers is a testimony to the unconscious delight taken in her physical voluptuousness and over-brimming sexuality. “Tess’s lush sexuality thoroughly upset contemporary readers for whom the synonymy of voluptuousness and purity was nothing short of a Hardyan hoax”.¹⁷ Hardy

emphasizes Tess's sensuality by frequent references to red colour – the colour of blood and life, the sign of danger and rebellion, the lush colour signifying lush sensuality. From Tess's wearing red ribbon in the May dance to her final doom at Stonehenge, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* abounds with allusions to 'red' colour. For instance, "Alec forces roses and strawberries on her, pushing a strawberry into her mouth, pressing the roses into her bosom", 'blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life' 'the red coal of a cigar', 'a tin pot of red paint', 'red hot poker', 'the red interior of her mouth', 'a piece of blood-stained paper', 'every wave of her blood', 'tall blooming weeds' giving off 'offensive smells' and 'some of the weeds are a bright red', 'crimson drops', then 'Tess virtually trapped and tortured on a piece of red machinery', and a 'red house contains her future rapist, so it is another red which contains her final executioner, for the prison where she is hanged is 'a large red-brick building'.¹⁸

Hardy puts his heart and soul into portraying Tess in such a manner that the reader is thoroughly persuaded that "the purest woman contains tides of blood (Tess is always blushing), and if the rising of blood is sexual passion and the spilling of blood is death, then we can see that the purest woman is sexual and mortal".¹⁹ The surging of blood in her blue visible veins – a sign of animation and turbulence of life – signifies her overwhelming sexuality.

Hardy supports Tess's stance and acknowledges her right to assert herself. After being seduced by Alec, she recommences her life by going to Talbothays and falls passionately in love with Angel Clare. Her desire for him grows intense as she knows "that the others had also lost their hearts to him. There is contagion in this sentiment, especially among women. And yet that same hungry heart of hers compassionated her friends".²⁰ She is pronounced as 'Ms Flirt'²¹ by Angel Clare who woos her persistently. She reciprocates his love, but is reluctant to respond positively on moral grounds. Alec calls her "Ms Independence"²² when she refuses to avail his offer of riding with him homeward. Hardy refers to her 'too tempting mouth' to signify the sexuality she embodies in her person and the desire she excites in men; she entices them with her large eyes which reflect all the colours. Kisses can be stolen from her without her explicit consent; her veins even tempt lovers to kiss them let alone her flower-like mouth, which is obviously a symbol of sensuality. "To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening".²³ She has been invested with such sensuality that even her damp, cold skin has the feel of new, fresh mushrooms in the fields. Here the upward lift in the middle of her upper lip drives Angel crazy while elsewhere in the text "madder stains on her skin"²⁴

push him to his testing limits. Angel alludes to the irresistibility of her arms when it starts raining “your arms are like wet marble, Tess. Wipe them in the cloth. Now, if you stay quiet, you will not get another drop”.²⁵ This reference to the dampness, chill and softness of her body is hinted at more than once in the text which lovers find irresistible. Alec and Angel both feel the same sensation when they kiss her. The touch of man’s lips derives instant, sensual response from her blood by propelling it to rush to her fingertips. Tess, assured of her irresistible charms by both lovers, wavers between her instinctual and moral choices before she succumbs to the dictates of her heart “Is coyness longer necessary? Truth is truth between man and woman, as between man and man...”.²⁶ She knows deep in her heart that truths cannot be concealed in such matters.

Angel’s observation that Tess seems “to be a coquette – a coquette of the first urban water!”²⁷ – is not without justification. Feeling the pangs of love, she gives in to the desire of her heart “to snatch ripe pleasure before the iron teeth of pain could have time to shut upon her...”.²⁸ She cannot bear to let any other girl but herself have him; her jealousy shows the intensity of her passion for Angel. She surrenders after thoroughly analyzing the consequences of her acquiescence in marrying Angel: “I shall give way – I shall say yes – I shall let myself marry him – I cannot help it! ...Yet it is a wrong to him, and may kill him when he knows! O my heart-O-O-O!”²⁹ Her articulations betray her longing to be loved passionately. Her confession of her former seduction by Alec drifts them apart; she is abandoned by her husband after which she goes back to Alec and starts living with him as his mistress.

Tragically, neither Angel nor Alec acknowledges and appreciates the true self of Tess. According to D. H. Lawrence, Alec knows only to gratify his own physical desire while Angel does not accept Tess’s right to be ‘the Woman in the Body’. For Alec, she is all experience in the senses – ‘the embodiment of his desire’, while for Angel she is just a spiritual principle.³⁰ He negates her body altogether and in this way both Alec and Angel fall deficient in their capacity to suffice for her desire.³¹ Tess keeps oscillating in her allegiance to these two men and her desire to be loved passionately eventually kills her; she could not join herself to either of them eternally. Gregor credits Alec for realizing and bringing to consciousness Tess’s sexuality:

*“If it were merely a rape, then there would be no sense in Tess’s profound feeling throughout the novel that her whole being has been invaded by Alec, so that in one sense, she feels she belongs to him...If it were simply a seduction, then there would be no sense in Tess’s equally profound feeling that her past with Alec is a nullity.”*³²

When Alec comes to know her true circumstances and maneuvers her to take advantage of his offer, she does feel that he is her husband in a true, physical sense and starts living with him but after Angel's return from Brazil, she kills him and reverts back to her old love.

*"Hardy retains, then, for Tess with her emotional generosity, sexual vitality and moral strength, the capacity to rise above her fall and ultimately, to redeem the man who, bearing the values and sexual prejudices and double-standards of the society, fails to rise above them in the hour of need. Nor does Tess's last hour find her bereft of will, self-determination and courage. In knifing the heart of the man who so remorselessly hunts her down, she turns her own life around yet again; but this time with readiness, she says, to face her executioner."*³³

If it were only for her material needs then she would not have considered Alec her husband in her consciousness. Her social consciousness makes her commit the murder and be hanged as a punishment. Once she is deserted by a man who is socially her husband, she succumbs to Alec's entreaties and chooses to be with him as his mistress, something unimaginable in Victorian culture. The last five days of her life spent with Angel testify to her sensual, insatiable nature which becomes the cause of her destruction and death; her "appetite for joy had sustained, propelled, and finally destroyed her".³⁴ In introduction to *the Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Patricia Ingham interprets Alec's murder as contrived:

*"She [Tess] returns to the path of 'self delight' by this deliberate act, and without guilt spends a few idyllic days with Angel; and briefly it is she who controls him. She finds an easy way out after Angel's refusal to consummate his marriage with her, that it was impossible for them to live together, while that man lives...If he were dead it might be different..."*³⁵

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, as one contemporary reviewer remarked, is 'peculiarly the Woman's Tragedy'. If Tess can be said to have a tragic 'flaw', it is her sexuality, which is, in this novel, her 'nature' as a woman.³⁶

Conclusion

Tess contains the tides of blood which surge when the satisfaction of her diverse inclinations lies open to her. She allures Angel and Alec both into loving her; they succumb to the temptations offered to them in her person. It is this element of seduction and irresistibility which zooms out 'the blemished part' of Tess Durbeyfield by pushing it to the background. She has been portrayed in her natural colours – a being who remains true to herself. She stands as 'a blemished woman' for those who judge and brand her according to the conventional ideals of purity

otherwise she is a challenging 'Seductive Eve'. Tess escapes 'external standards of judgments' due to Hardy's allegiance to 'a living, breathing, sentient woman'.³⁷ Her passion for life pulsates through the warmth of blood in her veins till it is turned cold by capturing and hanging her.

Notes & References

¹ Havelock Ellis, "Westminster Rev. of Thomas Hardy's Novels" in R.G. Cox, *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1979), 106

² *ibid.*, 107

³ *ibid.*, 106

⁴ Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 1988), 103

⁵ Geoffrey Harvey, *The Complete Guide to Thomas Hardy* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 169

⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 1991), 252

⁷ *ibid.*, 107-108

⁸ *ibid.*, 117

⁹ *ibid.*, 83

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 87

¹¹ *ibid.*, 91

¹² *ibid.*, 95

¹³ *ibid.*, 95-96

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 107

¹⁵ Virginia R. Hyman, *Ethical Perspective in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Kennikat Press Corp., 1975), 113

¹⁶ H. C. Duffin, *Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels, the Poems and The Dynasts*, (Manchester: The University Press, 1937), 255

¹⁷ Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, *op.cit.*, 124

¹⁸ Tony Tanner, "Colour and Movement" in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*" In R. P. Draper *Thomas Hardy: The Tragic Novels* (London: Macmillan Ltd, 1975), 182-194

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 191

²⁰ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *op.cit.*, 173

²¹ *ibid.*, 241

²² *ibid.*, 75

²³ *ibid.*, 178

²⁴ *ibid.*, 145

²⁵ *ibid.*, 219

²⁶ *ibid.*, 207

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 208

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 210

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46-47

³² *Ibid.*, 182

³³ Rosemarie Morgan, *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, op.cit., 109

³⁴ Virginia R. Hyman, *Ethical Perspective in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (London: Kennikat Press Corp., 1975), 120

³⁵ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, op.cit., xxvi

³⁶ Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (London: Harvester Press Ltd, 1982), 123-124

³⁷ Shanta Dutta, *Ambivalence in Hardy: A Study of His Attitude to Women* (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 9