
THE VICTORIAN WOMAN IN THE DEPICTION OF THOMAS HARDY

Elena PALIȚĂ

University Lecturer PhD, “Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Gorj

Abstract: IN THE VICTORIAN TIME WOMEN WERE NOT ENCOURAGED TO SEARCH FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT OF INDEPENDENCE. THEY WERE TAUGHT TO BE SUBMISSIVE TO THEIR FATHERS OR HUSBANDS AND TO DEDICATE THEMSELVES TO THEIR DUTIES. THOMAS HARDY IS KNOWN TO BE INFLUENCED BY THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE, ESPECIALLY WESSEX WHICH HE INCORPORATED IN MANY OF HIS NOVELS, AND *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES* IS ALSO SET THERE. HE WAS A VICTORIAN REALIST WHO TRIED TO DEPICT THE SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE LIVES OF THOSE LIVING IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND, HE ALSO CRITICIZED BELIEFS RELATING TO MARRIAGE AND RELIGION, WHICH LIMITED PEOPLE'S LIVES.

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**Contact details
of the
author(s):** Email: elena.palita@gmail.com

As *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* says in its subtitle, the woman in Victorian age was *a pure woman faithfully presented* – a country girl, a perfect embodiment of *natural humanity*, whose moral perfection is set in contrast with the social law of bourgeois society. Manasia¹ underlines the fact that a Victorian woman should accept her weakness, the need to be protected by a man. Hardy presented his female characters in the light of this perception. Naturalism was a literary movement that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity and environment had inescapable forces in shaping human character. Thomas Hardy, an important naturalist writer from the Victorian era wrote stories of people living in the countryside whose fates were governed by forces larger than themselves.

Thomas Hardy's novelistic output falls between 1871 (*Desperate Remedies*) and 1896 (*Jude the Obscure*). In the latter part of his activity he reverts to his first love which was poetry.

¹ M. G. Manasia, Pseudonymity: Victorian women authors' recognition strategy, *British and American Studies*, Timisoara, Vol 27, 113-121, 2021



He therefore writes at the time when the English novel, under the influence of contemporary scientific and philosophical developments acquires a more scholarly and more intellectual aspect; also under the impact of the French and of the Russian novel, it acquires a more analytic character, as well as a more comprehensive range. He has consequently been likened to his contemporaries George Eliot and Henry James, as well as to Flaubert, Zola and Tolstoy. Yet this comparison shows Hardy as the exponent of an older art. He is essentially a story-teller.

He is a countryman and a primitive; his range of subjects is limited by the circumstances of his upbringing which - in this turn - determine an angle of vision.

His novels show a permanent and almost exclusive concern with village life in England. They fuse his rural experience and his philosophical speculation. This fusion is their particular magic. Women in his novels are in a permanent struggle to surpass social and ideological barriers. According to Manasia "self-education often emerged as the solitary beacon against the shadows of ignorance"².

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is one of his "novels of character and environment"³ according to his classification. It is artistically the finest and intellectually the most telling, present with tragic vigour and poetic force Hardy's solemn view of the universe and the human condition. He does not write period pieces, documentary or minute analyses of contemporary society. He writes about the rural England of his childhood, primitive and largely pagan in contrast with the modern world. Behind his rural idylls or tragedies, we always detect his concern with the unity, mineral, animal and human of the living world and man's predicament within it.

Hardy ranks with the greatest realists of the English novel in treatment of setting, character and modes of expression; at the same time, he endows his characters with tragic force and, through poetic suggestion, raises them to more than mortal size.

Hardy was, intellectually a man of advanced ideas, rebellious against conventional views of religion, sex, marriage, status of woman in society. He preached explosive and for his age- heretical opinions, a fact which accounts for the scandal caused by such novels as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *Jude the Obscure*, which were considered as downright immoral. Intellectually he was therefore a man of his time and of the future. Yet emotionally, as well as aesthetically, he was a man of the past. Like the Elizabethan dramatists, like the novelists of the old school, he delighted in a good story, full of action, full of unexpected and improbable incidents, of grotesque effects. He knew how to infuse into it the mystery and magic of life.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy reaches the light of his accusing powers. They hold a passionate humanistic protest, convincingly setting forth the moral superiority of man as still uncorrupted in the rural area, against the so-called "civilised" society.

Tess Durbeyfield, *a pure woman faithfully presented* – as the subtitle says, is a country girl, a perfect embodiment of *natural humanity*, whose moral perfection is set in contrast with the social law of bourgeois society⁴.

Once more Hardy demonstrated a deep sense of moral sympathy for England's lower classes, particularly for young, rural woman who were victimized by the rigidity of England's upper class. He presents the real types and problems of rural England in the early nineteenth century. Hardy uses a third person omniscient point of view to tell the story of a seduced girl.

² M. G. Manasia, *Disguised defiance: the hidden feminist voices of Victorian literature*, Research and Science Today Journal, 2(26)/2023, page 78

³ Cartianu Ana, *Istoria literaturii engleze. Secolul al XIX-lea (Romanul și poezia – 1830-1900)*, Universitatea București, București 1967, p.212.

⁴ Cartianu Ana, *Istoria literaturii engleze. Secolul al XIX-lea (Romanul și poezia – 1830-1900)*, Universitatea București, București 1967, p.222.



The Durbeyfield family is typical for the hundreds of rural families which had come down in the world and were heading for complete ruin.

Inefficient, irresponsible John Durbeyfield, unable to complete with the rhythm and requirements of the times, seeks refuge in drink and dreams of grandeur; slatternly, stupid Mr's Durbeyfield, with her romantic dreams; a crowd of dirty, hungry children increasing as the years to go by- such is Hardy's realistic presentation of the small cottage.

At the opening of the novel his noble Norman origin has first been revealed to John Durbeyfield. According to Mrs. Durbeyfield's snobbish and practical plan, Tess is despatched to the neighbouring D'Urberville estate "to claim kin" and get a position.

Driven by the poverty at home and against her better judgement, Tess goes to the manor.

The manor now belongs to a rich upstart merchant who had bought the property and illegally assumed the name of the D'Urbervilles. Young Alec D'Urberville embodies the irresponsibility and lack of scruple of the upstart. He repeatedly lays siege to Tess's purity until she finally gives in.

She leaves the castle, returns home, gives birth to a child and become a social outcast.

She bears her misfortune quietly, with dignity. Her baby dies.

After a period of complete prostration, "a particularly fine spring came round and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds, it moved her as it moved the wild animals and made her passionate to go.... Some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpended youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and bringing with it hope, and the invincible instinct towards self-delight"⁵.

She leaves home anew and seeks work on a distant farm. There she meets Angel Clare, son of a clergyman. Who - by way of reaction against bourgeois civilisation - had broken with family ideals and conventions, with town life and prospects, to live a natural life and a pure life, as a farmer.

The two young people fall hopelessly in love and Tess - after much hesitation and in spite of her judgment - accepts Angel's proposal and becomes his wife. On their wedding night, driven by her innate honesty and confidence, Tess makes a full confession on her previous fault. But Clare is still a slave to bourgeois conventions. He is bitterly disappointed to find that Tess whom he had considered absolute purity is a fallen woman. He abandons her.

Tess is now broken. She seeks work as a farm hand, like so many rural proletarians in quest of seasonal gain. She is worked to death the abandoned. In physical and mental misery and hopelessness, she meets her seducer again. He persuades, supplicates, menaces; and the situation is further complicated by the Durbeyfield family having been expelled from the old cottage on Alec D'Urbervilles' domain and now shelter less.

Out of consideration for them, as once before, Tess yields once more. And just at this juncture, when everything had ceased to matter Angel Clare returns, with a changed outlook, convinced of her fundamental worth to claim and cherish her.

Tess realises what might have been and in utter despair at the injustice of circumstances, she kills Alec D'Urberville.

In the eyes of the law she is a criminal, while in fact she is the victim of society, of its puritanical morality narrow conventions and stupid laws.

The officers of the law find her a fugitive, symbolically asleep upon one of the ancestral sacrificial alters, on the heath of Stonehenge. She is arrested and hanged.

"Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylus phrases, had ended his sport with Tess. And the D'Urberville knights and dames sleep on in their tombs unknowing."⁶

⁵ Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Wordsworth Classics, London, 1998, p. 140.

⁶ Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Wordsworth Classics, London, 1998, p. 247.



Drama in the story is achieved nonverbally. The most obvious example is the seduction scene, where Hardy achieves non-dramatic tension through silence and ambiguity rather than through explicitness: “Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around”⁷. Alec’s act of abuse over Tess is the most serious instance of a male’s domination over women. The act is reversed when she kills him, but this leads to an even greater act of suppression of a woman by men when the crowd of male police officers arrest Tess. After the girl is hanged, the narrator concludes the story with the statement: “Justice was done” but justice may be put in quotation marks.⁸

There are many scenes which foreshadow Tess’s final end such as the killing of Prince or of the birds found by Tess in the forest. On various occasions Tess is resembled to the animals she loves. As the horse, Tess too bears a high – class name but is doomed to a life of physical labour. The woman is also associated to a bird in a cage. Ironically, birds offer images of hope and liberation for the girl.

In his work, Hardy made dense use of imagery. The setting is rural and many of the images are drawn quite naturally from the countryside. He also employs pathetic fallacy as a literary device. In the novel, the setting mirrors the action. The seasons are in direct accord with Tess’s life as she falls in love with Alec in summer; she is raped in autumn and marries Alec in winter. The use of imagery is further manifested through the use of symbolism of colours. Tess often wears white clothes – when she first meets Angel but before being raped by Alec – to suggest her innocence. On the other side, red, the colour of blood, is associated with guilt or sin. Although Hardy wrote mainly of country people, the diction and vocabulary used in *Tess* is frequently sophisticated. The author frequently quotes, directly or indirectly from other texts, putting his allusions into the mouth of his characters who have been well educated, such as Alec or Angel. At the same time, he is able to reproduce the typical language of ordinary, uneducated people using short, simple sentences.

Among the most important allusions that Hardy uses is the origin or the characters’ names and the Book of Genesis. Tess’s name recalls of a martyr whose visions of a greater reality cost her life. Alec’s second name suggests the conqueror Alexander the Great, while Angel’s name suggests brightness. On the other hand, the Genesis story is evoked repeatedly. While Tess would be Eve and Angel would be Adam, Alec would be the bad – to – the – bone Satan. He even describes himself as a demonic character: “I suppose I am a damn bad fellow. I was born bad and I have lived bad and I should die bad, in all probability.”⁹ He seduces Tess in a wood, under a tree, just as the Serpent seduced Eve. This guilt, which will never be erased, is known in the Christian religion as the Original Sin. At one point, the converted Alec preaches heavenly justice for earthly sinners but this is an instance of dramatic irony as his faith is shallow and insincere.

Tess represents, in a religious sense, the fallen humanity. Just as Tess’s clan was once glorious and powerful but it is now sadly diminished, so too did the early glory of the first human beings Adam and Eve fade with their expulsion from Eden, making human sad shadows of what they were once.¹⁰

All things considered, gender and sexuality constitute the main and most crucial aspects of Hardy’s fiction. It is in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* where he thoroughly examines the female protagonist, that he depicts her tragedy and stormy relations with men.

Though not innovative in delineating the theme of seduction and betrayal, the writer accentuates the heroine’s struggles to persuade herself and others of the uniqueness of her own life, and of her independence and mental strength. On the other hand, Hardy’s interweaving in the novel of literary and mythological allusions encapsulates the following meaning of Tess: that her

⁷ Idem, p. 98.

⁸ Rîncă, Felicia, *A Practical Course for English Exams*, Rovimed Publishers, Bacău, 2017, p. 65.

⁹ Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Wordsworth Classics, London, 1998, p. 158.

¹⁰ Rîncă, Felicia, *A Practical Course for English Exams*, Rovimed Publishers, Bacău, 2017, p. 66.



individual story does not symbolize the unique destiny of the individual but rather the potential fate of any member of her sex and class in a society that “what is written on the body can never be erased”¹¹.

¹¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280579318_Portrayal_of_Women_in_Thomas_Hardy's_Tess_of_the_d'Urber_villes_and_Stefan_Zeromski's_Dzieje_Grzechu accessed on November 27, 2023.



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