



The Tragic Heroine : Tess as a Representation of Classical Tragedy

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Abstract

Based on what is common belief in late Victorian society, pure woman. Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy is a poignant exploration of the tragic heroine, Tess, whose life unfolds as a sequence of irreversible events, marking her as a representation of classical tragedy. Tess embodies the quintessential qualities of a tragic hero in the Aristotelian sense, her downfall is rooted in a combination of her own tragic flaws, fate, and the unforgiving social forces that surround her. Like the tragic figures of classical Greek drama, Tess is a victim of both external forces and her internal conflicts, particularly the tension between her desires and the rigid moral codes of her society. Hardy, much like the Greek playwrights, uses Tess's narrative to highlight the role of fate, or "fortune," in shaping the tragic hero's destiny. Tess is portrayed as a figure who is simultaneously the victim of her own decisions and the victim of societal systems that operate outside her ability to control them. The inevitability of Tess's tragic end mirrors the structure of classical tragedy, where the hero is destined to fall due to a fatal flaw or an inescapable series of events. Her downfall is further propelled by the theme of hamartia, her misguided belief in the potential for redemption and the possibility of happiness in a world that is inherently indifferent to her suffering. Hardy's portrayal of Tess reflects the classical tragic idea of peripeteia and anagnorisis, as Tess's once hopeful prospects shift into a tragic fate. Through Tess, Hardy critiques the moral and social injustices of Victorian society, while simultaneously presenting her as an emblem of classical tragedy.

Keywords: Hamartia, Peripeteia, Anagnorisis, Catharsis, Fate, Human suffering, Personal flaws, Societal structures

Thomas Hardy was Born on June 1840 in Dorchester. He was one of the most influential writers of the nineteenth century. In depth of character and especially in his quiet, unassuming determination, he seems more to have resembled his father, also Thomas Hardy, a builder by trade, who had inherited a genius and passion for music. His talents were passed down to the younger Thomas who from an early age was playing the folk fiddle at local 'randys', and who throughout his life could be moved to tears by certain pieces of music. The personalities of his parents, the close-knit life of the small rural community, and the often harsh environment of the surrounding heath and woodland formed a deep and lasting impression on Hardy.

The fact that Thomas Hardy resented being called a pessimist is no reason why he should not be thus described. Hardy was the painter of darker side of life as it was no wonder if people charged him of "pessimist". He was hypersensitive; his own life was tragic and gloomy. For a speculative soul, this world is a thorny field. Hardy's philosophy of the human condition is determined by his natural temper and disposition. He says:

"Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain."

Hardy's cosmos was neither governed by the almighty god nor by social norms. He made his own world by his own perceptions and people around him. Human beings are of huge victim to the chance ordering of things over which they have no domination. Hardy's own life was full of mischances. Several of which he turned anti chances of his own profit. The same childhood milieu which could have tied him down to a family spent energy he converted into a treasure house of sources to draw upon, for his imaginative work. Hardy's opinion of the supernatural power in his novels and other works 'Character is fate'. Hardy's conception of life is essentially tragic. He is one of those who believe that life is boom. His novels concentrate on human sufferings and show that there is no escape for human beings. Tess of the d'urbervilles; A Pure Woman appeared in serialised version, published in 1891, then in book form in three volumes in 1891, and as a single volume in 1892. It challenged the sexual morals of late Victorian England.

Tess is worst fated to the sufferings of life. She tries her best to come out of her fated circle of misfortunes but remains fail. Throughout the novel she keeps on revolving around the predetermined circles of her cruel fate. Being the eldest child she has to go to D'Urbervilles for earning. Her seduction plays a vital role in her destruction. She is rejected by society on becoming pregnant. She goes to earn for her family to Talbothays. Her love affair, her marriage and then sudden rejection by Angle Clare, all this make her a victim of conventional social attitude.

Classical tragedy refers to a genre of drama that originated in ancient Greece and is most closely associated with playwrights like Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. It explores serious themes through a narrative that often leads to the downfall or death of the protagonist due to a combination of their own flaws and external circumstances.

Tess Durbeyfield, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, can indeed be seen as a representative of the tragic heroine in the tradition of classical tragedy. Though Hardy's novel is set in Victorian England rather than ancient Greece, the structure and elements of classical tragedy are deeply reflected in Tess's story. Her journey through the novel exemplifies many key components of the tragic form, including her tragic flaws, fate, moment of recognition, and ultimately, her downfall. Tess, the titular character embodies key elements of classical tragedy as her story reflects the inevitable downfall of a noble yet flawed character, a core aspect of classical tragedy. In the playwriting tradition of Aristotle, a tragic hero is usually of noble birth, has a fatal flaw (hamartia), and experiences a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) that leads to suffering, often with an eventual moment of recognition (anagnorisis).

Tess as a tragic heroine;

Tess Durbeyfield is an inherently good and virtuous young woman. She possesses qualities like beauty, purity, and nobility, making her a character worthy of admiration. Her tragic flaw is not in her nature but in the circumstances she is thrust into. She is a victim of both external and internal forces beyond her control, which makes her an ideal representative of the classical tragic heroine. Despite her moral integrity, Tess is consistently oppressed by fate and society, which leads to her downfall. Tess is of a peasant descent, but her discovery that her family is related to the once prominent d'urberville family elevates her to a kind of nobility, though it is an illusory status. This high potential for a tragic fall, as her tragic fate is partly due to the societal and familial pressures tied to her bloodline.

Hamartia (Tragic Flaw);

Tess's tragic flaw lies in her vulnerability and passivity when faced with the harsh realities of her life. While Tess does display strength at certain points, her inability to escape the oppressive social and moral norms of her time often leads her into situations where she is unable to assert control over her own fate. For example, her passivity in the face of Alec d'Urberville's advances and her reconciliation with

him, after being wronged, can be seen as an example of her tragic flaw. Additionally, Tess's hope for a happy life with Angel Clare, despite the weight of her past, also sets her up for further tragedy when he rejects her. Tess's fatal flaw is her naivety, innocence, and trust in others. She believes in the goodness of people, particularly Angel Clare, whom she falls in love with. Her flaw is not one of moral weakness but rather an inability to control her circumstances.

Peripeteia (Reversal of Fortune);

Throughout the novel, Tess experiences multiple reversals of fortune, each one more devastating than the last. After being seduced by Alec, Tess tries to rebuild her life with Angel, only to face rejection when she reveals her past. This rejection, in turn, leads to her return to Alec, and her life spirals further into tragedy as she becomes more entangled in her circumstances. Initially, she is a simple, innocent girl from a poor family, but the discovery of her connection to the d'Urberville name seems to open doors for her. However, after her rape by Alec d'Urberville, she is marked by shame and societal condemnation. Later, she falls in love with Angel Clare, but after revealing her past, Angel rejects her. This rejection plunges Tess into further despair. Finally, Tess's act of murdering Alec in an act of desperation is the ultimate reversal, as it seals her tragic fate and leads to her execution.

Anagnorisis (Moment of Recognition)

Tess experiences anagnorisis when she realizes that no matter how much she tries to escape her past and her fate, she is trapped by the harsh social realities of Victorian society, and by her own decisions. Tess's moment of recognition comes in several stages. The first occurs when she is forced to confront the reality of her sexual assault by Alec, which leads to her downfall. Another moment of recognition comes when Tess realizes that Angel's love, although true, cannot fully overcome the strict moral judgments placed on her because of her past. In both cases, Tess comes to understand that she cannot escape her fate and the social consequences of her actions, even though she is inherently a good person. Her realization comes too late to change the course of her life, and it is this tragic recognition of her powerlessness that deepens her suffering.

Fate vs Free will;

Tess's story is deeply rooted in the classical tragedy theme of fate vs. free will. From the beginning, she is constrained by the weight of her family name, the d'Urberville legacy, which sets her life on a tragic course. She is unaware of the past sins associated with this name, and yet, its legacy controls her future. Tess's repeated attempts to alter her fate—through her relationships with Alec and Angel—are thwarted by the social structures and moral codes of the time. Even though Tess tries to make her own decisions, it is clear that she is powerless to change the course of her destiny.

Catharsis

Tess's tragic end is her execution after killing Alec evokes felling of pity and fear in the reader. Her death, though violent and unjust, is portrayed the final consequence of her struggle against the societal forces that have oppressed her. This evokes Catharsis, as readers are left to reflect on her fate, the societal injustices, and the inevitability of her tragic end. The catharsis in Tess's tragedy is felt deeply by the reader, as Hardy elicits both pity and fear through her suffering. Tess's suffering is not only a personal tragedy but also a social commentary on the limitations placed on women, the hypocrisy of societal values, and the nature of human vulnerability. The tragic events surrounding Tess's life and her eventual execution for the murder of Alec leave the reader with a profound sense of loss and sorrow, providing the cathartic release characteristic of classical tragedy.

Moral and Philosophical Reflection;

In classic tragedy, the hero's fall serves as a moral or philosophical lesson for the audience. In Tess's case, Hardy critiques Victorian society, especially its moral codes, gender roles, and class systems. Tess's tragedy is a reflection on the cruelty of these societal expectations. Her suffering represents the fatalism of individuals born into lower classes or those who are victims of social prejudices. Hardy suggests that Tess's downfall is not purely her fault; it is shaped by both her personal flaws and the societal structures that limit her choices. Through Tess, Hardy asks profound questions about fate, justice, and human suffering.

"As flies to wanton boys, Are we to the god They kill us for their sport."

Causes of Tess's tragedy includes societal constraints, patriarchal society, and Tess's own mistakes. The last years of the nineteenth century were the Victorian period. Victorian morality imposed rigid norm on women, which demanded women to be pure. The loss of virginity was a fatal blow to Tess as she was turned against and crushed by the social convention, and consequently, suffered endlessly till she lost hope in retrieving her virginity and was forced to reach her self-fulfillment in her own way. Thus Tess's tragedy took place in such a particular historical and social background. In the world, Tess, made to transgress codified morality, would inevitably face a pilgrimage leading to tragedy. Men and women are unable to regard each other as anything but a being apart, she is made to conform to a higher moral standard for woman than for man. In the man-dominated society, woman has to suffer the injustices of man-made law, the law by which man and woman are not equally treated in terms of morality. "Then shall the man be guiltless, but the woman shall bear her iniquity." This notorious moral injustice takes its root in its society. This is why Tess, being violated by Alec, unfairly suffers from being morally and socially spurned and punished while Alec remains free from any social reprimands. It is obvious that Hardy is protesting against the moral injustice that society makes for woman. According to the Victorian customs, a man could live a dissipating life as he had once done while a woman could not. The double standard for man and woman make it impossible for Angel to forgive Tess. In fact, his unfair standard for Tess is quiet representative, because "the male demand for purity in woman and the use of the double standard in sexual matters are essential features of the social life of the nineteenth century." Angel is still dominated by the conventional

custom and the bourgeois view of morality. Bound up by the bondage, Angel exposes his class prejudice. He taunts Tess that person from different societies has different manners. He blames Tess for her humble status and her family that he thinks is the causes of her committing the disgraceful sin. Angel and Alec share the assumption that they are entitled to the power to determine Tess' actions and being; neither man seeks her out as a loving, equal partner. Alec reveals his feelings of superiority initially on the ride in the Chase, when he exclaims, "what am I, to be repulsed so by a mere chit likes you"? Clearly he assumes a cultural right, by virtue of class and gender, to possess Tess' body. Later, after he has proposed to Tess, he reveals his motive to be not love but a desire for power when he states: "I was your master once! I will be your master again." Angel's desire for mastery has less to do with Tess' body, but it nevertheless parallels Alec's attitude. Even before she has agreed to marry him, he is already presuming to order her to change her last name to d'Urberville.

Tess's filial obedience and responsibility. Tess could help her parents in any way. She was deflowered twice in succession, both of which were for her family's livelihood. Tess's first fall was for her family. Due to the death of her old horse, the pressure of life and the guilt toward her parents, she agreed with her parents to go to "claim kin" from a wealthy branch of the D'Urbervilles and helped there, but unfortunately it was there she was raped by Alec. Tess's second fall was also for her family: Her new marriage had been abandoned by her husband Angel Clare, she had been working around for her life so as to maintain her husband's dignity. She had taken part in extremely hard work, even though her life was extremely hard, she was still madly awaiting her husband to change his mind and come back.

In the novel, Alec is described as a bourgeoisie gilded youth, a spoiled and vicious incarnation, who directly causes Tess's tragic life. When he picks strawberries up, he puts them into her mouth in person regardless of Tess's refusal. While Tess has her meal, he watches her all the time. Alec takes advantages of Tess's helplessness, setting a trap to seduce her. Consequently, Tess becomes a "fallen woman", the object of ridicule and rejection. When Alec comes across with Tess after four years, he seems to have undergone a remarkable transformation from a villain into a religious man, a preacher. But his wickedness comes to life at once when he sees Tess again. He deceives Tess that her husband will not come back forever. He even pesters and threatens her, "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man's wife you are mine!"

Angel Clare is a secularist who yearns to work for the "honor and glory of man" rather than for the "honor and glory of God" in a more distant world. Because, as a typical young nineteenth-century progressive, Angel considers human society as a thing to be improved, and he firmly believes in the nobility of man. He judges "purity" with the conventional value and moral standard that are inculcated into him when he is a boy. Although he claims to have independent judgment opinion, once the thing is very crucial, he is still upholding the decadent bourgeois social customs and moral hypocrisy.

Conclusion

The novel emphasizes on the themes of fate, social constraints, and the harshness of Victorian society. Tess's tragic end reflects Hardy's belief that individuals, particularly women, are often powerless against the forces of nature, society, and circumstance. Her suffering throughout the novel seems inescapable, and her death becomes an inevitable outcome of her misfortune and the social system that condemns her. Tess embodies the archetype of the tragic heroine. She is a sympathetic character who experiences profound suffering but is never entirely free from the forces that control her fate. Her innocence and virtue are gradually worn down by the harsh realities of the world around her. In this, Tess represents the broader struggles of many individuals in society, particularly those without power or privilege. Tess's innocence and purity evoke empathy from readers, making her suffering all the more poignant. She remains virtuous despite the multiple traumas she faces, including her rape by Alec and the

judgment from Angel. Her downfall is tragic because it is caused by forces beyond her control—largely her social position and the moral standards imposed on her. The reversal highlights the arbitrary and capricious nature of fate. Just as Tess seems to find some happiness with Angel, she is once again doomed by forces outside her control. The catharsis in *Tess* is particularly painful, as it involves not just a single person's fall but a commentary on the societal structures that contribute to her destruction. Hardy's portrayal of Tess's suffering prompts readers to reflect on the nature of injustice and the human cost of moral and social oppression. By employing elements of classical tragedy—such as a noble yet flawed protagonist, a reversal of fortune, a moment of recognition, and an overwhelming sense of fate—*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* delivers a profound exploration of the human condition. Tess's story, while rooted in her personal experiences, reflects universal themes of societal injustice, the limitations of human agency, and the impact of uncontrollable forces. The novel's tragic ending, steeped in pathos and fatalism, ensures that Tess's fate becomes a timeless symbol of the vulnerability of individuals in the face of societal expectations and forces beyond their control. The significance of Hardy's tragic narrative lies in its moral critique and its ability to evoke both intellectual and emotional responses from the reader, culminating in a deep sense of loss and reflection.

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