

CONTRADICTIONARY VIEWS ON A LITERARY WORK: A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

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Abstract

From the time Thomas Hardy's popular novel, Tess of the d'Urbervilles came into existence till now, its reception has been fluctuating from absolute rejection to whole hearted acceptance. This started from the day the contract Hardy signed for its publication was cancelled because he refused to alter certain parts of the work. One wonders why Hardy in spite of his being well known has to pass through these experiences because of this novel. But on a deeper study of the work, it has been discovered that Hardy as a transitional writer between the strict and moralistic Victorian society and the more permissive era of the modern age, tries to force social changes on the Victorians. In addition, he uses the yet to be well-established social theories of naturalism and feminism where he sometimes goofs. Due to such, he receives acerbic criticisms that nearly forced him to jettison novel writing so as to concentrate only on poetry. In order to study why the novel has been vacillating between praises and denunciations, the researcher had to study the novel thoroughly and compare its content with what was obtainable during the Victorian period and the tenets of naturalism and feminism. Therefore, differences in opinion especially where he errs engender the two levels of critical studies surrounding the novel.

Keywords: Naturalism, Feminism, Victorianism, Novel, Superstition

Introduction

If there is any novel written by Thomas Hardy which has made generations of literary critics to be at loggerheads, it must be *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Starting from the day it was published till today, critics have not agreed on the status of the novel. While some see it as a trash, others see it as an elevated literary work produced by a master craftsman. Judging from the days when its manuscript was rejected till today, literary analysts have not come to an agreement on how to rate it. One wonders why it is so and how to assess it. Are we to agree with those who see it as a tragedy of high profile or are we to throw it away as a badly written work of art that is not worthy of our perusal? For illustrative purposes, let us look at few of these views on the novel.

The Novel in the Eyes of Critics

According to Alvin Birdi in an online source, the novel was, "Originally shunned by critics upon its publication in 1891 because of 'immorality'. The novel traces the difficult life of Tess Durberfield whose victimization at the hands of men eventually

leads to her horrific downfall” (n.p.). The critics of those days saw immorality splashed in the way Alec raped the protagonist. But in all truth and balanced assessment, there are just hints where things that would offend the reading public are written. But then, the strict morality of those days has shifted to the permissive life of today.

But what actually is treated here in these references to immorality is that:

By traditional Victorian standards, Tess is a fallen woman and as such is considered damaged goods suitable for the lowest bidder. Hardy is radically departing from these values by proclaiming Tess’s purity and virtue even though she has had sexual relations outside of marriage. It is therefore, not surprising that initial reaction to the novel was highly negative (Litwin1).

Another critic who has something to say about the status of the novel is Yoshino Satoko. This scholar starts by tracing the novel from its earliest days when in March 1887, the publishing company, Tillotson and Son offered the sum of 1000 guineas to Hardy for him to produce a novel which would be of the same volume with the recently published *The Woodlander*(31). When finally Hardy produced the novel, it went into record that: “Tillotson was appalled when he finally looked at the proofs and wrote to ask for changes, revisions and cuts but Hardy refused. Hardy and Tillotson agreed to cancel their contract” (31).

When one considers what Hardy threw away because of that cancellation, one is amazed. By that time, “... the annual income of a rising professional man was approximately £700” (Satoko 31). But then, Hardy went on to have more rejections from the publishers of the following: Murray’s *Magazine* and MacMillan’s *Magazine*. Finally, it was serialized by Arthur Locker of the *Graphic* but with some adjustments in the content of the novel:

Thus in the *Graphic* serialization, the scene of Tess’s violation was replaced by a mock marriage with Alec d’Urbervilles and the baptism and burial of Tess’s baby were cut off from the manuscript. These appeared as “Saturday Night in Arcady” in the *National Observer* on 14 November 1891, and “The Midnight Baptism: A Study in Christianity” in the *Fortnight Review* in May 1891 (Satoko 31).

In spite of all this, it is on record that the novel:

...was a huge success and the first printing sold out within a month. The *Westminster Review* described it as one of the greatest novels of the century and the *Athenaeum* pronounced it a great novel; also the *Star* and the *Illustrated London News* similarly praised it (Satoko 32).

In view of these citations and the waves which the novel has been making, this scholar further states that the novel is the richest novel that Hardy ever wrote (43).

Another analyst Richard Sime notes what happened in 1892. According to the researcher:

“After reading an unfavourable review of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, he [Hardy] wrote, “Well, if this sort of thing continues, no more novel writing for me. A man must be a fool to deliberately stand up to be shot at” (852).

But let it not be taken that such negative assessments of the novel occurred only in the days of Victorian views on morality. It is still happening today as can be seen in R. D. Trivedi’s book. This academic states that:

Tess of the d’Urbervilles has been called by some, Hardy’s tragic masterpiece. It is difficult to assent to this view. It is a profoundly moving story but it is not a

great tragedy. The gratuitous comment about the President of the Immortals whether it actually reflects Hardy's view of the government of the universe or not is deplorable. It robs the tragedy of its grace and power. The blasphemy is an outrage on the readers' feelings and such is not the effect of true tragedy (596).

Therefore, these contradictory assessments of the novel did not happen only at the time of its publication or as a result of Hardy's attack on Victorian social ills. They are happening now. But then, one cannot ignore the impact of that age in the literary work. Even Hardy shows that he is aware of what that era can do or else, what he has in the "Explanatory Note to the First Edition" November 1891 would not be written at all. But in black and white, he notes:

I would ask any too genteel reader who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels to remember a well-worn sentence of St Jerome's: If an offense comes out of the truth, better it is that the offense comes than the truth be concealed (n.p.).

From this assertion, it is clear that Hardy knows that the content of the novel would step on some toes and that can account for his writing an apologia. Also, who knows when that appendage was included --before or after his retrieving his manuscript and cancelling the contract. But why would the novel not be in the offensive and thereby raise some dust considering the Victorian society and its quizzical attitude towards women, religion and other social issues?

Concerning that period in English literature, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham record that Victorian or Victorianism: "... is frequently used in a derogatory way, to connote narrow-mindedness, sexual priggishness, the determination to maintain feminine 'Innocence' (that is, sexual ignorance, and an emphasis on social respectability" (338). These are what the master craftsman envisaged that would attract negative evaluation to his work. Judging from current social happenings, there is nothing offensive he inserted in the novel.

Finally on these contradictory stands of critics on the status of the novel, it is noteworthy to look at the online publication, *Wikipedia the free encyclopedia*. Of all that see the high literary standard of the novel, this source is the most effusive, backing its stand with historical facts and figures. According to this source, the novel is "a major nineteenth-century English novel and possibly Hardy's fictional masterpiece" (n.p.).

In buttressing its stand, the source enumerates some of the adaptations the novel has undergone. Some of these adaptations happened as far back as 1906 when an operatic version was written by Fredric d'Erlanger who performed it in Naples. The novel has been turned into films at least eight times. Another thing happened in 1952 when the BBC television programme was directed by Michael Henderson and starred Barbara Jefford as Tess, Michael Aldridge as Alec and so on.

Furthermore, in 2008, there was another BBC adaptation written by David Nicholls. It was aired in the United Kingdom in September and October. Also mentioned was what happened in 2019 when there was a theatrical adaptation into a musical piece as composed by Michael Blore and playwright Michael Davis. Another musical piece was recorded in 2015 by the American Metalcore Band, Ice Nine Kills which produced a song called "Tess-Timony". This song was inspired by this novel. The title of the album is *Every Trick in the Book*. Many are the citations of this encyclopedia concerning the influences of

this novel in different areas of creative works so as to show that the novel is of very high profundity (n.p.).

If that is the case, there is need to know why the evaluation of the novel all along has been vacillating from total denunciation to praises whose echo is reaching the high heavens. To understand this, there is need to study the novel and compare the content with what these critics write. Also important is the knowledge of the social milieu at the time it was published. But no matter the consideration, the novel is one of very high standard.

Hardy and the then Emerging Critical Tools

There is no doubt that Hardy is somebody who reads a lot if we are to go by the numerous references in the novel. Some of these references are from Walt Whitman, the Bible, Greek classics, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Velasquez, Corregio's *Holy Families*, Huxley's *Essays*, *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Milton and so on.

That we limit his references to just these is wrong because in this work there are hints that Hardy is aware of such movements like naturalism and feminism. But by the time he was writing, these had not been solidly established. But then, the influence of these on the Victorian culture helped to attract to him both detractors and emulators. Since he is a transitional writer from the rigid Victorian society and the modern period, he is bound to have those who hate his works and those who love them. At the present age, some of those ideas are firmly adhered to by the majority and this can account for the numerous genres the novel has been transformed into.

Naturalism and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Abrams and Harpham state that naturalism is a:

Product of post-Darwinism biology in the 19th century [and] it held that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world; and therefore, that such a being is merely a higher-order animal whose character and behaviour are entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment (270).

Any character in such naturalistic novels according to this source is "... subjected to the social and economic forces in the family, the class and the milieu into which that person is born" (270).

What is meant here is a higher standard of realism or so Emile Zola sees it. What is more, anybody belonging to a particular society must be affected by social happenings in that society and the economic forces controlling that society since nobody, according to a popular saying, is an island. Such economic and social happenings must affect and direct the person's behaviour either to mar him or uplift him.

Expanding this view is an article in the online publication of *Science Encyclopedia*, this article states that Zola advocates in his *Experimental Novel and the Naturalist Novelists* that:

Modern literature needed to be as accurate as possible in order to provide a record of "modern history". To Zola, literature could only be truly real if it examined life in a verifiable way, similar to a medical experiment or analysis, where humanity as an organism, would be able to function only by following predetermined hereditary laws that were to be studied within a very precise social environment (n.p.).

The proponent of this theory firmly believes that what he is doing can give an accurate view of man in society as if the study is conducted in a scientific way. To him, such study is as accurate as proper record of past happenings.

However, in the case of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy fails to follow all aspects of the view unwaveringly for there are areas where he deviates. To those who are experts in the field, he has failed. To those who do not like the theory, he has also failed. Such is the source of the views of some of those who denounce the work.

But no matter what happens, Holly Rose Litwin supporting the influence of naturalism in the work, cites Peter Widdowson:

If we read between the lines of the three fiction essays --verified by jottings in his notebooks and by memoranda quoted in *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* -- it is apparent that Hardy was actually participating in the pan-European debate about Realism, and that he was opposed to a "photographic" naturalism, favoring instead a kind of "analytic" writing which "makes strange" common sense reality and brings into view other realities obscured precisely by the naturalized version (3).

The major problem that finally ruins the heroine starts from Parson Tringham, the antiquary of Stagfoot Lane who excavates her family's connection with Durbeyfield family as: "A lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the d'Urbervilles who descended from Sir Pagan d'Urbervilles, the renounced knight from Normandy, with William the conqueror" (n.p.). (The citations of the novel are from the online edition of Gutenberg E Book. This version has no page numbers).

When Tringham explains this to Tess' father, a lot of events finally lead to Tess going with her brother to sell beehive using the family's only source of income, a horse named Prince. Because the family celebrated this newly discovered royal connection till late in the night and these two have to leave at 2.00 am the following day, the family cannot undertake the journey. Tess due to tiredness and weakness falls asleep and there is a collision with a mail cart. This leads to Prince's impalement and death. This ends in economic strangulation in the family, since the father, John Durbeyfield, a haggler, a middleman who buys and resells vegetables and poultry cannot fend for the family.

Also, without the horse, Tess as the eldest daughter is urged to go and "claim kin" when they hear of another family that bears the name D'Urbervilles. This is how she gets in contact with Alec D'Urbervilles who arranges for her to work in his blind mother's poultry at the Slopes. This contact with Alec leads to his raping her and her conception of the short-lived son, Sorrow.

In considering the Victorian society and its moral stand, Hardy goofed by initially titling the novel "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented". Later, with a plethora of negative criticisms, he changed that subtitle to "A Pure Woman."

According to Birdi in an online paper, "Hardy felt that its heroine was a virtuous victim of a rigid Victorian moral code" (n.p.). In collaboration is Litwin who opines that: "The novel is a fierce condemnation of the social, ethical, moral, religious and political values held by the majority of Hardy's cultural elite contemporaries in England" (1).

Needless to state here, this can account for our having more negative criticisms then than now. However, few people who share his views write in praise of the novel. But some, who cannot blame Tess in being raped, do not see how to exculpate her in the murder of her rapist which later takes place.

Also inherited is the beauty of that famous family. To show that her beauty is traceable to that family, one can see what the caretaker of the place where she and Angel Clare lodge after their marriage says. It is on record that "... in addition to their[referring to the portraits embedded on the wall]effects upon Tess, her fine features were unquestionably traceable in these exaggerated forms" (n.p.).

In addition to this source of beauty, there is the one from her mother. From the novel Joan's beauty is presented as follows.

There still faintly beamed from the woman's features something of the freshness and even the prettiness of her youth: rendering it probable that the personal charms which Tess could boast of were in main part her mother's gift and therefore unknighly, unhistorical (n.p.).

The view so far is that Hardy is following the tenets of naturalism. Also, when he writes that Tess is "... an almost standard woman but for the slight incautiousness of character inherited from her race" (n.p.), which race is being referred to here? Definitely, he is writing about the English race during the Victorian period. Some critics who read this may not agree with him and from such could have originated some of the negative appraisals.

In addition, that distinguished family has been noted for murder as can be seen in the reference to Tess after she has murdered Alec: "There momentarily flashed through his mind that the family tradition of the coach and murder might have arisen because the d'Urbervilles had been known to do these things" (n.p.). This episode tallies with the legend of the d'Urbervilles Coach. As Angel Clare reveals in the novel: "One of the family is said to have abducted some beautiful woman, who tried to escape from the coach in which he was carrying her off, and in the struggle he killed her -- or she killed him -- I forgot which. Such is one version of the tale" (n.p.). Therefore, her murdering Alec who put her into the family way is her following a family tradition and it is in consonance with the tenets of naturalism.

In summarizing the influence of heredity in the life of Tess, Sampler in an online article has this:

The final aspect of heredity that has a major impact on Tess is the legacy of her d'Urbervilles name. Two dramatic life changing events occur because of Tess' noble lineage: the affair with Alec d'Urbervilles and the separation from Clare. The incident with Alec d'Urbervilles takes place when Tess travels to his estate to claim kin and help her family (n.p.).

So far, heredity is not the only aspect of naturalism. If it is, there will be only eulogy showered upon Hardy and his novel. But other aspects may be missing. Such aspects will detract from making the novel to be a slice of life. This is where we must note that superstition is ruled out entirely in all works of naturalism and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has a lot of it. Therefore, rigid proponents of that theory will frown when they come across any of them and such can engender negative criticisms.

For emphasizing the importance of eliminating superstition, let us look at the online copy of *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* where naturalism is written about. In the present enquiry, superstition is seen as being in the domain of spirituality for the two cannot be amenable to scientific investigation. In that encyclopedia, it is written that:

Reality as exhausted by nature, contains nothing "supernatural and that the scientific method" should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the

“human spirit” ... they would both reject “supernatural” entities and allow that science is a possible route (if not necessarily the only one) to important truths about the human spirit (n.p.).

So, on the interference of spiritual entity in the affairs of man, Hardy records that as soon as Tess murders Alec who brought into her life untold level of suffering and frustration, who removed joy and inserted shame and perpetual sadness into her life that “justice was done and the President of the Immortals in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess” (n.p.).

A reference like this is irksome to hard core naturalists and such will attract negative criticisms. This is in view of John Jacobs assertion that: “... all of which there is belongs to the natural world. But the key point is that accurate and adequate conception of the world does not (according to the naturalist) include reference to supernatural entities or agencies” (n.p.). Therefore, in spite of criticizing the shallow view of Victorian morality which will attract positive appraisals from those of the same view, this reference to the President of the Immortals will turn the minds of naturalists against this novel.

On superstition, one can recall the issue of Tess going to “claim kin” which finally is the major source of her undoing. But then, the superstitious mother, Joan has it that “I tried her fate in the *Fortune-Teller* and it brought out that very thing [Tess being married by some noble gentleman]” (n.p.). On this issue, naturalists can praise Hardy because the way Tess’ journey flops is not supported by the reading of the *Fortune-Teller*. On this issue, Sampler states that:

Joan and Tess share in a mystical outlook on the world. A fantastical force governs Joan’s spiritual life, as she relies on a fortune telling book for insight. Tess carries on this superstitious and visionary nature. She concerns herself with the deterministic implications of ill omens (n.p.).

But then, it is not in all portrayals of superstition that the author shows the hollowness in such beliefs. The result is that his reputation swings up and down in the eyes of naturalists, and such informs their assessments of the novel. As an illustration, look at the croaking of a cock three times when Clare and Tessy are about to leave Talbothay’s Dairy. This croaking which is similar to that recorded in the Bible during the trial and betrayal of Jesus Christ later manifests in poor little Retty Priddle trying to drown herself and Marian being found dead drunk. These behave like this out of the unrequited love from Angel Clare and in this way supporting the efficacy of superstition in human affairs.

In summary of the effect of naturalism on the appraisal of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, it should be noted that at the time Hardy wrote the novel, naturalism was yet to be firmly established. Therefore, those who did not quite understand it were against the idea and that must have attracted a lot of negative criticisms. This is more so because of the society involved.

Now that the theory has been firmly established, one gets better and affirmative views than before, if one is to exclude some of such places where Hardy openly goes against the tenets of the movement. Openly going against the tenets of the movement can account for Trivedi’s stand that: “The gratuitous comment about the President of the Immortals whether it actually reflects Hardy’s view of the government of the universe or not, is deplorable” (596).

Feminism

Robert DiYanni affirms that “Feminist criticism ... examines the social, economic and cultural aspects of literary works, but especially for what those works reveal about the role, position and influence of women” (2090). Here, Tess as the protagonist is the main focus in the novel. What concerns her socially, economically and culturally is what the novel is filled with. In addition, the Victorian age was an age of strict morality. Therefore, any deviation from this code is frowned at. Such can be seen in the subtitles. Currently, it is ‘A Pure Woman’.

To any person from that age, how can an unmarried lady who has delivered a baby no matter how she was impregnated, be said to be pure? This lady later is seen committing murder. Yet she is pure? Therefore, where modern analysts sympathize with her, those of that era never saw anything good in her. Modern analysts do agree with Clare who after seeing that she was said: “You were more sinned against than sinning, that I admit” (n.p.).

Therefore, with this current change in people’s views, there has been produced more positive commentaries for in actual fact, there can be no fault imputed to a lady whose parents have sent on an errand to visit another and supposedly branch of their family. In addition, this serious minded lady is doing her best to help the family economically.

Note should be taken of what happens after the croaking of the cock as recorded above. From the look of things these girls are fickle minded. While Clare was unmarried and with them, they were inwardly being consumed by the love they had for him. Also to be noted is that all the girls in that dairy were affected. To a hard core feminist, is that how the female gender runs after men? This coupled with the age when the work was written must have attracted negative views for the novel. But with changes in society and the work being read in more places than it was at the time it was written, the profile has risen and that is why there are more acceptable analyses now than before.

The influence of the Victorian age on the views about women was much. Apart from feminism which at that time was not well established, there were many expectations of society from women. On this issue, it is on record that:

Women in particular were subject to male authority. Middle-class women especially were expected to marry and make homes a comfortable refuge for their husbands from the male domains of business, politics, and professions. Women who did not marry had few occupations open to them. Working-class women could find jobs as servants in affluent households while unmarried middle-class ladies could become governesses or teachers (Gray and Birninn 793).

Now, the situation has changed with many women being captains of industries, some being single parents and a lot of other examples. What was the trend then can be seen in the only woman entrepreneur --Alec D’Urbervilles’ mother. Her husband made the money and later died. Now, for her to have something doing, she established a poultry farm. But then, she is blind and the place is being managed by her son. Under this situation, while few women who were educated enough to write could see the merit of the novel, the men would either ignore that side of the presentation or will not write much about it seeing that their hitherto secluded domain has been intruded into. They could even produce negative commentaries. The result is that the novelist out of frustration decided to jettison novel writing so as to take up poetry production.

But with changes in social outlook, John Paul Rigueline as cited by Litwin has it that: “Intense energy has gone into feminist interpretations of Hardy including centrally

Tess of the d'Urbervilles. It is unlikely that any other male author writing in English has attracted more attention from feminist critics, a great deal of it thoughtful and positive”(3).Therefore, while there were very few females who aired their views the time the novel was produced, with the rise in feminist activities, a lot has been released. That can account for the rise in the number of critical works.

While noting these changes, Litwin affirms that: “Early twentieth-century critics of *Tess the d'Urbervilles* were correct in noting that Hardy is arguing against the double standard that allows men to have sexual relations outside of marriage but condemns women for doing so, no matter what circumstance” (2).This is part of the Victorian culture which Hardy frowns at but his challenging established norms earned him some frowns from the critics of those days. As a transitory writer between the Victorian age and the modern one, his avant-garde stance nearly cost him the exalted position he enjoys today as a novelist. Therefore with current awareness, more positive critical appraisals of his works are available today.

To show the era's narrow mindedness in male-female relationship, Angel had a relationship with a lady before his marriage. This relationship was not forced on him but was as a result of their mutual understanding and desire. Nobody condemns him. In the same way, Tess had such a relationship and hers was forced on her. But she is receiving everybody's condemnation.

After their marriage, Angel makes a confession.With this, Tess is elated because she thinks that since she has forgiven him, he will forgive her as well:“O Angel -- I am almost glad -- because now you can forgive me! I have not made my confession. I have a confession too -- remember. I said so” (n.p.).Her confession disgusts him to the extent that he wonders whether she is out of her mind. From his behaviour, she begs, “Forgive me as you are forgiven! I forgave you, Angel” (n.p.).

This is what ruptures the marriage. Therefore, while the male sows his wild oats without reprimands, the female should be chaste in all ways no matter the condition. Hardy's stance against this situation affected him then but with modern outlook on life and with more sincerity in social issues, the novel has been receiving positive regards from critics.

But no matter what Hardy underwent initially, today it is to his credit that in this novel,

“Hardy criticizes Victorian England's moral standards for continuing to validate and legitimize this specific type of abuse and all other forms of male domination and gender inequality” (Litwin 13/14).So, with modern stance, his stand then is today lauded by all and sundry --female writers whose interest he defends and male writers who see the truth in his assertion.

Conclusion

The popular novel, Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has not been so regarded as a worthwhile work of fiction. Its manuscript was rejected a number of times by different publishers until it was serialized. What happened was that the Victorian society in which it was produced did not accept the criticisms leveled against it. In the novel, Hardy challenges certain social ills using a girl who descended from a once illustrious family.

At that time, such critical theories like naturalism and feminism had not taken root but were being forced on the people. Hardy then took the two and inserted them into this

novel so as to study the Victorian society where he belonged. However, he did not quite adhere to the requirements of the former theory and for the latter, not many women were outspoken and learned. Then, not many men could see with him for the result of his assertion was vehemently against them.

The result is that even today, some do not see any literary potential in the work because of where he fails in strictly pursuing naturalism. As for the latter one, he uses the heroine to criticize the unwarranted stand of the Victorians that gave sexual liberty to men and denied such to women.

The result is that while some laud the novel, others see it as not being qualified to be a sound tragedy especially those who are on the side of naturalism. However, the profile of the novel has been rising especially when many have seen his stand that in what happens to Tess that he is stating that the:

... human spirit is battered down by the forces not of fate, but of social hierarchy. Tess's eventual death, one of the most famous in literature is a direct result of human cruelty and as such represents one of the most moving indictments of the lives of nineteenth-century English women in all literature (Birdi n.p.). Everybody now is on the side of life-affirming principles and the removal of social ills that subjugate the people. Such has helped to elevate the novel to a very high level in spite of its earlier problems.

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