

The Destruction of a Pure Woman: Reflections on Tess of the d'Urbervilles

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Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a novel by English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. Set in impoverished rural England during the Long Depression of the 1870s, it tells the tragic experiences of Tess, an innocent country girl.

Due to the death of the family's horse and the health problem of her father, Tess, as the eldest child, has to shoulder the responsibility of supporting the large family. Informed by chance that they have noble blood of the d'Urbervilles, her parents insist on Tess's visiting Mrs. d'Urberville, a rich widow, and "claim kin". In reality, Mrs. d'Urberville's husband adopted the surname even though he was unrelated to the real d'Urbervilles. Tess meets Mrs. d'Urberville's libertine son, Alec, who takes a fancy to her and secures her a position on the estate. Late one night after a dinner party, Tess runs into some trouble with the other girls and Alec offers to "rescue" her from the situation. Instead of taking her home, however, he rides through the fog deep into the forest, where he rapes her. Tess returns home, hopeless and ashamed. The following summer, she gives birth to a boy who lives only for a few weeks.

Two years later, Tess finds a job as a milkmaid outside the village, where she meets Angel Clare, the son of a reverend, and they fall in love. Soon they get married. On their wedding day, Angel confesses that he once has a short affair with an older woman, and this makes Tess decide to tell her past to Angel, too. Unexpectedly, Angel cannot tolerate her mistake and goes far away to Brazil, leaving Tess alone. She has to perform hard physical labor to make a living. One winter day, Tess accidentally runs into Alec and the man keeps pursuing her. At this time, Tess's father dies of heart attack and her family's condition is worse than ever. Moreover, Alec keeps telling her that Angel will never come back. Heart-broken Tess has no choice but to be Alec's mistress so that her mother and siblings can live better.

Actually, at this time, Angel is seriously ill in Brazil and begins to repent of what he has done to his wife. When he finally comes back, ill and emaciated, and manages to find his abandoned wife, Tess thinks it is Alec who ruins her happiness again. Extremely angry, she kills Alec with a knife. At last, she spends five sweet days with Angel before being taken away by the police.

Tess is a pure woman who is maltreated by fate, as the author exclaims. Although she fails to live up to the traditional moral standard of women—getting pregnant unmarried and being someone's mistress, her essence of purity never changes.

Born in the vast countryside of Britain, Tess inherits all the wonders of nature. She is beautiful, with "a fine figure" and "dark brown eyes". She is innocent and honest, spotless as snow, understanding no evil in the world. Also, she is hard-working, never complaining about tough physical labor.

It seems everything about her is the best as it can be except that she is born in a poor peasant family. However, she is cornered savagely by the unfair world and finally falls off the cliff. What is it that destroys a pure girl like Tess?

From my point of view, there are altogether three factors contributing to the tragedy.

The first is the general background of the society. In the mid-20th century, the capitalist industrial civilization begins to affect the rural areas of Britain, bringing about unemployment to farmers. As a girl from a peasant family with neither wealth nor social status, Tess has to endure unfair treatment from the capitalist class. When raped by Alec, Tess has to shoulder all the consequences by herself, not daring to prosecute Alec for his criminal behavior. When Angel is away and Alec keeps pursuing her, Tess has no choice but to be Alec's mistress to save her family out of financial difficulties. Once again, she loses her dignity and loyalty to marriage. She sacrifices her body and purity as a woman. She knows it, and her heart bleeds, but she has no choice. If she refuses to compromise, her mother and siblings may die. Before the huge gap of wealth and social status, all she can do is to lower her head in submission.

The second factor leading to Tess's tragedy is the society's deep-rooted moral standard of women. Tess becomes the object of public contempt for becoming an unmarried mother. Her father, clinging to the family name, refuses to fetch the priest to baptize the sick baby. As a result, the innocent baby dies as a victim of the traditional moral code. Even when Tess is determined to start a new life, her humiliating past keeps being an incurable pain impeding her pursuit of happiness. On the night of her wedding day, Tess thinks it a must to confess her past to Angel when he has confessed his. However, as the perfect image of Tess breaks into pieces, Angel cannot face the reality and abandons his heart-broken wife. If Alec ruins Tess physically, then it can be said that Angel hurts her spiritually, which is, in some way, more fatal and extinguishes her last spark of hope.

The third factor is the unfair legal system. Alec represents the evil of human nature and the power of the new capitalist class. He tosses with women and ruins the lifetime welfare of Tess. However, the victim, Tess, has to taste all the bitterness by herself, while Alec continues to live a free happy life. When Tess kills Alec in a rage, what awaits her is death penalty. She revenges on the man who destroys her, at the cost of destroying herself. It shows the partiality of the law in late Victorian England for the higher social status and for male citizens.

To sum up, Tess's tragedy is mainly due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution on farmers, the deep-rooted hypocritical moral standard in the Victorian era, and the unfair legal system at that time. Some people think the weakness in Tess's character is also to blame for her tragedy, but I insist that we can't require a woman to get rid of the chains of the society when its power is completely overwhelming. Tess is the victim of the unfair society, and her tragedy is also that of all the working class women.

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