

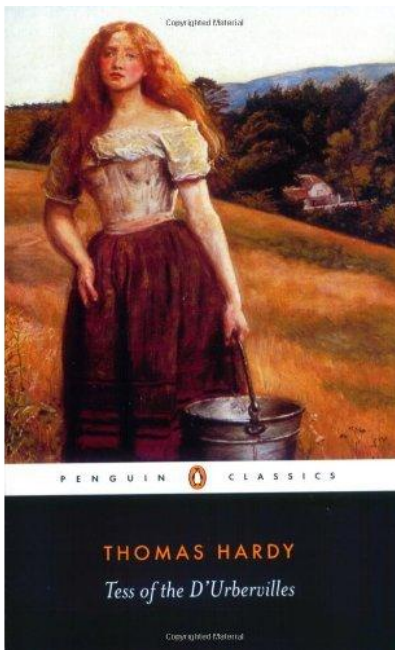
**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 10 : 8 August 2010**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

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**Ignorance -  
A Maiden Spoilsport in Thomas Hardy**

**Tissaa Tony. C., M.A, B.Ed, M.Phil.**

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**Introduction**

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Ignorance - A Maiden Spoilsport in Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* moves the hearts of its readers in India like no other novel in English literature. Prescribed as a non-detailed or detailed textbook for many undergraduate and post-graduate classes, young readers are totally absorbed in reading it. Numerous newspaper reports on the sexual misuse and rape of domestic servant girls certainly make us all relate to this Hardy's story and feel great sympathy for all those who are abused. Written with the background of Victorian age, the novel somewhat depicts the lot of poor girls in current times in India.

Tess is the archetypal anti-heroine. That is, she does not win major battles or influence political decisions; instead, she inhabits her own small world and tries to cope with the fate that life has dealt her. By the end of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, she is a complete, whole character, but the scale of her influence in her own world, Wessex, is small, indeed. Tess is a simple country girl/woman who had a basic education growing up, but had little exposure to the wiles of the world outside Marlott. Her weakness is her innocence; she is unschooled "in the ways of the world" and therefore unable to protect herself. Tess chides her mother for not telling her full truth about a less-than-kind world: "Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk?"

### **Entrapped Ignorance**

Various powers, like those of nature, fate, and men, rule over the heroine of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, her subjection to these powers culminating in the motif of her victimization. The motif of victimized Tess, in turn, through its recurrence and the polysemous usages of nature, demonstrates both the multiplicity and the interrelations of those powers ruling over her.

The Victorian times and attitudes victimize Tess, despite the fact that she possesses high morals and standards. Her family, social, and economic background provide the reader with a perspective of living as a poor woman during the Victorian Era. Another avenue Hardy uses to show the unfairness of life for a poor woman during these times is two men who victimize Tess, Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville.

According to Patricia Strubbs, "It is when he [Hardy] shows men and women shaped or bound in their relationships by external events, by class or environment that Hardy is at his most compelling. He is then showing us what it means to live in a particular time in a particular kind of society" (85).

### **It Was To Be**

Fate plays a predominate role in what happens to Tess. The acknowledgement of the role of fate is summed up by the locals in the small town as "It was to be." Even Tess realizes that she and her family are in a tough spot when Prince, the family horse, is

killed and she must go to the Stoke-d'Urbervilles for financial recovery. Joan, Tess' mother, realizing that her daughter has suffered several devastating blows by Alec says, "Well, we must make the best of it, I suppose." Tess is resigned to accept Alec's proposal near the end of the novel when she tells Angel, "I don't care what he [Alec] did wi' me!" Her own safety and happiness are of no consequence to her. Even when she must atone for murdering Alec, she accepts the inevitable as she is arrested for Alec's death — "It is as it should be." That is, she knows her attempt to avoid prosecution and ultimate death are futile, and she must accept her fate. She does so willingly.

### **Victims of Two Men – A Lesson in Victorian Values**

Hardy uses two men to victimize Tess-Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare. They both profess to love her, even though they hurt her badly and cause her downfall. Even though they seem very dissimilar, in many ways they share commonalities: "The swarty, swashbuckling, brutish, nouveau-riche phoney aristocrat and the delicate, rebellious, skeptical, even squeamish dissenting minister's son turned radical farmer are two halves of Victorian culture that dooms Tess" (Weissman 245). Alec and Angel cause Tess most of the problems she faces. They come from a higher social class, having money even though neither of them earns it. And though they associate with a poor, working class girl, neither of them earns a living from the land. As one critic notes, "In these two characters, Hardy has shown the Victorian nature of both of these men, and a lesson in Victorian values" (Weissman 245).

### **Disillusioned Marriage Dreams**

Tess holds the status as one of the great all-time sympathetic sufferers in literature which she doesn't deserve. It's not because she's perfect, because she isn't (and most certainly not by Victorian standards), but because she's so thoroughly undeserving of her misfortunes. Tess flees Trantridge, pledging violence to Alec in an uncharacteristic manner, which proves that she does not remain complicit with fate and instead promises to be proactive in changing it. At home, she incurs her mother's disappointment, fueling the need to fulfill her familial obligations. Later, she bears her doomed son Sorrow and buries him, against the precepts of the church and proper society.

She is miserably unhappy throughout this period, but her unhappiness seems to stem at least as much from her fall from the grace of society and from her own troubled conscience as from her child's birth and death, which are treated almost tangentially. Tess is sad when he dies, but she seems just as upset when villagers whisper about her in church—she even begins shunning daylight to avoid prying eyes. Tess's early one-sidedness gives way to an identity crisis in which she is torn apart by her hatred of Alec, her guilt toward her family, her shame within society, and her disappointment in herself.

### **Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk?**

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However, we view Tess's struggle with what has happened to her, we are likely to consider her an innocent victim and to be sufficiently impressed with her character that we react with outrage to her unhappy fate. As she asks her mother, "How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me?" Tess sees herself as a victim of her own ignorance. She can claim that she did not know the dangers a man such as Alec d'Urberville posed and that it is not fair that she is made to suffer for succumbing to an unknown danger. When Tess refuses to marry Alec despite the social advantage the match would give her, and refuses his offers of help because she does not sincerely love him, we see her as more than an unwitting victim: her integrity and courage make her heroic.

### **Hardy's Use of Compassion**

Hardy uses comparison throughout the novel to reveal character and theme. The most obvious comparison is between Angel and Alec. The juxtaposition of Angel, who represents the ideal love of Tess, is contrasted with Alec, who represents the sexual possession of Tess. Since neither character is a perfect personification of good or evil, Hardy has both men exhibit both passion and coldness when they interact with Tess. Angel is passionate about Tess and his love for her, while he coolly dismisses her after learning of her torrid past. Alec is at first cool in his treatment of Tess as a possession, a symptom of his class, and then he decides later that he cannot live without her. Hardy's *Tess* is filled with these side-by-side comparisons

Alec and Angel cause Tess most of the problems she faces. They come from a higher social class, having money even though neither of them earns it. And though they associate with a poor, working class girl, neither of them earns a living from the land. As one critic notes, "In these two characters, Hardy has shown the Victorian nature of both of these men, and a lesson in Victorian values" (Weissman 245).

The first man with whom Tess contends is Alec, who victimizes Tess chiefly because of her beauty and poverty. He takes advantage of Tess time and time again, using her economic status to his advantage. In one scene, Tess has gone to the Chaseborough fair with the other workers of the village. Late at night, after a hard day's work, Tess gets into a struggle with one of the women. Alec comes along and rescues Tess from the melee, giving her a ride back to the estate. He asks Tess, "Why haven't you told me when I have made you angry?" Tess replies, "You know very well why. Because I cannot help myself here" (Hardy 83).

### **Exploitation of Poor Labor Women**

Just a short while after this conversation, while still on this ride, Alec takes Tess deep into the woods and rapes her. Alec knows that Tess feels powerless because of her

feelings about her poor family and their dire need for her help, and he knows of Tess's impotence in fighting his despicable treatment of her. In Weissman's words, "Alec wields almost unlimited sexual power over the women who do agricultural labor-the many women like Tess-because he has economic power that is absolutely unconstrained by . . . social bonds . . ." (246).

Phase Second is primarily a transitional period, taking Tess from the scene of her disgrace to the promise of a new life at Talbothays. But it also begins to crystallize some important themes in the novel. We see in the previous section that Tess is fated to tragedy. In this section, we learn about the human instinct that leads Tess to oppose her fate, "the invincible instinct towards self-delight." Tess's healthy desire simply to be happy is perhaps the source of her great courage and moral strength.

### **Doll in the Hands of Destiny**

Tess perceived by Hardy is a sentient, physical being inhabiting a palpably physical world. And her capitulation to Alec, in 'The chase' is the uttermost expression of this physically. She is quite simply exhausted. Hardy leads up to this episode of describing, in detail the hard material fact of life as it is lived, for Tess the miles she goes, the hours she works without sleep. She lacks the moments of repose she is denied.

Feeling wearily, that her companions 'will never leave of' Tess decides she can bear to wait no longer. Alec offers to hire a cab and drive her home but despite pangs of hunger and fatigue, and the lateness of the hour, she had 'never quite got over her original mistrust of him'. So she turns down his offer. Alec departs with the half approving retort : 'very well Miss Independence please yourself ...'

### **Coarse Appropriates Finer Things**

Following an imbroglio with the lusty Car Darch, and her equally lusty compeers, Tess is provoked into a vituperative argument upon 'whorage' which leaves her 'almost ready to faint, so vivid was her sense of the crisis' At this point of time Alec reappears. Tess accepts his offer of escape, gets shot of the screaming cars in a jiffy as he crudely puts it. Alec takes advantage of Tess's weariness. It was not dumb passive yielding but self determined 'votable resistance. This is when the couple find them themselves lost, with Alec's connivance, she is bedded down upon the leaves he has prepared for her and tenderly buttoned into his overcoat for warmth, instantly falls asleep. Sleeping her body is appropriated : 'why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus...

Hardy's word is 'appropriates'. The act is an act of theft, a dishonest appropriation of another's property with the intent to deprive her of it permanently. The term suffices to denote the amoral nature of the act, which passes beyond sexual assault to take account of violation of rightful ownership. It is a fitting emphasis in a novel that stresses a sexual ethic that denies women the right to control not even her body.

## Conclusion

Through the use of Victorian social taboos, the bleak picture of a poor social and economic background, and two Victorian men, Hardy has enabled readers of many different societies and eras to feel a compassion for this girl and to learn something about history. In the words of Peter Casagrande, "Hardy's originality in *Tess* lies precisely in his refusal to adopt constraining norms, whether artistic or theological" (55).

Over a hundred years after the publication of this novel, readers have enjoyed, learned, and been intrigued because of a radical writer who fought against pressure to conform to the Victorian standards through his character - a poor, oppressed woman named Tess Durbeyfield.

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