



## THE FALL OF INNOCENCE: TESS AS A VICTIM OF FATE AND SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the character of Tess in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a tragic figure caught between fate and a rigid Victorian social structure. The study analyzes how Tess's innocence is gradually lost due to societal norms, gender expectations, and the inescapable force of destiny. By examining key moments in her life, the paper sheds light on Hardy's critique of moral hypocrisy and injustice. The article also discusses Tess as a symbol of purity, resistance, and inevitable downfall, offering a deeper understanding of Hardy's social and philosophical worldview.

### KEYWORDS

Tess, Thomas Hardy, fate, Victorian society, gender, tragedy, innocence, social norms, moral criticism, purity.

### INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a time of strict social codes, rigid class divisions, and deeply entrenched gender roles. Society placed a high value on outward appearances, morality, and the preservation of social status. These values significantly influenced how individuals, particularly women, were judged and treated. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy critiques these attitudes through the tragic life of Tess, a young woman caught between societal expectations and her personal truth.

### Gender Roles and the "Fallen Woman"

Victorian gender ideology emphasized the ideal of the "pure woman"—modest, passive, and sexually innocent. Women were expected to conform to strict standards of behavior, and their value was often tied to their sexual purity. Men, by contrast, were allowed more freedom, and their moral lapses were frequently overlooked or even justified.

Tess becomes a victim of this double standard. After being seduced or possibly raped by Alec d'Urberville, society labels her as "fallen," regardless of her will or innocence. Her worth is questioned not because of her character, but because of what has happened to her. This judgment continues when Angel Clare, despite loving Tess, rejects her after learning of her past—demonstrating the societal tendency to idealize and then punish women. The Victorian class system was deeply hierarchical. One's birth determined one's opportunities, and crossing class boundaries was often seen as undesirable or even dangerous. Tess's family, though poor, discovers they may have noble ancestry, leading them to send Tess to the d'Urbervilles in hopes of improving their social status.

Hardy shows how dangerous these class aspirations can be. Tess is exploited by Alec, who represents a corrupt form of inherited wealth and power. Meanwhile, her supposed noble lineage offers no real protection or privilege—only illusions. Through Tess, Hardy critiques the idea that social class reflects moral worth or destiny. Victorian society was outwardly moralistic, but Hardy exposes the hypocrisy behind its values. Tess, a fundamentally good person, is condemned for her victimhood, while Alec (her abuser) and Angel (who fails to forgive her) escape similar judgment.

The moral code is shown to be selective and cruel, especially toward women and the poor. Tess is repeatedly shamed and punished for actions beyond her control, suggesting that Victorian morality was more concerned with appearances than justice or compassion.

### **Tess's Innocence and Early Life**

At the beginning of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess Durbeyfield is portrayed as a symbol of natural purity and rural innocence. She is introduced as a kind-hearted, modest, and beautiful peasant girl who lives a simple life in the village of Marlott. Her connection to nature and her quiet dignity make her stand out from other characters in the novel, and Thomas Hardy carefully crafts her early life to emphasize her vulnerability and moral integrity.

### **A Child of Nature and Simplicity**

Tess's upbringing in a working-class rural family highlights her lack of worldliness and her deep bond with the natural environment. Hardy often describes her using images of pastoral beauty, portraying her as almost one with the landscape. This connection reinforces her status as an innocent figure, untouched by the corruption of urban or aristocratic society.

Hardy writes:

"She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman — a whole sex condensed into one typical form."

This poetic depiction suggests Tess is more than just a character—she is an idealized representation of womanhood, innocence, and purity, which makes her eventual fall even more tragic.

Despite her youth, Tess is forced to shoulder responsibilities far beyond her age. After her father, John Durbeyfield, learns of their supposed noble ancestry, he sends Tess to claim kinship with the wealthy d'Urberville family. Though reluctant, Tess agrees to go, feeling responsible for her family's financial struggles—especially after accidentally causing the death of their horse, Prince.

This sense of guilt and duty drives Tess into a situation that exposes her to danger and manipulation. Her early experiences are marked by external pressures rather than personal choices, underlining her powerlessness in a world dominated by class and gender-based inequalities.

Tess's encounter with Alec d'Urberville marks the beginning of her moral and emotional downfall. Though the nature of the incident is ambiguous (seduction or assault), Hardy makes it clear that Tess is the victim. Her innocence is violated, not through fault of her own, but by the actions of others and the social circumstances that placed her in Alec's path.

From this point on, Tess carries the emotional burden of shame and societal judgment. However, Hardy insists on her moral purity, even if society does not:

"Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern."

This metaphor emphasizes the cruel contrast between Tess's inner purity and the external stains society imposes on her.

### **Society's Role in Her Suffering**

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is not only a personal tragedy but also a scathing critique of Victorian society's harsh moral codes and its deep-rooted gender double standards. Tess's suffering is not simply the result of her individual choices, but of a society that judges women more harshly than men, often punishing victims while excusing perpetrators. Through Tess's experiences, Hardy exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy embedded in Victorian morality.

#### **The Double Standard: Punishment for Tess, Freedom for Alec and Angel**

From the moment Tess is sexually victimized by Alec d'Urberville, she becomes socially condemned. Regardless of whether the incident is read as rape or seduction, Tess is viewed by society as a "fallen woman" — someone whose value is diminished because her sexual purity has been lost. This moral judgment, however, is applied solely to her. Alec, who exploits Tess and bears far more responsibility, faces no societal consequences. He lives freely, continues to manipulate others, and only later seeks religious redemption, which Hardy ironically portrays as shallow and opportunistic.

Similarly, Angel Clare, who claims to love Tess for her purity and intelligence, becomes a symbol of hypocritical morality. When Tess confesses her past to him on their wedding night, Angel cannot reconcile her experience with his idealized image of womanhood. Though he had earlier admitted to a moral lapse of his own, he refuses to forgive Tess — treating her not as a person, but as a symbol of lost virtue. His reaction reveals a deep societal flaw: the assumption that women must be paragons of chastity, while men are allowed repentance and freedom.

#### **The Concept of the "Fallen Woman"**

In Victorian society, a woman's social worth was closely tied to her chastity. Once that was lost — regardless of the circumstances — a woman could be ostracized, shamed, and even disowned. Tess becomes a tragic embodiment of the "fallen woman" trope, not because she has committed any sin, but because she is a victim of male power and societal indifference.

Hardy challenges this construct by repeatedly affirming Tess's moral integrity and emotional strength. He refuses to frame her as immoral; rather, he questions a culture that punishes women for being vulnerable, while allowing men like Alec and Angel to escape accountability.

As the narrator observes:

#### **"The woman pays."**

This brief but powerful statement encapsulates the gender injustice of Tess's world — a reality in which women bear the emotional, social, and moral consequences of actions often beyond their control. Perhaps the most painful betrayal Tess experiences is Angel Clare's rejection. His abandonment is not due to hatred, but to idealism and internalized social prejudice. Although Angel had once rejected the rigid dogmas of his religious upbringing, he ultimately cannot see Tess as a whole, flawed, and human being. He instead clings to a moral ideal that Tess no longer fits, revealing the very hypocrisy Hardy critiques.

Angel's failure to forgive Tess reflects the cultural conditioning of the time — a man's error is a "mistake," a woman's is a "ruin." His delayed realization of Tess's virtue comes too late, underscoring the tragic cost of his—and society's—rigid expectations.

Tess's suffering is intensified not just by fate, but by a society that upholds unjust gender norms and moral hypocrisy. Through Alec and Angel, Hardy illustrates how male privilege operates within a moral framework that condemns the powerless. In making Tess the moral center of the novel — despite her social condemnation — Hardy not only evokes sympathy but also demands a reevaluation of the values that define justice, purity, and human worth.

### **Tess as a Symbol of Resistance and Tragedy**

While Tess Durbeyfield is often viewed as a passive victim of fate and society, Thomas Hardy also portrays her as a complex figure of quiet resistance and profound tragedy. Tess's journey is not only marked by suffering but by moments of inner strength, dignity, and defiance. These qualities elevate her from a mere object of pity to a symbol of resistance against a world that seeks to define and destroy her.

### **Tragic Heroism and Inner Strength**

Tess embodies the classical traits of a tragic heroine: noble in spirit, morally upright, and doomed by forces beyond her control. Yet, she is not completely passive in the face of her fate. Time and again, she displays agency in trying to protect her family, confront injustice, and take control of her own destiny — even if her actions are ultimately constrained by social realities. Her decision to tell Angel Clare the truth about her past, though it risks her happiness, reflects her integrity and courage. Her later choice to confront Alec d'Urberville and reject his renewed advances shows her unwillingness to remain silent or submissive. In killing Alec, Tess commits a desperate act of resistance — not out of cruelty, but from the weight of accumulated oppression and hopelessness. In this moment, she asserts control over the very man who once robbed her of autonomy.

Tess's tragedy is not a result of personal flaws, but of a world built on injustice — a world where women are judged by rigid moral codes, where social class limits freedom, and where male power goes unchallenged. Hardy constructs Tess's downfall as a critique of these forces, not as a moral failure. Her suffering evokes a sense of injustice rather than inevitability, making her death all the more devastating and politically charged. The image of Tess at Stonehenge — lying peacefully, as if she belongs to an ancient, lost world — carries deep symbolic weight. It suggests that Tess is out of place in a society that has no room for her purity, complexity, or resistance. Her execution shortly after symbolizes the final act of society's cruelty: destroying what it cannot understand or forgive. In many ways, Tess transcends her own time and place. She becomes a universal figure representing the plight of the oppressed, the misunderstood, and the morally pure who are condemned by flawed systems. Hardy's subtitle, "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented," stands as a direct challenge to the Victorian idea of moral worth, asserting that true purity lies in character and heart — not in outward appearances or societal approval.

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