

Humanism in Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles

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Abstract

This Research paper examines Thomas Hardy's Humanism in his novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Hardy cuts bitterly at social evils which are not irremediable like natural evils, and lays stress on the need for a sound secular ethics of human responsibility. Douglas Brown rightly observes.

"with so many others, he adhered to firm moral standards and kept his conscience unusually sensitive but without acknowledging any transcendental cause as the ground of moral values. {...} His moral feeling is outraged by the difference of nature to human values. But a profound sense of human responsibility remains."¹

Hence Hardy's position in social ethics may accurately be described as humanism.

Keywords: Tess, moral standards, Humanism, President of the Immortals, ameliorist, determinist, Immanent will.

Introduction

Humanism has been in the centre of every philosophical thinking since the Renaissance in Europe. When Hardy started his literary career as a novelist, scientific developments and Industrial Revolution have forced the British government to bring second reform bill in 1867 for the betterment of human life. Hardy was a stout believer of human beings, so humanism became a centre theme of all his novels.

Hardy's Tess is a landmark in the History of the English Novel. It is a universally acknowledged fact that Hardy is the greatest upholder of human values. A central 'principle' of humanism is that "Man is the measure of all things" and it shows full development of human potentiality.

"Hardy subtitle "A Pure Woman" was an after thought, but several times in a novel, he stresses the essential purity of his heroine - though Tess has "fallen" she should be judged not by this, but by her intentions, her life and nature seen as a whole."²

Tess has universally been regarded as Hardy's masterpiece. It describes the life of a very beautiful girl named Tess. For a long time all goes on well. One day her father John Durbey field hears that he is descended from the noble D'Urbervilles. He begins to dream of high things. His wife Joan thinks that Tess will get a good match. They send Tess to a rich lady, D'Urbervilles with the hope that she will get a good job in her poultry form. But she meets the lady's son Alec D'Urberville who seduced her and makes her pregnant. She returns home unhappy.

After sometime she gives birth to a child. She has to face a lot of difficulties on account of it. She works as a dairy maid on the Talbothay's farm. The child dies. Here she meets Angel Clare, the son of a clergyman. He loves her and both decide to marry. Before the marriage is performed, Tess writes a letter to Angel informing him about her past life. But somehow he does not get that letter. Tess finds it hidden under the carpet of the room. When they are married Angel tells her his secret and asks her if she had any. She also tells him her past life. Angel deserts her. But now her father being dead, she has to face many difficulties. She works at some farms. She is again seduced by Alec and her poverty compels her to surrender herself to a villain whom she does not like. But she longs to see Angel who meets her too late. When he finds her with Alec, he returns sad. She murders Alec and overtakes Angel. The following morning she is arrested and is sentenced to death. In this way a pure woman pays her debt to the social code.

"Tess of the D'Urbervilles" has all the quality of humanism. We find this quality from the beginning to the end. In the first phase:- "THE MAIDEN" we find one of most prominent qualities of human nature : desire,



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to become a rich person. In the very beginning of the novel Jack or John Durbeyfield (father of Tess) meets with a parson named Tringham. The parson tells him that, in the course of his studies of family pedigrees, he had discovered that John Durbeyfield was the lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the D'Urbervilles. As a result of this, he was lost in his dream. When he awakes from his dream, instead of continuing his homeward journey on foot, he sends a boy for a carriage, giving at the same time a shilling.

The heroin of the novel is simple and innocent: she had never before been away from the vale of Black moor. Every counter of this vale was familiar to her like faces of her relative. When she reaches her destination, she meets Alec and Alec at first sight awakes is filled with lust for Tess. Tess is free from such evil inclinations. At first, he makes every effort to fulfill his lust and in this course he once succeeds in kissing her. As a result, tears come into Tess's eyes and she is overcome by the feeling of shame. The second time when she quarrels with women at The Slopes she has to accept Alec's offer. Because of the strain of the quarrel, she becomes drowsy and rests her head on the shoulder of Alec. Alec stops the horse and puts his arms round her in order to support her. But this gesture immediately wakes her up and she gives him a little push. But in the end he seduces her. Hardy asks about Alec's action: "Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer and practically blank as snow as yet"³ Tess's innocence reveals from following words spoken by Tess herself to her mother when her mother suggests her she should have been more cautious. At this Tess replies: - "How could I be expected to know. I was a child when I left house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hand against because they read novels that tell them of this risk: but I never had the chance of learning in that way, and you did not help me."⁵ Further as the novel proceeds, we find another humanistic quality in Tess i.e. hypersensitiveness. Tess's depression of spirits shows her to be a sensitive girl, quite unlike her mother. The glance and whispers of the people at the church on her first visit there, makes it impossible for her to go there again, she tries to find some comfort by roaming so that she might get rid of her sense of guilt. However, Hardy makes the following comment on the way, Tess's mind works: "But all the while, she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism, she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law known to the environment in which the fancied herself such an anomaly".⁶ From this episode we get an insight into the characters of Alec and Tess's mother. Alec is the type of a man who can do anything without any difficulty and trouble. He has no sense of guilt about what does.

Tess's deterministic approach towards life also is a source of humanism in the novel. After she has come to her home, she begins to work in a field. In this course she gives birth to a child. It is very

difficult for her to work with her baby. But she now reconciles herself to her fate and does not need much sympathy, though it was impossible for even an enemy not to feel pity for her as she sat in the field with her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes, she has accepted that "The Past is Past. Whatever it has been, it is no more at hand. Whatever its consequences, time would heal all wounds. But it is her fate that her child suddenly falls ill and seems to die. She knows if he is not baptized, then there would be no salvation. The Vicar refuses to give Christian burial to the dead infant. As a result of this, she herself baptizes her baby. This incident of this chapter arouses in us a deep feeling of pity for the unfortunate Tess and a feeling of protest against institutional religion which on doctrinal grounds declines to offer the comfort that is so badly needed and sought. After the death of her baby, she becomes more reflective than ever before. She sees some prospects of happiness if she can leave her present abode and go to a place where past memories will not haunt her. The following lines of this phase are very significant, "Was once lost always lost really true to chastity? She might prove it wrong if she could veil by-gones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maiden hood alone".⁷

As the story moves forward we find another quality of life or humanism; love between two souls. Hardy also shows love between Angel Clare and Tess. The acquaintance between Tess and Angel has developed into an intimate friendship. Tess's personality acquires a certain splendour in Angel's eyes, especially when he sees her in the morning. This reaction to her is described by Hardy: "It was then that she impressed him the most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid but a visionary essence of woman - a whole sex condensed into a typical form. He called her Artemes, Demeter and other fanciful names, which she did not like because she did not understand them"⁸ Along with this relation we get some characteristic of Angel's character. "He has no worldly ambitions. He is very studious and independent person. He refuses to obey authority of his father. He is a man who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future." He is struck by Tess's freshness of youth and beauty which indicates possible development of relations between the two.

Angel loves Tess with from the core of his heart. As a result he proposes to her for marriage. Tess is, undoubtedly, deeply in love with Clare, but she refuses him due to her sense of guilt. The misfortune of her experience with Alec stands in the way. We can appreciate Tess's reason for her refusal. Being a conscientious girl she does not want to deceive Angel. Under renewed pressure by Angel, Tess eventually says "yes" to his proposal of marriage. As a conscientious girl she wants to tell him the story of her past. She passes an envelope under the door but it slips beneath the carpet and does not reach Angel. Tess supposes that Angel would have read the letter and he had accepted her. After the marriage when Tess confesses the truth the whole situation changes. The effect of Tess's confession on

him is profound. In fact, to some extent, we can understand the dilemma in which he finds himself. It really requires a divine compassion to forgive a woman who has been so unfortunate as to have undergone the tragedy of which Tess was victim. This shows that Tess is very honest towards Angel. It is because of fate that the letter slips under the carpet. If the letter had reached Angel, he would either not have married Tess or would have felt compelled to forgive her if he still wanted to marry her. We also find some fault in the character of Angel who represents that person in a society who was always haunted by its narrow conventions. It is all right to say that Angel is a prig, a snob and hypocrite, but a disclosure of this kind would come to anybody as a terrible shock, a shattering blow, a bolt from the blue. In spite of her sobbing and weeping, the heart of Angel goes to his home. His parents do not express any opposition to his scheme. Though they are greatly surprised at his coming home without his wife. He tells them that Tess has gone to her family and it has not been possible for him to bring her along with him. Hardy finds Angel's attachments to the conventional notion of respectability and virtue, "With all his attempted independence of judgement, this advanced and well meaning young man, a simple product of the last five and twenty years, was yet slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings."

When Tess arrives at her parents' house her mother is surprised to learn what has happened. The mother calls her foul for having disregarded her advice and her mother tells this fact to her husband. To hear this fact he sheds tears. He asks his wife if Angel has married Tess or she has suffered the same fate at his hands which she has suffered at Alec's. When Tess overhears this question she feels very sad. If her own father doubts her, would not the neighbours and other acquaintances doubt her? She feels that she could not live long at home. Tess's mother and father are against humanism because that they are money minded and they press her to fulfill their desires. They think about themselves. As the story of the novel progresses, we find Angel comes to Well bridge farm house to settle his affairs there. There he meets with Izz and Izz tells him about the condition of Retty and Marian his love. Then he asks her if she would go with him to Brazil in view of fact that he has separated from Tess for certain personal reasons. Izz jumped at the offer, but Izz tells him that no woman could love him more than Tess did. So we know that in a moment of weakness or perhaps desperation, he makes the reckless offer of taking Izz to Brazil with him. But he soon realizes that this would be an act of disloyalty to Tess. Angel appreciates Izz's honesty in telling him about his wife's love for him, and thus saving him from an act of treachery'. Further we find that after leaving her home she starts her new job as a dairy maid at Port Bred. But again misfortunes come in her way. She loses her job and it becomes necessary for her to use the money which had been given to her by Angel. But at the same time she receives a letter from her mother asking her for money. Tess sends the required amount of money to her mother to meet her own requirements. She

wonders whether it would be better for her to contact Angel's parents and ask for some money. But sense of delicacy and sense of pride checks her from asking for money from them.

On the way back to her home, she sees a man preaching a sermon in an earnest voice; and this man was no other than Alec D'Urbervilles. Alec recognizes her. As soon as Alec gets away from his audience, he reaches toward Tess and tells her that he has been converted from his wicked life. to a religious and spiritual life by a priest called Mr. Clare (Angel's father). Tess refuses to believe such a transformation in Alec. She scolds him for this hypocrisy. She tells him that she has learned lot of things from her troubles and he could not deceive her again. Before leaving her, he made her swear that she would never tempt him by her charms. Several days have passed since Tess's futile journey to Angel's father. One day Tess happens to be working in the field. Suddenly, Alec appears at the place of her work and says that he wants to talk to her. He blames himself for the misfortunes which Tess has suffered and the hard labour to which she is now subjected for a livelihood. He says that he wants to make amends for his misconduct towards her. His plan is to sell his property and devote himself to missionary work in Africa. In order to do all this he wants to marry her and thus compensate her for a wrong he had done. But Tess feels that she has no interest for him and she has married another man, though she does not disclose her husband's identity.

One day Tess receives the sad news about the circumstances of her family. It was her sister, Liza-Lu who brought the news that Tess's mother and her father are seriously ill. Although it was evening when Liza-Lu brought the news, Tess feels that she should not wait till the morning to set out on her journey homewards. She immediately gets ready to leave for home, directing Liza-Lu to follow her next morning. She has covered a distance of 15 miles the whole night in order to reach her home. When she reaches there, she learns that there is no improvement in her mother's condition, and her father too is not well. Tess has no intention of going back to work, although it is a violation of her agreement with her employer requiring her to stay there till Lady-Day. She starts working in a garden and a small field close to her house. One day she is surprised to see Alec close to her in the field. He has come disguised as a working man. He tells her that he has been thinking about her brothers and sisters and that he would like to do something for them. Tess is in no mood to accept any help from this man and does not respond to his advances. The same day, Tess's father dies. The death is a great loss in more ways than one. It means that the family might have to leave the cottage which they had been occupying under a lease, Tess's father being the last tenant to have held the cottage under a lease. The family now finds itself homeless. Just before the family vacated the house, Alec D'Urberville calls and offer to accommodate the family in his house. Tess declines the offer and says that they have taken rooms and also tells him that she does not want to take any help from him. But another misfortune comes

their way. The rooms which they have booked have already been given away to somebody else. In her distress John Durbeyfield said to Tess : "O, Tess what's the use of your playing at marrying gentleman if it leaves us like this".

Tess at last enjoys the happiness that she had been yearning for but this happiness proves short lived. The way the gods have treated Tess justifies her in saying that even his brief happiness has been too long. The stoical manner in which Tess accepts the fate which now overtakes her is remarkable. She shows no sign of fear; she does not scream or shriek, she does not become hysterical when she is about to be taken into custody, she quietly says, "I am ready".⁹

Now this is the highest spiritual development of Tess and she is ready to be hanged. The consistency with which misfortune dodges Tess throughout her life are suitable for her fate. The tragedy of Tess's life is now complete. At last the moment came when she was hanged. The president of immortals had done justice and had ended his sport with her.

The accidents and situations in the novel evolved a human quality in Tess. Hardy's original portrayal of Tess shows more physical familiarity between Tess and Alec before her loss of virginity in the chase. Hardy's own tendency towards partnership as well as his emphasis on Tess' victimization, increased in the later stages of the manuscript. These changes are no doubt linked to the difficulties, Hardy encountered in trying to find a publisher for the novel for periodical publication. Hardy was half able to suggest that Tess was more a passive victim of male aggression and idealization than an active participant in her own disastrous fate. Mary Jacobus argues that Hardy's original vision of Tess was falsified by the revisions, if Tess is simply a victim, then neither her sexuality nor her moral position in the novel is interesting.

As Tess is innocent and simple, she blames herself for the disaster. This feeling of guilt had transformed very much the very being of Tess's personality and had changed her universe of consciousness. This suffering and feeling of sin made her more human and deep in touch with human values. That is why she told Abraham that they live on a blighted planet - thus suggesting that they are not answerable for what happens to them - she then sees the mail cart accident as entirely her fault. This suggests a purely subjective view of external events. What the novel demonstrates of course is that neither view offers a full account of the complications of human experience, but external and personal responsibility converges in the life of Tess Durbeyfield.

Thus we see her early freedom and independence are stressed, as in her innocence and her delicacy of feeling which in part causes her tragedy. If she had been ready to echo her mother's superstitious acceptance she might have been content, if not happy, but Tess is proud. She will never beg either money or sympathy, and thus her final broken helplessness and yielding to Alec D'Urberville are made more poignant. The characters who surround her - her father and mother and the dairy

maids at Talbothays - all recognize in her someone of finer, and hence more fragile clay than themselves. Hardy does not really show us how she acquired it but her dignity and fiery temper (inherited from the D'Urbervilles) are made clear when she first rebuffs Alec. Her beauty, her flower-like mouth and large tender eyes are equally impressive in character, since she then will use them to help herself. Hardy points out that there is a vein of recklessness in her as well. She is complex, yet in all the long heart-rending scenes which follow the confession, Hardy never blames Tess. Her farewell to Angel is only a compromise with the conditions. She agrees to the conditions because she knows best what her punishment ought to be. It has been thought that here and elsewhere she is too long suffering, but we must remember that immediately afterwards Hardy says, "Pride to enter into her submission". Indeed, while she keeps this pride, and this humility, she remains Tess, essentially untouchable by Fate. In the whole book, there is nothing more moving than the scene where Tess puts the tormented game birds out of their misery and says, "poor darlings - to suppose myself the most miserable beings on earth in the sight of such misery as yours! And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and not bleeding and I have two hands to feed and clothe me". This is the "impulse of a soul who could feed for kindred sufferers as much for herself", and this remains our final impression of her when she says, as she wakes up at Stonehenge, "This happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough and now I shall not live for you to despise me!" She stood up, shook herself and went forward, neither of the men having moved. "I am ready", she said quietly. She is happy with the little happiness she has at last snatched, we are anguished at her having had so little. No wonder Hardy was betrayed into saying, "Her speech will never be forgotten by those who knew her", it seems that Tess had become real to him. She is certainly more real to us than many people whom we know.

Tess, it should be remembered, is not faultless. And here is the essence of Hardy's genius in creating Tess. He made her a kind of saint and martyr, but a flawed saint, not a wax effigy of virtue. He describes Tess as one who, "sought not her own, thought no evil..... and might have been apostolic charity herself". Yet with withering irony she is made a martyr to religion, the religion of convention, to which Angel for all his free thinking is slave.

And thus we see that the characteristic pattern of Tess's life is movement between extremes of despair and joy. And this suffering of despair and joy transformed her into a kind of saint and martyr - full of feelings and emotions and deep understanding of human beings.

Hardy has variously been called a fatalist, a determinist, a pessimist, a meliorist, and so on. A pessimist though he is in so far as he concentrates on the dark side of human life to the exclusion of its bright and cheering aspects, no single formula covers all his novels so far as the cause of human suffering is concerned. Character, society, nature, chance and coincidence - all these are responsible for the human

tragedy but the degree of responsibility of each varies from novel to novel.

Tess is a pure woman, admittedly, but this is not the feminine counterpart to Henchard's "A Man of Character". It is not Tess's sexual misadventures which impugn her as a woman of character, and Hardy is indeed at pains to show, in the later part of the book when she resists the now twice reprobate Alec, that she is comparatively faithful and steadfast. But she has a weakness nearer her centre; an alienation, a dreaminess which Hardy depicts unsuccessfully in the ride at night when she tells her younger brother that we live on a blighted planet, and which he depicts again, this time with brilliant success at Talbothay's dairy when she tells dairyman Crik how "our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive".¹⁰

Hardy's final comment in the novel has become famous. "Justice" was done, and the President of the immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.¹¹

This comment is not to be taken lightly or as a mere outburst of anger. It should be regarded as summing up of Hardy's philosophy of life, at least as far as it concerns this novel. Hardy has put the word "justice" within inverted commas, thus implying that it was justice not in any absolute or ideal sense but justice as demanded by a man-made law which condemns a murderer to death. But apart from that, Hardy here insists that fate or destiny had wilfully been persecuting Tess throughout her brief life and that now in her death the culmination of the persecution has been reached. Hardy, in clear and unambiguous terms, here clinches his indictment of the gods who preside over the destiny of human

beings. In his preface to the novel, Hardy appropriately quotes the following lines from Shakespeare's King Lear to support his fling at the President of immortals.

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport.¹²

Aim of the Study

In this paper I have explored many facets of Hardy's Humanism in his novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

Conclusion

To sum up we may conclude that Tess is the moral centre of the Hardy's tale. She acts in a natural, humanistic way to what occurs in her life and struggles against what Hardy termed the Immanent will, and indeterminate destiny.

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