CHAPTER V

HARDY'S TREATMENT OF TRAGEDY
IN
TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

When *Tess* was published in 1891, the critic of *The Times* described it as Hardy's greatest work, "daring in its treatment of conventional ideas, pathetic in its sadness, and profoundly stirring in its tragic power".¹

In *Tess*, critics have found a likeness to Greek tragedies and the quotation from Aeschylus at the end of the novel has confirmed this view.²

The spirit of Tess' persecution by a relentless fate, of the condemnation of that persecutor, and the plea for a

² "Justice was done," and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess." *Thomas Hardy: Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, New American Library, 1964, p. 419.

All further page references will be to this book.
new understanding of moral laws through the great emancipator, the human intellect, all recall the early Greek dramatist who dared to question without fear the scheme of things. Aristotle said of the *Prometheus Vinctus* that "out of little myths and ridiculous language" Aeschylus had created high tragedy. Out of local gossip and sometimes in dialect speech, Hardy has made a masterpiece.

Hardy disliked the title of pessimist, and *Tess*, while tragic in tone and bleak in atmosphere, is not completely fatalistic; a strong impression of human possibility remains. Like the ballad world, it may suggest fate and doom, but it also suggests the strength of unyielding human endeavour.

II

The plot of *Tess* is direct and simple, even "a paltry thing"\(^3\), as Irving Howe calls it. Nevertheless, it provides a framework for the manifestation of Tess' character and her steady growth, which are the real life of the novel. In its stark simplicity and steadily accumulating cruelties of fate, it suggests the bleak impersonal world of folk ballads, with which Hardy obviously wishes it to have affinities.

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3 Irving Howe: *Thomas Hardy*, p.112.
In *Tess*, Hardy uses simplicity of plotting for complex purposes; to suggest both fate and affirmation, the dual movement of pain and pleasure which Hardy saw as the movement of life itself.

The action is presented in four phases (though Hardy divides Tess' life into seven) each of which has its distinctive narrative momentum and points of crisis. The first represents the accumulating concerns that persuade Tess to undertake her mission to Trantridge and seek employment from the spurious D'Urberville family, despite her misgivings about Alec. This phase ends with the difficulties that lead to her seduction. At this point, Hardy begins another narrative rhythm, exhibiting the recovery of Tess' youthful spirits as they bounce back from the guilt which she falsely thrusts upon a natural incident. Her recovery at Talbothays and the burgeoning of her love for Angel Clare are given a narrative drive by her difficulties in attempting to tell him of her seduction by Alec. This phase culminates in her confession and the disastrous separation to which it leads. The third phase concentrates on her attempts to endure, while waiting for Angel to come back to her, and on her growing desperation as Alec once more hovers around her. In this phase, the family tragedy takes place and impels her to become Alec's mistress. The last section brings Angel back to her, and ends with the murder of Alec, the strange and wonderful idyll in the deserted house and the final capture of
Tess at Stonehenge.

This brief outline does not do justice to the infinite variety of Tess' character. For the story of Tess is the story of a woman, "an almost standard woman" (p.106), as Hardy calls her. Tess is a woman made real through the craft of art, a woman pulsating with life; one's sense of this novel is one's sense of her.

"She dances on the green with the maidens. She is raped in the wood at sixteen. She buries her child in secret. She milks a cow named Dumpling. She hack turnips on a barren farm, she hides at night among dying birds, she longs to be dead with her ancestors. She stabs a man. She hides in an old house with her lover. She wakes to a circle of police, to a noose in the morning."

III

A ballad strain runs through this tragic novel.

"Tess of the D'Urbervilles, whatever else she may be, is ........ the deserted maiden who finally murders her seducer with a

knife in the effective ballad way. And she, with the
love-stricken trio — Marian, Hetty and Izz — is a milkmaid;
and milkmaids, in balladry, folk song and folk tale, are
somehow peculiarly subject to seduction."

This is the art of the ballad writer: the beautiful
village maiden seduced in the green wood, who rallies to find
her true love; only to be rejected by him when he discovers
her "past" and brought to a tragic end. As in *The Mayor*,
Tess' tragedy hinges on a secret revealed.

Both the club walking scene and the final scene at
Stonehenge belong to the ballad world.

"The forests have departed, but some old customs of
their shades remain. Many, however, linger, only in metamor-
phosed or disguised form. The May Day dance, for instance, was
to be discerned on the afternoon under notice in the guise of
the club-revel, or 'club walking', as it was there called"
(p. 23).

It is at this May Day dance that Tess and Angel encounter
each other, neither knowing how their two lives would get so

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5 Donald Davidson: "The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's
Fiction", from *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays*,
*Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. by A.J. Guerard,
p.17.
seriously entangled. For Angel is a stranger intruding on the revelry of the balladic world⁶: "Angel emerged at the very beginning of the book as an incongruous and threatening factor in the rural scene: he and his brothers, upper class townfolk discussing modern theology, have disturbed the village fertility rites in which Tess is artlessly involved .⁷

The final scene in the book, Tess' arrest at Stonehenge, belongs to the ballad world of the novel. It has the stark and visual stylization which would provide a fittingly dramatic conclusion to a tragic ballet. The quiet sleeping figure on the altar-tomb, the bowed, protective form of the lover and the dawn gradually coming up behind the Sun-Stone to reveal the encircling arm of the law: "The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-Stone beyond them, and the Stone of Sacrifice midway ....... He went to the Stone and bent over her,

⁶ Cf. Troy and Fitzpiera.
holding one poor little hand; her breathing now was quick and small like that of a lesser creature than a woman. All waited in the growing light, their faces, and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stone glistening green grey, the plain still a mass of shade” (pp. 416-17).

At the heart of the novel is the ballad world, when Tess returns from a day in the fields after her tragic encounter with Alec, “her female companions sang songs ...... they could not refrain from mischievously throwing in a few verses of the ballad about the maid who went to the merry green and came back a changed state” (p. 103).

That is the world—the maid, the seducer and the true lover. It is primal in form and content. More exactly, it is the world of an extinct noble family, with its sinister legend of a mysterious coach. Tess mistakes it for her wedding coach, and she imagines she hears it again when Alec walks back into her life. There are the three forlorn milkmaids at the Dairy; the rose given to Tess by Alec, which later pricks her so that “steeped in fancies and profigurative superstitions, she thought this an ill omen” (p. 56). Her mother consults The Complete Fortune Teller, which has to be removed from the house at night; when Angel and Tess drive off for their honeymoon, a cock crows, and it is the middle of the afternoon; when a
dairyman tells a story it is about a bull chasing a man until, finally overcome by his playing of Christmas music, it falls to its knees and the man makes his escape; as Tess contemplates her wedding gown, "There came into her head the ballad of the mystic robe, 'That never would become that wife/That had once done amiss.' Suppose this robe should betray her by changing colour, as her robe had betrayed Queen Guinevere" (p. 224). When Alec meets her again he makes her swear over a strange stone pillar that she will never tempt him again. He departs and she hears the pillar is a thing of ill-omen put up by the relations of a man who was hanged. At the end of her tether, oppressed by her work and by Alec, she begins to learn, in the man hope of Angel's return, the ballad that he liked, "the simple, silly words of the songs resounding in painful mockery of the heart of the singer" of (p. 363). Even her murder/Alec with the knife belongs to the ballad world. As Dorothy Van Ghent says: "Her stabbing of Alec is her heroic return ..... into the folk fold ..... Her gesture is the traditional gesture of revenge of instinct by which she joins an innumerable company of folk heroines who stabbed and were hanged".

This primal world of love and grief, of omen and song, forms the centre of the novel. Tess belongs to it entirely.

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and, like all ballad heroines, she is fundamentally changeless.

IV

Tessa can be considered either as a personal tragedy or a social tragedy.9 We do not know what exactly Hardy's intentions were, but the fact that there is an immediate insistence on historical processes at work10 and the effect of industrial revolution on the rural folk, it makes it probable that Hardy meant it to be a social tragedy, even an industrial tragedy.11

9 Arnold Kettle in his study on Tessa says: "It is a novel with a thesis—a Roman'a these—and the thesis is true. The thesis is that in the course of the nineteenth century the disintegration of the peasantry—a process which had its roots in the past—had reached its tragic state. With the extension of capitalist farming the old yeoman class of small holders or peasants, with their traditions of independence and their own native culture, was bound to disappear. The developing forces of history were too strong for them and their way of life. And because that way of life had been proud and deeprooted its destruction was necessarily painful and tragic. Tessa is the story and symbol of that destruction". Arnold Kettle: An Introduction to the English Novel, Vol. 2, London, 1957, p.49.

10 The landscape in the second chapter is described and given significance almost wholly in terms of history: "The district is of historic, no less than of topographical interest. The vale was known in former times as the Forest of White Hart from a curious legend of King Henry III's reign in which the killing by a certain Thomas la Lynd of a beautiful white hart which the King had run down and spared was made the occasion of a heavy fine. In those days, and till
The social nature of Tess' tragedy and her status as representative of a class caught up in an economic process that she cannot control or fully comprehend becomes clearer and clearer in the later stages of the novel. The Flintcomb Ash episode is followed by the death of Jack Durbeyfield and the enforced migration of Tess' family, who become literally vagrants, sleeping in the open air in the shade of Kingsbere Church. Once again it is her inability to see her way comparatively recent times the country was densely wooded. Even now, traces of its earlier condition are to be found in the old oak copses and irregular belts of timber that yet survive upon its slopes and the hollow-trunked trees that shade so many of its pastures" (p. 23).

II The effect of the industrial revolution on the rural folk is nowhere more explicit than in the threshing scene. The machine is importunate, inhuman, insatiable. The old workmen recall with nostalgia the slow threshing on the barn floor; the machine man is different: "He was in the agricultural world but not of it. He served fire and smoke ..... " (p. 344). He and his machine are like Alec D'Urberville, in fact, who on this day is equally importunate, inhuman and insatiable. Hardy makes the comparison explicit: after Alec has persisted once more in telling Tess that he will master her again: "...... Tess resumed her position by the buzzing drum as one in a dream, untying sheaf after sheaf in endless succession" (p. 351). The machine is as repetitious as Alec and as powerful. And Alec D'Urberville is equally a creature of industrialism, son of a rich but landless tradesman who usurped a landed name and symbolically expropriated both the old upper class (true D'Urbervilles) and the old yeomanry (the Durbeyfields) in the shape of the same family.
out of a very specific, material situation that sends Tess back to a second time to Alec D'Urberville. Hardy is quite explicit about the Durbeyfields' predicament: they pack up their belongings and convey themselves "whither no hirer waited" (p. 381). But one hirer is waiting, Alec is there to take his chance and to point out the moral: 'The old order changeth', "The little finger of the shan d'Urberville can do more for you than the whole dynasty of the real underneath" (p. 385). In the new order relationships are determined by money alone.

But to consider Tess' tragedy merely as a social tragedy is to take a very limited view. Arnold Kettle himself has admitted that his treatment of Tess in his Introduction to the English Novel, Vol. II, is "somewhat one-sided". And Ian Gregor says: "When Mr. Arnold Kettle, beginning his essay on Tess, writes: 'The subject ...... stated clearly by Hardy to be the fate of a pure woman: in fact it is the destruction of English peasantry', he slants his analysis in a way from which it never recovers." 13

To treat *Tess* merely as a social tragedy is to lose sight of the infinite variety of the character of Tess.

With her cheeks "as smoothly chill as the skin of mush-rooms" and with "the stopt diapason note which her voice acquired when her heart was in the speech" (p. 193), Tess is continually before the reader as a living presence. She/the heart of the novel, giving it all the life it has, and that life remains a personal life; it does not transform itself into symbolic terms so that she becomes "the agricultural community in its moment of ruin".  

If an enlargement of the character takes place, it is to increase the force of the character, not to point out its significance.

For, in *Tess* Hardy has portrayed a very complex character—a character with contradictory qualities: on the one hand are her simplicity and purity, on the other, her self-destroying impulses. As Evelyn Hardy has pointed out: "This is the true tragedy of *Tess Durbeyfield*—not a girl's loss of virginity.

or even a woman's murder of a man when goaded past endurance .... Tess was not only the victim of fate, Circumstance, a malign progenitor, of shiftless, cowardly or bestial people, she was also the victim of her own strong sensuality and of an insidious need to immolate herself under the deceptive guise of benefiting others.15

As a personal tragedy, Tess' tragedy is the tragedy of a strongly sexed woman who meets the wrong man at the wrong time. At the beginning of the novel she does meet Angel Clare, who would have been the right man at a time when Tess was still a maiden. But at the May-day dance Angel takes no notice of her and dances with some other girl.

Tess at sixteen has a "luxuriance of growth" which one of her mother's friends considers dangerous: "'Tess is a fine figure o' fun, as I said to myself to-day when I read her vamping round parish with the rest,' observed one of the elderly boozers in an undertone. 'But Joan Burburyfield must mind that she don't get green malt in floor.' It was a local phrase which had a peculiar meaning, and there was no reply * (p.38).

The irony is that she does get "green malt in the floor". After the horse, Prince, John Burburyfield's only means of livelihood, is killed through Tess' negligence,16 Tess is

15 Evelyn Hardy; Thomas Hardy : A Critical Biography, p.234.
16 Tess' mood of self-reproach is evident here. She regards "herself in the light of a murderess" (p.46).
persuaded by her mother to go to Trantridge to claim kin with the Stock d'Urbervilles. As Arnold Kettle has pointed out: "From this visit (itself an attempt to solve the Durbeyfields' economic problems) the whole tragedy derives."

Here at Trantridge she meets the wrong man, Alec D'Urberville (a figure almost out of Victorian melodrama), the moustache-twirling bounder who refers to Tess as 'My Beauty!'. Tess tries her best not to give into his guiles, but after a night in the woods she is a maiden no more: "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 as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order" (p. 89).

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18 In the passage quoted Hardy appears to suggest that Tess' predicament is due to some force outside her control, call it fate or destiny, what you will, but a careful examination of the novel shows that Tess is as much responsible for her tragic predicament as fate. Or, we may say, Tess' tragedy hinges as much on weakness of character as on external determinants.
Rape is too strong a word for what happens in the Chase. In chapter 12 we find that "temporarily blinded by Alec's ardent manners" Tess "had been stirred to a confused surrender awhile" (pp. 97-98). In other words, Tess is not merely a victim of Alec's lust, she is partly responsible for what happens to her. Her seduction in the woods is an illustration of the balladic strain in the novel. It is a consummation of the hint given in the lullaby:

"'I saw her lie do'—own in yon'—der green gro'—ove Come, love 'I and I'll tell you where!" (p. 30).

Albert Guerard in his study on Thomas Hardy's Novels and Stories has prepared a table to show where Tess stands in relation to other women in Hardy's novels and stories. In a queer way she seems to have kinship with such strongly-sexed women as Arabella Donn and Suke Damson. 19

It is significant that it is Tess' physical beauty that has all the attraction for Angel, apparently an emancipated Victorian: "How very lovable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it; all was real vitality, real warmth, real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before, and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat

19 A.J. Guerard: Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories, p. 141.
almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening. He had never before seen a woman's lips and teeth which forced upon his mind with such persistent iteration the old Elizabethan simile of roses filled with snow, perfect, he, as a lover, might have called them off-hand. But no—they were not perfect. And it was the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which gave the humanity." (p. 166).

The way Angel deserts Tess after her confession would tend to show that for all his emancipated ideas Angel is a prig and a snob—"a young man without any fire in him". It is also significant that here in this passage "it is the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect" that Angel extols but when he learns that there is literally a touch of the imperfect on Tess, he immediately deserts her. As Donald Hall says: "It is unfortunate that Angel Clare who found the imperfections of Tess' mouth made it perfect, should not have profited by the discovery". 20

20 Donald Hall: "Afterword" to the Signet edition of Tess, p. 430.
That there is a streak of sensuality in Tess' character is further evident after Alec has come into her life a second time. When at Flintcomb Ash farm Alec asks her to leave that mule she calls her husband, Tess "without the slightest warning passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face." (p 330).

About this incident Evelyn Hardy says: ".....she is not merely protecting the honour of her husband, whom Alec has insulted, she is giving expression to a fury which precedes her collapse before her insidious torturer". 21 For, as she sees blood oozing out of Alec's mouth she sinks down: "Now punish me! " she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck. 'Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the risk! I shall not cry out, once victim, always victim — that's the law!' " (p. 331). 22

Desmond Hawkins seems to have interpreted this cry rightly when he says: "This is a very remarkable speech .......It is the cry of a passionate woman ...... to her demon lover ......". 23

21 Evelyn Hardy: Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography, p 231.
22 In an interesting article in NCF, 1963, titled "Psychic Evolution: Darwinism and Initiation in Tess", Elliot B. Gosse, Jr. says, "Although Tess says that once victim always victim is the law (of nature), she has actually taken the first step towards denying the dominance Alec gained when he sealed their relation with her blood" (p. 267).
23 Desmond Hawkins: Thomas Hardy, Arthur Barker, 1951, p. 82.
When Angel does not return even after she has written a passionate letter (brimful of poetry) to him, Tess is more and more filled with the conviction that in a physical sense Alec alone is her husband: "It was not her husband (referring to Alec) she had said, yet a consciousness that in a physical sense this man alone was her husband, seemed to weigh on her more and more." 24(p.378).

Her final surrender to Alec is also symptomatic of her strong sensuality as much as of her economic distress; death of her father and the destitution of the family. Her life with Alec while materially good is sensual, soulless. When Angel meets her again at the pleasure city of Sandbourne he has "a vague consciousness of one thing, though it was not clear to him till later, that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers — allowing it to drift like a corpse upon the current in a direction dissociated from its living will" (p.400).

Angel's return makes the murder of Alec inevitable. Alec has subdued her pride and will and immersed them in luxury, but upon her meeting Angel again, that will comes to life.

24 The trouble with Tess is that she is shackled by the Victorian attitude towards physical chastity. She considers Alec her husband, purely in a physical sense, because it is he who has violated that chastity. Here she stands as antipodal to Becky Sharp.
She stabs Alec to sever finally the blood bond between them. Murder is the only way left to her and to do it she has to regress as far down the human scale as Alec had done in the Chase. Tess in Angel’s company reaches Stonehenge which is “older than the Turbervilles”. She is taken away by policemen who had surrounded her while she slept.

But Tess’ failure to resolve her chastity is not the only cause of her tragedy; there are her self-destroying impulses as well. 25

When Tess attempts to make Angel prefer the other dairymaids to herself, Hardy openly calls it “self-immolation” (p. 156).

When Angel tells her that he is going abroad and that she must not follow him, Tess’ pride forbids her to cry out; “Her mood of long suffering made his way easy for him, and she herself was his best advocate” (p. 271).

Like Eustacia, Tess prides herself that she is not a “crying sort of animal”. Suffering is endured by Hardy’s character, passively with resignation. Those who contend with it, like Michael Henchard, only destroy themselves. Yet passivity and inaction can sometimes be as destructive as action (Cf. Hamlet), and Hardy hints at this when he says that had Tess

25 This is true of almost all Hardyan tragic protagonists: Henchard, Clym, Jude, Sue, Giles.
pleaded with Angel "in that lonely lane ...... he would probably not have withstood her" (p. 271).

About Tess' passivity Evelyn Hardy says: "Her 'passive responsiveness' to all that Angel suggests, her mute obedience to his wishes which prevents her repeated attempts to be honest with him, imply the longing of a passionate woman to be possessed by a more powerful mate."

Then Alec woos her beside the ancestral tomb she melodramatically wonders why she is not on the other side of the vault.

This, then, is the tragedy of Tess: She is not only a victim of society, but a human being caught in the ebb and flow of history, environment and self.

VI

Arnold Kettle has this objection to treating *Tess* as a personal tragedy:

"If we read the novel as a personal tragedy, the individual history of Tess Durbeyfield, a great deal

strikes us as extremely unsatisfactory.

"In the first place there is Hardy's flouting of normal probability in his insistence on a series of most unlucky chances. In *Tess* the most notable of these chances are the episode in which Tess' written confession, pushed under Angel's door, goes under the carpet and the moment when Tess, having walked from Flintcomb Ash to Emminster, overhears Angel's brothers talking about her and has not the heart to visit her parents-in-law. If either of these chance happenings had not occurred, all might easily have been saved."  

But it must not be forgotten that chance happening is an integral part of Hardyan tragedy. The narrative system of the book is a series of accidents and coincidences, although it is important to note that the really great crises — Alec's seduction of Tess, Clare's rejection of her and the murder of Alec — are psychologically motivated. As Dorothy Van Ghent has observed: "In the accidentalism of Hardy's universe we can recognize the profound truth of the darkness in which life is cast, darkness both within the soul and without. The accidentalism and coincidentalism in the narrative pattern of the book stand in perfectly orderly correlation with the

grounding mystery of the physically concrete and the natural. 28

The mislaid letter is almost always pointed to as a major instance of Hardy's overworking of coincidence. Is there actually anything unusual in the fact that a letter pushed under a door, goes under the carpet? The circumstance of the mislaid letter, to my mind, does not have such a determinative influence on the plot as Tess' second meeting with Alec D'Urberville and that too in the garb of a Revivalist preacher. This is perhaps the most improbable coincidence in the novel. Similarly, though it is a matter of chance that Angel's parents are not at home when Tess reaches the Vicarage, it is her sensitiveness that makes her run away from the place when she hears Angel's brothers criticizing her and her walking boots: "Thereupon our heroine resumed her walk. Tears, blinding tears, were running down her face. She knew that it was all sentiment, all baseless impressibility which had caused her to read the scene as her own condemnation. Nevertheless she could not get over it; she could not contravene in her own defenceless person all these untoward omens" (p. 319).

It is also wrong to dismiss the killing of Prince as an accident. For Tess' negligence in falling asleep is partly responsible for this, and Tess herself is only too aware of it: "'Tis all my doing— all mine!" The girl cried, gazing at the spectacle...... it was a relief to her tongue to find from the faces of her parents that they already knew of their loss, though this did not lessen the self-reproach which she continued to heap upon herself for her negligence...... Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself\((p.45)\).

VII

As a classical tragedy Tess arouses the emotions of pity and fear.

With every stroke of chance in Tess we are face to face with terror, we realise that all the endeavours of Tess to carve out a decent life are futile. The entrance of Alec into her life is one of those moments where destiny spreads its net for Tess: ".......Tess Durbeyfield did not divine, as she innocently looked down at the roses in her bosom that there behind the blue narcotic haze was potentially the 'tragic mischief' of her drama —one who stood fair to be the blood-red
ray in the spectrum of her young life ...... Thus the thing began. Had she perceived this meeting's import, she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects ........" (p.54). As she sleeps soundly in the Chase after a tiring day, we know that in her sleep she is not half as secure as the birds and beasts of the forest. For, very soon "a coarse pattern" is going to be traced on that "beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer and practically blank as snow"(p.89). From that moment Tess is indeed trapped — "an immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm" (p.89).

This sleep in the Chase where the tragedy begins takes us forward to the sleep at Stonehenge where the tragedy has its culmination. And it is here in her calm resignation to her fate that Tess rises above her destiny:

"'What is it, Angel?' she said, starting up. 'Have they come for me?"

'Yes, dearest,' he said 'They have come,'  

'If is as it should be,' she murmured. 'Angel, I am almost glad — yes, glad! 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" (p.417).

Throughout the novel Tess has been presented as a victim, a victim of her own strong sensuality, and self-destroying impulses, a victim of Alec's lust, a victim of social pressures, a victim of Angel's prudery, and also a victim of a relentless force, call it fate or destiny, as we will. It is significant that at Stonehenge she sleeps on a piece of stone that suggests a sacrificial altar.

The pity of Tess lies in the fact that she is too delicate an instrument to carve crude life into satisfactory shape. It was because of her sensitivity, sensuality and her insidious need to immolate herself that she was brought to her ruin, not because she once half-wittingly committed a crime.

She committed her crime and came to her miserable end because even when the bitter compromise had been forced on her i.e. her final surrender to Alec, the bright flame of her light

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29 This is an example of that "tragic acceptance" discussed in the first chapter, an instance of the fact that the proud heart can subdue the hardest fate in submitting to it.
desiring spirit—flickered up at the appropriate call i.e. when Angel comes for her ill and penitent. Had she been as lumpish, as thickskinned, and as sensible as her mother, she would have found no difficulty in adjusting herself and would have avoided the physical fatigues and moral agonies she set herself to go through.

Tess gives us an impression that something fine has been broken, specially in the following passage:

"It would have melted the heart of a stone to hear her singing these ditties whenever she worked apart from the rest of the girls in this cold dry time; the tears running down her cheeks all the while at the thought that perhaps he would not, after all, come to hear her, and the simple silly words of the songs resounding in painful mockery of the aching heart of the singer" (p. 363).

Tess, at the end of her tether, accusing Alec of the way he has "torn her life all to pieces," (p. 402) arouses our emotion of pity:

"I... Oh, you have torn my life all to pieces—made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again! .... My own true husband will never, never—oh, God—I can't bear this! I cannot! " *(p. 402).*
Thus Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the landscape; a field-woman pure and simple, in winter guise; a grey serge cape, a red woollen cravat, a stuff skirt covered by a whitey-brown rough wrapper, and buff-leather gloves. Every thread of that old attire has become faded and thin under the stroke of raindrops, the burn of sunbeams, and the stress of winds. There is no sign of young passion in her now:

The maiden’s mouth is cold

. . . . .

Fold over simple fold
Binding her head.

Inside this exterior, over which the eye might have roved as over a thing scarcely percipient, almost inorganic, there was the record of a pulsing life which had learnt too well, for its years, of the dust and ashes of things, of the cruelty of lust and the fragility of love" (p. 298).

Tess’ tragedy is linked up with nature—the smiles and tears of Tess have their appropriate background in nature. At 30 Tess is the "white moth steered" towards the spider by the "Design of Darkness" as Frost would have said. Louis Untermeyer: A Pocket Book of Robert Frost’s Poems, Washington Square Press, 1960, p. 212.
every stage of the tale interior states are visualized in terms of landscape.

Tess' innocent childhood is spent in the village of Marlott, "an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape painter" (p. 22). A sense of virginity of the soil is linked up with Tess' own virginal condition at that stage of the tale. As a contrast to this, the final catastrophe takes place at Sandbourne, with its fashionable streets and promenades. The place is as sophisticated as Tess now (which is reflected in her dress) with her loss of innocence.

The fatal party, on the day of her seduction, is at Chaseborough, "a decayed market town" (p. 73) and from there it moves to the Chase, — "a truly venerable trace of forest-land, one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primeval date, wherein Druidical mistletoe was still found on aged oaks ....."(p. 49).

Tess begins her rally in "the valley of the Great Dairies where milk and butter grow to rankness ..... the waters were as clear as the pure River of Life shown to the

31 "She was loosely wrapped in a cashmere dressing-gown of grey-white, embroidered in half-mourning tints, and she wore slippers of the same hue. Her neck rose out of a frill of down, ....." (p. 399).
Evangelist" (p. 119).

It is at Wellbridge, in a crumbling manor of the old D'Urberville family, that she goes to spend her honeymoon and the fatal confession takes place. Wellbridge stands as a pivotal point between the scene of recovery in the Froom Valley and the scene of growing despair at Flintcomb Ash where "the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow should be only an expanse of skin" (p. 303).

That face is now also Tess' and the interchangeable image shows the kind of fusion that has taken place between the landscape and the person, without either losing identity.

Tess is thus very much a daughter of the soil. She not only finds hope and sympathy in nature; she sometimes merges herself with it:

"The outskirt of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass, which sent up mists of pollen at a touch, and with tall, blooming weeds, emitting offensive smells — weeds whose red and yellow and purple hues formed

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32 "Her hopes mingled with the sunshine in an ideal photosphere which surrounded her as she bounded along against the soft south wind. She heard a pleasant voice in every breeze and in every bird's note seemed to lurk a joy" (p. 129).
a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers. She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him" (p.139).

That Tess seems at home in the overgrown garden as she moves through the undergrowth "as stealthily as a cat" — is an image, which taken in conjunction with the "fascinated bird" simile catches up the whole web of natural imagery and references applied to Tess throughout the novel. The passage stresses the active nature of her relationship with the natural world. She seems to collaborate in the transformation of her appearance rather than suffer it.

As David Lodge has pointed out "The paragraph describing the overgrown garden might be aptly described as an image of 'unconstrained nature'. It reminds us of the wild, exuberant anarchic life that flourishes on the dark underside, as it were, of the cultivated fertility of the valley."


Symbolically it is true of Tess, for she is a curious mixture of exuberant sensuality and cultivated chastity.
Nature, then, is a fitting backdrop to Tess’s tragedy. 34

Let us now examine the roles that Alec and Angel play in Tess’s tragedy.

Angel and Alec appear as figures of Victorian society hovering around Tess but misunderstanding her, unworthy of her, unable to match her natural strength and spontaneity. Though they seem opposites, one all licentious, hypocritical and cruel, the other too ethereal, logical and insufficiently free of the dogmatic and social codes, he claims he has put behind him, they are really complementary and close. Both are statements about the principal character types of the Victorian middle class—the cruel bourgeois and disinherited intellectual: both are without roots, both show a split between thought and feeling, both lack an adequate image of self-hood.

It has been frequently urged against Alec that he is simply a stock-in-trade figure from Victorian melodrama.

34 Cf. R.L. Stevenson’s "Pandora".
He is certainly a stock figure, but only because he belongs to a stock world; he is the eternal tempter. He describes himself to Tess as "the old Other One who can tempt you in the disguise of an inferior animal" (p. 369). To a large degree he is simply the anonymous villain of the ballad.

He is dressed and cut for the part, "moustarcher", fashionable tweed suit, a gay walking cane and idiom to match ("'Well, my beauty.....'") (p. 51).

Alec's conversion has come in for much criticism, notable among the critics being Lord David Cecil. But there is at least one critic who thinks it is perhaps Hardy's finest achievement in psychological analysis.

"It was less a reform than a transfiguration. The former curves of sensuousness were now modulated to lines of devotional passion. The lip-shapes that had meant seductiveness were now made to express supplication; the glow on the cheek that yesterday could be translated as riotousness was evangelized to-day into the splendour of pious rhetoric; animalism had become fanaticism; paganism, Paulinism; the bold, rolling eye that had flashed upon her form in the old time with such mastery now beamed with the rude energy of a

35 "The subtle way in which his conversion is described to a slight shift of point of view under the influence of the same, sensual temperament is perhaps Hardy's finest achievement in psychological analysis".

theolatry that was almost ferocious" (p. 324).

Just as Alec is lightly connected to the ballad world of Tess, but really 'lives' in the new capitalist world, so Angel is lightly connected with that world of Alec's. — "He did not milk cows because he was obliged to milk cows but because he was learning to be a rich and prosperous dairyman, landowner, agriculturist and breeder of cattle" (p. 141) — but his real element is that of the Free Thinker's Hall.

Angel is an intellectual whose potentially redeeming feature is that "early association with country solitudes had bred in him an unconquerable and almost unreasonable aversion to modern town life" (p. 133) so that "he became wonderfully free from the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of a belief in a beneficent power" (p. 135). It is the strength of his reaction against contemporary middle class Christianity that allows Angel to be attracted by Tess: her purity is warm and natural while that of Mercy Chant is cold and classbound. But if Angel is emancipated enough to appreciate Tess, he is also sufficiently corrupted to destroy her.

How could this high-minded and introspective youngman be quite so obtuse as to treat Tess with such insensitive brutality and not even see the moral connection between her
confession and his? The trouble with Angel is that he is, in the philosophical sense, an idealist; until the final pages of the book, he is more attached to his ideas about life than life itself. He cannot appreciate Tess without idealizing her, without turning her into a personification of what he calls "rustic innocence". As he himself admits, without at the time, realizing the implications, he has loved not Tess but another woman in her shape, a woman who has never existed except in his mind, and when his dream is shattered, he has no reserves of human experience and common fellow-feeling to tide him over, but accuses the wretched Tess, in succeeding taunts, of being an "unapprehending peasant woman" and "the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy" (p. 250). Such cruelty, however indefensible, is quite comprehensible when one recalls the generally inward turn and priggishly theoretic cast of Angel's mind. Hardy speaks directly of this when he refers to "the hard logical deposit" within Angel "which turned the edge of everything that attempted to traverse it" (p. 250), a concern with "principle" that is shown at moments of crisis, to be essentially abstract and egocentric.

Thus the basic flaw in Angel is a morbid idealism — an idealism, derived from certain human institutions, certain social attitudes prevalent in his time and class, which has gone bad and become negative. After Tess has confessed, Angel out of his
frozen recalcitrance echoes this corrupt idealism again and again — "You were one person, now you are another…… the woman I have been loving is not you" (pp. 345-46). So blinded by an uprush of idealistic sexual prejudice, which overpowers his intelligence and his tenderness, Angel Clare cannot even glimpse the height and depth of the love he is rejecting.

It is the tragedy of Tess that she is torn between Alec, the sensual and Angel, the intellectual. And Angel turns out to be more dangerous. We are more apt to condemn Angel for his rejection of Tess than Alec for his seduction of her; and in the novel's closing parts, Alec seems genuinely smitten with Tess and lost in both his images of libertine and preacher. To this extent Lawrence seems just in his comment that there is good stuff gone wrong in Alec: "One feels that in…… Alec D'Urberville there is good stuff gone wrong——just as in Angel Clare, there is good stuff gone wrong in the other direction.

"The one extreme produces the other. It is inevitable for Angel Clare and for Alec D'Urberville mutually to destroy the woman they both loved. Each does her the extreme of wrong, so she is destroyed."36

The chorus of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is almost missing in *Tess*. There are a few quaint comments on life by Dairymen Crick. He has a fund of witty stories in his repertoire and his stories of Jack Dollop and of the bull fascinated by Nativity Music usher some mirth and jollity into this otherwise "general drama of pain".

Tess' father is quaint in his ways but Tess' mother is very much a typical village matron with her fetishistic fears and superstitions and with her own moral code which differs markedly from that of Tess. "Between the mother, with her fast perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained national teachings, and standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. Then they were together, the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed" (p.34).

The milkmaids, Marian, Izz Huett and Betty Priddle are
interesting in so far as they are hopelessly in love with Angel Clare. The room they share seems to throb with their hopeless passion: "The air of the sleeping chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature’s law—an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired ......... The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion and each was but portion of one organism called sex" (p.163).

There seems to be a hierarchy of fate in Tess. Though Marian and Izz have not broken a moral code as Tess has done, they are made to undergo the same physical hardship as Tess at the Flintcomb Ash Farm. What unifies these three characters is their unbounded loyalty to Tess. When Angel, in a moment of weakness asks Izz to accompany him to Brazil, she says:

"'I loved you all the time we was at the dairy together!'"

'More than Tess?'

'No', she murmured, 'not more than she',

'How's that?'

'Because nobody could love ee more than Tess did! ....... she would have laid down her life for ee. I could do no more' " (p.268).
This is a striking revelation to Angel and he says:
"... you have saved me by your honest words about my wife
from an incredible impulse towards folly and treachery. Women
may be bad, but they are not so bad as men in these things."
(p.289).

XI

In conclusion it may be said that as a tragedy Tess
has elements of both Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedies.

The fact that Tess is entangled in the web of fate
recalls Greek tragedies; whereas the fact that she is caught
in the meshes of her own weaknesses of character recalls
Shakespeare's tragedies.

Tess fulfils at least three conditions laid down by
Aristotle about tragedy:

(1) "The object of tragedy is to produce terror and
pity. The plot should be so constructed that even without seeing
the play anyone hearing of the incidents thrills with fear
and pity as a result of what occurs."

37 Aristotle: *The Poetics*, Ch. XIV. P.45.
(Butcher's translation).
The elements of pity and terror in *Tess* have already been discussed.

(2) The second condition as laid down by Aristotle about tragedy is that the centre of tragedy must lie in action which issues from character; in other words, the victim must be the chief cause of his own catastrophe.

There are critics who think that the whole of *Tess* is a passionate cry that the innocent pay the penalty for the guilty. According to R.A. Scott-James: "Hardy sometimes violates the rule which forbade the shocking spectacle of a virtuous person brought through no fault of his own from prosperity to adversity."

But *Tess* does have her *hamartia*: a conventional sense of purity struggling with a natural sensuous nature. For ever there rages a battle in *Tess* between her mood of self-preservation and mood of self-immolation.

(3) Reversal of situation and reappearance of key characters: In the manner of Greek tragedies the reappearance of key characters, Alec and Angel, plays an important part in *Tess'* tragedy. For example, if Alec had not come back a second time into *Tess'* life, her final surrender to him would have been averted.

Similarly the reappearance of Angel from Brazil, chastened and penitent makes Tess' murder of Alec inevitable.

Finally there is the question of catharsis: Does Tess provide a purgation and purification of our emotions of pity and fear? Most of the critics would answer in the negative. Lionel Johnson, for example, writing ten years before the publication of The Dynaste says: "Our pity and our fear are not purified merely; they are destroyed and no room is left for them..... I can find no tragedy in that. I can find it nothing but a reason for keeping unbroken silence."

And Henry Nevinson observes: "In my case, the pity, far from purging my emotions of excess remains so intolerable that, ...... I can still hardly endure to read the final destruction of such a soul and body."

As opposed to these views, there is this view of Rutland's: "Were it altogether true that neither our pity nor our fear are

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39 "His had been a love "which alters when it alteration finds'. He had undergone some strange experiences in his absence; ...... he had thought of the woman taken and set in the midst as one deserving to be stoned, and of the wife of Uriah being made a queen; and he had asked himself why he had not judged Tess constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed?" (p. 350).
purified by *Tess*, the book would of course, not grip us as it does ....... we may remain unmoved by the President of the Immortals. But our pity is surely purified . 42

And this is what Abercrombie says: "Tess merely hopes, modestly and humbly, for the happiness in life which her instincts seem to promise her; and it is for these instincts, implanted in her that she is destroyed by anguish and crime. Thus the tragic idea of the world, which underlies all Hardy's work, finds in this book its simplest and therefore its most terrible statement." 43

To my mind *Tess* is Hardy's tragic masterpiece. As Hardy himself said, "I have put my best in it." 44 It contains the finest portraiture of a tragic heroine who is chaste and sensual at the same time, a tragic protagonist caught up in the forces of history, condemned by the conventions of the Victorian society ruined by Alec's lust and Angel's idealism and her own fatal flaw in character. 45


44 F.E. Hardy: *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.429.

45 *Tess* presents an interesting contrast to *Hester Prynne* of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Whereas Hester is not ashamed of her moral lapse, *Tess* is forever hiding away from the conscious eyes of the Victorian society.