Chapter 5

TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES (1891)

Of all the novels of Hardy Tess of the d’Urbervilles is regarded by many critics as the ‘most problematic novel, stable in scarcely any aspect.' Apart from its superficial theme of agricultural crisis and the destruction of English peasantry, the novel engages into a vigorous examination of Victorian morality and ‘the complexity of sexual morality as a whole.' Clementina Black praises the novel for its ‘profoundest moral earnestness.' Echoing more or less akin critical insight, Katherine Porter observes:

Hardy’s mind led him out of the tradition of orthodoxy into another tradition of equal antiquity, equal importance, equal seriousness, a body of opinion running parallel throughout history to the body of law in church and state: the great tradition of dissent.

Furthermore, Dorothy Van Ghent, Irving Howe and Dale Kramer, among other things, try to treat the novel as a fictional enquiry into the inevitable tragedy of individual consciousness. A recent critic, Peter J. Casagrande examines the novel as a study in, to use his own jargon, ‘beaugliness’- beauty in suffering, ugliness and defeat. Thus Tess has attracted a startlingly enormous body of critical opinion all of which do contribute to

Page references to Tess of the d’Urbervilles are to the Penguin edition (1978).
the intensity of our understanding of this powerfully moving creative work. *Tess* demands a more rigorous critical examination to comprehend the vitality of the novelist's tragic vision. Essentially *Tess* is the tragic tale of a simple woman of exceptional natural propensities ruined by the combined forces of the universe and society. Rutland's acute observation in this connection is worth quoting:

*Tess* is, among other things, an argument. It is an argument made up of two related, but quite distinct elements: one is a grievance against the organization of human society; the other is a quarrel with the ordering of the universe.  

In portraying Tess's tragic social life and sympathizing with her existential plight, Hardy anticipates the postmodern tendency to deconstruct the established assumptions about sexual morality. In fact, postmodernism tries 'to express a contextual discourse that disturbs us into revisioning the ideological orientation of dominant and dominating discursive practices.' Hardy is subverting the notions of sexual morality and female purity. Tess's individuality is self-reflexive, free from any romantic conceptions of female identity. Here Hardy is questioning the basic assumptions and premises of morality that we have taken for granted. 'In place of the well-wrought urn, in other words, postmodernism posits the module of a kaleidoscope wherein there are no fixities and finite patterns but multiple
possibilities. In questioning the received structures and concepts, Hardy shows affinity with Foucault who is a champion of anti-totalisation. All the other issues that go into the narrative structure of the novel are meant to supplement this central concern. The controversial attack on Victorian social arrangements and the indictment of Christianity needs to be viewed in relation to the fundamental impulse of the novel which comes into direct conflict with the established social and ethical principles of society. Without any radical departure from the centrality of his cultural imagination, Hardy earnestly advocates the cause of a reviled, innocent woman whose uniqueness of situation calls for sympathy and flexibility in the application of a universal moral code. 'In opposition to the limitations and inadequacies of the conventional social attitudes of his time, Hardy consistently evokes a world of action and values more truly natural and therefore more fully human.' 9 Tess articulates the perennial conflict between the natural and the unnatural, instinct and crude rationality; spontaneity and cold reason. It is a celebration of the subjective over the collective; particular over the general, and the specific over the universal. Throughout the novel Hardy stresses the subjectivity of Tess. She is simultaneously in and out of the ordinary. There are discordant elements in her personality – natural and the social. Therefore, 'Tess’s suffering is at once highly personal and irrefutably universal.' 10 What Hardy stresses in
the novel is the sanctity of the individual in spite of the social or moral laws. In her is combined 'the tragic extremism of individuality and of general significance. In herself she is Dionysian and Apollonian.' Like *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is the tragedy of a particularly inescapable inner life. The difference, however, is that whereas Henchard is ruined more by his inner life, Tess is ruined by both the external and internal forces. Tess’s character is full of complexities and ambiguities. In this connection Dale Kramer observes:

Hardy never reconciles Tess’s ordinariness and her specialness; her simple-minded literalness and her sensitivity to the explicitly non-literal; her sexual ‘purity’ and innocence and her sensuality and flirtatiousness - all contradictions which of course enhance her life likeness."

Unlike in Hardy's earlier novels, in *Tess* the ethical polemic is targeted against the hypocritical dispensation of moral laws in a hierarchical male dominated society. The changing social world of *Tess* is divided irrevocably between the poor and the rich, the working class and the capitalists, the customary and the educated. But in the novel Hardy subverts and disintegrates the age old idea of the elite, and of morality. If in the earlier novels it is the rebellious, anarchical individual who ostracizes himself from the communal fold, here the callous society excommunicates the individual. It is the dislocation and extradition of the natural by the unnatural which is
the focus of the novel. Hardy is not a revisionist here; he is rather openly highlighting the inherent contradictions on which the emergent new civilization is being built. In the creation of Tess, Hardy places nature in opposition to culture as in The Woodlanders. If Giles’s death is suggestive of the death of rural culture, in Tess’s death too Hardy finds the elimination of all that is unique, natural and humane. She is a real human character in whom is combined conventionalism and paganism, submissiveness and rebellion, sexuality and guilt in equal proportion. In her death all that is normal and natural is dead too.

H. C. Duffin’s observation about this life destroying defect of the Victorian social system is worth our attention:

Tess arises from narrow conventional views usurping the place of the one great law by which all other must be tested, the golden rule of love and happiness. The ordinances of society are administered with great neglect of this golden rule, in a rigid and unintelligible fashion.11

What is brought into sharp critical focus in the novel is the ugliness and inhumanity that lie beneath the sham facade of a fossilized category of moral precepts- axioms and doctrines which are arbitrarily created and executed without adequate scrutiny of their contextual aptness. Hardy’s belief is in a philosophy of humanism.
Hardy’s moral vision is informed by his particular concern for the individual. He is a celebrant of particularity over universality. In Brazil Angel Clare realizes, through his own experiences and through the intervention of a friend, the folly of “being influenced by general Principles to the disregard of the particular instance.” (p.423) Tess’s tragic death is a sacrifice to the false philosophy, false morality of pharisaic Christianity legitimized by conventions which are dialectically opposed to an authentic individual self. Tess never falls from her basic integrity or inner virtues; she is merely ruined by the whimsical capriciousness of the social world. The novel illustrates the unscrupulous destruction of simplicity and artlessness by sophisticated social constructs. Hardy is insistent in his repudiation of the universalizing, totalizing moral laws, something that the postmodern thinker, Michel Foucault champions. ‘Against the free life of Nature …..Hardy counters the claustrophobic life denying moral law of human society which traps Tess like a bird in a springe.’ 14 Angel Clare’s two educated brothers - Felix and Cuthbert - represent the mental limitation of the social world:

Neither had an adequate conception of the complicated forces at work outside the smooth and gentle current in which they and their associates floated. Neither saw the difference between local truth and universal truth; that what the inner world said in their clerical and academic hearing was quite a different thing from what the outside world was thinking. (p.220)
These two university educated individuals are prototypes of the larger social world which fails to comprehend the felt particularities of life as it is actually lived by the majority of the human race. Hardy wrote in his diary in March, 1890:

Society collectively, has neither seen what any ordinary person can see, read what every ordinary person has read, nor thought what every ordinary person has thought.

The social laws, more often than not, are cruel inventions which attempt to thwart and repress the pure expressions of life; they are a threat to the natural growth and existence of the individual. For instance, the supercilious contempt entertained by the two brothers of Clare for the working class is the outcome of a conventional, stereotype mental training received by them which is alien to the elemental surges of a natural being like Tess or to the ancient, idyllic community of Talbothays. The organization of human society, Hardy seems to plead, ought to take into account the plurality of human nature. Society must not attempt to fit its members into its own mould without making room for specificities.

In Hardy’s humane ethical system Tess is still essentially pure, for in her sexual defilement no personal choice is involved, a fact that Clare comes to realize in Brazil:
During this time of absence he had mentally aged a dozen years. What arrested him now as of value in life was less its beauty than its pathos. Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed. (p.421)

And Tess’s confession of her unfortunate past error of simple, innocent youth on the first night of her marriage with Clare is an eloquent expression of her intrinsic purity. Though it is a spiritual triumph, it acts as a slur in the world of conventional morality. Hardy does not see Tess’s purity in a narrow moral sense. Hers is the purity of the spirit, not of the body. Irving Howe observes that ‘Hardy shows with conviction that Tess reaches a purity of spirit even as she fails to satisfy the standards of the world.’ Mentally and morally she is stainless, and remains so till the end of her tumultuous life. Even her final return to Alec ‘d Urberville must be viewed as an act of sacrifice to save her impoverished, homeless family after its eviction from the cottage at Marlott following the death of John Durbeyfield. At The Herons, the stylish lodge where she stays with Alec, Angel Clare vividly perceives the astonishing transformation of Tess:

But he had 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 drifting like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will. (p.467)
In her passionate, natural urge to prevent her family from falling into utter desolation, she has cared nothing for her body: “I didn’t care what he did wi’ me!” (pp.466-67). She subdues her nobler instincts to brute necessity. This brief interlude with Alec is a momentary annihilation of her cultural and moral self-hood to preserve the life of her little brothers and sisters. It is, indeed, the most self-destructive sacrifice, an immolation that transforms her into an embodiment of pure love and self-renunciation, which may be viewed as immoral by a priggishly conventional society. Tess embodies the virtue of self-renunciation. To view her still pure one has to correlate her personality with the circumstances of her life. In this connection Peter J. Casagrande makes a subtle observation on Tess’s personality:

As a woman Tess can be pure only in terms of her particular experiences: that is, she can be chaste but not virginal. Hers then is not the purity of a beautiful innocence, but the purity of ugly experiences, something one perhaps might wish to term a higher innocence, because an innocence she has sought and forged rather than inherited.  

Casagrande here seems to focus on the purity of Tess’s intention though her virginity is lost in the physical sense. Furthermore, it suggests the unflinching loyalty of Tess to the preservation of her sexual and spiritual integrity throughout the course of her ordeals - both physical and mental. With the experience of her physical violation, her beautiful, natural innocence is corrupted; but within the brutality of that involuntary
experience lies a pure, natural self which has never deviated from its native virtues in the direction of impurity either in thoughts or desire. To remain spiritually pure, despite the ugly physical and mental experience, is a nobler kind of innocence and purity. So Tess’s whole life is marked by ‘beaugliness’ - beauty in the ugliness of her unique situation.

Many critics have tried in vain to settle the exact nature of Tess’s sexual violation in the Chase. Is it seduction or rape? From the ambiguity of the given circumstances of the incident, it is hardly possible to be absolutely certain about either, and Hardy wants us to consider it as such. Had it been rape, the question of Tess’s purity would have been settled too easily, for the Victorian legal laws were absolutely clear about it. Instead, he (Hardy) uses the expansiveness afforded by the novel form (rather than a single scene) to argue for a definition of female purity that includes Tess’s sexual nature and her sexual responses to man. 18 Tess’s purity, Hardy seems to stress, has to be ascertained within the ordinariness of her natural human self, her own flesh and blood existence. It is quite clear that both seduction and rape have been resorted to by Alec for the sexual conquest of Tess. That her sexual violation is more than seduction is hinted by the reports of other people:

A little more than persuading had to do wi’ the coming o’t, I reckon. There were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in the Chase;
And yet it is not a savage rape alone that subdues her. The narrative leaves enough scope to highlight Tess’s sexuality. And the ignorance of her simple youth adds to the whole affair. Tess’s views on it are made clear during their conversation later as she is accompanied by Alec to Marlott against her own will:

‘What are you crying for’? He coldly asked
‘I was only thinking that I was born over there’ murmured Tess
‘Well-we must all be born somewhere’.
‘I wish I had never been born-there or anywhere else’
‘Pooh well, if you didn’t wish to come to Tantridge why did you come?’
She did not reply
‘You didn’t come for love, that I’ll swear.’
‘T’s quite true. If I had gone for love O’ you, if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I love you still, I should not loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now! ------ My eyes were hazed by you for a little, and that was all.
He shrugged his shoulders. She resumed ---
‘I didn’t understand your meaning till it was too late.’(Pp. 124-125)

This honest confession of Tess reveals how human she is, how innocent and ignorant she is about sexual matters. Her ignorance of male trickeries is clearly revealed when she cries out pathetically to her mother:

“O mother, my mother!” cried the agonized girl, turning passionately upon her parent as if her poor heart would break:

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? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o’ learning in that way, and you did not help me! (Pp.130-31)
In this ambivalent approach to Tess’s violation in the Chase, Hardy establishes the human essence of her personality: ‘She is also to be seen as an emblem of purity on the one hand and as an emblem of the quintessential female on the other.’ Hardy does not project Tess as a marble statue, but as a normal, healthy human being capable of the natural passions and emotion, subject to errors and mistakes:

She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had stirred to confused surrender a while: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had ran away. (p.130)

Within the given natural, authentic self, Tess remains pure and honest in her thoughts and intentions which are her own, and are tainted only by external forces beyond her control. The character of Tess, as we have mentioned earlier, differentiates itself by its commingling of naturalness and social consciousness. The urgency of her life is to establish an identity for herself within the scope of her own being. She searches for her identity not in her supposed d’Urberville ancestry, but in her own definition of her unique self. Tess’s sexuality and her sensuousness are hinted at in the novel from the very beginning. She cannot establish her identity without a fulfilment of her natural sexuality. But then, Alec is not the man. He can satisfy only the physical aspect of her sexuality, and not the spiritual. And when she thinks that she has met the right man in Angel
Clare, he appears or pretends to be more spiritual than physical. One violates her sexuality whereas the other undermines it. And Tess remains without a self defined identity, but she is defined by the social world and many undiscerning readers as immoral. Hardy wants the readers to understand that Tess’s sexuality is as natural as the air we breathe. It is precisely for this reason that Hardy remains ambiguous in the narrative where Tess is defiled or seduced by Alec in the Chase. However, her final surrender to Alec should not be taken as a lapse in her moral life; it is an act of self sacrifice.

The sub-title—'A pure Woman'—was shocking to the Victorian public and the guardians of conventional morality. Hardy tried to persuade his vitriolic critics and readers to re-define the meaning of ‘pure’, which their traditional ethical system had taught them. Tess’s behavior, her thoughts, her desires are unimpeachable. Her grace and vitality are evocative of pristine simplicity and frankness. Hardy is firm in his belief that it is not the act that should matter, but the intent. He attacks relentlessly the organized social and religious creeds, which have no foundation in nature. If the social and moral laws are not in harmony with the inherent laws of human nature, Hardy finds them destructive of human life and a deterrent to the limited possibilities of happiness. His
conventionality or traditional allegiance is an instinctive recognition of the vibrant flow of uninhibited expression of the inner self. In the moral judgment of Tess, Hardy pleads that her moral integrity ought to be measured not by one isolated, unintentional deed, but by the whole aim and tendency of her life and nature. Hardy refuses to endorse a collective moral code which ignores the elemental virtue of the individual. He explores the dichotomy between the rules and values of nature and those of contrived social arrangements. His uncompromising bitterness for the implausible, ridiculous authority of social laws is vividly expressed in his ironic authorial comment on sorrow's death:

So passed away sorrow the undesired that intrusive creature, that bustard gift of shameless nature who respects not the social law. (p.146)

In the parson's refusal to give sorrow a Christian burial we can perceive how his personal theological convictions have been diluted by the weight of social pressures: "Well I would willingly do so if we too were concerned. But I must not – for certain reasons." (p.147)

In spite of this learned parson's personal convictions of the validity of Tess's heroic private baptism of Sorrow, and the absence of divine wrath even if he gives a religious burial to the dead child, he is subdued by the force of social conventions to carry out what he personally believes in.
Tess, the pure incarnation of nature’s legacy, is corrupted by society and sacrificed on the altar of conventions though she remains unalloyed till her death. Before she was compelled to enter into the world of dissolute Alec d’Urberville, she was a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience” (p.51) Her journey from Marlott to Tantridge is a journey from innocence to experience, from artlessness to an environment of social manipulation and craft. She is the prototype of a pure nature intruded upon and assailed by an unscrupulous materialistic social world. At Talbothays Angel Clare recognizes her naturalness: “What a fresh and virginal daughter of nature that milkmaid is!” (p.176) Tess’s personality is defined not in terms of modern social subtlety or intellectual accomplishments. Hers is a personality defined by an ancient culture. This is the effulgence in which Angel casts her when he pleads her case with his parents:

“She is not what in common parlance is called a lady”, said Angel, unflinchingly, “for she is a cottager's daughter, as I am proud to say. But she is a lady nevertheless—in feeling and nature.” (p.225)

Being a descendant of tough aristocratic d’Urberville lineage, Tess has inherited certain hereditary traits of that family’s toughness, aggressiveness, dignity and capacity for self-respect. Even when she is sexually violated and bears Alec’s undesired child, Tess never forces him to marry her, rather she repudiates such thoughts, if any, and always resists the advances of this unscrupulous, spurious d’ Urberville. Remaining loyal
to the promptings of her instinctual self is an outstanding trait of Tess’s personality and character. Her natural honesty and sincerity of feeling are implacable even in the menacing shadows of self annihilating circumstances. To Alec’s nagging complaint “you’ll never love me, I fear”, she replies:

I have said so, often. It is true. I have never really and truly loved you, and I think I never can.” She added mournfully, “perhaps, of all things, a lie on this thing would do the most good to me now; but I have honour enough left, little as ‘tis’ not to tell that lie. If I did love you I may have the best O’ causes for letting you know it. But I don’t. (p.126)

Hypocrisy and opportunism are alien to Tess. She is honest and sincere. It is the same moral force in her which drives her irresistibly to confess her past sexual lapse to Angel Clare on the night of their wedding though her more pragmatic mother had dissuaded her to refrain from such suicidal folly. Tess of the d’Urbervilles is, therefore, on one level a narrative of ‘primitive emotion, guilt and sorrow.’ Tess represents the essence of genuine feeling and living which can neither be comprehended nor appreciated by a society dominated by petrified, obsolete conventions that are hostile to the rhythms and flow of a natural self. Tess is morally unimpeachable in her soul. Though she is more sinned against than sinning, she is forced to view herself as a sinner in the social and religious mirror of her antagonistic world.
Tess’s aristocratic blood intensified by her untinctured primitive cultural personality is both a strength and a weakness: ‘She has the strength, pride, and fineness of spirit that Hardy associates with the superior gentry, the passion and the violence.’ For instance, when threatened with an immanent separation from Angel Clare after her heroic confession, she thinks of ending her miserable life through suicide; but her sense of honour compels her to refrain from such thoughts to preserve the reputation of her husband’s name falling into a scandalous history. At Flintcomb-Ash, she does not adopt her husband’s title so as to not tarnish his social image. And it is her long suffering and sense of pride which prevent her from indulging in pleas and entreaties at the time of Angel’s separation from her:

If she had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically, in that lonely lane, not withstanding the fury of fastidiousness with which she was possessed, he would probably not have withstood her. But her mood of long suffering made his way easy for him, and she herself was his best advocate. Pride, too, entered into her submission- which perhaps was a symptom of that reckless acquiescence in chance too apparent in the whole of d’Urberville family- and the many effective chords which she could have stirred by an appeal were left untutored (pp.324-25)

It is the same pride and sense of dignity which restrain her from appealing to her in-laws for help when she has been physically and mentally tortured at Flintcomb-Ash. Tess is capable of pure, selfless love.
as well as violent passions. Her love for Angel Clare forces her to deify him to the extent of self-effacement:

Her idolatry of this man was such that she herself almost feared it to be ill-omened. (p.281)

Her hitting Alec on his mouth with her glove is, on the other hand, an indication of the volcanic passion she is capable of. And in the end when Tess kills Alec, it is nature’s law avenging the violator of a natural self. Tess has changed incredibly through her experiences. Life has taught her that “the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing, and her views of life had been totally changed for her by the lesson” (p.123) The enormity of transformation brought upon Tess by her ceaseless sufferings is startling in its intensity. During her journey to Flintcomb-Ash, she kills the wounded birds, breaking their heads with her own gentle hands to relieve them of their suffering of which she has had a fair experience. In this moving scene Tess is presented both as a simple peasant and as an interpreter of contemporary philosophy. Her reflections in this scene are consistent with the novel’s theme of a search for self-identity. She consciously longs for death to escape from her defenceless existence. Perhaps, it is only in her death that she can find her true identity. According to Alan Friedman, the ‘expansion of Tess’s innocence into experience has been towards disintegration and death.’ 22 But before this
physical disintegration through suffering Tess possessed the purest heart and innocence.

The most absorbing example of Tess's powerfully awe-inspiring, simple, natural faith and purity of heart is the baptism scene of her son, Sorrow. Her misery at the thought of her child not being baptized is beyond endurance. She cannot bear that her "darling was about to die, and no salvation" (p.143) She decides to baptize the child on her own, when her father has refused to let the parson in the house, even if that means her own doom in hell. She is haunted by the thought of "the child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell as its double doom for lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy." (p.143) Turning her little cottage into a church, and her little brothers and sisters the faithful congregation, Tess assumes the role of a parson and baptizes the dying child. At the time of this most moving baptismal ritual Tess "did not look like Sissy to them but as a being large, towering, and awful-- a divine personage with whom they have nothing in common." (p.146) This scene is evocative of the transfiguration of Christ on the mount (Bible according to Mathew 17, 1-13) Tess's uniquely deep faith has elevated her momentarily to the status of a spiritual being, endowing her with a kind of divine radiance. It is, perhaps, symbolic of the divine approval of her intrinsic goodness and her powerful faith. Hers
is a faith that is marvellously natural, godlier than the mundane faith of the rigid society which has ostracized her from its social and religious fold. About her radical christening act she contemplates boldly and rightly so:

Whether well founded or not she had no uneasiness now, reasoning that if providence would not ratify such and act of approximation she, for one, did not value the kind of heaven lost by the irregularity- either for herself or for her child (p.146)

In her private baptism of Sorrow, she defies the church, the tradition and the establishment. In her return to Alec, she defies the social as well as moral laws. By subverting the established norms of social behaviour, Tess becomes a forerunner of postmodern assertion of the subjective self. She acts by her sense of the right and wrong. Hardy negates the Victorian centralist attitude and privileges the marginalized, the periphery. Tess moves to experiential truth, and not to referential truth. The purity of her inner life and faith is too powerful for any dogmatic creed.

One of the chief causes of the tragedy of Tess is her obsessive sense of guilt and her individual consciousness from which she cannot disengage herself. For instance, Tess blames herself for the death of Prince more than anyone else in the family. It is her sense of guilt and duty that drives her to a strange new world which is the cause of her subsequent tragedy. Once violated by Alec, her innocent world transforms itself into a psychological hell. Her sexual abuse remains with intense force in her
consciousness. 'The dilemma of Tess is the dilemma of morally
individualizing consciousness in its earthly mixture.'\textsuperscript{23} This consciousness
is her nemesis. According to Jonathan Wike 'in both the man and the race,
consciousness has become a burden.'\textsuperscript{24} Tess’s individual consciousness is
an extension of the totality of collective social consciousness. It is
inalienably interwoven with the external world. Consequently, the
individual is unable to disentangle himself from the value systems of his
environment. In the dynamics of this interplay between the individual and
society, there is hardly any chance for creating a comforting individual
psychic world without the risk of personal frustration. Tess’s personality
and character are the result of her social, cultural and religious
determinism. Her consciousness is conditioned by the inevitable external
forces. The novel stresses the subjectivity of experience which is again
guided by the social norms. The tenacity of Tess’s consciousness
ultimately becomes a destructive element in her cultural self. Dale Kramer
is right when he says that ‘Tess is a tragedy of the individual, by which I
mean that there is no valid way to judge Tess according to an extended
standard of social necessity or duty.’\textsuperscript{25} Hardy is protesting against the very
concept of objective moral standards. Angel Clare’s fears of a bleak future
with Tess are the result of his social conditioning. Tess’s individual
consciousness is not simply a creation of her own autonomous self; rather,
her consciousness has evolved from the inescapable social world. In the absence of an external standard of social and moral laws, her life would have been less tragic. Hardy's authorial questioning makes the point clear:

Moreover, alone in a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. If she could have been just created to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as the parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein. Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensations. (p.141)

Isolating the individual consciousness from the value systems of society is an impossible task. Individual 'subject' means not simply a conscious person, but a social fact - a being subject to socially produced constraints and divisions which create dilemma in the individual. But Hardy seems to suggest that in a universe where events shape themselves by accident rather than by moral design, such aggressive moral consciousness is highly tragic, though unavoidable. Even if the individual is able to ignore the force of her consciousness, society does not absolve her of her deeds. Tess's spiritual exacerbation is caused by consciousness. She is trapped by her social self, her role as a social being. She is ruined by her own consciousness. 'Tess's confession is an acute form of the disillusion that follows enchantment.'26
Tess’s confession of guilt to Angel does no good except relieving the burden of her conscience, for Angel is driven away from her after the confession. Since then suffering becomes her mental harvest. It only adds to her miseries of life. It never turns out a ritual of salvation for her. The novel characterizes the “fallen” woman as superior to her confessor, although neither she nor her peers recognize her as such. When she eventually discovers the falsity of her fantasized moral attitude towards her personal life, she supports the novel’s critique of the romance of confession. In the essentiality of Hardy’s vision he is critically censorious of the individual’s obsessive allegiance to self destructive laws for “the world is only a psychological phenomenon and what they seemed they were” (p.134). But the tragedy is that this psychological phenomenon is conditioned by the social psyche from which there is no escape. In Tess’s solitary walks among trees and hills, she would project her own mind into it and perceive it as a reflector of her present state of mind:

The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the highly wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not class definitely as the God of her childhood, and could not comprehend as any other. (Pp.134-35)

No durable sustenance can be had even if one forces oneself into believing that the world is a psychological phenomenon. Tess is simply
caught helplessly and irrevocably in the entanglement of social conventions—something that she cannot escape from:

But this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess’s fancy—a cloud or moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. 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, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (p. 135)

As an individual, Tess is a pure daughter of nature. Nevertheless she is overpowered by conventional society.

Though Tess personifies the ingrained rapport between man and nature—the focus of Hardy’s central cultural imagination—she is a martyr of the conflicting claims of natural impulses and social laws: ‘Two opposing elements struggle in Tess for dominance after her reduction: the law of nature and the laws of Victorian morality.’ 28 She is destroyed both by the patriarchy and the arbitrary social laws. The compulsive power of Nature over human conduct and its supremacy over the laws of man is remarkably powerful even in her reduced state of social existence. 29 But what is ironically tragic is that her natural self is inconsequential in the face of intransigent social establishments which function with mechanical rigidity.
Suspended between the two worlds of equal force – the natural and the social – Tess is crushed by both. The oppressive weight of socially inherited moral consciousness combined with the callousness of Universal Will drives Tess to her tragic end. Eugene Good heart captures the irony of Tess’s life:

Only nature can give freedom, Hardy seems to be saying, but she gives only slavery to the people who inhabit her world. This is the irony of Tess’s suffering.

This paradox of a natural self being destroyed by nature herself is a recurrent point of Hardy’s imaginative understanding of life. Like his other novels, *Tess* is a novel of character that may stand as an example of the part played in human destiny by a capricious, if not malign fate. Early in the novel Hardy alludes to the actual condition of human race in an inscrutable universe. This dismal spectacle of human life is communicated through the meditative dialogue between Tess and her brother Abraham during their catastrophic journey to Casterbridge to deliver the beehives:

‘Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?’

‘Yes.’

‘All like ours?’

‘I don’t know; but I don’t think so. They sometimes seem to be like apples on our stubbard-tree.

Most of them splendid and sound— a few blighted.’

‘Which do we live on a splendid one or a blighted one?’
'A blighted one.'

'Tis very much unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many of 'em!' 

'Yes.'

'Is it like that really, Tess? 'said Abraham, turning to her much impressed, on reconsideration of this rare information.

'How would it have been if we had pitched on a sound one?'

'Well, father wouldn't have coughed and creeped about as he does, and wouldn't have got tipsy to go this journey; and mother wouldn't have been always washing, and never getting finished.' (Pp.69-70)

In this incomprehensible universal scheme for man, we can easily recognize the cogency of the raison d'être of Hardy's use of tragic coincidences. Critics have often complained against Hardy's overindulgence in coincidences and chances to manufacture tragic events in the lives of his characters. In Tess too, coincidences play a key role. Parson Tringham's discovery of John Durbeyfield's knightly ancestry, the death of prince, Angel Clare not finding the letter of Tess's confession placed under his carpet in the room, and his belated penitent return to Tess are all coincidences rooted in the drama of human life. They are beyond the power of finite beings to control or evade. It is here that Hardy's tragic vision of life remains vindicated. It is painfully ironic that Tess, the genuine offspring of nature, has not been able to preserve her self either against the vagaries of society or within her own instinctual self. She
shouldn’t mind learning “why- why the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike... but that’s what books will not tell me.”(p.182) And, indeed, that’s what will remain a mystery of life just as the causes of her own tragic sojourn on this “blighted” planet will remain forever an enigma. When she is hanged to death at Wintoncester, Hardy’s authorial fury at the universe finds bitter outlet: “Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals in Aeschylean phrase, has ended his sport with Tess” (p.489) and ultimately the novel ‘explores as in his earlier novels the insignificance of the individual’s will and foresight and paradoxically the insignificance of the individual in relation to an immense and indifferent cosmos.31

Among other factors that cause Tess’s personal tragedy is the agricultural predicament of the times. Douglas Brown, H.C.Duffin and Arnold Kettle, to name a few, see the novel as the corruption of innocence by experience and the destruction of countryside by the intrusion of modernism. By the time Hardy came to write Tess the traditional order, which had sustained Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterborne, and to some extent Michael Henchard, had disappeared. Perhaps, Tess is the last representative- victimized, exploited and tortured- of the natural agrarian world of innocence and pristine purity. With her grotesque execution disappear symbolically a whole culture and an ancient way of life in rural
England. To witness such a traditional rural society wilting under the pressure of modernist tendencies was a painful experience for him. Tess’s melancholy views about life startle even a supposedly well-read man like Clare. And he comes to the conclusion that “she was expressing in her own native phrases….. feelings which might almost have been called those of the age-- the ache of modernism.” (p.180) In contrast to the idyllic and spiritually soothing atmosphere of Talbothays, Flintcomb-Ash is both physically and mentally enervating to Tess and other labourers. The threshing machine- “the red tyrant” (p.404) is symptomatic of the ruthless machine age which has little or no human concern for the agricultural workers. According to Arnold Kettle ‘the sacrifice of Tess to d’ Urberville is symbolic of the historical process at work.’  

He represents the sinister, brutal forces of industrial advancement which are threatening the traditional, agricultural way of life still pursued by Tess and her social class. Faced with an unremittingly harsh materialistic culture, Tess’s primitive simplicity and native feelings are doomed to total extinction. Alec is a man fully versed in the inhuman sensibilities of modern civilization. He is intrinsically evil, beyond any redemptive possibilities; he is the voice of the bestial, profligate aristocracy. As a fictional creation, Alec may be compared with Sergeant Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Manston of *Desperate Remedies*. His pretended conversion is
as hollow as his inner life: "Reason has nothing to do with his whimsical conversion, which was perhaps the mere freak of a careless man in search of a new sensation, and temporarily impressed by his mother's death." (p. 403) He moves from one extreme quality of licentiousness to another extremism of religiosity. He is unscrupulous, remorseless and reckless in his behaviour. His whole life has been marked by moral indiscipline. And Tess's murder of him is the natural response to the provocation of a whole culture, and through this she demonstrates her allegiance to her own natural self and the community to which she belongs; she reestablishes her identity as a woman of the field.

Angel Clare, one of the chief protagonists of the novel, seems to have been conceived in a mood of authorial outrage as well as sympathy in so far as the portrayal of his character and personality is concerned. Hardy stresses the inadequacy of abstract intellectualization when it encounters actual experiences of living. Clare's personality and character are as admirable as they are repulsive. In his dauntlessly radical questioning of the fossilized social stratification, class divisions and accompanying snobbery, and in his well-informed belief in the equality of the human race, Angel Clare is an exemplar of fine humanistic sensibilities; but in his retrogressive views of female sexuality and purity, he is irretrievably
retrograde. His “indifference to social forms and observances” seems to remain only as an intellectual and academic exercise without being supported by emotional convictions. Nevertheless “the material distinction of rank and wealth he increasingly despised.” (p.172)

Andrew Enstice gives a succinct picture of Angel Clare:

Clare is, in many ways, a type of the Victorian rationalism, scholarship and philosophical exploration which, while purporting to free the human mind from the shackles of human superstition and darkness, only served to mask and distort true feeling and the inexpressible wonder of the human mind. 33

He represents intellect with all its limitation; he lacks pathetically the vitality of imagination necessary to understand human nature and life. With all his intellectual pretensions, he is still vulnerable to the overpowering hold of conventions. What is eloquently demonstrated through his character is the undeniable truth that intellectual formulations about life cannot liberate oneself from the hold of obstinate conventional and moral orthodoxy. The lack of direction is central to Angel Clare’s character. Angel is throughout ‘fluctuating between a rationalistic idealism and the corrective of concrete occasion.’ 34 Like Tess, he too is seeking his real identity. It is in Brazil that he begins to revaluate old systems of morality to take intention, not deeds, into account. Hardy himself has acknowledged that Clare is a type of a certain class of modern man—the representative of fragmented sensibility. Though he displays an amazing sense of identity

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with the native culture and extraordinary courage to deviate from the settled thoughts and values of his social strata, he is more abstract and theoretical in practice. He has an idealistic, romantic cast of mind; he is so detached from the rhythms of natural life. But he makes conscious efforts to integrate himself with the natural forms of life. For instance, Angel’s union with Talbothays is intellectual and deliberate whereas Tess’s is natural and instinctive. Max Weber prophesied that the reign of rationality, applied equally in the social as well as in the natural environment, would produce the “disenchantment of the world.”

As with Tess, Angel Clare too succumbs to the pressures of social consciousness:

With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings. (p.338)

Whatever harmony Angel tries to achieve with nature is dwarfed by his idealization, his gross rationalism. His social consciousness is too strongly ingrained in his personality to free himself completely from its haunting presence. To add to this he attempts to co-mingle what works independently. His impersonalized erudition finds itself in dialectical confrontation with the natural forms of life. Consequently, he is incapable of understanding the depth of Tess’s character, her single-mindedness.
According to Dorothy Van Ghent, 'both Angel and Alec are metaphors of extreme human behavior, when the human has been cut off from community and has been individualized by intellectual education or by material wealth and traditionless independence.' 36 Without evolving an enduring set of alternative personal convictions, he has renounced the values of his natural class; nor does he fully understand the vitality of the life embodied in Tess. Theirs have been opposing worlds of values which are hard to converge. 'The division in Angel between modern thought and traditional feeling makes him, much more than Tess, our intellectual and emotional contemporary.' 37 For Clare the intellectual and the emotional seem to remain totally dissociated from each other, driving him to lead a typically dual psychic existence. Where sexual morality and female purity are considered, Clare's views are hopelessly dependent on conventional opinion:

Though I imagine my poor father fears that I am one of the eternally lost for my doctrines, I am of course, a believer in good morals, Tess, as much as you- I admired spotlessness, even though I could lay no claim to it, and hated impurity, as I hope I do know. (p. 291)

And in relation to Tess, Clare is blinded by the force of conventions to differentiate voluntary act of impurity from involuntary deeds. Besides, Clare applies two scales of moral values in judging the same moral offence- one to his own dissipation of the past and the other to Tess's
sexual defilement by Alec. His meanness is so bluntly expressed when he says:

O Tess forgiveness does not apply to this case. You were one person; now you are another. My God-- how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque prestidigitation as that? (p.298)

The tragedy of the Angel--Tess relationship is that both idealize each other. Both Tess and Angel idealize each other without being able to see the other as an individual susceptible to vices and virtues. For Tess, Angel is the epitome of goodness, an incarnation of perfection, and she almost deifies him. Her impressions of Angel’s educated character impel her to fancy that he would always defend her and love her even with all her innocent fault. However, she is deluded into believing his appearances as the expression of his quintessential self. Similarly, Angel sees Tess as he wants her to be, and not as she actually is. He loves his own idea of her, her spiritual image:

‘I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you.’

But who?’

‘Another woman in your shape.’(p. 299)

It is here Angel’s romantic idealism alienates him from the crude realities of life. In looking for what Tess is not, Clare fails miserably to see
what she is intrinsically and spiritually. His sleep walk, carrying Tess to the graveyard is symbolic of the death of his spiritualized image of Tess. When angel argues erroneously that Tess’s “heart was not indexed in the honest freshness of her face” (p.305), he betrays his lamentable inadequacy to penetrate into the soul of Tess. And it is with intolerable pain that she confesses that “for I you love is not my real self, but one in my image: the one I might have been.” (p.281). Both Alec and Angel fail to see the real Tess If Alec, for whom Tess has only erotic value, violates her sexually, Clare violates her spiritually. These two men may be said to represent the contrast between the flesh and the spirit. Both are blind to the inner richness of her self. They can gratify only one aspect of Tess’s personality, not the whole. They are egotistical. Both are diabolic, though in varying degrees, in their respective relationship with her. It is a delusion of Angel to think that he is morally superior to Tess. Surrendering to his middle class moral consciousness, Angel deserts Tess, for he fears himself being labelled. His apprehension of social criticism is indicative of the intellectual limitation of his mind just as that of his two scholarly brothers:

Within the remote depths of his constitution, so gently and affectionate as he was in general, there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in a soft loam, which turned the edge of everything that attempted to traverse it. It had blocked his acceptance of the church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess. Moreover, his affection itself was less fire them radiance, and, with regard to the other sex, when he ceased to believe he ceased to follow: contrasting in this with many impressionable
natures, who remain sensually infatuated with what they intellectually despise. (p.311)

It takes the effort of a simple, rustic girl like Izz Huett to make Angel see the sacrificial nature of Tess's selfless love for him, and the intervention of a stranger in Brazil to make him aware of the decrepitude of his moral principles. He learns through sufferings and experience what he has failed to learn through mere ratiocination. What Clare has failed to comprehend at the crisis of Tess's life is that love and intimacy can exist without reference to external laws.

Angel Clare's ultimate realization of his erroneous judgment of Tess comes a little too late to save her from the cruel hands of fate: "I did not think rightly of you— I did not see you as you were" he continued to plead. "I have learnt to since, dearest Tessy mine!" (p.466) Angel's particular cast of mind does not seem to ensure a happy married life even with Liza-Lu- "a spiritualized image of Tess." (p. 488) It is quite probable that this man of high idealism may fail in practical life. For instance, Tess's last question, "Tell me now, Angel, do you think we shall meet again after we are dead? I want to know" (p.486), remains unanswered by Angel. And Hardy's authorial comment is bitterly ironic: "Like a greater than himself, to a critical question at the critical time he did not answer." (p.486) A practical man of sincere emotions could certainly have answered the
question in the affirmative even if it was an assumption. But he still remains entrapped in his own hardened world of intellectual obstinacy. And Liza-Lu, the spiritualized image of Tess, would perhaps lack the sensuality and physical charm of Tess which was no less a factor in Angel’s attraction towards her.

Tess’s final rest in the dilapidated heathen temple at Stonehenge is symbolic of her primitivism, her inviolable affinity with the soul of nature:

And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home. (p.484)

This primitive heathen place connects Tess with the cosmic power of the universe. There is an ineluctable bond between her native self and that of the cosmos. Her brief happy interlude with Clare before her death is a reward for her inner purity and innocence, though it is highly doubtful whether Angel deserves it. Ultimately Tess’s life becomes a redemptive martyrdom. The brutal execution of Tess is perhaps prompted by Hardy’s uncompromising belief in the hostility of the omnipotent will towards man. Apart from this, and more significant indeed, Tess’s death is a symbolic expression of the eventual eradication of an authentically unique self by inhuman social and moral laws. Tess of the d’Urbervilles is distinguished by its virtually obsessive, unswerving singularity of perspective— the indictment of the application of universal ethical laws to the utter disregard
of the unique individual. And in the novel he remains committed to the cause of the authentic individual. The organization of human society, he argues, ought to be on the basis of human nature, not on the basis of artificially imposed subjective social laws. It is the harsh and indiscriminate application of rigid moral laws which is resented in *Tess*. And Hardy seems to suggest that the individual should learn to turn back upon himself for moral evaluation when the social world is intransigently antagonistic to the life of nature. It is only appropriate to end this brief discussion with the words of Noorul Hasan: ‘The peculiar resonance and form of this tale of the village maiden is the work of an ineluctable cultural memory. It is this memory which makes the novel what it is.’  

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Reference


8. Ibid. p.24


11. Ibid. p.80.

12. Ibid. p.60.


