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## GENDER DYNAMICS IN TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES AND THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE BY THOMAS HARDY

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NATIVE BY THOMAS HARDY

by

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B.A., (Honors) University of Zimbabwe, 2019

A Research Paper

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## INTRODUCTION

### WOMEN AND THE VICTORIAN ERA

Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) are novels that explore the complexities of societal expectations and gender roles which governed the 19<sup>th</sup> century British society. Through his female protagonists in these two novels, Hardy raises awareness and critiques the harsh treatment of women during the Victorian period. This paper investigates the gender issues in *Tess* and *The Return of the Native* and shows how Hardy challenges traditional gender roles that were oppressive.

In Victorian England, gender norms and expectations were particularly painful for women. Women's rights were extremely limited in all spheres of life- domestically to socially. Mary Ann Mason Burki (1975) states that "...there were many novelists that focused on women and the relations between men and women" (195) and mentions Thomas Hardy as one of them. She then goes on to list six categories of relationships women had with those around them: women and government, the nature of women, woman and work, women and religion, women and sex, and finally woman and education. Women did not have the right to vote or to own property, and were expected to be submissive to their husbands, nurture their children, take care of their homes and put other people's needs before their own. Conduct books were even published to reiterate how exactly women were supposed to behave. McKnight (2019) does an excellent job in dissecting these conduct books and what exactly they meant for women at the time. She lists a couple of conduct book authors such as Sarah Ellis, Sarah Lewis, and Isabella Beeton. She states that "wives were expected to conduct themselves as martyrs" (29). She draws these conclusions from the fact that these influential conduct book owners believed "women were meant to live for others" and that "women should approach marriage with habitual

subjection of self to the interest and happiness of others.” This shows a total lack of autonomy for woman. It also shows this was a patriarchal society that put the needs of men above the women’s while limiting women’s career opportunities and education.

Harvey (2003) points out that the image of the Victorian middle-class woman was controlled culturally (34). According to him, “women were also denied any sexual feelings. And were doubly victims of idealization and abuse, particularly of the double standard in sexual morality, which branded liberated women as ‘fallen’ while condoning their lovers. This is a remark that is true of Tess. She is the perfect example of when everything that could go wrong, goes wrong. Not only does she come from a poor background, but she is also unlucky with love, is raped, conceives from the rape, and loses her child, and ultimately dies. Tess poses many character traits of what was expected of a woman. She lacks assertiveness and is easily manipulated. She knows the right thing to do for herself but is easily swayed into going the other direction. This is seen in the very beginning of the novel when she is persuaded to go to the D’Urbervilles for financial help. Her mother asks her; “Do ye know that there is a very rich d’Urberville living on the outskirts o’ The Chase, who must be our relation? You must go to her and claim kin and ask for some help in our trouble.” To which Tess responds, “I’d rather try to get work” (41). She is persuaded long enough to where she eventually goes, and there she meets Alec. The second time a thing of a similar nature happens is when Alec writes a letter to Tess’s family claiming to be his mother, asking her to come to work for him. Again, Tess knows this is not a good idea as shown by “I don’t altogether think I ought to go, said Tess thoughtfully... I would rather stay here with father and you.” (51). Upon being asked the reason why by her mother, she answers, “I’d rather not tell you why, mother- indeed I don’t quite know why”. From this it is clear that her conscience was not in alignment with her going to the D’Urberville house. Her mother uses

different persuasion strategies, which are mainly monetary-driven. She starts off by speaking of Alec's physical appearance- "He is a mighty handsome man." To this Tess responds, "I don't think so" (52). When this technique fails, she hints on his financial status "Well- there's your chance whether or no. And I'm sure he wears a beautiful diamond ring!" (52). This shows social class differences, a major thematic concern in the novels of Thomas Hardy. A person's financial state was a major driving force for marriage. Harvey agrees with this by stating "Hardy's intelligent and sympathetic portrayal of women is informed by his perception of the inextricable entanglement of class and gender issues, particularly the importance of class and gender issues, particularly the importance of education and marriage as offering upward social mobility" (34).

## THE INFLUENCE OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES AND THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

One very important aspect of gender issues in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, as stated above is Alec raping Tess. By so doing, he displays a level of sexual entitlement to her body. It also showcases the power dynamics that existed between men and women during this time. Hardy, through the rape incident also highlights the double standards and hypocrisy that was prevalent in this society. Though many readers and critics look at this incident and consider it as rape, it should not be ignored that there has been quite a number of scholarships on whether she was forced to engage in the act or not. William A. Davis Jr in his article "The Rape of Tess: Hardy, English Law, and the Case for Sexual Assault" (1997) poses the infamous question: "Was Tess raped or she was seduced, by Alec d'Urberville" (221). This question has been the cause of a century long debate. Davis looks at this from the legal perspective. He states how in the 1891 version of *Tess*, Alec gives Tess a drink, which could have clouded her judgment. He goes on to say "Victorian readers of the 1891 edition of *Tess* read a description of the assault scene containing specific details that would have further established the scene's legal undertones". (Davis 224). Hardy, however, clearly states that Tess was asleep, shown by "She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears" (82). He talks about several situations that English law considered to be rape during that time, and being asleep was one of them, as an individual is unable to give consent when they are asleep (224).

Rape or no, bottom line is this was an incident that brought about great pain to Tess. When Tess gets pregnant as a result of this, she is shunned, while on the other hand the perpetrator of the crime goes scot-free. This again reinforces the patriarchal society which does not care for the well-being of women. On top of this sexual and physical abuse, Tess also faces



psychological and emotional pain when her child dies in infancy. She faces double emotional turmoil, not only is she the laughingstock of society, and an example of what not to be, because she has a child, out of wedlock, she now also has to deal with mourning her child. On the same fence, Hardy shows that the plight of women in the Victorian era also came through religion. As Tess's child is about to die, she is worried for his soul because he is not baptized.

“And when she had discovered this, she was plunged into the misery which transcended the child's simple loss. Her baby had not been baptized...like all village girls, she was well grounded into the Holy Scriptures, and had dutifully studied the histories of Aholah and Aholibah and knew the inferences to be drawn therefrom” (105). Hardy himself was not particularly against religion, but he was conscious of the fact that it kept people ignorant, and many people were hypocrites because of it. Simon Gatrell (1993) on the notion of Christianity states that “So it is too with the issue of Christianity; Hardy was quite capable of loving the Bible and the Prayer-book and the Hymnal, of caring for churches not just as architectural designs, but as conductors of something of value, of entering fully into the beauty of the services; and yet at the same time denouncing utterly the Christian Churches as institutions, and declaring that they represent and mediate a bankrupt creed that has outworn its usefulness in this world.” (103). The priest that she asked to conduct her child's baptism does not do so, and as a last resort, she baptized him herself as shown by “SORROW, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. She sprinkled the water and there was silence.” (107). She names her son “Sorrow”, symbolizing the sorrow and misery she has been through in her life thus far. One would think that the introduction of Angel to Tess, as his name suggests, would be to come and save her from the pain, suffering and misery she has been through. It does appear so for a little while, before all comes crumbling down. The story of Angel and Tess is a classic story of double standards of the

Victorian era. When they confess their past to each other on their wedding night, Tess forgives him, and expects the same from her newlywed husband. Upon hearing Tess's past, Angel doesn't turn into a demon, but most definitely something very close to it. He fails to forgive her and starts looking at her from a whole different angle because she turned out to not be as 'pure' as he thought her to be. From this, Hardy highlights not only the double standards that women had to suffer in relationships during this time, but he also critiques the ideals of moral perfection which women were expected to uphold against all odds, as if life cannot take a toll and shift at any moment, as in the case of Tess who was molested. It's not like she went out there looking for these circumstances, it was just fate that found her, and she sadly had to go through them. This is unlike Angel, who intentionally went out and had other relations. All this goes to show the unfair gender disparities that existed, all in favor of men. Hardy shows that even love could not save women as Tess loved Angel, but she still deserted him, and was even the cause of murdering Alec, which also led to her own death. Hardy shows that there was no escape for women in this kind of society. *The Return of the Native* also explores gender issues. Eustacia Vye is one of the female protagonists in this novel through her, Hardy presents the nuances in resistance against the forces of oppression to women. The story is set in Egdon Heath, which the narrator describes as "the vast tract of unenclosed wild" (9). It is in this single setting that all the pandemonium takes place in the lives of the characters. Hardy's dedication of the first chapter of the novel to describing the Heath can be seen as a form of foreshadowing to the tragic events that follow. Eustacia Vye is a character worth talking about when looking at the gender issues as presented in this novel. Unlike Tess and Thomasin, who are naïve, passive, and unassertive, Eustacia does not conform to societal expectations that subdue women. Norman T. Carrington (1968) describes her as "Hardy's most powerfully drawn woman" (23). Not only is she beautiful, but she is also

intelligent, strong and does things on her own terms. The majority of chapter VII entitle “Queen of the Knight” is dedicated to describing Eustacia”. The narrator describes her physical appearance by saying;

“She was a person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow. It closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow...She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries...she was a girl of some forwardness of mind; indeed, weighed in relation to her situation among the very reeward of thinkers, very original” (68-72).

Eustacia is not from Egdon Heath. She was born in a comparatively urban space but was orphaned and had to move to stay with her grandfather. She challenges the societal norms by being independent, ambitious and openly expressing her feelings. She hates the Heath and wants to leave as soon as possible. She sees an opportunity to leave the Heath if she gets married to Clym. They get married, and she spends the majority of their marriage trying to convince her husband to move to Paris. Clym, is, however, determined on not going back to Paris but staying and opening up her school. Hardy uses their marriage to critique unions that are formed on the wrong foundation of what people can get from each other rather than truly and purely on love. Carrington (1968) comments on this by pointing at the Clym’s naivety of thinking that they could build a future together, as shown by “He is blind enough to imagine that because he is attracted to Eustacia she will make a fit helpmate for him in running a school in Budmouth” (30). Carrington further confirms this by saying that “She marries Clym for what she can get out of the marriage, not what she can put into it. (23). Eustacia defies societal expectations by being strong and unafraid of walking in the dark. The community of Egdon Heath finds her mannerisms

strange and accuse her of being a witch. Ultimately, she dies while trying to leave the Heath. She fought to the last breath to get what she really wanted, which was not a common occurrence among women of the time. Thomasin, on the other hand, is put in contrast with Eustacia. She is more passive and laid back. She is affected by gender normal and societal expectations when she goes off to get married but returns unmarried due to issues that arose with the marriage certificate. She and her aunt are extremely embarrassed by this, mainly because they worry about what people are going to say.

While the novels effectively weave the gender issues, they represent the matter differently. In the story "Tess of the d'Urbervilles," Tess symbolizes the result of a woman being bound to the chauvinistic nature of men presented throughout the book. This represents the Victorian era's nature and society's expectation of gender roles between males and females. The introduction of Alec D'Urberville turns the fate of this lady, portrayed as pure and innocent from the start, into a ruthless one. What Alec does leverages Tess's future experiences of misery; it epitomizes the predatory male.

Alec D'Urberville epitomizes what is worst in male dominance, using position and power for manipulation and control over Tess. In his seduction, or some say rape, of Tess, it is she who is victimized by pregnancy and then ostracized from society. This first act of victimization throws into sharp relief the stage of purity and sexuality on which the novel is performed (Leighton & Hardys 2023). Pure Tess is not so much an individual as a social category; once she loses that quality, she is judged and excluded. Another essential male character of great importance in the novel is Angel Clare, who represents the hypocrisy of Victorian moral standards (Bertrand 2022). Angel idealizes Tess as a pure, pastoral maiden untouched by the pollution of modernity. However, with her giving an account of vice in her past, this was to be

no more. In translation, this response points at the rigorous moral expectations with the sting of forceful judgment that society applies on women, and men like Angel are part of it.

In contrast, "The Return of the Native" depicts gender issues through its character, Eustacia Vye, who has the brightest prospects of emancipating herself from ruralism. With a spirited nature and longing for a more exciting, fulfilling lifestyle, Eustacia differs from the most common expectations of women in her society. She is the romantic ideal of an unbroken, hot-blooded woman, but such desires are never realized under the restrictions that her surroundings or others place on her. The love story of Eustacia with Clym Yeobright, the returning native, is just one illustrative example of the conflict in the story: the conflict between individual desires and the story. After Eustacia's efforts to win back her lover prove ineffective, Hardy throws the heath into a winter of storms and frost. Just as Clym's intellectual pretension and liberal ideas are bound to collapse on the deep-rooted conservatism of the heath, in the same manner, Eustacia ultimately fails since her failure to realize is because of Clym's incapacity to accept or submit to her desire for something different in life (Duran 2023). Incapable of bridging his constituents' individualism with Eustacia's realism, Clym is now set to presage the more significant incompatibility of personal aspirations with societal values. Another well-developed female character in "The Return of the Native" is Thomasin Yeobright (Leighton & Hardys 2023). Thomasin is the epitome of the typical feminine type, whose conflicts represent keeping up with social propriety while pursuing happiness (Bertrand 2022). Her experiences with Damon Wildeve and Diggory Venn show shades of the various forms of stability/instability men provide women within their lives. Wildeve's capriciousness is another variation of this male influence on female autonomy that Venn assures and stabilizes with his demeanour. Both novels use a lot of freedom and determinism. Tess and Eustacia, in their distinct narratives, look for a way to

control their lives regarding their predetermined fates, and finally, are doomed to be by deterministic forces in society. In "The Return of the Native," the heath almost becomes one of the characters, symbolizing the wild, untamed aspects of Eustacia's desires and the societal constraints that ultimately bind her. The vastness of heath bears eternity stamped upon its face—unchangeable social mores and the hopeless endeavors of Eustacia to change this state of affairs (Bertrand 2022). All these point to a more significant theme within the novella: determinism and the clash of individual aspirations against society's mores. The male characters in both novels are substantial in rendering gender relations and sketching out the differences between the power and freedom of men and women (Leighton & Hardys 2023). The predatory nature of Alec d'Urberville and the moral bigotry that characterized Angel Clare in "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" are manifestations of male dominance in different forms and its effect on the life of a woman. "The Return of the Native" opposes Clym Yeobright's intellectual pursuits and Wildeve's fickle appeal in asserting Diggory Venn's steadfastness beside them—the spectrum of varying male influence on female autonomy. The character of Angel Clare represents an aspect of gender issues. His immediate reaction to shun and reject Tess right when he heard of her past unveiled the extremely misogynistic face of his time. Angel does not forgive Tess for her sin, which was her misfortune; at 16, she did not have her family decisions (Bertrand 2022). But then he expects and believes he shall be forgiven for his sins. It thus represents a harsh image related to gender discrimination and puts a big difference or dichotomy between women and men as far as tolerance is concerned. Hardy also reveals the burden placed upon the various female characters by society. Society always denies Thomasin Yeobright the life that she can have—secure and reputable through the selfishness of the men in her life and her perseverance through societal censure—followed by final acceptance of the love of Diggory Venn.

These reveal the lack of options open to women in high society and outline the backbone that had to force this world into submission. The novels also lead the reader to question the consequences of a condemnatory society with a limited degree of power for women. The hanging of Tess at the end of "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" is a perfect reflection of a condemning society that penalizes women who have fallen prey to atrocities (Leighton & Hardys 2023). Similarly, the tragic end of Eustacia in "The Return of the Native" only underscores the point of a society that is destructive and unkind towards women. The gender issues in Hardy's writings are appraised in enhanced ways because symbolic elements further describe them. From the plush dairy farm presented in "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" to the wild heath in "The Return of the Native," the natural settings serve as metaphors for the characters' interior lives and the constraints of society (Duran 2023). Both the beauty and brutality of nature mirror the struggles of the characters and their broader themes: freedom and restriction.

Ultimately, the Hardy novels criticized the patriarchal norms of the time to a great extent. Hardy presented his tragedies of Tess and Eustacia to show the reader the adverse verdict that the forces' expectations could have on women (Leighton & Hardys 2023). His strong presence of male characters and the different levels at which one is dominated in life become another solid testimony to the complexities that ripple gender dynamics. In these ways, Hardy offers a more subtle and enduring look at gender issues as he delves beneath the surface into playing between what a person wants and what society allows that person to do.

Such interplay between individual desires and societal expectations, the contrasting roles of male characters, and the symbolic use of nature all add up to a rich tapestry and a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics that is as alive in contemporary debates about gender and society. The works by Hardy show not only wrongs directed towards women but also require a

thorough understanding and reassessment of norms that World Society upholds and that circulate gender inequality.

In conclusion, gender is deeply involved in Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" and "The Return of the Native" in issues about Victorian society. Through the complex experiences of characters such as Tess Durbeyfield and Eustacia Vye, Thomas Hardy criticizes patriarchal norms and societal constraints that suffocate women from their autonomous fates.



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