

## An Analysis of the Symbolic Meanings of Settings in Tess of D'Urbervilles

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**ABSTRACT.** *Tess of D'Urbervilles is one of Thomas Hardy's famous series of novels called "Character and Environment." Tess of D'Urbervilles is the story about the misfortune and tragedy of Tess, a beautiful and innocent young country girl. To stress Tess' tragic fate and her personality, Hardy uses a lot of depiction of the settings in this novel. Through the symbolic description of the settings in Tess of D'Urbervilles, Thomas Hardy interweaves settings so thoroughly into the plots as well as the fate of the heroine in the novel. This paper will analyze the symbolic meanings and the archetypal images of the settings from the following aspects: the color, the bird imagery, seasons and the changing of places. The changing of the places symbolizes the changing of Tess' fate; the season is tied to the development of Tess' mind state; the appearances of the red color imply the changing of Tess' tragic fate and situation; Tess' fate is closely related with the birds' fates. Through the analysis, readers can predict the heroine's tragic fate and have a more deeply feeling and profound understanding of the whole novel and her tragedy.*

**KEYWORDS:** *settings, symbolic meanings, archetypal images*

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), world famous novelist and poet, is one of the representatives of English critical realism in the 19th century. He is good at describing environment. His principal works are the Wessex Novels, which describing the characters and environment of his native countryside. He is familiar with the Bible and likes using archetypal images. "Among his famous novels, Tess of D'Urbervilles could be regarded as the summit of his realism.[1]" Tess of D'Urbervilles holds up a mirror for the spirit of the time which reflects the reality of the British Capitalist economy which penetrated agriculture to extinct, the peasant class gradually fading away and their painful process of trying to find a new way. Tess, heroine of the novel is a peasant girl whose family is originally a noble one, which declines in a special era. In her short life, disasters follow closely on her, "Tess likes a lonely bird.[2]" She seems doomed to the fact of her life. Undoubtedly, this novel is a tragedy. For many readers, Hardy's crowning achievement is his creation of Tess, who has become one of the most memorable women characters in all literature. Irving Howe regards Tess as "rare creature in literature" and "She is Hardy's greatest tribute to the possibilities of human existence.[3]" To stress Tess'

tragic fate and her personality, Hardy uses a lot of depiction of the settings. Through these settings and their symbolic meanings, readers can predict Tess' fate and have a more profound understanding of the whole novel and Tess' tragedy.

### **1. The changing of the places symbolizes the changing of Tess' fate**

Setting is the essential part of a novel. In *Tess of D'Urbervilles*; Hardy uses a lot of description of the settings. Setting not only serves as the background, but is thoroughly interwoven into plots of the story as well as the characters in this novel. In *Tess of D'Urbervilles*, the landscape and the title character take parallel routes, Tess seems to be one with nature and the paths of her life blend with her surroundings. Tess experiences five main different places in her whole life. Hardy uses a lot of specific description to describe these different places. He expresses and describes the character's fate through the settings.

#### ***1.1 The simple life in the quite Blackmoor***

Tess starts her life-long journey from a remote village named Marlott lay in a beautiful vale- Blackmoor Vale, where she is born and brought up. At the very beginning of the story, Hardy gives a very detailed description of the landscape, which doesn't seem to mean much, but in essence indicates the appearing of heroine and shows that she is as beautiful and natural as the landscape. Tess is just an innocent country girl and lives a very simple and quite life in her hometown at that time.

#### ***1.2 The rape in the dark Trantridge***

Tess live in Marlott lay for quite a long time. When she is grown up, she leaves her family and hometown for the first time and goes to Trantridge for asking for help from the D'Urbervilles, who are the possible wealthy relatives to her family. Hardy gives a description of this village, which obviously includes the moral evaluation of the local customs, the conventional style of the villagers and their bad habits like alcoholism. It implies that Tess lies in a perilous situation as well as foreshows the occurring of her tragedy. Several indulgent women drink so much that they make a conflict with Tess unreasonably, which provides an opportunity for Alec to lure Tess. Then Tess is seduced and raped by Alec.

#### ***1.3 The love affair in the beautiful Talbothays***

Tess encounters rape in a dark forest of Trantridge, after which she returns home for escaping from Alec. After being staying at home for two or three years, Tess leaves home for the second time, Hardy stresses on the difference between Blackmoor and Talbothays. The description of these three places is cleverly linked together, even though they are only a few miles apart. Talbothays is a very different

place. It foreshows the coming of Tess' new life. Tess and Angel fall in love with each other in this beautiful place, and spend their happiest time there. Whereas some detailed description of settings also implies that Tess will meet some unhappy things and end to tragedy. The cattle in Talbot hays are "tribes"; while the cattle in Blackmoor are "families". "Tribe" is not as admirable as "family". The atmosphere of Blackmoor is intensely blue and its soils and scent are heavy, whereas the air of Talbot hays is "clear, bracing, and ethereal." "Ethereal" in the novel means "delicacy, lightness", and it also has another meaning, that is "too spiritual", which shows us the characteristic of Angel-is so ideal that makes Tess displays a vivid life with her life in his mind. Tess is completely antagonistic to the idealistic one, Angel abandons Tess on the wedding night. The image of the river in Blackmoor is "slow, silent, often turbid with muddy beds into which the waders might sink" which can be taken as a symbol of trap. While the river Froom has a positive meaning, which is regarded as "the pure river of life" in New Testament. [4] And as what is said in it, any unclean and defiled objects are not allowed to flow into the river, which implies that Angel as well as his world will not accept Tess and their marriage is a tragedy. There is still pain and misfortune waiting for Tess.

#### ***1.4 The rough life in the terrible Flintcomb-Ash***

Tess is abandoned by Angel and then reaches Flintcomb-Ash, which is southeast to Blackmoor. The name itself implies the characteristics of the place-it is poor, deserted villa and located in a hard table-land and as spiritless as "Ash". This disgusting and cold environment of this place makes a sharp contrast with the green world in Blackmoor. There is nothing but the coldness and hard labor in Flintcomb-Ash. The setting here implies hardship of Tess' life as well as her fate.

#### ***1.5 The decadence in the impetuous Sandbourne***

When Tess leaves a very Flintcomb-Ash, her mother takes a serious disease. Tess returns home but her mother's condition doesn't improve. Even worse, her father suddenly dies of heart disease. Alec catches this opportunity to express his love towards Tess and promises to look after her family. Tess has to become his mistress. Then Tess separates from agriculture and comes to a small tourist city-Sandbourne. This place here is far different from the others which she had been. There are no farm, crops, or cattle. It is a good place for pleasure, but it doesn't suit for Tess, who is the daughter of the nature. Compared with the old Blackmoor Vale, Sandbourne is flashy and inauthentic. Its vanity reflects Alec's untrue love towards Tess, she is only his toy. The brilliant appearance of Sandbourne conceals its vacuity and emptiness of life. Nature is the only one patron saint for Tess; bustling city never can be her home. Hardy uses the changing of the setting implies the end of Tess' life.

### ***1.6 The end of the tragedy in the sacred Stonehenge***

After killing Alec, Tess and Angel come to Stonehenge. Tess' end of her life journey is arranged in this special place where ancient British people supplied sacrifice for the sun. Tess offers herself up as a sacrifice and is soon taken away to be hanged. She is just lying in the middle of the altar of sacrifice platform, surrounded by policemen. This scene is a typical image of the "scapegoat" in modern society. In ancient myth, only the heroes would be regarded as the sacrificial scapegoat, who offered a sacrifice to God for the happiness of his tribe as well as the propriety of his state. [5] Tess ends her life in here, just like the ancient sacrificial scapegoat, she is also the offering of the modern society and an innocent victim of hypocrisy in morality. Tess tragedy concludes.

### **2. The symbolic meaning of the seasons**

The description of the seasons also has symbolic meaning, which is tied to the changing of the heroine's mind and situation. Every image has strong power to move the readers' feelings. Tess leaves her home for the first time in spring, which means that she is full of hope and towards a promising life. And Tess meets Angel Clare also in spring. The archetypal image of spring is "life, rebirth and recovery". Along with the coming of spring, Tess recovers from the "hurt" and gets a sort of rebirth. She is moved by spring, which "makes her passionate to go 'to search for 'the instinct towards self-delight'". Spring brings Tess not only the recovery but also the hope to pursue a new life. Tess falls in love with Angel Clare in summer. The coming life for Tess is completely different; she is beloved and has a happy time. Another year's installment of many creatures foreshows the fate of Tess. They are engaged in autumn which stands for harvest, and their love seems very beautiful in that period. Tess arrives at Flintcomb-Ash in winter and lives a very a very difficult life here. The winter is "coldness and lifeless", which indicates the heroine's inner world-Tess' disappointment and desolate mood. Tess is in a very miserable situation in that period. There is no hope for her, her life is completely desperate.

### **3. The archetypal image of the red color**

Meanwhile, Hardy uses a lot of archetypal images in this novel. The employment of archetypal images is another representative character in his works, which also contributes greatly to the successful creation of the characters in this novel and implies the future of Tess. Color is the essential part of the setting. The red color is a typical archetypal image, which is used for many times in this novel. According to the traditional interpretation of the images, red refers to "warmth and enthusiasm", but it also can be interpreted as "blood, crime, lust and violence". The negative meanings of the red color repeat several times throughout the novel, which is tied to Tess' situation and fate. The first time of her appearing is in the village's ceremony of the May-Day dance. Her "red ribbon" is so striking that makes a sharp contrast to

the environment, which foreshadows Tess is so unusual that her destiny will also be rough and involved.

When Tess comes to Trantridge for the first time, there is a detailed description of the house of the D'Urbervilles, furthermore, Hardy tells us that it is a "country-house built for enjoyment pure and simple." This image of the red color of it seems not to match with the green ground red color is applied to the house, which reminds us of the opening mouth of a wild beast. Tess is just like an innocent small animal, and will be eaten. When Alec is around, the red color tends to become more overwhelming. It is very dangerous for Tess to get along with him. There are also many other color images in this novel: the blood of the old horse-Prince in Tess' family. When Tess leaves Trantridge for home, she meets a man who stops at a gate and writes some large "red" letters. They are some words from the Bible: "THOU, SHALT, NOT, COMMIT". When Tess kills Alec, the hostess of her house sees "this scarlet blot in the midst" of "the oblong white ceiling". The images of the red color predict Tess' tragic fate.

#### **4. The bird imagery**

"In Hardy's works, bird is one of the imageries which he likes to use most." [6] Hardy uses the bird imagery as many as forty times in this novel, which plays a very important role in shaping character. "Even sometimes it can serve as the impetus to impulse the development of the plots". When Tess is full of hope, the birds sing the joyful songs; when she is down, the songs of the birds are also sad. Tess' tragedy in her early years tells her that "the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing". After Tess is abandoned by Alec, Tess comes to Flintcomb-Ash, where she meets a dying bird. The bird imagery just represents Tess herself. Tess is chased by the indifferent forces of the destiny, just like a bird driven by the hunter, their fates are closely related. The grief of the birds is caused by the cruelty and indifference of the natural world, and Tess' tragedy is caused by the prejudice of the mundane people.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Setting is the essential part of the novel, which provides specific locations for forming the characters and the development of their actions. In *Tess of D'Urbervilles*, setting is not merely a backdrop against which the action takes place, but is rather an integral part of the book. The description of the settings makes an important contribution to our understanding of the characters and the action. The setting in the novel strengthens the point that Tess is tragic character. The symbolic meaning of the last scene is the most unforgettable. "Thomas Hardy as most critics commented, as it seemed to be, never failed to dissatisfy his reads by giving his novels disillusioned endings.[6]" Hardy is good at describing the natural scenery and using archetypal images. He interweaves settings so thoroughly into the plots as well as the situation, psychological state and fate of Tess, which make this novel to be more attractive. He can blend the setting and the feeling of characters very well. "Hardy makes so ingenious arrangement that enhance the artistic value of this novel

greatly” [7] . This novel can be called as one of the most classic works throughout the history of the literature. On the whole, The setting in *Tess of D'Urbervilles* is highly symbolic which can strengthen the artistic appeal of this novel and also can help readers to understand the profound connotation of the environmental description and its deep connection with changes of Tess' fate in the novel , which is actually a stylistic symbol repeatedly found in the works of Hardy. Though setting is silent, it tells the tragedy of “a pure women” by its own distinctive method.

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