

# The Picturesque and the Tragic Vision: Thomas Hardy's Landscape and Female Images in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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**Abstract:** *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is one of Thomas Hardy's representative works, which depicts the tragedy of an innocent girl on the countryside. Hardy, sharing the romantic and impressionist pictorial features in his literary texts, employs the techniques of the picturesque, such as using light, colour and layers, to demonstrate his tragic vision. This study examines the picturesque and its aesthetic value on the construction of characters, whose location within a specific geography symbolizes the social entrapment. With the protagonist Tess as a case study, this paper finds that Tess's doomed destiny is prefigured by the depictions of landscape and her portraits in it, revealing that she is imprisoned by her geographic and social realities. The employment of the picturesque in the novel, therefore, embodies Hardy's deep understanding of genres of realism and tragedy.

**Keywords:** *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy, Picturesque, Landscape, Tragic Vision

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy is a remarkable English novelist and poet in the Victorian era. Among his literary works, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) is of critical importance. The relationship between Hardy's literary works and the visual arts has received abundant attention. Alastair Smart, in "Pictorial Imagery in the Novels of Thomas Hardy" (1961), recognises Hardy's possession of "so intimate a knowledge of the visual arts".<sup>[1]</sup> J. B. Bullen's *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (1986) further develops the connection between the visual arts and human emotions in Hardy's fiction.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition, the relationship between the picturesque and gender is a main concern in Hardy's writing. Kristin Brady, in her essay "Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender" (1999), states the challenging gender matters in Hardy's fiction: "Hardy's fiction simultaneously depicts and elicits sexual responses that are transgressive, not only for their failure to conform with standard rules governing courtship and marriage, but also for their failure to subscribe exclusively to the dictates of compulsory heterosexuality".<sup>[3]</sup> The picturesque in Hardy's fiction has been critically connected with gender studies. And many feminist readings of Hardy present their criticism of his portrayal of the female characters, and even identify Hardy's attitude as "unsettling" or "anti-feminist".<sup>[4]</sup>

However, this paper finds that Hardy's fiction may provide a promising case for studying a male writer who criticizes the gender stereotypes by unravelling the tragedies of women under the male gaze and the public perception. He transcends his time and endows literary texts with such knowledge through the employment of the picturesque. By means of close reading and allusion to the visual arts, this paper explores the picturesque presented in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and its aesthetic effects on serving to the characterization, the atmosphere as well as the theme in this novel. And with the study of Hardy's tragic vision through the picturesque, a deeper understanding of his gender ideology might be formed.

## 2. The Picturesque in Landscape Depiction

Hardy's interest in the history of English and European paintings almost runs through his life, and he often leaves traces in his literary work of his appreciation. The connection between Hardy's works and the visual arts, in fact, is quite self-evident and has been much studied. He frequently visualizes the pictures with the techniques of the picturesque, leading readers to see them in their mind's eye. In particular, Hardy is good at using light and colour to "paint" the landscape in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, therefore, his depiction of landscape is intensively visual.

## 2.1. The Romantic Style

The landscape that Hardy depicts has frequently been his most familiar pastoral scenery. Using the texts as paintbrushes, he truthfully represents those landscapes with verisimilitude. The employment of light, colour and perspectives shows the exact beauty of the scenes like a landscape painting. In the beginning of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the most noticeable part is the concreteness of the scenery description. To introduce the Vale of Blackmoor as the "most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape-painter",<sup>[5]</sup> Hardy uses a panoramic view of a traveller to overlook the landscape. Here lies the beautiful landscape with hills, plains and valleys: "Behind him the hills are open, the sun blazes down upon fields so large as to give an unenclosed character to the landscape, the lanes are white, the hedges low and plashed, the atmosphere colourless. Here in the valley the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale; the fields are mere paddocks, so reduced that from this height their hedgerows appear a network of dark green threads overspreading the paler green of the grass. The atmosphere beneath is languorous, and is so tinged with azure that what artists call the middle-distance partakes also of that hue, while the horizon beyond is of the deepest ultramarine... Such is the Vale of Blackmoor".<sup>[6]</sup> The description of landscape here is vivid and detailed, with a diverse use of light and colour. The colour here is more abundant, such as the "dark green" hedgerows and "paler green" of grass, makes a layered sense of different still lives stand out, contributing to the realistic effect. Although there is no particular name of a painting mentioned here, with Hardy's use of the painting technique terms like "the middle distance",<sup>[7]</sup> it is evident that this depiction resembles a way of drawing a picture of this landscape by the narrator himself.

Also, by employing different light and colours, the description reflects the different perspectives of the landscape. Bullen demonstrates that the paintings of J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) could be an important visual inspiration for effects of light and colour in the landscape description in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.<sup>[8]</sup> Turner was a remarkable English landscape painter, whose works were mostly characterized by a chromatic palette and broadly applied atmospheric washes of paint. From the perspective of painting characteristics, Turner's landscape paintings are more concerned with conveying an overall impression of landscape, paying particular attention to effects of light and atmosphere. Therefore, Hardy's treatment of landscape "shows him as the disciple of many masters, the most pervasive being Turner."<sup>[9]</sup> This similarity in romantic style not only lies in this particular work. When studying Hardy's another novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), there are also scholars pointing out, "Turner's name has become synonymous with Victorian landscape painting, and his paintings show the powerlessness of man compared to the romance and glory of the natural world. In this thematic way he is very similar to Thomas Hardy".<sup>[10]</sup>

In addition, this beautiful "painting" with a romantic style is filled with Hardy's love for this piece of land, because for Hardy who was born in Dorset, the scenes in the novel are mostly experienced by him in person. Here lie the precious memories of his childhood and peaceful life. Therefore, at the beginning, Tess is in perfect harmony with her birthplace, which possesses aesthetic beauty and nostalgic feelings. The involvement of inner feelings within the use of colour and light is exactly another feature of Turner's style, echoing the subjective feature of romanticism. Evolving from the classical painting that paid more attention to composition and lines, "the romanticism flourished in the first half of the 19th century overthrew the program of classical painting, they walked out of the studio to the nature and paid attention to the change of light and colour, they expressed their inner feelings with full colour".<sup>[11]</sup>

In this sense, when Tess comes back home after being seduced by Alec d'Urberville and losing her virginity to him, she sees the signs of reprobation in the landscape about what happened to her. "The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly-wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of bitter reproach".<sup>[12]</sup> Here, landscape becomes haunted and Tess's image becomes objectified as a visual element in this upsetting scene. However, when Tess tries to start her new life in the Talbothays Dairy, she stands high and watch this beautiful landscape. "These myriads of cows stretching under her eyes from the far east to the far west outnumbered any she had ever seen at one glance before. The green lea was speckled as thickly with them as a canvas by Van Alsloot or Sallaert with burghers. The ripe hues of the red and dun kine absorbed the evening sunlight, which the white-coated animals returned to the eye in rays almost dazzling, even at the distant elevation on which she stood".<sup>[13]</sup> Hardy combines several bright colours in this description—red, dun and white—these dazzling colour shows the landscape is full of vigor, combined with Tess's longing for the new life. Van Alsloot and Sallaert are both Dutch painters in 17th century, and their paintings are famous for the landscape and grand scenes from common life. Thus, we can see Hardy's knowledge of the visual arts and its traces in the novel not only from the techniques of the picturesque that he employs.

Reasonable use of colour and light as well as the combined inner feelings has become a major feature of Hardy's landscape depiction. This picturesque feature and the romantic painting style have the consistent creative principle. Through the close reading, this study proposes to read Hardy's representations of landscape and characters who inhabit in it together, with the landscape serving as an extension and externalisation of the character's visual subjectivity. The landscape does not change physically but rather psychologically in the character's perception and interpretation, as their affection contributes to their subjective vision. This helps us understand Hardy's idea about treating literary realism as an interpretation rather than a reproduction of reality.

## 2.2. The Impressionist Style

The ideographic abstractness brings about the illusionary artistic world into the novels. In the visual arts, Impressionists, instead of reproducing the nature, prefer to use light and shade as well as layers of colour to present reality as an impression and express their feelings. Unlike the romanticist, light becomes the leading role in Impressionist paintings. Impressionists do not pay attention to lines and contours but focus on the performance of the colour layers under light as well as the hue of the patch. The perception of the Impressionist painting might be fuzzy, but as a whole, the painting has reached a very integrate and realistic effect. Just as Hardy's words in the Preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, "A novel is an impression, not an argument".<sup>[14]</sup>

In His landscape depiction, there is also a taste of Impressionist style. For example, when Tess says yes to Clare's propose, the landscape goes like this: "They saw tiny blue fogs in the shadows of trees and hedges, all the time that there was bright sunshine elsewhere. The sun was so near the ground, and the sward so flat, that the shadows of Clare and Tess would stretch a quarter of a mile ahead of them, like two long fingers pointing afar to where the green alluvial reaches abutted against the sloping sides of the vale".<sup>[15]</sup> The descriptions of "tiny blue fogs", "bright sunshine", "shadows of Clare and Tess" all depict a dreamy scene at afternoon. They are drunk in their love, so the light and colour seem ethereal. Blue light and shadow are actually typical impressionist feature, like Claude Monet's painting "Impression, Sunrise" (1872), which is full of blue light and shade. In this way, reading Hardy's landscape depiction resembles looking at an impressionist painting.

By analysing Hardy's picturesque feature in depicting landscape, it can be inferred that Hardy's treatment of landscape, which conforms to the romantic and impressionist styles, serve as a key to explore the feeling of his characters. It provides us a new perspective to see Hardy's frequent deployments of putting an individual in an environment where he or she is confronted with nature. The individual here, instead of being diminished by nature, is constrained by one's own visual subjectivity.

## 3. The Aesthetic Effect of the Picturesque

As mentioned, light and colour have always played an important role in the development of western paintings as a special kind of painting language. With the continuous development of western arts, light and colour become the main elements of painters to express their subjective feelings, especially in the Impressionist paintings. "They not only express the subjective emotions of painters but also make the works more expressive, decorative and symbolic".<sup>[16]</sup> When applying these picturesque techniques in literary works, there are also the aesthetic effects on expression and symbolism.

### 3.1. Female Images for the Construction of Characters

In addition to Hardy's excellence in landscape depiction, he is also good at character portrayal. Joan Grundy comments that "most readers, however, probably think of him primarily as a landscape artist... Yet his characters, as we have seen, maybe 'in' other settings than a landscape... Hardy, in other words is also a portrait-painter".<sup>[17]</sup> As a matter of fact, Hardy also finds an artist's approach to portraits—the appropriation of elements from the visual arts, such as colour, light and other means of expressions—to present the complexity of characters. "Hardy looks at his characters' facial characteristics with the eyes of a painter. He notices line, curve, and colour, and is alert to what they can tell us of the personality within".<sup>[18]</sup> For example, in this novel, Hardy describes the protagonist Tess in this way, "[as] she walked along today, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then".<sup>[19]</sup> Tess's Peony mouth and red ribbon are set off evidently by the band of women in white gowns and with white flowers in their hands. Thus, with the distinct colour, Tess is the red flower

in the blank background. Written as this novel's subtitle "a pure woman faithfully presented", Tess is the representative of an innocent and beautiful woman at the very beginning of this story.

In the Talbothays Dairy, Clare regards Tess as the daughter of Nature. "She was milking Old Pretty thus, and the sun chancing to be on the milking-side is shone flat upon her pink-gowned form, and her white curtain-bonnet, and upon her profile, rendering it keen as a cameo cut from the dun background of the cow".<sup>[20]</sup> The profile here is similar to the girl in Pierre-Auguste Renoir's painting *Mlle Irene Cahen D'Anvers* (1880), with the repetition of the colour white, it indicates Tess's youthful fairness and female beauty in Clare's eyes. Therefore, Hardy "is one of the few novelists who can make us appreciate why the heroes are in love with the heroine".<sup>[21]</sup>

### 3.2. Symbolism in Light and Colour

Another aesthetic effect of the picturesque in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is the symbolism of colour and light. Hardy is sensitive of colours. In his eyes, even the same colour has different degrees in different time. And the various colours in this novel are not randomly accumulated to show his knowledge of the visual arts but embody symbolic meanings.

#### 3.2.1. Symbolism of Red and the Theme of Tragedy

The colour red, repeatedly mentioned in the novel, has its symbolic significance. At the first appearance of Tess, the "red ribbon" has already buried a hint of her tragic fate. In her life, "Red" has constantly brings her disaster, and finally pushes the flames of her fate to its end.

When Tess leaves Trantridge for home after losing virginity to Alec, she sees the large red words from biblical texts on the walls: "THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT. Against the peaceful landscape, the pale decaying tints of the corpses, the blue air of the horizon, and the lichened stile-boards, these staring vermilion words shone forth. They seemed to shout themselves out, and make the atmosphere ring".<sup>[22]</sup> Feng Jianqin believes, "controlled by different emotions, people's reaction to colour is also different. Such as when feeling irritated, seeing strong stimulating colour will deepen the uneasiness".<sup>[23]</sup> Therefore, the vermilion here deepens Tess's anxiety and shame. Tess feels ashamed when she sees the words, accused by "the words entered Tess with accusatory horror",<sup>[24]</sup> as if these words are here representing her "sin".

The colour red reappears when releasing Alec's death. With the lady-lodger's narration, "the oblong white ceiling, with this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts".<sup>[25]</sup> Tess finally revolts against her fate and kills Alec. Red here officially becomes a real sin, as Tess commits murder. The red ace of heart here easily makes readers associate the "A" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which was also symbolized Adultery as a sin. Red highlights the theme of tragedy, strengthening the tragic effect and rendering the tragic atmosphere. It prefigures Tess's doomed destiny, which leads from innocence to destruction. In the repeated emergence of red, the strong sense of determinism brings the inevitable fate of tragedy.

#### 3.2.2. Symbolism of Light and the Theme of Love

Also, light in the novel has its own symbolic meaning. It is frequently mentioned in the novel, especially when describing Tess. As analysed above in Tess portrait and characterization, the employment of in Tess's portrait symbolizes love. She is innocent and pure in Clare's eyes, like the daughter of nature. Therefore, nature loves her and always pours the sunlight on her to stress her romantic charm. Clare loves her, therefore in his eyes, she is the angel who always has the halo. The emphasis here is not the light itself, but how visual subjectivity endows the beloved ones with light. Light is the reason as well as the effect. Therefore, light and love have the reciprocal relationship, where light stands for the love and love brings forward light.

In the end of the story, when Tess is finally caught at the Stonehenge, they haven't arrested her until she wakes up by the light. "All waited in the growing light, their faces and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stones glistening green-grey, the Plain still a mass of shade. Soon the light was strong, and a ray shone upon her unconscious form, peering under her eyelids and waking her".<sup>[26]</sup> For Tess, there is the punishment of death waiting ahead. However, like the coming of the sunlight, she is ready to move on. Death here is no longer fearful, but an escape for her from her destiny. She finally faces herself directly and loves herself without any self-loathing. Therefore, with all the symbolic meanings of colour and light, it can be concluded that although *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a tragedy, it is not all pessimistic but like an allegory.

#### 4. Conclusions

Hardy, as a novelist and poet, not only has a poet's temperament, but also has a painter's eyes. His works are full of the beauty of the picturesque. In addition to the performance of colour and light, they also reflect different painting styles, which are inseparable from the contexts in which he wrote this novel. Both the colour in Romantic painting and later the light in Impressionist painting reflect how the public sphere became more internalized and people's perceptions became more subjective in the Fin de siècle, indicating Hardy's understanding of Victorian realism on the verge of modernism.

As Hardy believes, all arts have an intrinsic core. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he displays a special way of writing in combination with the picturesque techniques. This way of writing also implies his unique aesthetic values. "The beauty of association is entirely superior to the beauty of aspect, and a beloved relative's old battered tankard to the finest Greek vase".<sup>[27]</sup> Such a statement implies that Hardy encourages the subjective vision in aesthetic judgments rather than those conventional values shared by any schools or cultures.

Through the study of the picturesque in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, an interdisciplinary approach has been brought to attention. Hopefully, the examination of Hardy's visual representation and interpretation can provide new insights not only to intermedial relations but also to Victorian and contemporary literary and visual studies.

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