

From Endurance to Resistance--a Brief Analysis of the Mental Development of Tess

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ABSTRACT. *As one of the greatest novelists in British Victorian period, Thomas Hardy's literary works have been enjoying high popularity in contemporary times. His masterpiece, Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a critical realistic novel describing the misfortune of a poor peasant girl named Tess. This novel stands out among the English novels of critical realism for its deep sympathy to the simple rural people, and for its true exposure and powerful condemnation of the social injustice and bourgeoisie morality. In the novel, the heroine Tess has an intense love. However, it is her love for her family that pushes her into painful swale every time. She struggles in the contradiction in bitterness. Though she never yields to her tragic fate, life plays tricks on her again and again. In the end she does have some happy days with her beloved. Nevertheless, it is at the cost of her life. In the contradiction of her life, she undergoes a series of mental trials through which she contends against fate in endurance. This essay tries to probe into the mental development of the heroine from her endurance to final resistance. Besides, the social significance of her mental development is revealed in this essay.*

KEYWORDS: *Tess, Endurance, Resistance, Mental development*

1. Introduction

A good work will not be easily forgotten as time passes. On the contrary, it can gain its value of eternity with the gradual assimilation and comprehension of its readers. Even though time passes, the great work of Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has been enjoying its popularity among worldwide readers and the heroine Tess still stands in the gallery of the world literature. The humanity and the great force deep in her soul endow the heroine with a great image of feminism. Thomas Hardy is not only a prominent realistic writer but also an indisputable outstanding poet of 19th century who deems that no matter how the extent to which human civilization develop will be, human beings cannot evade the tricks played on them by their fate. From the novel, it is known that Tess was unfortunately raped by Alec D'Urbervilles and was later deserted by her beloved husband Angel. Under the physical and mental torture, Tess killed Alec in bravery and ended her life in scaffold. Unlike the traditional females who are invariably submissive in Victorian period, Tess chose to struggle bravely in her adversity. When her beloved husband

Angel who had ever deserted her came back to her again, she courageously held the resistant whittle, killing the contemptible Alec who was the originator of her tragic fate. Hardy renders a vivid depiction of the mental development during which the heroine Tess turned from a simple, pure and naive girl to a woman who committed a crime eventually. Her degeneration was the consequence of not only her poor economic condition but also the merciless oppression and exploitation brought by the bourgeoisie society, in which she was tormented physically and spiritually. Based on this background, this essay tries to make a brief analysis of the mental development of Tess from her endurance to final resistance in the harsh bourgeoisie society.

2. The Mental Development of Tess Turning from Endurance to Resistance

Tess is an unusual girl, full of contradictory state of mind and actions. On one hand, she is feisty and independent. On the other hand, she is shy and easily victimized. She is overburdened with responsibilities for her family and her loved ones. When we compare her with Angel and Alec, she seems to be fresher, less inhibited, and even wiser. Unlike these men, she tries to combine thought and feeling. She is a daughter of the earth rather than of the intellect. Tess is a good-natured innocent and simple girl from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the misfortune and misery befall on her ruthlessly. She was forced to seek her so-called distant relative and later she was seduced and raped by Mrs. d'Urbervilles son, Alec. Finally, she bravely killed him for her love and reunion with Angel. During this period, Tess experienced a series of mental tests. There are more than one causes of her tragedy, but the real cause of her tragedy lies in the wicked nature and hypocritical morality of the bourgeoisie society. As a matter of fact, she is the victim of the social changes.

2.1 In Search of the Relative

The good nature of Tess and the destitution of her family curtailed up Tess's tragic fate. When told that he was descended from the famous d'Urbervilles family, Tess's father Jack Durbeyfield, a poor rustic packman was overwhelmingly excited. He freakishly persuaded his oldest daughter, Tess, to seek their supposed relative, Stoke-d'Urbervilles, a wealthy family who had assumed the d'Urbervilles name because no one else claimed it. The true intention of him was not to ask his daughter to make relation with d'Urbervilles' family, but to take advantage of this opportunity to break away the poor family's economic plight. As a matter of fact, Mr. d'Urbervilles was but a mere businessman of northern England. He picked up an ancient surname-d'Urbervilles to disguise himself as an aristocratic squire. Tess, a virtuous, pure and naive girl, who at that time was only 17 years old was asked to search d'Urbervilles family in a state of contradictory mind.

2.2 Purity Deprived

When Tess reached d'Urbervilles' family, the so-called "gentlefolk", she got no warm reception as a relative should get. Later she was allowed to stay there but only for two reasons. For one thing, the "noble family" just wanted to maintain their prestige. For another, she was unfortunately coveted by Mr. d'Urbervilles son, Alec, a contemptible man. During the time when she stayed in her supposed relative family, she was nothing but a servant. No matter whether she was willing or unwilling, Alec's courtship towards her made her feel not at ease and her life there was gloomy. However, the helpless girl ultimately sank into the evil and slippery man's trap. Without knowing his wicked intention, she was desperately outraged. Since then she was reduced from a pure girl to a depraved and ignominious woman. From then on, she could not go anywhere but to stay at home, concealing her body but could not defile her lowliness and dirtiness. She was besmirched more mentally than physically. It is appropriate to say that she was sullied more by the society than by Alec d'Urbervilles.

2.3 Ill-Lookingly Dressed

When a vernal girl is forced by her life to dress herself ugly, we can imagine how mentally tortured she is. The abandoned Tess endeavored to preserve her virginity as well as Angel Clare's dignity in the hope that her husband would someday change his view and come back to her. She wore female uniform, with her face half wrapped with handkerchief and eyebrow shaven, which was so ill-looking that even the passersby felt appalled and disgusted at the sight of her. Actually she dressed herself in such manner with an attempt to make other men disdain and estrange her. Only in this way can she protect her purity.

2.4 Reluctant Reliance on Alec

Tess was ruthlessly bereft of her purity. In front of morality, she was perceived as a model that corrupted public morals, an example that was used to reprimand any carnality and a sinful incarnation that violated the field of purity. Nevertheless, with so many misfortunes befalling on her, she had no choice but to do something against her will. Her father died; her mother was always frustrated with poor health; her sisters and brothers were deprived of schooling; the lease expire drove her family homeless and there was still no sign of her husband Angel Clare's response, all of which compelled her to eat humble pie, accepting Alec's help reluctantly and became his mistress unwillingly at the cost of her pure body.

2.5 Honest Confession

On their wedding night, Angel told Tess about an evening of debauchery in his own past. Tess forgave him and then honestly told Angel Clare about her former

affair with Alec, thinking that he would forgive her as she had him. But such was not the case. Angel was at first stunned, and then so hurt that he could not even speak to Tess. Finally he told her that she was not the woman he loved, the one he married, but a stranger with whom he could not live, at least for the present. Unable to accept a less-than-ideal wife, the seemingly liberal Angel abandoned Tess unhesitatingly and traveled to South America. For a while, Tess eked out a miserable living as a farmer laborer. Unable to bear the heavy manual work and Alec's ceaseless harassment and threat, she had no option but to write Angel Clare a long earnest letter beseeching him to come back to rescue her out of misery. Here the desperate and helpless Tess could do nothing but to place all her hope on the man who used to love her and then relentlessly deserted her.

2.6 The Summit of Resistance

It seemed that fate had played a joke on Tess. When her day-and-night-missed husband, Angel Clare, came back to her repentantly to implore for her forgiveness, she had become Alec's mistress. Happiness brushed past her and hope turned into despair. Having undergone such a series of hit and sufferings, she eventually, with her resistant spirit reaching its summit, stabbed Alec by whom she was ruined. As long as she could have some days with Angel Clare, she feared nothing, even death. Therefore, she never regretted her murder. She did have some happy days with her beloved during their escape. When the officers finally found them, Tess was asleep. Angel asked the officers to wait until she awoke. As soon as she opened her eyes, Tess saw the strangers and knew that they had come for her and that she would be hanged, but she was not afraid. She had had a few days with the husband she truly loved, and now she was ready for her punishment. She was brave enough to stand up and faced her captors. Like this, her contradiction ended up with her serene death. It can be said that Tess lived for love and was destroyed because of love.

3. The Struggle in Modern and Traditional Whirlpool

3.1 The Defiance Against Tradition and Defense of Human's Dignity

Tess resists against her fate to defend her own dignity and reflects the self esteem of the poor. However, such dignity and self esteem is not the same with that of petty bourgeoisie women of Jane Eyre type. Such self esteem is the ideal female realm of aristocratic culture type: flawless beauty, unyielding dignity and firm fortitude. The ideal principle that Tess wants to defend is in concord with the earthly law that she tries to defy. Not only does she fight against the violent forces represented by Alec, but she also boldly flouts the religion. As a common country girl, she is courageous enough to baptize her bastard in the name of the holy father, the holy son and the holy spirit. After undergoing a series of tribulations in her life, she finally realizes the illusion of god and then resolutely breaks herself away from the church and sneers at the injustice of god. Therefore, Hardy uses "a pure woman" as the subtitle of this novel to show his praise and sympathy to the heroine and his trenchant

denouncement and impeachment to the prevailing hypocritical morality. All of Tess's tribulations and distress originate in the oppression laid by the social morality. It is this novel that Hardy tries to use to express his rebellious ideas against social etiquette and his eagerness to overthrow the prevailing divine morals.

3.2 In Pursuit of True Love in Violation of the Law

After undergoing a lot of sufferings, Angel Clare was eventually aware of what real life is and his stupid adherence to the traditional morals which not only ruined Tess but also destroyed himself. The inward rue together with his intense miss to Tess drove him to go back to her without knowing the fact that her happiness had already been throttled by him. Clare's coming back and their reunion actually exacerbated Tess's misfortune and made her feel even more disgraceful and distressed. Tess again came to know that she was deceived by Alec. Out of overwhelming indignation, she courageously murdered the contemptible Alec who disillusioned her beautiful dream of life and brought too many miseries to her life. Her resistant spirit here reached the summit. She held her beloved husband's hand and ran away with him, forgetting the time, the room, and forgetting everything just to accompany with Angel Clare as they had ever done in the farm. Tess showed her strong resistance against her long-lasting torments, tortures, disgrace and the unfair fate befalling on her. Although Alec finally got his retribution, yet, the heroine Tess's tragedy cannot be transferred to comedy. Though she succeeded in her revenge by killing Alec, however, the causes to social tragedy were still rampant. Moreover, what was awaiting Tess was the brutal gallows. The death of Tess was a symbol and miniature of social tragedy.

4. Social Significance of Her Mental Development

It is believed that every literary work, to a certain degree, embodies its social significance, so does *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The novel renders a portrayal of an honest, warm-hearted, and innocent girl Tess who is able to clearly distinguish between what is love and what is hatred. Even though she is later outraged by Alec again, it is just for the sake of the living of her family. However, such a simple and ordinary girl gradually steps on the destructive road and her resistance finally ends up with a fiasco. She is arrested when the sun rises, which is a symbol of her tragic fate. Though she is put into prison and becomes a victim in the end, her awareness and tenacious spirit of resistance will be carried forward forever just like the sun that will shine forever, banishing the darkness of society, the shadow of religion and the abuse of traditional ethical system. The ultimate victim of Tess will help to awaken more people's resistant spirit. Truth and justice will be bound to defeat evils eventually. It is just a matter of time.

5. Conclusion

It has been said that literature is not only an art but also a mirror which reflects

real life. It comes very close to daily life, reflecting the real social problems and is used as a powerful instrument of human progress. As a masterpiece, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* vividly reveals the nature of the society in which the author Thomas Hardy lives. Thomas Hardy succeeds in portraying the image of the heroine Tess and unraveling the hypocritical ethics and morals of bourgeois society. This paper has made a brief analysis of the tragedy as well as the mental development of Tess. From the tragedy of Tess, it is not difficult for our readers to detect the dark side of the society at that time. Pure, good-natured, and beautiful as she is, the heroine Tess is ruined by brutal Alec in the process of her seeking the supposedly noble relative out of a series of reasons which include her family, environment, era and her own personality. After being outraged by Alec, her life changes dramatically and she finally kills him just to prove her innocence. From this essay, we know that Thomas Hardy draws us a vivid picture of the mental development in which the heroine Tess turned from a simple, pure and naive girl to a woman who committed a crime. This influential novel is really a mirror of the society in Victorian period. Tess's innocence, beauty and, most of all, strong sense of family responsibility cannot prevent herself from being ruined by the hypocritical and cruel society. Even though she physically degraded, she mentally elevated. Ultimately, her resistant awareness comes to the summit. She is so courageous that she murdered Alec even though she could not exterminate all the evils of the society. Her final death actually attributes a significant weight to the enlightenment of resistance. Her indomitable spirit of resistance will be carried forward forever like the sun that will shine forever to banish the darkness and evils.

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