

# Characteristics Determine Fate—An Analysis of Tess' Tragedy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is one of the most famous novels of Thomas Hardy. Tess—the heroine brings us deep inspiration and profound reflection. And the author Thomas Hardy describes the impacts of the industrial civilization on a village panoramically, then Tess as an individual miniature, further shows the people struggle in the plight of the struggle in the material. Tess is difficult to be recognized by the society, which makes her realize the hypocrisy of bourgeois society and the distortion of ethics. Briefly in this paper, the author tries to find out the causes of the tragedy of Tess by analyzing the characteristics of Tess and the male characters in Tess' life and make people have a better understanding of the literary work.

*Keywords:* *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, tragedy, characteristics

## Introduction

Thomas Hardy was one of the most important novelists of the Victoria age. In his Wessex novels, he vividly and truthfully described the tragic lives of the tenants in the last decade of the 19th century. His most famous novels are *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* came into a conflict with Victorian morality. In this novel, Hardy reaches the height of his achievement as a novelist. In this paper the author analyzes the causes of Tess' tragedy from the aspects of her characteristics and influence of other males on her.

## The Characteristics of Tess Cause Tess' Tragedy

The heroine Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was born in a rural worker family. Her father was a peddler, foolish and vanity. Her mother was a milking station, vulgar and shallow. There were seven siblings in her family. Life was penniless and there was a heavy burden in her family. However, in such a family, Tess did not feel pessimism and despair. On the contrary, she had a good heart, industrious and strong character.

Tess is a diligent, kind, and family-centered woman. She was the eldest daughter in the home. Because of family difficulties, she began to work to make money for the family as soon as she left school and she shared the burden of life at home without complaint. Tess drove horse-drawn to the carriage market. Cart died accidentally on the way home. This made Tess suddenly break life source. So her mother urged Tess to claim kinship with the

remaining D'Urbervilles, so that Tess could marry a gentleman, and then they will get rid of the poor life. She was very unwilling, but when she thought of the death of their horse—the only means to make their living, she came to the D'Urbervilles. There she met Alec D'Urbervilles, who was attracted by Tess's beautiful appearance and always tried to seduce her. Having received a job of tending to chickens, Tess stayed in the D'Urbervilles. Her tragic life had just begun.

Because of her ignorance and innocence, Tess was raped and lost her chastity soon. She returned home and told her mother her terrible experiences, hoping to get consolation from her mother, but what her mother only worried about was whether Alec would marry Tess or not. Alec utilized the fact of her poor family and wanted to help her. The brave girl refused and went to work in the field, but worse still, Alec followed her from place to place in order to possess her again. At last, Tess managed to get rid of Alec to give birth to her baby. The baby did not live long, however, and after its death, Tess went to a dairy farm as a dairy maid. It was there that Tess met Angel, son of a clergyman, and fell in love with him. He thought of her as a beautiful and innocent young girl. But her innocence caused her to feel that she was wicked, so she rejected Angel Clare's love. She refused his love and urged him to turn to one of the other girls even though she suffered much from a great grief. But Angel, acting against the wishes of his parents, insisted on marrying her. Finally, they got married. It seems Tess would be happy from then on. On their wedding night, they told each other about their past hoping to be forgiven by each other. Tess forgave Angel's past, and then she told about her nightmare with Alec, thinking that he would forgive her as she had. But in contrast Angel deserted her and left for Brazil. In order to keep herself and her family alive, Tess had to become a labor in the field again. What was worse, her father died. With the bad condition of her family and no hope to obtain Angel's return, the poor girl went to Alec again, seeking help from Alec, who was a preacher now, and lived with him as his mistress. Unexpectedly, Angel returned from Brazil and repented of his cruel treatment of Tess. But Tess's relationship with Alec stopped her from living with Angel happily. She hated Alec and she believed all her tragedy was caused by Alec. She killed him. After a short happy life with Angel, Tess was arrested by the police and hanged.

Tess was a brave and strong woman with dignity. When she was violated by Alec, She had chosen her dignity, and returned to her hometown. Although she received her neighbors contempt for unethical behavior; although her friends were not very friendly to her; although there were so much worldly prejudice and bondage; although even his father thought she gave the family shame, Tess did not despair. She tried to get rid of the shadow of the past, trying to make herself against the interference of gossip. Even in the heyday of religious thought, she ignored the religious canon to give the priest for his dead son baptism. When she was rejected, she says, "I never go to your church with" such a "rebellion". For women at that time, this is how brave and fearless behavior! After a variety of trauma, Tess chose to leave home again, live alone, in a strange place and continue to live strong by her own efforts.

Tess was a woman who dared to love and hate. She only loved her husband Claire through her whole life. Even Clare left her for Brazil because of her past, but Tess still suffered in silence, waiting, hoping that one day Claire would come back and hoping they would be able to reconcile. She even made herself look ugly. What a steadfast love it is, and this is a woman's most faithful expression to her husband. In the face of the endless entanglement and threats of Alec and the difficulties and hardships of life, Tess was still thinking of Clare and she wrote to Clare, pleading with him to come back to save her, for Clare was the hope of her life. However, what left

for her was only a long wait, only the harsh reality brought her unfairly, only the harm her husband brought to her. She was angry, despaired, and awaked. She had a strong sense of rebellion in the heart, only waiting for the day to break out. How much Tess loved Clare and how much she hated Alec. In the eyes of Tess, Alec was a nasty hypocrite. From the outset Alec cheated her virginity and when they met again, he talked of virtue and morality hypocritically, which all made Tess feel sick. Tess hit Alec's face with leather gloves with blood, and that was what she would not yield to power performance. Tess resisted the temptation of Alec that he wanted to help her to pay for the debt, which was the good character that she had not stooped. Tess hated the hypocrisy of people such as Alec. Finally, when her lover came back, Tess' revolt consciousness completely awakened, she finally broke and killed Alec with a knife. She spent the last stage of her life with Clare. She put an end to all her love and hatred.

### **Males Cause Tess' Tragedy**

Tess's tragedy was also caused by two men, Alec and Angel. Alec is a typical dandy who is lascivious, censured, and ungrateful. Angel is an egoist who pays undue attention to the dignity, social status, interests, family customary moral standards, and way of life of the middle class he belongs to. Angel changes his mind when Tess tells him about her history with Alec on their wedding night. Their peaceful and affectionate days are gone forever. From him we can see how the ideology of a given class suffocates and contaminates people's mind within a definite period. In a year and a half, Angel understands that he is wrong after experiencing many hardships but then a new tragic accident of Tess happened, this is, she stabs her lover, Alec to death.

In this novel, the leading characters' description has reflected the darkness and false capitalism moral views in capitalist society at that time. Alec is the emerging bourgeoisie's representatives; he is representing the bourgeois society's authority, the wealth, and the evil and Tess's tragic life is caused by him.

His father was a rich merchant, but after crown by aristocrat D'Urbervilles surname. This young man depended on his father's money and power to dominate the native place. When he met Tess, the dissolute lascivious countenance was completely unmasked and he supposed the snare that destroyed young girl's purity and chastity and the life happiness. In order to control Tess, Alec even used money and power and influence to cause Tess's family homeless. Alec is an upstart on behalf of the bourgeoisie, a typical playboy. His image is a symbol of western civilization hiding under the clock of barbaric cruelty of sex desire. He also believes that the beauty of Tess is negative, because a woman's beauty is the bait to lure men's desire. From his view, it seems to imply that his possession of Tess is due to the temptation of her beauty. The first time that Tess went to claim kindred is very reluctant to Tess. With the feelings of shyness and shame, Tess went to D'Urbervilles and started her acquaintance with Alec. Later Alec threatened to Tess in every possible way, but Tess would prefer to remain in the poor cave, to endure the cruel exploitation and oppression to bear the heavy manual work, and she was not willing to yield to Alec and accepted his help. Since then, she completely ruined her happiness of life. The whole life of Tess is the victim of Alec's power and violence.

As to Angle, he is the incarnation of traditional ethical concepts. Angel and Alec are completely different. He is an intellectual and has liberal thinking. He despises class prejudice and hierarchy. He dislikes bustling city life and is longing to the countryside farming. He is not willing to marry the rich Miss, but a poor farm girl. All of these show that Angel is progressive ideologically. As for women and love, he and Alec are also widely divergent.

He treats young women gently, and loves seriously. It is precisely because of these virtues on Angel and his perseverant pursuit that Tess changes her mind and agrees to his proposal, feverishly falls in love with him.

If someone says Alec's evil force is the direct reason to cause Tess' tragedy, the traditional ethical morality survives on Angel Clare is the invisible and the more fearful spirit injure, which devastates to Tess. Angel Clare is a complex artistic image. He not only has the certain enlightening thought, but also is retaining the traditional moral prejudice. Although he was born in a pastor family, he was not willing to be a pastor "servers for the humanity". He despises the class prejudice and the rank idea and he wants to go to the country to do the arduous physical labor as those farmers. He feels the village life is simple and fresh when he stays with the innocent peasant family young girls. As for females and the love question, he is mild-mannered and cultivated, serious and earnest and pays more attention to emotion. All of these are different from Alec. This implies that he was the Bourgeois intellectual who has the free thought at that time, but the way he departed from this social class is also extremely limited. He will be engaged in the agricultural production with the goal that later it would be a large landed estate. He contacts with Tess but he did not abandon the traditional ideas. He starts to recognize Tess could be a good steward in the future and the most important thing is that his love to Tess is not as selfless and sincere to him. Because of his "noble virtue", Tess opens her mind to him and tells him all her past story with Alec on their wedding night, thinking that Angel would forgive her as she does for him. But he disappoints her. His intellectual refinement drops away. He thought he was fooled very cruelly. Suddenly, his life and his universe changed. This kind of love from the concept of rational, not only stifled the true feeling of his mind, also ruined Tess's happiness of life. In his eyes, Tess is "nature", a new born daughter, however, once she confessed the insult to him what she received, then the inherent morals have strangled in his heart, which was the real sentiment. Although he also had the profligate behavior, and obtained Tess's forgiving, but actually he was not willing to forgive innocent Tess. This indicated the traditional ethics thought of his inner heart was ingrained and it reflected the hypocrisy "gender equality" and "freedom marriage" of capitalism.

The bourgeois morality was an unwritten code; men were not found guilty when they have done bad things, but only women would become the target, who was reviled and accused by the secular. In the Victorian era, men and women's status in marriage could never be equal. Tess was the victim under such an unfair view of ethics and moral. It can be say that Alec was the devil of Tess's life and he acted cruelly and destroyed Tess's white body. Angel was an angel of Tess's life, but his abandon ruthlessly crushed the innocence of Tess's heart. The devil and the angel were the cutting edge on Tess's head, Alec physically tortured her, and Angel destroyed the spirit of her, which was fatal. If we say Alec caused Tess to lose chastity and brought deep pain to her, but those did not make her lost the desire and hope to future life. Then, Clare abandoned her, to some degree, he has destroyed her spiritual prop (because Tess loves him so deeply). From this, Alec represented evil force and Angel himself preserved the traditional ethics morality, which together pushed Tess to the tragic abyss.

### **Conclusion**

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is one of the masterpieces in the literary history and also microcosm of the Europe in the 19th century. The novel shows the life of the female protagonist during the transition period of chaotic social environment, all kinds of social factors interwoven into a vast network and she is trapped in it

and cannot escape. The despair of love is the immediate cause which makes Tess tragic. On the one hand she wants to escape from the reality, on the other hand she cannot get rid of the existing social norms.

And the causes of her tragedy can be concluded as her characteristics and the influence of the males in her life. The author describes the impacts on the industrial civilization to a village panoramically, then Tess as an individual miniature, further shows the people struggle in the plight of the struggle in the material. All efforts of industrious and kind-hearted Tess are difficult to be recognized by the society, which made her realize the hypocrisy of bourgeois society and the distortion of ethics and created the ultimate tragedy.

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