

# On the Death of Tess—the Innocent Woman\*

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This paper aims to make study on Tess' death from two major areas, which includes social factors and human factors. From the perspective of social factors, the moral concept in Victorian era tends to be conservative. The double standard towards chastity entrenched in people's mind. Women are oppressed by such moral concepts and controlled by men. Tess is the one who is prosecuted by such morality. Meanwhile, the rise of capitalism changed the old economic form, which made devastated blow to the peasant class, Tess belongs to the peasant class, her fate is also influenced by such devastation; apart from conservative moral concept, unfair law and hypocritical religion are also responsible for Tess' death. In Victorian era, law and religion serve for the bourgeoisie and protect their interest instead of the peasant class like Tess, which indirectly caused Tess to kill Alec and become a murderer. From the view of human factors, Tess' parents, Alec and Angel also play an important role in Tess' tragedy. As for her parents, who are vain and selfish, devoted to marry their daughter a rich husband and do not care about her own happiness; besides, Alec obsessed with Tess' beauty and seduced her, which directly made her be despised by people and feel immoral about herself; and Angel's love also made Tess lives a more miserable life, since his initially strong love aroused Tess' hope but the final abandon threw her down to the deep. With all the three social factors and two human factors, Tess' tragedy is inevitable.

*Keywords:* tess, death, society, law, religion

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy was influenced by William Wordsworth in both his novels and poetry. He is famous for his depictions of the semi-fictional country Wessex and his works reflected his pessimism and sense of tragedy in human life. And this writing style is embodied in the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The novel was first published in 1891. As a typical one in Hardy's tragic novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* laid the foundation of Hardy's tragedy writer and earned him the reputation of a prominent novelist (Weber, 2016).

The protagonist Tess is an innocent, kind woman. Her death is obviously a tragedy. For many years, scholars from all over the world have dedicated to doing research on the novel. International research on Tess focuses on all sorts of ways. Examination of sexual identity from the aspect of road in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has been studied by Rode, in which he linked Tess' fate to the development of mechanical power (Rode, 2005). And Sivandipour illustrated the fate of Tess through Christian Feminism, and explained the situation in which women are controlled by patriarchal society (Sivandipour, 2013). Besides, Akemi also proved that Tess is a pure woman

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just as Hardy added in the subtitle—a pure woman. Akemi deals with Hardy's depiction of the characteristics in Tess from a male perspective, and so as to figure out the opposition between pure and vice among women in Victorian era (Akemi, 2014). Domestic research on Tess has also been studied in various ways. Researches about the characteristics of the main characters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the art of the novel's language, analyzing Tess from the perspective of industrial civilization, and analyzing Tess related to eco-feminist are rich. Besides, scholars also made contrastive analysis about Tess and other female protagonists (Gong & Li, 2016). Apart from that, in 2012, He explained the power of law related to the desperate fate of Tess from three aspects, which are property inheritance law, marriage law and criminal law respectively (He, 2012).

In spite of many studies about *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* being made, there is also some room remaining for us to explore. This paper focuses on the tragedy of Tess, aims at exploring her desperate fate from two main areas, which are social factors and human factors respectively.

## 2. The Causes for Tess' Tragedy

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is an excellent work which helps Thomas Hardy win a world reputation. Among the novels in Victorian era, many tragic characters in Hardy's works attract people's eyes. As one of the most concerned ones, Tess' tragedy contains profound and meaningful connotation. Tragedy of Tess does not only derive from one single factor, it involves complicated causes. And those complicated causes in this paper are mainly divided into two major parts. One is social factors and the other is human factors. Social factors for Tess' death include moral concept, the rise of capitalism and legal institutions as well as hypocritical religion. Human factors include Tess' parents and the two men—Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare.

### 2.1. Social Factors

Social factors can be regarded as one of the decisive elements in Tess' tragic fate, which mainly include moral concept in society, the rise of capitalism and legal institution as well as religion.

Firstly, from the perspective of social morality, Britain was known as a patriarchal society during the Victorian era, which is similar to Chinese feudal society in the Qing Dynasty; besides, with the rapid development of the Industrial Revolution, Victorian era was considered as a golden age of the British Empire (Du, 2003). In spite of its rapid development of science and technology, morality and ethic concepts still remain conservative and hypocritical. Social morality is influenced by the society controlled by men, which strongly emphasizes the importance of women's virginity and loyalty. High standard of virgin morality is imposed upon women, which does not allow them to have any premarital sex behavior. If women violate this moral rule, they will be despised and punished by the whole society. Meanwhile, People are ingrained with a double standard attitude towards chastity (Li & Ma, 2017), which means a cheating husband can be accepted, but a woman who lost virginity will be disdained. Under the control of such feudal morality and ethics, Tess was forced to regard herself as a guilty woman even though she was a victim. When Tess returned home from the manor of her bogus kinsfolk, villagers in Marlott quickly knew what happened to her, and rumors spread like a hurricane. People talk about her and look down upon her. In the novel, it describes like that: "The people who had turned their heads turned them again as the service preceded; and at last observing her they whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more" (Hardy, 2012, p. 146). It is not hard to see that Tess is despisable by people around and lives a miserable life owing to she was seduced by

Alec and lost her virginity—the only value that is possessed by women. With all kinds of old ethics and moral constraints on women, their living conditions get even more miserable. The idea of patriarchy is the ideological root of Tess' tragedy (Du, 2003). It not only harmed Tess deeply but also distorted the relationship between Tess and Angel.

Secondly, from the perspective of the rise of capitalism, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a symbol of the destruction of British peasantry. With the rise of capitalism, small-scale farming which peasant class rely on for living is gradually devastated. The destruction of Tess also reflects the tragic fate of British peasant class, and Tess' tragedy also attributes to class and economic factors (Du, 2003). In the novel, because Tess' father got too drunk to deliver the beehives, Tess had to take the place of her father to deliver it. During the journey, she falls asleep which caused her horse Prince was killed by the postal wagon in the crash. The accident was not only a crash and lost a horse. It has immense influence on Tess' family. It's about their livelihood. The horse is the source of their family's livelihood, just as the novel described: "The haggling business, which had mainly depended on the horse, became disorganized forthwith. Distress, if not penury, loomed in the distance" (Hardy, 2012, p. 53). The postal wagon being developed as the rise of capitalism and the new system including the post industry is also one of the achievements of capitalism. With the death of horse Prince, losing the source of living can be considered as a symbol of the perish on old small-scale peasant economy. The death of the horse killed by a postal wagon caused the bankrupt of Tess' family reflects the rise in bourgeoisie changed farmer's economic life; farmers cannot live in their originally small-scale farming life. At the same time, with the expansion of Capitalism, owner-peasant like Tess' family lost their traditional independence and their own traditional culture. Tess' tragedy influenced by this destruction. As Capitalism occupied patriarchal society, peasant class lost their means of livelihood, and can hardly adapt to the new industrial work. They were deprived from the economic foundation on which they rely for existence and lead to devastation. This process is also Tess' destiny (Nie, 1982).

Thirdly, from the aspect of legal institutions and religion, in Capitalist society, morality is closely connected with law and religion. The upper class and bourgeoisie possess property and power, whether it is ethical concepts, law principal or religious beliefs are all under control of them and also serve for them. They use laws to vindicate their ethical principles and rights, and people who violate it will be punished. After Tess' father died, her family had no place to live in, and the landlord derived them away. If the law can protect their interest, they will not be asked to leave and being homeless. According to He's research, based on the British general law, the house where the Durbeyfield lives takes the lease form, which means only the king can be the landowner and other people are tenant (He, 2012). Therefore, that's the reason why the Durbeyfield was unable to continue living in that house in Marlott after Tess' father died. If the law allows her family to continue living in their house, they would not be forced to take shelter in the churchyard. For the safety of the family, Tess has no choice but to accept Alec's help, which made her live with Alec, and that indirectly leads to the final murder case. Except for the traditional moral concept, Capitalist development and injustice legal institution, hypocritical religion is also one of the social reasons for Tess' tragic fate. As a mental power, religion has a sweeping effect in western countries. Religion governs people's mind, influences their behaviors and serves for bourgeoisie. Religion is based on male chauvinism and under the control of men. It oppresses women's need, and blames them for violation (Du, 2003). After Tess' baby was ill, her father refused to ask the pastor for help, since he believed that this baby was a shame,

which directly made the baby die. Lost baby is a heavy blow to Tess and makes her feel more guilty about herself. All of these social factors together contribute to her final tragedy.

## **2.2 Human Factors**

In addition to some social factors, there are also two human factors that are involved in Tess' tragedy, which include Tess' vain parents and two decisive men: Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare. On the one hand, Tess' parents didn't shoulder their responsibility to protect her, because family should have been a harbor for children but her parents lost their duty. Her parents have hypocritical mind which pushed Tess into the depths of despair, therefore they are responsible for Tess' tragedy as well as her eventually death. In Tess' family, living is already hard, because it is a large poor family, but the worst thing is that his father is an indolent man and drinks excessively. When her father knew that his family was the descendant of the d'Urbervilles, even though Parson Tringham had told him there was nothing he could do about it, Tess' father was still immersed in self-gratification all day and drank excessively rather than work. Due to his drinking too much to deliver the beehive, Tess has to do it for him. And that caused the horse accident. Although Tess refused to go to visit the d'Urbervilles, she felt very guilty about losing the only horse in the family, and had to make up for the loss and agreed to go there. However, meeting the d'Urbervilles is the beginning of her tragic life. As for Tess' mother, she is a light-minded woman; her mind permeates the feudal religious value. She fascinated in marrying her daughter to a rich man all day, and hopes to get abundant betrothal gifts in this way. So, she persuades Tess into visiting the d'Urbervilles to spare no effort. Although she knows about Alec d'Urbervilles having a crush on Tess, she didn't tell Tess about it or tell her girl should stay alert to men. She just worried Tess wouldn't go if she knew the truth. As a mother, she missed her duties. It can be said that incompetent parents are another push for Tess' death.

On the other hand, Alec and Angel are two decisive men in Tess' tragical life. They respectively occupied Tess physically and mentally. Those two kinds of desires serve as a specific tool for the patriarchal society to persecute women. Clearly, Alec only loves Tess' beauty and has a physiological desire to possess her; while Angel has a psychological desire to possess Tess (Du, 2003). The two men are the origin of Tess' death. Alec was captivated by Tess' beauty when he saw her for the first time. He knew Tess mistook him as her relative, but he refused to reveal the truth and even conspiracy to seduce her. He uses Tess' naive to deceive and molest her, regardless of Tess' unwilling feeling and kept harassing her. He felt shameless after hurting Tess. Although later with the help of old Clare, he decided to be a good man and began to preach. But he quickly gave up all the preach thing when he met Tess again, and start to harass her again. Alec never introspects about himself. He did evil things and put the blame on Tess, and even criticized Tess for tempt him and defame Angel Clare to her face. In Tess' eyes, Angel is an intellectual who believed in science, doubted religion, ignored social customs and worshiped the natural world. He was a wise man. He brought Tess happiness when they stay at Talbothays Dairy. He regarded Tess as a flawless goddess not a flesh and blood, so when his idealism thought was broken, he could not accept Tess. Angel Clare aroused Tess' hope for beautiful love, but then he abandoned her. His attitude towards Tess was also a reflection of his bourgeois thought, which made Tess deeply harmed.

### 3. Conclusion

The causes of Tess' death are not only a personal tragedy, but also a social tragedy. The root of her death is not attribute to her own character but to the whole social environment and her parents as well as Alec and Angel. Double standard morality and ethical concept oppressed women which made Tess an unmoral woman after she was seduced by Alec. People's judgment and Angel Clare's attitude made Tess feel guilty about herself although she is a victim. With the rise of Capitalism, the economic development change lets bourgeoisie control everything; with the perish of the peasant class, Tess' tragedy is an inevitable result. Besides, law and religion tend to serve for the rich and ignore the rights of the poor. Alec belongs to bourgeoisie; that's why he didn't get any punishment after he seduced Tess. And hypocritical religion influenced people's moral outlook, made a woman who lost virginity can hard to live. Moreover, Tess' vain parents are to some extent caused Tess' eventually death. And the last cause of Tess' death is the two men—Alec and Angel, both of whom are responsible for Tess' tragedy. Alec's harassment made Tess physically desperate, while Angel's love and abandon made Tess mentally harmed. All in all, under the influence of these three social factors and two human factors, Tess' death is inevitable. The innocent Tess is the sacrifice of the society and her death deserves contemplation.

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