



# Analysis of the Causes of Tess's Tragedy from Multi-perspectives

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**Abstract**—Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is one of the greatest rustic novelists as well as a great poet in English literary history. He is very good at looking at life in a tragic way and describing the human suffering in the tragic sentiment and a unique manner, so he is regarded by critics as "Shakespeare in English fiction". His representative masterpiece, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, tells the tragic fate of Tess, a very pretty rural girl who is seduced by one man, then deserted by the other and finally propelled to murder for which she is hanged as a miserable consequence. Any tragedy is not isolated or accidental, but the result of many factors. Tess's tragedy happens with a lot of causes. This paper aims to analyze the causes which lead to Tess's tragedy from three perspectives: characters' factors, social factors and writer's factors.



**Keywords**—Tess ; Tragedy; Characters' factors; Social factors; Writer's factors

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tess is a beautiful, innocent rural girl who is vividly portrayed with realism in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, the famous British writer in the late 19th century.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* describes a tragic story that took place in the nineteenth century in England. One night in May, on his way home, the rural haggler Jack Durbeyfield was told by a priest that he was descended from the noble family of the d'Urbervilles. He was so excited and believed it definitely. He wanted to get rid of the poverty of his family, so he asked his daughter Tess to go to Trantridge to claim kinship with a rich family with an assumed name of d'Urbervilles. Tess, 17 years old, simple and beautiful, with no life experience, finally went to the "family" to help there. But the young master of the

d'Urbervilles, Alec seduces and impregnates her. Tess has to return home in disgrace and later gives birth to a baby, who dies soon. She is then rejected by the society around her as a fallen woman. People's gossips force her to leave home to work on a dairy farm at Talbothays as a dairymaid. There she meets Angel Clare, the son of a clergyman, and then they fall in love with each other.

But Tess was full of inner conflict: the lingering love for Angel often let her forget the past, but her sober rationality reminded her of the past. The history of grief seemed to weigh heavily upon her like a cross, and she repeatedly hesitated. In Clare's strong pursuit, the two finally got married. On her wedding night Tess resolved to tell Clare all her sins. But Clare opened his mouth first, confiding in Tess his own past absurdity, and Tess instantly condoned him with sincerity and magnanimity. However,

Tess did not receive the same forgiveness when she confided her misfortunes to him. Clare left her coldly on the grounds that " status is different, morality is different " and that " country women do not know what decency is ". Then, in order to feed her family, satisfy her parents' vanity and uphold the dignity of her husband, Tess had to endure the constant humiliation of having to work on a farm as hard as a man and waited for her husband to return from Brazil. It did not take long for Alec to haunt her again, when her father died, her mother was seriously ill, the landlord forced them to pay the rent, and the whole family was expelled from their cottage and fell into the street. Forced by the pain of losing her father and the embarrassment of her life, despairing Tess again accepted Alec's protection and promised to live with him. But misfortune always befell poor Tess. Just then, Clare hurried back from Brazil, being chastened and repented of his cruel treatment of Tess, but now Tess's relation with Alec stops her from living with Clare happily. In strong despair, Tess stabs Alec to death, the man who is considered the source of all her miseries. After a short happy life with Angel, Tess is arrested and Finally hanged.

Tess's fate was full of tragedy. What was it that led to her tragedy? Who is the culprit? This paper posits that Tess's tragedy is not an isolated incident but rather the culmination of a complex interplay of factors. Through a multi-perspective analysis, I delve into the human factors that define Tess's character, the social factors that shape her world, and the writer's factors that reflect Hardy's own philosophical outlook on life.

## II. CAUSES OF TESS'S TRAGEDY FROM THREE PERSPECTIVES

### 1. Characters' factors

#### 1.1 Tess

Tess was a dutiful, kind, pure, self-respecting, responsible, defiant English country girl, but it was her filial obedience, kindness, purity, self-respect, responsibility that brought her disaster. That is, it was her personality that caused her own tragic fate, which seemed a great injustice.

**1.1.1** Tess's filial obedience and responsibility. Tess could help her parents in any way. She was deflowered twice in succession, both of which were for her family's livelihood. Tess's first fall was for her family: Due to the death of her

old horse, the pressure of life and the guilt toward her parents, she agreed with her parents to go to "claim kin" from a wealthy branch of the D'Urbervilles and helped there, but unfortunately it was there she was raped by Alec. Tess's second fall was also for her family: Her new marriage had been abandoned by her husband Angel Clare, she had been working around for her life so as to maintain her husband's dignity. She had taken part in extremely hard work, even though her life was extremely hard, she was still madly awaiting her husband to change his mind and come back. Then Tess's family changed again: her father died suddenly and their house was taken back by the owner, so the family had no place to live in. At this time, Alec was again engaged with her, and the fierce rich farmers deliberately made trouble for her, but Clare was nowhere to be heard from. In order to help to settle her family, Tess had to give up her love and sacrifice herself again as Alec's mistress. It was in this situation that miserable Tess was driven to her doom step by step.

**1.1.2** Tess's simplicity and self-respect. After she was seduced, faced with Alec's economic temptation, Tess resolutely chose to leave with the contempt and disgust of Alec. Her simple pride made her unable to get along with the brute Alec. Tess's choice is in essence a denial of the traditional conception of chastity by simple logic, which shows the purity of her nature. It was also because of simplicity that Tess revealed her " stain " to her beloved on her wedding night, despite her mother's dissuasion. Knowing that Tess had lost her virginity, Clare's grief was at its extreme, and he even sleepwalked on the wedding night. Tess could have told him the love of dreams, so as to awaken the tenderness in his heart, and caused a turn for the better. But her purity, self-respect, did not let her exert the charm of women to soften him vigorously, nor did she make a scene to overwhelm him, but her self-esteem is behind the inferiority and guilt of the psychological strange. Tess was willing to divorce or die for Clare's benefit. Tess refused to ask Clare's parents for help at the end of her life because of her pride. If Tess gave up her pride and asked Clare's parents for help, she would not be Alec's prisoner. It would not have happened.

**1.1.3** Tess's resistance and compromise. She struggles bravely against her destiny and the conventional morality. She desires for happiness and true love. She dares to hate

Alec, also dares to love Angel Clare. Tess is skeptical on moral and legal norms of the existing system. She asks herself “Was once lost always lost really true of chastity?”, “The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone.” To a certain extent, she has the courage to resist the hypocritical ethics. However, she cannot completely get rid of social conventions and standard of that time, which makes her believe that she has to pay for what she has sinned. When Tess falls in love with Angel, she still cannot do away with her sense of guilt. As their courtship continues, Tess feels nervous and contradictive. She knows that a woman’s virginity is regarded as supremely important by most of her society, and that Angel does not see her as anything but completely pure. She understands in her heart that she must tell Angel about her past. But she fails to do so for fear of losing him. She feels that the moral sin that she experienced will most certainly drive Angel away from her. Later on, when she knows a similar error of Angel, she securely makes her confession and hopes to get Angel’s forgiveness. However, Angel takes Tess’s transgression as a personal attack on him. His idealized, pure vision of Tess is destroyed. Tess becomes depressed as she realized the distance between him and herself. What is worse is that she does not accept that as Angel’s disadvantages. Although she is wrecked by Angel’s prejudice that leaves her in total darkness in her life, she never complains about Angel’s feelings, and she only criticizes and blames herself. She loses her strength and wishes to submit to her husband, “I will obey you like your wretched slave, even if it is to lie down and die.” Tess’s deep sense of guilt makes her submit to Angel’s maltreatment without resistance, thinking she deserves it.

In a word, apart from fierce Alec and hypocritical Angel, it is the weakness of her character that leads her to go far on the way to her tragedy.

### 1.2 "Satan" Alec

In the novel, Alec is described as a bourgeoisie gilded youth, a spoiled and vicious incarnation, who directly causes Tess’s tragic life. The young Alec is the son of a rich merchant who adds the name of d’Urbervilles to his own name, Stoke. He is a fraud as well as a morally corrupt person. His viciousness is revealed completely when he meet Tess for the first time. In Chapter 3, he calls

Tess “beauty” and intends to show her around his mansion. When he picks strawberries up, he puts them into her mouth in person regardless of Tess’s refusal. While Tess has her meal, he watches her all the time. As soon as Tess leaves, he plans how to get her. In Chapter 4, when Tess has to work for his family, he does everything he can to seduce her. Tess is innocent and has no social experience, and her living environment is so dark that no one comes to help her and no law to protect her. So Alec takes advantages of Tess’s helplessness, setting a trap to seduce her. Consequently, Tess becomes a “fallen woman”, the object of ridicule and rejection. This is the first blow Alec made to Tess.

The second blow happens four years later. When Alec comes across with Tess after four years, he seems to have undergone a remarkable transformation from a villain into a religious man, a preacher. But his wickedness comes to life at once when he sees Tess again. He deceives Tess that her husband will not come back forever. He even pesters and threatens her, “Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man’s wife you are mine!” He further enhances the deceit by telling her that even if her husband returns, she should never look upon him as a husband. After waiting a long time without Angel’s reply, Tess gives up all her hope and becomes Alec’s mistress for the sake of her starving family. But soon, Angel returns with his repentance for Tess. Tess cannot bear Alec’s insult anymore and puts all her anger on him, stabbing him to death, as well as going to her own end—finally, Tess is punished by hanging for the murder, destroyed completely by Alec.

### 1.3 Angel Clare

It can be said that Alec represents evil force which is the direct reason to cause Tess’s tragedy, whereas the traditional ethics morality surviving on Angel Clare devastates Tess invisibly, and much more severely spiritual injures her. He not only has enlightened thought, but also remains the traditional moral prejudice. It is Angel who kills Tess indirectly but more cruelly.

Angel Clare, the youngest son of a provincial parson, is the direct opposite of Alec. He is educated, reserved, subtle, sad and differing. He looks down on the material distinction of rank and wealth. He determines to go to the countryside to study the agricultural skills instead of going

to Cambridge like his conformist brothers. He is a secularist who yearns to work for the “honor and glory of man” rather than for the “honor and glory of God” in a more distant world. Because, as a typical young nineteenth-century progressive, Angel considers human society as a thing to be improved, and he firmly believes in the nobility of man. Angel, a freethinking youth, rejects the value handed to him, and set off in search of his own. It can be showed that he loves Tess who is a mere milkmaid and enjoys inferior social status, and does not suit him both socially and culturally. However, it must be pointed out is that he departs from this social class extremely limitedly, he does not really jump out of his area against the old moral values. On the wedding night, Tess tells him all her past with Alec, thinking that Angel would forgive her as she does, but she is disappointed. Angel cannot accept the fact, for him, the lover who is beloved has been transformed in his mind from the embodiment of purity into the tarnished reality of an “fallen woman”. He judges “purity” with the conventional value and moral standard that are inculcated into him when he is a boy. Although he claims to have independent judgment opinion, once the thing is very crucial, he is still upholding the decadent bourgeois social customs and moral hypocrisy. His love for Tess may be abstract. Tess may be more an archetype or ideal to him than a flesh and blood woman with a complicated life. He says to Tess “the woman I have been loving is not you, but another woman in your shape.” The next day, he leaves for Brazil, leaving Tess in hot water again. Enduring the abandoned life, Tess struggles against the hardship, exhausted both physically and mentally. The worse is that, after her father died, her family are evicted. Tess has no other means to choose, only to turn back to the wicked man, Alec. Angel's hesitation is unbearable in the crucial moment. Alec destroys Tess physically, while Angel makes a fatal blow to Tess's mind. The loss of chastity does not kill all Tess's desire for love and hope, but Angel's desertion and her hopelessness of love for him make her lose courage to live on. Because of her innocence and helplessness, she is seduced. But because of Angle's moral callousness, which totally comes from the cruel social conventions and moral standards of that time, she is forced to come back to Alec for the second time. Eventually, out of love for him, Tess

murders Alec at the cost of ending her own life. It is said that as an accessory, Angel preserving the traditional ethics morality pushes Tess to the tragic abyss.

#### 1.4 Parents

The poverty and decay of the family are the most direct factors leading to the beginning of the tragedy. For a person, the family is very important. Most people's personalities and attitudes are largely inherited from their parents. The opening of the novel reads: There is a middle-aged man with thin legs, all the way to the west, holding an empty basket for holding eggs, the hat is old and broken, walking in the evening at sunset. This person is Tess's father - a lazy, ignorant and vain haggler. As the pillar of the family, he has the responsibility to shoulder the heavy burden of family life, but he is addicted to alcohol and laziness. Her mother was a milkman first and then a launderer. She was vulgar, shallow and unsophisticated. Two incompetent people had seven children. Tess is a good girl. She understands the hardships of her parents, loves her siblings, and is willing to share the sorrow for her parents, so she bears the heavy burden of her family. Tess's home is in the countryside, but they are not engaged in agricultural labor. In addition, her parents have many children and live in poverty, so they are very unpopular with the local people. One day, her father heard from the talkative priest that his family had "noble blood", so he was carried away and became even more lazy at work and got drunk every day. The responsible Tess was afraid that her father was in danger, so she went to deliver the goods, causing the old horse "Prince" to be killed by a car, making the family's economic crisis more serious and life more embarrassing. Forced by the helplessness of life, Tess had to obey her parents and go to claim a wealthy relative. At the moment she left home, she was completely unaware that bad luck was quietly approaching. As a result, she was simply seduced by Alec, the young master of the d'Urbervilles' family, and was doomed to a tragic fate in her life. The Hunter house incident was caused by her ignorant parents. For parents, they understand that claiming kinship means that they want to marry their daughter into a good son-in-law. It is sad to be out of financial trouble at the expense of daughter's happiness. But parents were also forced by life out of helplessness, and it was also their ignorance that led

to the death of their daughter. In a sense, her family had pushed her to the depths of tragedy. If her family were well fed and clothed, if her parents were aware of the danger of sending a teenage girl out, even if Tess was a particularly confused and especially uncaring child, none of this would have happened. However, all of these 'ifs' do not exist, so Tess's tragedy is inevitable. As Hardy said, "The family is part of her body and her life." She could not get rid of the family, nor could she get rid of her miserable fate.

## 2. Social Factors

### 2.1 Socioeconomic factors

In Tess's time, the British society is full of tremendous changes in almost every respect. The industrial revolution continues to develop in spite of the social evils that accompanied. The emergence of locomotives throws Britain into a frenzy of railway building. Agriculture is further mechanized. Trade and commerce grow rapidly, driving more peasants, hand spinners and weavers to the crowded factories of the smoky cities. The great transformation transformed England from an agricultural base to an industrial one under the process of industrialism and the disintegration of peasantry. More and more peasants become impoverished and live a miserable life. Wessex is not immune from destruction. Capitalism brings a great harm to this old, rural and agricultural region. The self-supporting peasants are displaced and impoverished and live an extremely poor life. In the countryside, too, Tess's plight was a true reflection of the life of the rural poor.

Tess's family belonged to an unpopular and precarious class in the countryside, and by the time she appeared in the novel, it was on the verge of collapse. Tess lives in a remote mountain village, her father is a lazy, incompetent, greedy haggler, and her mother is a simple rural housewife. The two incompetent parents have seven children, among whom Tess is the eldest daughter of the family, whose heavy family burden had cast a shadow over her fate from the start. As a result of an accident, Tess killed the old horse on which the family lived on her way to deliver the goods for her father. After the death of the family's sole economic source, the horse, the family lost its economic support. Good Tess bravely shouldered the burden of feeding the whole family. In order to make a living for her family, she was forced to abandon her pride

to recognize her "family" and work on a chicken farm, which led to her loss to Alec. Alec, the representative of the new bourgeoisie, is a playboy and a famous expert in the pursuit of beauty. He used Tess's poverty and lack of social experience to trap her and rape her. As for Tess's tragic life, the former Soviet literary critic Anix said: "The real cause of Tess's destruction is entirely realistic, the poverty and helplessness of the heroine, and the prevailing social hypocrisy. All these circumstances directly determine the woman's tragic fate."

### 2.2 Social ethical and moral factors

Tess, a beautiful and pure rural girl, suffered misfortune as soon as she stepped into society. Instead of receiving social sympathy, she was ridiculed and criticized. This was mainly due to the influence of social ethics and chastity at that time. The "Victorian golden age" is a society centered on patriarchal ideology. In a patriarchal society, men regard women as their appendages and private property. The most obvious manifestation is the so-called "chastity" problem of women. The traditional concept of women's chastity believes that the wife's chastity is the husband's privilege, and women's loss of chastity is a sin. Tess was the victim of this thought. After Tess lost her life, the concept of social chastity profoundly affected her life, and finally became the ideological root of her tragedy. She always harbors a sense of guilt, guilt, and inferiority complex, which makes her shy away from her loved ones when encountering such problems.

Clare is the most important person in Tess's life. Their first meeting was at the ball after the parade. Tess fell in love with Clare at first sight when she was a girl. Tess was "a lost woman" when they met again at the Talbothays Dairy. Clare was attracted by Tess's beautiful appearance and extraordinary temperament, and they soon fell in love. Tess's thoughts are very contradictory. She loves Clare deeply and laments that she is unworthy of being his wife. Because of Clare's hard pursuit, Tess overcame the mental pressure and agreed to his marriage request. Although Clare is a cheerful young man, there is still a deep-rooted traditional theory in his heart. In Clare's mind, Tess is the ultimate of material and spiritual beauty, and the "embodiment of poetry", but on the wedding night, after Tess truthfully confessed her past humiliation, he could not accept the cruel reality in any case, and his beauty idol

collapsed, and he felt fooled. Although he also had a dissolute life, he could not get rid of the shackles of the concept of chastity and ruthlessly abandoned her. Their love tragedy is the bitter fruit of Clare's deep-rooted traditional morality. In the Victorian age when men were superior to women, the status of men and women in marriage and love could never be equal. After Clare abandoned Tess, she forgave him, blamed her sin on herself, found various reasons to defend him, and looked forward to his return fondly. All this shows that the concept of chastity and the moral concept that men are superior to women in the society at that time had a deep poison on people. Clare is a slave of custom and tradition. The hypocritical bourgeois morality embodied in him pushed Tess into the abyss of tragedy.

### 2.3 Hypocritical religion and unfair legal system

Alec, the "evil" incarnation, raped the pure Tess. Tess could only come back to her parents with the trauma of heart and body, silently bearing the contempt of bourgeois hypocrisy. On the contrary, young villain Alec still dominated the countryside, committing crimes with impunity. Even more ironically, when she saw Alec convert to religion, Tess pointed to the sins and hypocrisy of the religious impostors and scolded him, "You, and those like you, take your fill of pleasure on earth by making the life of such as me bitter and black with sorrow; and then it is a fine thing, when you have had enough of that, to think of securing your pleasure in heaven by becoming converted! Out upon such - I don't believe in you - I hate it!" When Tess took the knife and killed Alec, the devil who had tortured her, bourgeois law responded quickly, and a few days later the police put her to the gallows to uphold the so-called "justice". The law of the bourgeoisie serves exclusively the possessors of assets; it protects the interests of the bourgeoisie and imposes only merciless oppression on the people of the poor.

### 3. The writer's factors

Hardy likes to think about life from the height of philosophy. He feels painful and confused about all kinds of suffering in life. He has been trying to find answers all his life. Therefore, his works are full of interpretation and hesitation of suffering. He emphasized the inevitability of tragedy, and showed the loneliness and desolation of life as well as the powerlessness of individuals in the world and

the helplessness of being manipulated by fate when portraying characters and nature. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy's fatalism and pessimism in his philosophy of life are clearly visible.

#### 3.1 The writer's fatalism

Tess's tragic fate comes from the writer's fatalism, which is the expression of the limitations of Hardy's world outlook and social outlook. As an excellent realist writer, he was able to depict the reality of the late Victorian era in crisis; As a thinker, he did not understand the law of social development. Hardy was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer's voluntarism, Darwin's theory of evolution and Huxley's agnosticism, forming skepticism and nihilism. He believes that the crisis and contradiction in reality come from the mysterious and unpredictable cosmic will. Human beings are small and weak in front of the powerful cosmic power, and are powerless to compete with it. They can only passively submit to the environment and be dominated by fate. This fatalism makes his characters subject to the will of the universe, and accidental misfortunes often come at the critical moment of life. Tess's misfortune is the portrayal of the writer's fatalism. Although Tess was unwilling to be manipulated by fate and fought again and again, she still could not avoid the end of destruction, as if there was an invisible hand of fate pushing her into a tragic situation step by step at every critical moment of her life. This arrangement is not due to the writer's random nature, but is inseparable from his own inherent ideas and ways of thinking. This is in line with Hardy's world view - to look at life from an idealistic perspective and use this to explain the changes in social development and the causes of tragedy.

#### 3.2 The writer's pessimism

Hardy lived in an era of transition from liberal capitalism to imperialism. Capitalism not only brought economic prosperity to British society, but also deepened the plight of the lower class people. Especially in the late Victorian era, the capitalist mode of operation invaded the countryside and completely collapsed the social foundation of rural patriarchy. Hardy witnessed the tragic situation of the small-scale peasant economy bankruptcy caused by the invasion of capitalism into the countryside. In his works, he described the disaster brought by the capitalist industrial civilization to the countryside, and

expressed deep feelings for the tragic situation of farmers.

Hardy tried to find a way to solve these problems. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* "is not a general ancient Greek tragedy of fate, but a social tragedy that contains the author's profound rationalism and reflection on the logical contradictions of human history. It is a great work of critical realism". However, in the end, Hardy did not find a way to solve the problem. On the contrary, he eventually became a pessimist. The reason why his series of "Wessex" novels are all tragedies has something to do with his pessimistic thoughts. In Hardy's view, the world is full of sorrow and pain, and there is no way to happiness or even to avoid misfortune; The survival of people in the real society is a great sorrow in itself. Although Hardy did not cater to the subsequent "Zola style" naturalistic aesthetics in his creation, naturalism has undoubtedly affected his creation. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, in the face of adversity, the reason why brave Tess "failed repeatedly" is inseparable from Hardy's pessimistic world outlook.

### III. CONCLUSION

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* presents a profound exploration of the intricate web of factors that contribute to Tess's tragic fate. By examining the character's, social, and writer's factors that converge in Tess's life, this paper has illuminated the complexity of her story and underscored the universality of human suffering. Hardy calls Tess " a pure woman " in his work and sympathizes with her deeply, which is undoubtedly a mockery and ridicule of the decadent social system and the stupid ethic of morality. Through Tess's tragic fate, the author criticizes and castigates openly the marriage system, the brutal and cruel religious etiquette law, the moral morality and so on, which killed human nature in the Victorian era, aroused people to hate all kinds of social evil forces and reactionary ethics, and let people understand the hypocritical nature of bourgeois law more clearly.

In summary, Tess's tragic fate in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* serves as a powerful testament to the complexity of human suffering and the need for empathy, understanding, and social progress. By analyzing the character's, social, and writer's factors that contribute to Tess's downfall, this paper has deepened our appreciation

for Hardy's masterpiece and its enduring relevance in the annals of English literature.

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