
Dissatisfaction and Bafflement

In his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as well as much of his poetry, Thomas Hardy expresses his dissatisfaction, weariness, and an overwhelming sense of injustice at the cruelty of our universal Fate—disappointment and disillusionment. Hardy argues that the hopes and desires of Men are cruelly thwarted by a potent combination of all-powerful Nature, fate, unforeseen accidents and disasters, and tragic flaws. Although Tess, the heroine of the novel, is fully realized with physical, emotional, and mental attributes, grasping desperately to be her own master, she is nevertheless overpowered, becoming a victim of circumstance, nature, and social hypocrisy. Likewise, Hardy's dark realities bleed into and saturate his poems.

First, Hardy personifies Nature as a main character in the novel. Instead of allowing the influence of Nature to show only in weather and seasonal changes, allowing the reader to sense the plot, Hardy creates a Nature who is not the typical capricious but distant goddess. Instead, she is terrifyingly responsible for influencing and overpowering man. Hardy's Nature is not only essential for the subsistence of the entire farming countryside, but the waxing and waning cycles—in the weather, time of day, and season,—which seem to influence the actions of the characters. Every disastrous occurrence seems preordained by the mood of Nature. Before Prince, the Durbeyfield horse, is killed, Tess' brother wonders at "The strange shapes assumed by the various dark objects against the sky; of this tree that looked like a raging tiger springing from a lair; of that which resembled a giant's head" (p. 24). While Abraham wonders at these ominous and disquieting shapes, Tess herself becomes intensely aware "The occasional heave of the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, coterminous with the universe in space, and with history in time" (p. 26). The sigh of this divine, timeless soul reinforces the idea that a sad life is preordained; even less can we carry out our free will.

Nature revolves in seasonal cycles of rebirth and death; therefore the action and moods of Tess flow from hope into despair. Summer, with its heat and abundance, causes a tide of fertilization not only in Nature, but in the farmworkers. Everyone is swept along: "Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Var Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate. The ready bosoms existing there were impregnated by their surroundings" (p. 146). Likewise, the love between Tess and Angel becomes passionate and sultry. Her morals of staying away from men are thrown by the wayside, illustrating the fact that Nature does not follow any moral or societal law. "Every seesaw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears, was a voice that joined with nature in revolt against her scrupulousness" (p. 175). Tess, try as she might, is swept along in the rush of summer. In the same way, Hardy places a poem of lost love and bitter lesson in the icy "Neutral Tones" of

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winter. "We stood by a pond that winter day / And the sun was white, as though chidden of God, / And a few leaves lay on the starving sod; / - They had fallen from an ash, and were gray." The imagery of nature is brutal, like death. The seasonal death coincides with a spiritual and moral death. The speaker learns "keen lessons that love deceives," calling the sun "God-curst" in his bitterness.

Nature's arbitrary power, which does not respect moral or ethical justice, is also condemned. The other farm girls, who yearn after Angel, are caught in the tide of summer as well. "The air of the sleeping-chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired" (p. 144). Hardy goes on to call this relentless, inexorable force of Nature torture. But not only is Nature cruel and tortuous, it is "shameless", uncaring of the destruction havoc left in its wake. When Tess' baby suddenly takes ill and dies, Hardy provides the reader with a rare commentary: "So passed away Sorrow the Undesired that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law; a waif to whom eternal Time had been a matter of days merely.." (p. 94). Nature takes even the lives of the most innocent and unstained. Upon reflection of the weariness of life, he writes that perhaps Sorrow's death is for the best. Life is a "battle" that squelches the hopes and dreams we build for ourselves.

Furthermore, Hardy senses the repetitive, neverending cycles of Time, a component of nature. Tess says, "I am one of a long row only finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'" (p. 125) Hardy expresses despair and resignation at the idea, using strange coincidences and parallels in his novel to illustrate the reoccurrence of all happenings. For example, long ago, the Stoke d'Uberilles came from barbarians that raided and mastered the true and noble d'Uberilles, now reduced to simple Durbeyfields. In the same way, now Alec d'Uberville, described as having "barbaric" features, quickly gives Tess "the kiss of mastery." Years later, when they reunite, Alec exclaims, "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again!" (p. 326). Even more chilling are the hints that Tess is preordained to be a murderess. Early in the story, when Prince dies, "Her [Tess'] face was dry and pale, as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess" (p. 29). Throughout, we read allusions to the legend of the d'Uberville coach, where the woman kills her captor.

Hardy has a strong sense of the accidental, the coincidental catastrophe, and the too late. The mainstay of their agricultural existence, the Durbeyfield horse Prince is killed before Tess' meeting with Alec d'Uberville. Tess' fellow milkmaids commit suicide or become alcoholic after Tess' marriage to Angel. Tess rushes home at news that her mother is ill, but her father

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suddenly dies, leaving the family penniless. Angel returns too late. (The list is endless) The lethal combinations of such events lead to a downward spiral into catastrophe. In his poem "Hap," Hardy states that if he knew a god's profit was his suffering, he would at least have reasons to decline, disclaiming, "But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain, / And why unblooms the best hope every sown? / - Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, and dicing Time for gladness casts a moan? / These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown / Bliss about my pilgrimage as pain."

Hardy feels so strongly that life is doomed that he urges death rather than life. Tess consistently wishes for death and thinks of suicide. "there was yet another date? that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it but not the less surely there. When was it?" (p. 97) But more often than not, the thought of death is active rather than passive. After being forsaken by Angel she wishes death would come now: "I wish it were now." (p. 273), and seriously contemplates hanging herself after Angel's rejection. In his poem, "To an Unborn Pauper Child " Hardy tells the child, "Breathe not, hid Heart: cease silently, / And though thy birth-hour beckons thee, / Sleep the long sleep (that sounds like Hamlet, doesn't it?) / The Doomsters heap / Travails and teems around us here, and Time-wraiths turn our songsingings to fear." The peace of sleep definitely outweighs the pleasures of life, few and far between. Hardy refers to Nature, Time, and Fate in original and dark ways: Doomsters, Wraiths, even Sportsmen (in another poem), illustrating the casual ways in which they control our lives.

Hardy expands the blame, however, to humans. Tess, however godlike in form and conscience, does have her "tragic flaw" of passionate impulse, which contributes to her doom. Tess is portrayed as impulsive and indecisive at times a "vessel of emotion", which Hardy attributes to "the slight incautiousness of character inherited from her race" (p. 89). In her courtship with Alec d'Urberville, Tess is angry at his advances "sometimes," pleased "sometimes." There is at least a temporary and partial acquiescence: "Tess eating in a half-pleased, half-reluctant state whatever d'Urberville offered her" (p. 36). This indecision and vacillation prolongs the relationship needlessly. Furthermore, there is the same duality in the way Tess treats her baby, varying between a "gloomy indifference that was almost dislike" and a "strangely combined passionateness with contempt." Tess prolongs setting the marriage date, unable to stem off the relationship, yet racked with guilt about the episode with Alec. In "Tess' Lament," Tess says, "And it was I who did it all, who dod it all; Twas I who made the blow to fall."

It is this inner conflict the conscience urging her to confess her past to Angel and her simultaneous fear of rejection that leads to their separation. In two incidences, Tess has ample opportunity to tell Angel, but can't. Her first excuse is lame. "Driven to subterfuge, she stammered "Your father is a parson, and your mother wouldn't like you to marry such as me. She will want you to marry a lady" (p. 168). The second excuse reveals her d'Urberville heritage,

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but nothing else. "She had not told. At the last moment her courage had failed her, she feared his blame for not telling him sooner; and her instinct for self-preservation was stronger than her candour" (p. 186). She lies once and it is enough. When Tess writes Angel a confessional letter, circumstances prevent him from getting it, but she knows that there is still time to tell him. She makes it easy for herself by catching him at a moment when he naturally urges putting confession off. Tess understandably fails to tell Angel; it is agonizingly difficult choice to make; but it will result in misery and violence. Hardy sympathizes in his poem "The Coquette, and After" with "Of sinners two At last one pays the penalty The woman women always do!"

In true Hamlet form, Hardy brings up another question of illusion vs reality. Not only are the characters affected by the outer world, their own hopes, dreams, and ideas lead to misjudgement and misunderstanding. Tess increases her own suffering by elevating Angel to the realm of a god. "She loved him so passionately, and he was so godlike in her eyes; and being, though untrained, instinctively refined, her nature cried for his tutelary guidance (p. 178). Indeed, Angel's tragic flaw is his hypocrisy, yet Tess doesn't look at all the facts. "He was all that goodness could be knew all tht a guide, philosopher, and friend should know. She thought every line in the contour of his person the perfection of masculine beauty, his soul the soul of a saint, his intellect that of a seer as if she saw something immortal before her" (p. 189) Likewise, Angel's love is not as emotionally passionate as it is spiritual (his name), calling Tess Artemis and Demeter. "[Angel] could love desperately, but with a love more especially inclined to the imaginative and ethereal." Angel falls in love with the thought of Tess, but does not love her as an entire person.

Hardy is anti-modern, and though Nature is cruel, it provokes our emotions, unlike the deadening influence of machines. The machines in the field are described as dehumanizing, with powerful imagery of hell. "The isolation of his manner and colour lent him [the engineman] the appearance of a creature from Tophet (hell) he served fire and smoke in the service of his Plutonic master." (p. 319). The machines drain life, deaden the emotions, and isolate people from each other, unlike Nature, which can certainly be termed vibrant and ever-changing. Hardy, furthermore, uses irony to describe "the process, humorously designated by statisticians as "the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns," being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery" (p. 346). In *The Milkmaid*, Hardy uses the train as the symbol of industrialism. "Is it that passing train, / Whose alien whirr offends her country ear trains shriek till ears were torn." But in "The Mother Mourns" Hardy personifies Mother Nature, asking why she gave power to Man to pursue his own demented creations. "Why loosened I olden control here / To mechanize skywards he holds as inept his own soul-shell - / My deftest achievement - / Contemns me for fitful inventions / Ill-timed and inane"

Both Angel and Alec have "feelings which might almost have been called those of the age the ache of modernism advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition a

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more accurate expression, by words ending in logy and ism, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries" (p. 123). This "ache of modernism" splits Angel's reason from his emotions and accounts for his hypocrisy. Angel himself feels that he is free of social barriers and foolishness "He spent years and years in desultory studies, undertakings, and meditations; he began to evince considerable indifference to social forms and observances. The material distinctions of rank and wealth he increasingly despised" (p. 115) And yet, after Tess forgives him of the same crime, he cries out with revulsion, "O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God- how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque-prostitution as that!" (p. 224) Suddenly, his mind blocks off his emotions (for in fact, he still loves Tess) and represses them until too late. "there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in a soft loam it had blocked his acceptance of the Church; it blocked his acceptance of Tess (p. 237). "With all his attempted independence of judgement this advance and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings in considering what Tess was not, he overlooked what she was, and forgot that the defective can be more than the entire" (p. 261).

Conventional religion, Hardy argues, is not the key to salvation. Alec rejects the shallow fire and brimstone method, while Angel rejects the rigid institutional religion of his family, forcing one to automatic judgements and hypocrisy. Tess herself, although brought up religiously, does not believe in God. Hardy says ironically "If before going to the d'Urbervilles' she had vigorously moved under the guidance of sundry gnomonic texts and phrases known to her and to the world in general, no doubt she would never have been imposed on. She and how many more might have ironically said to God with Saint Augustine: "Thou hast counselled a better course than Thou hast permitted"(p. 96). Alec refuses to take responsibility for his actions when he feels that everything goes wrong. "How could I go on with the thing when I had lost my faith in it I am not going to feel responsible for my deeds and passions if there's nobody to be responsible to" (p. 323)

In Tess of the d'Urbervilles and his poems, Hardy takes a tragic, searing stance on life that urges one towards bitterness and a feeling of impotence. Every instance of Hope and well-being is followed by disaster, through potent and devilish twists of accident, coincidence, seasonal weather, conventional social attitudes, one's own nature, and other circumstances. All these factors beyond our control impart a dark cloud of inescapable doom. His poem "To Life" says it best. "O life with the sad seared face, I weary of seeing thee, And thy draggled cloak, and thy hobbling pace, and thy too-forced pleasantry!"

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