
Traditional values and Intellectual Evolution in Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the D'Urbervilles"

Hardy's novels are grounded in a realist portrayal of a society defined by constant advancement. The preceding Enlightenment era developed a sense of shedding traditional values in pursuit of intellectual evolution, and this only accelerated into the constant striving for progress of the Victorians. "Modernity" encompasses a web of issues, ideas and concepts ranging from industrialisation to sexualisation. One could also use the term to describe changes in class distinction, political systems and even societal loss of faith. Although it is not specified when exactly *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is set, Hardy conveys a strong sense of contemporaneity by firmly embedding the plot in Nineteenth Century culture; he depicts the changing conditions of agricultural labour, a changing class structure where wealth eclipses the importance of ancestry, and he even points to specifics such as Tess's education within the National Schools movement.

All of these allusions suggest that the author wishes to address themes of current debate and this is explicated in the novel's Explanatory Note: "The story is sent out in all sincerity of purpose, as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things... I would ask any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St Jerome's: 'If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come out than the truth be concealed.'" (p3) The phrases "a true sequence of things" and "what everybody nowadays thinks and feels" convey an awareness of an evolving opinion surrounding topics of contemporary importance. "Modernism", as a term, is usually retrospectively applied, however Hardy uses it within the novel itself when Angel muses that Tess's disposition has the "ache of modernism". This uncomfortable description, alongside statements in the Explanatory Note, indicates that the author does not share the view that Victorian progress is inherently positive, and that the novel intends to represent flaws in its incessant forward march. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* could be perceived as a depiction of traditional rural life and the industrial forces that are destroying them. Machinery and urban scenes are often portrayed with hellish imagery whereas nature is given a softer perspective, alluding to Pagan Gods of fertility and Druid mythology. Hardy's description of "the engine-man" (345) most aptly encompasses his view of mechanised agriculture. The language itself suggests that this man, intrinsically out of place in the country setting, serves as a microcosm for the industrialisation of Victorian England: "By the engine stood a dark motionless being, a sooty and grimy embodiment of tallness, in a sort of trance, with a heap of coals by his side" (345). The author's choice of description could almost be applied to an urban factory, and everything about the figure is shrouded in mystery. He is given little sense of identity - a "being"

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masked by darkness, not a person with character or human features.

Every quality of the “engine-man” explored by Hardy is wholly at odds with his surroundings: “He was in the agricultural world, but not of it.” (345) These factors evoke a sense of two very different worlds clashing – the city and the country, modernity and tradition. This is also not seen to be an isolated occurrence - Hardy emphasises the movement of this machine “from farm to farm, from county to county” (346) implying a continual spread throughout the country. The author states that “as yet the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex” (346) and although this appears transitory, the opening words “as yet” convey a feeling of inevitable foreboding. Another aspect of the “engine-man” that could be seen to be representative of modernity’s industrial movement is Hardy’s impression that it separates man from nature: “His thoughts being turned inwards upon himself... hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all; holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives... The long strap which ran from the driving wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him.” (346) This introspective and callous attitude represents the tunnel vision of urbanisation: Progress for progress’s sake without consideration for the flaws that modernity may bring. The “engine-man” is almost as contrasting to the “natives” as he is to the crops he imperviously harvests. This suggests that Hardy adopts a view that those from the cities had no desire to care for those in the country; that rural inhabitants were perceived as a means for sustenance that will soon become unnecessary when the threshing-machine loses its status as “itinerant” in favour of permanence. Hardy’s realist literature usually has an undercurrent of pessimism, though the natural world does not share the “Plutonic” (345) descriptions of industry.

In place of fire and darkness the forest is given a mythical hue. In describing the Chase there’s a “soft azure” (18) over “one of the few remaining woodlands in England of undoubted primeval date, wherein Druidical mistletoe was still found on aging oaks, and where enormous yew trees, not planted by the hand of man, grew as they had grown when they were pollarded for bows.” (18) The constant historic references add to the sense of nostalgia, there’s a feeling of belonging and glimpse of, perhaps, what all of England could still be. Modernity’s inescapable advance is a stark contrast to Hardy’s idyllic natural world. Although cities are not prominent in Hardy’s literature, their influence looms over the fictional Wessex and their importance should not be understated. Some natural scenes even seem described through the lens of a modernist artist or architect – Hardy comments that “the world seemed constructed” (18) when describing Tess’s homeland, and refers to “what Artists call the middle distance” (18). Their physical presence is largely avoided, however, through descriptions of their significance seeping into agricultural provinces we are offered insight into Hardy’s view of urbanisation: “Families who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past... had to seek refuge in the large centres; 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

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machinery.” (372/373) This is a witty, yet scathing perspective of rural poverty inflicted by city growth in the 19th Century. It states explicitly what the novel’s negative portrayal of mechanised agriculture and contrastingly idyllic pastoral landscapes implies more subtly – industry and machinery are detrimental to provincial life, forcing inhabitants to migrate.

One could attempt to summarise *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as an encounter between industrial modernity and traditional rural life, however Hardy is not so na?vely nostalgic as to suggest his folkloric countryside is the real alternative to Victorian cities. Many, including Marxist critic Raymond Williams, counter the idea that Tess’s downfall is a representation of rural England undone by modernity. Certainly this is an aspect of the novel, though Hardy’s cynicism concerns matters deeper than an increasingly urbanised society. Tess is not the antithesis of modernity – her education in the National Schools movement is a facet of modernism, and even her ambitions to rise socially could be considered in this bracket. The author even attacks Victorian attitudes to premarital sex by adding the subtitle “*A Pure Woman*” - this could be described as sexual modernity. Even if Tess were the embodiment of traditional values she is not, fundamentally, undone by any symbol of industrialisation such as the “engine-man” - Alec D’Urberville is more representative of the landed nouveau riche, and Angel Clare of intellectual idealism as opposed to modernity. The rigidity and double standards of Christianity, particularly regarding sexuality, are in fact more traditional values that abet Tess’s downfall through the condemnation by her family village. When considered in more depth, we see that Hardy does not present a clear modernist/traditionalist dichotomy. There are aspects of both that he critiques, and both have an influence on the trajectory of the plot.

Sexualisation and secularisation are both important facets of modernity, and Hardy addresses them in many of his novels including *Tess*, gaining many detractors in the process. His interest in the latter is clear from his own life – Hardy strongly considered entering the Church, but his declining faith led him towards writing. Romans 12:19 states ““Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” saith the Lord” meaning Christian Justice is to be repaid divinely. The biblical implication is that suffering endured in this life may be benefitted from after death, however any sins Tess inadvertently commits (or has forced upon her), are punished temporally. She is admonished for the unintentional death of Prince and even her own rape, and Hardy emphasises this irony by using quotation marks around the word “justice” in relation to Tess’s ultimate execution. The paradoxical nature of the Church is also exemplified by Alec’s conversion: the way Christianity adopts a man (who is, by his own admission, “a bad fellow—a damn bad fellow” (89)) yet casts out Tess (who Hardy claims to be “A Pure Woman”) clearly shows the author highlighting the double standards of traditional Christian values. Loss of faith is further explored as Angel Clare turns away from religiosity in the hope that his “intellectual liberty” (133) will answer questions that Christianity failed to. Although it is less explicit that Angel’s humanism, Tess’s “ache of Modernism” also emanates some of Hardy’s religious cynicism. This can be seen in her description of the world as a “blighted... star” (37); despite the pessimism, there remains a

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sense of spirituality that permeates the text through references to Paganism. The criticisms of Christianity and examples of lost faith don't leave a spiritual vacuum or atheism.

Hardy questions organised religion and is cynical in his spirituality, but the ending of the novel is left open to interpretation: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing... As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on." (420) The irony of the word "Justice" here could be a bitterness towards Christian notions of divinity, however something about the connotations of carelessness in the word "sporting" give a sense of a capricious Pagan-styled God. The inherent spirituality of the phrase doesn't have the confidence of an atheist – it seems closer to the resignation of a pessimistic Christian or just a spiritual, yet confused, declaration. Neither of these options point to a simple encounter between modernism's secularisation and traditional organised Christianity but more of a critique of and cynicism towards one flawed society evolving into another. One possible reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* could consider Alec and Angel as sexual antitheses: Alec striving for liberal, physical sexual modernity and Angel in pursuit of an idealised, natural woman taken from arts and literature. One could argue that Hardy clearly criticises sexual modernity as Alec is evidently conveyed as an intrinsically evil character, however it is not as simple as this. They are alike in their efforts to force Tess to symbolise her entire sex: Angel describes her as "a visionary essence of a woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (146) and Alec's attempts to generalise her induces the response "Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?" (89) This is one of several instances where Tess attempts to assert her individuality, though ultimately it is vain as both lovers fail to separate the individual from their general conception of femininity while she is tragically torn in the middle.

Hardy was evidently concerned with modernism's effects on societal change during his life, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* explores these ideas extensively. There is a strong feeling of contextual debate, emphasised by the realist depiction of the struggles of normal life, particularly in a victimised class – rural women. I do not, however, believe that the novel is particularly concerned with an "encounter" between modernity and the traditions of rural life. This would imply a sense of distinction between the two, whereas Hardy's portrayal of modernism is far more convoluted, and his commentary both agrees and disagrees with differing facets of it. Modernism is defined by its continual state of motion, yet the author's pessimism towards past, present and future remain a constant. Alec is by no means a symbol of modernity, and Tess is less a symbol of natural, traditional life than an example of moral purity as a victim struggling against the current of change, from one flawed system to another.

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