
The Critical Role of Paganism in ‘Tess of the D’Urbervilles’

Upon reading Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, one may notice that references to pagan goddesses and ancient religions of the past are strewn throughout the book. These allusions range from the affectionate names of endearment by which Angel Clare refers to Tess, such as “Artemis” and “Demeter,” to the climax leading to the end of Tess’s wretched life at Stonehenge. The motif’s frequency suggests that it carries more meaning than meets the eye, and that paganism is not present in the novel simply as a means to carry forward the plot. It is very easy for the reader to spot the link between Tess and the goddesses of antiquity. What is Hardy trying to prove to the reader by associating Tess with divinities from a bygone time? Ultimately, the entire novel carries across a potent message about the identity of Tess herself.

Before considering the relation of paganism to the story, it is important to consider certain elements of this motif. Ancient religions saw the female figure as highly significant in society because it carried with it the association of fecundity and prosperity. The ability of the female to give birth was celebrated and regarded with respect in ancient times. There are multiple theories as to why women started to be seen through a different perspective. According to Kass, man might have grown envious on the female’s ability to give life while society insists that he brings death about at war, and therefore ended up restricting the female lifestyle to that of a domesticated housewife. Others described the female body as a source of sin and temptation, as imperfect and so it needs to be kept out of public life. During the Victorian era, when Hardy was writing, the gap between men and women was especially wide. Women were expected to drape their whole bodies with wide dresses and skirts to distort the shape. Girls were left mostly uneducated since schooling was discouraged and they didn’t learn much except for some basic grammar and arithmetic, sewing, cooking and other ‘useful’ skills. Their future would be based on either marrying and finding a fortune that way while also raising a family, or become a governess to earn your own money if you belong to a middle class family. Women from the lower classes had less chances of rising up the social ladder. Should they fall to temptation or worse still lose their virginity to a rapist, they will be deemed as fallen, failed women in the eyes of the society – even if it is perhaps not their fault.

Hardy portrays his protagonist Tess as one such woman. Her best bet in life was to work in the fields or as a milk maid. Alec’s act of violation upon Tess leads her to be shunned by everyone around her, even by the man who supposedly loves her. Therefore, why is Tess compared to a goddess, when these divine entities are associated with power and respect, two things the poor girl completely lacks in the novel? The reasons for these depend upon the reader’s interpretations. Hardy may be trying to emphasise Tess’s innocence and therefore going against the conventions of his time. By establishing Tess as a goddess he is assimilating her

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with spirituality and purity, and thus justifying the subtitle of the novel being 'A Pure Woman'. This must have caused a stir during the Victorian era as it degraded everything they thought is right and moral. However, Hardy was simply asserting the rights of women in society. Each time Angel Clare refused her apologies and every excerpt stating how Alec D'Urberville never was punished for his actions is a piercing cry of satire straight from the author to the reader's heart. Alec's status as subordinate to Tess in terms of spirituality, and innocence is shown through his occupation as a priest, while she maintains her prestigious place as a goddess. Angel Clare's coming from a highly religious family also suggests that like Alec, he is worshipping Tess from down below, unable to reach her level of goodness. This again heightens Tess's innocence in spite of having her virginity robbed away from her, something condemnable during her time.

The reader witnesses the sacrificing of Tess in a process very similar to that of Christ. She escapes to Stonehenge, where she performs kenosis on her pure, spiritual form and allows herself to appear to her tormenters in all her humanity, much like Jesus Christ let the Jews arrest him without resistance. Such an episode is probably meant to raise pity in the reader, who feels sorry that Artemis, the goddess of hunting is now the hunted one. Thomas Hardy sacrifices Tess with the hopes that her fictional death will save the lives of many real, tormented women who are suffering because of actions they didn't commit. The rejection of her status as a pagan goddess who stems from Ancient Greece and Rome – the elite civilisations - may also be a signification of the community's letting go of civil behavior and return to barbarism by condemning the girl to death. There is one may say the performance of kenosis on humanity, both from the side of Tess as well as that of the community. Since Tess is the bearer of humanity and civilization in a barbaric world, her death leads to cutting ties with civilization, involving language itself, and thus ending the narrative as a whole. In a way, the entire novel is an allegory to the life of Christ. There is the celebration of the harvesting and Tess as the goddess with her child, the symbol of fecundity. Her attempt to transcend by sinking down from her godlike status to be with a human man she loves is what kills her, just as Christ demonstrates his love for all humanity and suffers death by crucifixion. The duality of the Christian voice may be there also to serve to show others how in reality both heathens and Christians alike depended on a greater being for survival. Both communities thrived on peace and harmony. Yet Christians seemed to be quite as bloodthirsty as the alleged barbaric heathens as they too carried out a deadly ritual by sacrificing poor Tess. Therefore, Hardy is bridging a gap between heathens and Christians seemingly telling them that everyone is the same, in spite of the faith they claim to have. Therefore, the book is a celebration of paganism and a yearning for the past echoed through a Christian voice.

One may also compare Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in the sense that both seem to be aiming to imitate the bygone classical past of virtue and dignified endeavor. While Jude is trying to master his Latin and Greek as well as to acquire a good education, he is put down by society simply because of his social class. Tess herself is unable

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to raise herself out of the murky waters she was thrown in because she does not belong to a society that appreciates women, unlike the society of the classical era. Therefore, it is easy to come to the conclusion that Thomas Hardy did not quite agree with the conventions of his time, and would have liked to see changes applied. Through his novels, he aimed to urge his readers to open their eyes and understand what is taking place in the world around them, that it is not necessarily right and that not everyone benefits from the social system. Tess, the pagan goddess, had to grasp at the past in order to generate the present in the future, thus encouraging the readers to consider and learn from history so that mistakes are not repeated.

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