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Fatalism views of Thomas Hardy in Tess's tragedy

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy is the influential English novelist and realist writer in the nineteenth century. His masterpiece *Tess of D'Urbervilles* has won him the world prestige. Tess's tragic fate is the core and clue of the novel. By analyzing the contemporary social, historical and cultural backgrounds and the heroine's character flaws, this paper points out that Tess's tragedy is caused by women's status of economic appendages and the subordinate position in society. Tess's tragedy in life is inevitable. The arrangement of the plot structure also reflects the fatalism views of Hardy, and renders the necessity of the heroine's tragic destiny.

Keywords: character flaw, fatalism, fate, tragedy.

1. Introduction

Hardy is the first English novelist to write about the countryside and its inhabitants in a serious manner. As a novelist and writer of short stories, he belongs to the age of Victoria. During his long span of life, his religious beliefs also experience great changes, which are embodied in his words. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reflects Hardy's social pessimism and sense of tragedy in human life. Chapter one intends to analyze the social backgrounds in which Tess lives. The story happened in the late half of the 19th century when capitalism had already invaded the distant rural areas of England and crisis and depression began to appear. Tess just lived in the huge historical transformation. Customary morality and religious ethics of Victoria era constituted the most important factor that determined Tess's inevitable tragedy. Meanwhile, Tess is a victim of the capitalist laws. Anyone is doomed to be repelled by society whoever tries to change the capitalist laws. Chapter two, Hardy describes many accidents and coincidences, omens and natural environment in

Tess of the D'Urbervilles. These accidental matters, mysterious and incapable to foretell, which like an invisible hand give Tess a serious attack, and pushes the development of story. What's more, kinds of omens embody the Hardy's fatalism. He thought that human life was controlled by mysterious power beyond the universe. And fatalism consists of nature and human nature which are against the order of society. Chapter three a discussion on the weaknesses in the main characters—Tess, Alec, Angel and Tess's parents are made. Hardy molds an orthodox femininity which threatens the Victorian model of women. In the contrary, Tess possesses certain inherent qualities, such as pride, independence and passivity, while obedience and passivity are the inner reasons that lead to her downfall. In addition, Angel's love and Alec's persecution push Tess to hell. According to Hardy's position, Tess's tragic life is inevitable. Facing the chaotic and crazy life, Hardy, with his keen, observation and skillful writing techniques, successfully presents the tragedy of Tess.

Although Hardy describes many "Fallen women" in kinds of works, Tess is the perfect one.

2. Literature Review

During the test of time for 108 years, the people's attention to Tess of the D'Urbervilles was added, the depth and the width of research beyond the past. Lenin compared worker's hardship described in it with the Russia's present situation affirmed the real of realism. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* becomes the most acute denouncement against British ruling class and whole capitalism. The tragedy of Tess was rightly the epitome of many labors in that socialism of extremely rottenness. Hardy endowed Tess with great vigor, fused the tragedy of main fate and character into the rich contents of social tragedy, and sent this book to the ridges of British novels directly. In this paper, the reasons of the inevitability of Tess's

tragedy are analyzed from two aspects: the outside causes and internal causes. The hypocritical era and morality of Victorian age, the pressure of Tess's parents and the symbols of damage force Alec and Angel formed the outside causes. The internal causes included the contradiction between her submission and her pride independence and her indistinct equal thoughts.

3. Social Background

The story of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* happened during the late half of 19th century, which saw a decline and destruction of the English peasantry and was an age of transition and great social upheavals. Although the British Victorian society entered into the capitalist industrial civilization, there were still many old concepts and systems that restrained people. Marriage is a hot problem. At that time the concept of marriage is a reward that God grants to a virtuous people. The mass production of machines makes small land owners and farmers lose their land into the proletariat. In order to find a way of survival, they are reduced to the employees under the capitalist mode of production. Professor Chen Jia gives the following comments on the description of Flintcomb-Ash farm:

The striking scene of capitalist exploitation and oppression on the Flintcomb-Ash farm is one of the highlights in the novel, for here as rarely elsewhere in English fiction does one witness a vivid picture of how women laborers were especially heavily exploited, with their lower wages but not lighter work, how they were insulted as well as maltreated with harsh words and orders, how they had to work under the most terrible condition of weather and long hours until all except the very staunchest of them collapsed with over-fatigue. In this respect *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is almost unique among the English novels of critical realism in the latter part of the 19th century, in which such vivid scenes are given of the central character as a peasant worker under capitalist exploitation and oppression. (Chen, 1998, p.436)^[1] Tess's tragic fate has a deep social origin. She is the victim of social oppression. The capitalist morality and religion as well as the capitalist exploitation constitute the most important factors that determine Tess's inevitable tragedy.

A. Customary Morality

Customary morality is represented in the novel first by the population of Marlott. Tess is seduced by Alec in the wood and gives birth to a child before marriage. The attitude of Marlott people towards Tess is not humane, nor sympathetic. They consider that she has infringed the custom. Tess becomes the center of gossip in Marlott. She feels very uncomfortable and guilty all day long. Therefore, she remains indoors during the day. Only at the twilight does she go out. Those people absolutely ignore how a maternal love for her child. Those people who insist upon conventional moral standards are narrow-minded.

Customary morality is also reflected in Angel's brothers, Felix and Cuthbert. They are merely "contented dogmatists" treading the trodden way requiring neither purity of soul nor originality of thought. The following paragraph presents a vivid description of them:

After breakfast he walk with his two brothers, non-evangelized, well-educated, hall-marked young men, correct to their remotest fiber; such unimpeachable models as were turned out yearly by the lathe of a systematic tuition. They were both somewhat short-sighted, and when it was a custom to wear single eyeglass and string they wore a single

eyeglass and string; when...they wore ...; when he was decreed in favor of Velasquez, they sedulously followed suit without any personal objection. (Hardy, 2006, p.219)^[4]

Felix and Cuthbert are both clergymen. They are completely involved in their own little world. Although they have the education that Angel lacks, they are completely deficient in humanity. Capitalist hierarchy deepens on their heart. They disapprove of Tess because of her "low" social station, which they think lowers them in the eyes of the world. Customary morality is not, according to Hardy, the right and reasonable ethical response of the collective mass to the pitiable cries of the "units" of society in distress.

Hardy refused to regard a casual indulgence in sex before marriage as immoral or sinful. It was, to him, a venial lapse, just amoral. Tess, in spite of her which is regarded as normal within the monogamous marital limits, should seem so outrageous when it is premarital. Social laws, unlike the indifferent laws of Nature, should be informed with the spirit of sympathy, and they must not be allowed to lose sight of the human need to be happy. They must civilize, but must not stifle the animal instinct. The case of Tess, moreover, is different. Her first lapse is the betrayal by Alec of her innocence, almost ignorance of sex. But her final fall could have been averted if she had not been harassed beyond endurance, if she had found all around her not scorn but compassion, and if she had been allowed an opportunity to improve. (Dave, p.109)

B. Religious Ethics

Religion is a typical form of social conventional and laws. "Throughout Tess, Hardy deprecates religion. He thinks that it is either a lifeless affair, as with the Clare family; or a matter of fanaticism, as with the text painter or those who are followers of Alec later in the book" (Dave, 1985, p.110)^[2].

At the beginning, Tess is a believer of God and goes to church regularly. But ever since she is seduced by Alec, she begins to throw doubt on her belief. Tess neither gets forgiveness nor compassion, but the endless accusation after returned home. "...the people...and at last observing her they whispered to each other" (Wu, 2002, p.139)^[9]. She cannot have a proper baptism, when the innocent child is born. She cannot have a religious funeral, when the child is dead. Although Tess for their children's funeral was rejected and she promised would never come to church, religion has always troubled Tess.

Angel Clare neither believes in God nor wants to enter the church as his father wishes. He influences her through their contact and his influence on Tess is fully revealed through the conventional between Tess and Alec in Chapter 46. "How can I pray for you," she said, "when I am forbidden to believe that the great power who moves the world would after his plans on my account?"

You really think that? Yes, I have been cured of the presumption of thinking otherwise. "ured? By whom?" By my husband, if I must tell"...

Hm, Fancy your being able to teach me what you don't know yourself!" He fell into thought. "And so I threw in my spiritual lot with his," she resumed. "I didn't wish it to be different. What's good enough for him is good enough for me." (Hardy, 2004, p.399)^[5]

Loss of chastity is not Tess's fault, but she is guilty. Therefore, she refuses Angel's love. She cuts off eyebrows and wears old clothes to demonize her. Because in her deep heart she considers she lures Alec as well as others. Finally, she kills Alec and is sentenced to death, which she thinks a

good opportunity to prove her innocent to God. Whether Alec or Angel is contrary to Christianity, it is not clear. However, Tess, the true piety, suffers the most injuries but does nothing wrong and finally becomes a victim of religion.

C. Capitalist Law

Tess is also a victim of the capitalist laws. First of all, she is the victim of the over-rigid marriage law of that time as well as the religious ethics. Those people in a Victorian era were not free from the impact of social conventions and customary. During the Victorian era, marriage was regarded as the gift of God to these virtuous people. Neither Christianity nor the law allowed divorce.

The other reason that causes Tess's tragedy is the cruelty of law. At the end of the story, Angel Clare, who is remorseful for his mercilessness, comes back, but to find the cruel reality. And his arrival makes Tess even more desperate. After Angel leaves, she stabs Alec in the heart and kills him. Finally, she is arrested and hanged to death. Thus, the author writes sarcastically: "„Justice“ was done, and the president of the immortals has ended his sport with Tess" (Hardy, 2004, p.489)^[5]. Tess, such a pure, kind, sensitive woman should be sentenced to death! What kind of law it is!

Hardy put forward his own views, such as marriage, morality, religion in novels through the creating of typical person. He believes that marriage has morphed into a paper recombination of property and hypocrisy contract that improves and safeguards the reputation. The core of the marriage corroded by modern morality is a pragmatic and self-interest. Hence, the tragedy of Tess is inevitable.

4. Fatalism

Hardy lived in a time of United Kingdom free capitalism over the period of imperialism. He witnessed the capitalists invade the rural areas and farmers got bankrupt. A large number of individual farmers in the patriarchal society under the influence of the rapid disintegration became unemployed. Hardy's soul was badly hit. Deep emotional attachment to the ancient civilization, and hated the destruction of the people currently living by industrial civilization. Unfortunately, he had to put all the blame for the "destiny". On this point, we must point out that Hardy's fatalism is deeply limited by social conditions, and their own ideological and time limitations. Therefore, Hardy can only save the ancient civilization of a society's hopes in the hands of fate. In particular, his fatalistic thought was expressed most prominently on the heroine Tess.

In the work *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there are several accidents and coincidences that conduct this mystery. These accidental events promote the development of the plots, and lead Tess to the tragedy. Fatalism is doomed the experience of life, which all things are beyond the control of human power. Hardy's fatalism does not simply refer to regulations but rather involves the mystery. There is a definition of fatalism in Cliff's note, it says "fatalism being that view of life which says that all action is controlled by the nature of things or by Fate which is a great, impersonal, primitive force existing through all eternity, absolutely independent of human wills and superior to any god created by man" (Force, 1966, p.8)^[3].

A. Accidents and Coincidences

Coincidences cover mysterious color of fate. The first coincidence in the novel is that Tess's father, John Durbeyfield happens to know from a local parson that he is

the last descendant of the d'Urbervilles, an ancient noble family with a long and distinguished past. He is proudly in his noble lineage and takes so much wine that on no condition to make a long trip to market. Tess and his brother have to go in his place. Thus the tragedy happens: both of the two children fall to sleep on the way. The mail coach has crashed into their unlighted wagon, and their only horse was killed. That directly caused Tess to accept her parent's recommendation looking for so-called relatives. Old horse was killed appears to be a coincidence, but imply a corollary. Tess had to act against her willing, which eventually led to the tragedy of life. Tess took part in the ball of paddock, falling out with the "Queen of spade" on the back way. She had to go along with Alec to return to the paddock. Unfortunately Tess was insulted by Alec on the way. This reflects Hardy does not predict the people living in the poor a bright future, which can only be attributed their misfortune to the result of coincidence. The second coincidence is that Tess works in dairy farm. She intended to have a quiet life but came across the Angel and fell in love him. Tess always condemned by the conscience. She wrote a letter to tell Angel. She is infidelity, but the fate plays a cruel joke that the letter stuffed below a blanket. Wedding night with Angel, Tess told truth to Angel. He could not forgive Tess, and then went to Brazil. Tess became an abandoned woman.

Thirdly, distress of living caused Tess to seek the assistance of Angel's father. On the way, she came across Alec, and the heart hurt again. This paved the way that she was caught again by Alec's tentacle.

A series of accidents and coincidences combine to hinder Tess's happiness. It seems that God subjects Tess to his every irony on impulse by playing tricks on Tess with accidents and coincidences, and destroys Tess finally.

B. Omens and Signs

Hardy's fatalism is presented not only through accidents and coincidences but also revealed by means of many omens and signs. In this novel, Hardy describes many unlucky things with the color of fatalism. It is an inauspicious omen that Angel did not select her when the grasses dance. It isn't a good omen that Tess's chin is stabbed by the rose worn on the chest. According to the custom, marriage must be announced three times ahead. From the day they got married only two weeks, so that marriage can postpone for a week, which is not auspicious. On Tess's wedding day, the cocks' crows in the afternoon are regarded as bad omens, and it does indicate that something terrible going to happen. Retty Priddle tries to kill herself. Dairy man finds Retty in a river and Marian drunk in a field, because of their desperate love towards Angel. Therefore Tess feels she has taken all the love, and would tell Angel the truth. But what's more terrible is the misfortune that falls upon Tess that night: Angel bears no love for her after her confession. Except Tess, to other people of Wessex, more or less has the fatalistic thought. Tess's mother Joan, who is uneducated "with her fast perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect and orally transmitted ballads" (Hardy, 2004, p.61)^[5] living by her fortune-telling book. She believes in fortune-telling book, but has a "curious fetishistic fear of" it, and thus never allows it to stay in the house all the night; once it is used, it will be brought back to the thatch. She tests Tess's fate in this book and believes it is a good idea to send Tess to claim kin to a rich relation. Tess's family always use a fatalistic tone to speak each other: "This is fate". Each omen or sign has its significance in the plot of the story. It is either

a forecast of what will happen on our heroine or an indication of the misfortune and miserable life our heroine or other main characters will lead. The Wessex people have a deep belief in superstition and fate. Hence, omens and signs are employed to present their belief. Therefore, whatever Tess does, the final result is doomed. The author's main intention is not to publicize the fatalism, but angrily rebuke the dying power of social cruelty, thereby enlighten people to resist.

C. Nature Environment

Hardy's fatalism is also embodied in the form of nature, nature of the world and nature of the people. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy makes a keen and genuine description on the natural background, so the readers can get a better understanding of the natural scenery. But, what is more important is that landscape description is closely coherent with Tess's tragic fate. The author describes the landscape, aiming to set atmosphere and keep accordance with the heroine—Tess's destiny.

In the novel, the reader can perceive numerous pictures of landscape, which are mainly attributed to the pictorial arts used by Hardy. Like a pointer, Hardy combined the painting techniques such as color, ray and tone in the landscape description to enhance atmosphere and aesthetic effects.

There are several places in which Tess lives and which have great influence on Tess. The first place is the Vale of Blakemore, where Tess was born and brought up. She had been living in this place before 16 years old, leading a quiet and happy life. The beautiful vale rears a beautiful girl. We are told that "Tess, with her sensuousness, is an embodiment of the principle in nature of irresistible sexual attraction. Her flower-red mouth, her pretty face, her fine figure, and her unselfconscious affinity with all that is natural suggest how nature is a force in her character and determinant of her fate" (Kramer, 1979, p.135)^[7]. The second place is Trantridge, where Mrs. D'Urberville's house is located. That is a turning point in Tess's life. Seen from the exterior appearance, the owner of this house is very rich. This is a typical merchant's family, a newly-sprouted capitalist's house. These also contribute to Tess's tragedy. Seduced by Alec, Tess returns to Marlott. She withdraws and leads a secluded life. Enjoying the warmth of sunlight, Tess has thought it over and realized that she could be useful and independent again. Therefore, landscape description in Tess does not merely provide the physical background for the novel. Its main function lies in correlating spatial and seasonal changes with the changing of Tess's fate and contributing to the thematic depth and artistic charm of the novel.

5. Weaknesses in the Main Characters' Personality

The tragedy of Tess besides the factor mentioned in above chapter, another important factor is the weaknesses in the main characters. In addition to Tess, there are other people who caused the tragedy of Tess, such as Angel, Alec and Tess's parents. This part mainly analyzes the key characters to see what kind of role they respectively play in the making of Tess's tragedy.

A. Tess

Tess is a modern woman persecuted by old moral. In the eye of the world, "she is a sinner, a fallen woman, the mistress of a dependent by other, and finally is a murderer." (Zhang, 1986, p.93)^[10] However, Hardy considers that Tess's talent

is her greatest beauty of nature, and she is a pure person. Tess, nature beauty, good simple, has courage of self-sacrificing, full of noble woman temperaments. Tess has a strong sense of responsibility on an unyielding heart, which causes her tragedy.

Tess has a strong sense of responsibility to her family. She loves her brothers and sisters, willing to support them. This lofty goal gives her endless suffering. Initially, parents persuaded her to visit the famous families, Tess is firmly rejected. However, she assumed responsibility and promised to visit D'Urberville. This sense of family responsibility propelled her into the side of Alec, but also into the beginning of her tragic life. In the dairy field work, she met and fell in love with Angel. She still choose telling the truth to Angel when she agreed to his marriage proposal finally. Thus she bears a new combat for fortune. These are the responsibility of the true love from Tess. The paper describes the psychological of Tess before marriage, as the reader can clearly see the suffering of Tess: "They were not aware..., and which somehow seemed wrong to these". (Hardy, 1994, p.104)^[6] After breaking up with Angel, her responsibility resumes dominant. The family faces tremendous difficulties after her father died. Alec was familiar with her weakness, and took the chance of persuade her. Tess again compromised to her mother and young brothers and sisters. Every sense of responsibility ate made Tess's tragic fate even more tragic. If her character cannot change, her tragic fate will not change.

She does not yield to real, which is the character tragedy. Tess doesn't want to succumb to the prejudice of traditional ethics. Alec made her deflowered, and she left him firmly. When her child was not buried by religious ritual, she bravely shouted: "I will never go to your church." She has a heroic quality of endurance, of "patience, that blending of moral courage with physical timidity". (Hardy, 2004, p.360)^[5]

Tess is simply trapped, like the innumerable trapped birds and small beasts which suffer both in the action and the imagery of the novel, like the "entrapped flies and butterflies" in the gauzy skirts of the milkmaids going to church, trapped like the workers on the juddering threshing machines, even trapped like Jack Dollop in the milk churn, mechanically pounded into submission—trapped by her heredity and her conditioning. (Norman, 1980, p.139)^[8]

B. Alec and Angel

Angel and Alec are the two main male characters in the novel and they are also the two men who influence Tess deeply and finally destroy her. They seem distinct in appearance and personality. Angel Clare is a typical of bourgeois idealists and old intellectuals. He is a religious rebel and despises the gentlefolk and class bias. He wouldn't accept the career his father chosen for him to the priesthood, but go to the countryside to learn farming techniques, and eager to seek freedom of knowledge. Under the prevailing social conditions, he represents the progressed bourgeoisie desire called for changes to pursue freedom and having progressive meaning. He is more complex than Alec, and therefore, it will not do to say merely that he is all brain and no emotion. He does not so nasty like Alec, but also contains great selfish ingredients. When he didn't know the history of Tess's virginity, he loved Tess sincerely, and idealized Tess on his mind. Although he had the same error with Tess, the secular bias let him abandoned Tess mercilessly. He has not

jumped out of the old moral values barriers, yet not escape from the shackles of class prejudice he despised and finally became a failure rebels.

If we say Angel's love is completely spiritual and eternal, while Alec's has an animal nature. Alec is described to be a typical playboy who will fascinate and seduce cottage girl. He is an upstart and relies on commercial wealth. When he first meets with Tess, a nasty face immediately exposed. In Tess "short life, leaving aside the bigger factor-- social background, which is just the culprit who propels Tess toward destruction. Alec is selfish throughout the whole story and seldom thinks for the others. Alec does feel sorry for Tess after seduced Tess, but since he comes from a newly-rich family, his easy access to money colors the way he reacts to things--his only reaction to his sense of wrong he has done to Tess is to say: "I will pay to the uttermost farthing" (Hardy, 2006, p.125)^[4]. Though he does change to some extent, his basic personalities keep unchanged: his selfishness, arrogance, bad temper, capriciousness and superficiality. Alec's soul is ugly, and embodies the characteristics of the bourgeoisie. It is very ridiculous that Alec become a religious preacher. Obviously, religion is the narcosis that ruling class uses to fraud and deceive working people in a capitalist society.

In summary, actually Angel and Alec have basic similarities beneath the surface of differences. Both of them inhabit a moral and spiritual vacuum, both suffer from what Hardy calls "The ache of modernism".

C. Tess's Parents

Tess's father and mother are of a social class "ranking distinctively above" the agricultural laborer. With the pressure of bringing up a large family in difficult circumstances, it is no doubt that both of them prefer slipping out for drink, to doing anything positive. Thus it can be seen Tess's parents are both lazy and selfish. Jack, Tess's father, is unlike those diligent laborers who work hard to improve their life, but lazy and shiftless, even foolish to some extent. He is so excited about his ancestry that he drinks a lot in the village inn, boasting his noble ancestry. And the result is he can't send the beehives early the next morning. So the first misfortune is caused by the news about their ancestry. And throughout the story, the history about their family throws a shadow on their life. The whole family is tired of poverty and makes a dream to the noble relatives.

As the story develops, Jack's foolish and childish pride in the discovery of his descent shows more serious consequence. Facing Tess's illegitimate child, he locks the door to prevent her from fetching a parson. The failure of Tess's marriage only worries him because others gossip will collapse of his family pride. He, as a father, even doesn't care about his daughter's feeling.

If Tess's father is lazy, ignorant, shiftless and irresponsible, Tess's mother Joan is no better. She associates with his family by a spoon. She gives everything to her daughters. With great expectation, she submissively sent their daughter, a 16-years old girl to a named noble relative. It is sad that this noble relative just has a dissolute son—Alec. This is the beginning of Tess's tragic life and is the continuation of Alec's fallen life. The family poverty is just a part of Tess's tragedy. Ignorance of parents and slack hand with their child, make Tess loses support. Battles alone again and again, there is so scarce environment which can integrate into. She couldn't get the true love. She falls in love with Angel, in my view, because the surrounding environment is cold and

careless.

As parents, Jack and Joan are quite unqualified. They seldom make efforts to improve their living conditions. Instead, they are given to drinks to escape the burden of life. Though they are adult, they seem ignorant and low intelligent. The largest component of Tess's tragedy is that her arrival to her parent's home only to twice frustration: Tribe's cynicism is one of this, the attitude of parents to make her feel more helpless. They just hope Tess will bring home wealth, and blame for the failure of Tess. These force her to leave home again and again, facing a miserable life lonely. At the end, she killed Alec and became a sacrificial object of villain Alec. If Tess had been born into a more diligent and striving family, it is possible that her tragedy would have been avoided.

6. Conclusion

Hardy's tragic novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a classic realistic work. One important reason is that he created an animate and tragic figure—Tess. She committed mistake for subjective or objective reasons led to tragic result. She is a good person but not perfect. She has a very good and admirable character, as well as weaknesses and shortcomings. All these contribute to her tragedy. Her life style, feelings and tragic ending better reflect the realities of times. Hardy creates Victorian girl's true feelings and the fate of a humble-born girl. She struggles with fate, environment, and society but finally fail. This tragedy is not accidental and does not just happen on Tess. Hardy uses a variety of circumstance to frame the tragic plot of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Throughout the first half of the novel, we see the situation closing in through a series of events, which, because the characters take no measures to avoid or change them, ultimately lead to Tess's ruin.

Hardy shows that the common people's tragedies are consequences of their economic condition as well as the legal, educational, moral and religious standards of the bourgeois society. They are victims of economic oppression and social injustice. He bravely declares war against almost every aspect of the bourgeois superstructure as we can see in Tess.

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