

# Tess D'Urbervilles—A Suffering Daughter of Nature

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## Abstract

Thomas Hardy is one of the most outstanding novelists who have made great contribution to the English literature. In his literature creations, he attached great importance to the relationship between man and nature, males and females. In his close observations, he not only sensed the close relationship between women and nature, but also integrated them together into a whole unity. He believed that women are the integral part of nature, and women are more sensitive to blending into the nature. In the male-dominated world, women have the same suffering fate with nature in human civilization, which tends to be isolated and lonely. Hardy advocates to rebuild the respect for women and nature, which is embodied in his feminism consciousness. This paper attempts to study Tess of the D'Urbervilles from the perspective of feminism, centered on the analysis of the affinity between Tess D'Urbervilles and nature. Tess D'Urbervilles is a suffering daughter of nature, she has an uncanny similarity with nature, and she is the womanized nature, therefore, Tess is naturalized in the whole novel.

**Keywords:** Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Tess D'Urbervilles, Women, Nature

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy is considered as one of the most prominent writer in British Victorian period. With the awakening of feminist, the various kinds of females in Hardy's novels have been studied from the perspective of feminism. Hardy's masterpiece Tess of the D'Urbervilles has appealed to the concern of many scholars. Even though there are a large quantity of researches on this novel, most of them are just from traditional perspectives, very few scholars studied the novel from the perspective of the "naturalized" Tess D'Urbervilles, a suffering daughter of nature. Studied from the perspective of feminism, this paper analyzed the relationship between women and nature, centered on the close similarity between Tess and nature, and Tess's suffering life is the consequences from the oppressions of patriarchal society and the result of modern industrialization.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is one of the most controversial novels in Hardy's literary creations. Since its first appearance in British newspaper as a serial story, the arguments on it had never ceased, the controversies had become more furious after it was published as a novel. In Thomas Hardy's times, Hardy challenged the common moral values by claiming that Tess, a woman who lost virginity, is a pure woman. With the awareness of feminism, however, Hardy's thoughts and works received unprecedented acknowledgements. Hardy's feminist thoughts were evidently displayed in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, the awakening of Tess' feminist consciousness showed Hardy's expectations on the equal and harmonious relationship between women and nature. Tess was naturalized in the novel, and nature had a close affinity with Tess, her life journey was even coincided with the changes of seasons in the novel. This paper is going to analyze Tess from the perspective of feminism, call on reader's attention on the destruction resulted from the male-dominated industrial civilization, and encourage women to fight against the patriarchal oppression brought upon them by the society. A harmonious coexistence between human being and nature can only be realized in the world where gender equality is achieved.

## 2. "Naturalized" Tess

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, women had a mysterious affinity with nature, the intrinsic nature of the women conceive and raise the lives endowed the women a unique intimacy with the earth who is the mother of all living things in the world. In the novel, Hardy earnestly built a profound relationship between women and nature, his feminist consciousness was fully revealed in his heroine Tess.

Tess' close affinity with the nature is firstly embodied in her naturally beautiful appearance. Tess belonged to the nature by birth, she was born as the daughter of the nature while was tortured by the patriarchal society and the man-dominated world. Since her first appearance in the novel, the image of Tess has aroused heated discussions because Hardy referred her as "a pure woman" on the earth. However, no one denied the fact that Tess distinguished herself from the usual secular girls by her authenticity and naturalistic beauty. Her natural beauty was embodied in every part of her body.

Tess made her first debut in the novel as a dancer in the "club-walking" of the village. In the band of beautiful young girls, Tess was outstanding in her own natural way. "She was a fine and handsome girl---not handsomer than some others, possibly---but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment."(Hardy, 14)

The red ribbon distinguished Tess from other country girls in the band, however, "to almost everybody she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more" (Hardy, 14) only a small minority of people, mainly the strangers would be fascinated by Tess' natural freshness, and admires her beauty. Her childish heart was blended into her mature female body which added charm to her beauty. "Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves

of her mouth now and then” (Hardy, 14). Tess was just like a beautiful fairy who stumbled into the earthly world. Every part of her body belonged to the nature, and was in harmony with the nature, Tess was the daughter of the nature.

Tess’ close similarity with the nature is then embodied in her personality. On the one hand, Tess is tolerant and docile as any females in the patriarchal society, however, on the other hand, Tess is bold and defiant. Being hardworking and tolerant, Tess has an innate ability to do various kinds of farm work. As a daughter of nature, she contacted with nature through those tough farm work, she was born in nature and also lived by nature. She supported herself and her family by working hard in one field after another, and Tess’ abilities in the farm work was endowed by nature which also proved Tess’ identity as the daughter of the nature. Besides, she can only find peace and comfort in doing the rough field work, and only in nature can she be the true self.

In the novel, Hardy presented a mysterious relationship between Tess and nature. The uncanny force stored in Tess’ tiny little body inspires the readers to explore the further deep connections between Tess and the nature. “Some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpected youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and binging with it hope, and the invincible instinct towards self-deligent” (Hardy, 91). Tess is compared to a weak plant, fragile yet unyielding. Although life is harsh and tough, Tess never gives up, she keeps on fighting for a better life. The destructions which life brought upon her can be converted into a mysterious spirit which helps her to overcome all kinds of difficulties and hardships. After temporary rest and recovery, Tess can gain the strength and wait for the spring to come. Although Tess suffered a lot, she never gave up her hope, she held a firm belief that she can revive and regain her strength very soon.

Furthermore, Tess, as a daughter of the nature, relies too much on the nature where she can find comfort and peace. In the novel, Tess is very sensitive to the nature, and has her own understanding of the nature. She is unwilling to socialize with other human beings out of horror and dread while she aligns herself in the nature to be at ease. For Tess, nature is safe and comfortable, and she firmly believed that pain and hardships would disappear with the alteration of day and night. As the sun rises from the east on a new morning, she would gain all the strength and energy to live on the world. Once in the novel, she intentionally isolated herself in the woods for a long time while all the people thought she had gone forever, she only chose to step out from the woods after dark. In the woods, she fully freed herself and gained all the vigour and strength from the nature to fight against all the hardships in the real life. “and it was then, when out in the woods, that she seemed least solitary. She knew how to hit a hair’s-breadth that moment of evening when the light and darkness are so evenly balanced that the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty. It is then that the plight of being alive becomes attenuated to its least possible dimensions. She had no fear of the shadows; her sole idea seemed to be to shun mankind---or rather that cold accretion called the world, which, so terrible in the mass, is so unformidable, even pitiable, in its units” (Hardy, 77). It is obvious that Tess is unwilling to cope with real people, she has innate distrust in real human beings, and she relies too much on the nature to find consolation and vitality to attenuate the plight in the real life. She would rather live alone

in the woods to feel the “the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other”. Only in nature can she fully liberate herself and enjoy the absolute freedom and inner peace because she is the daughter of the nature.

### **3. Tess D’Urbervilles’ Life Journey in Accordance with the Alternation of Seasons**

Tess D’Urbervilles’ life course coincides with the alteration of four seasons in the novel. As a daughter of nature, Hardy spares no efforts to illustrate Tess’ uncanny affinities with nature. Hardy intentionally integrates Tess’ happiness and sadness into different seasons. With a detailed description of different seasons, Tess’ mysterious relationship with nature is evidently demonstrated in the novel.

Tess’ destiny was closely linked with the changes of seasons. It could be concluded that spring was the beginning of Tess’ life which brought vigour and vitality to her life, summer was the turning point for her which brought confusion and depression to her, autumn was not the harvest season for Tess which only implied the start of her miserable life, winter only made her life worse in which Tess had to pay for all her mistakes.

The novel began in the spring, and Tess’ appearance in the first spring was unparalleled, she distinguished herself from a band of young girls by her natural beauty without any world adornments. Everything was new and refreshing for her, and her first encounter with Angel gave her beautiful dreams for love and wonderful hope for the future life.

Tess’ second spring came after the death of her first baby, she gained strength and vitality after this devastating strike with the coming of the spring. Although she suffered serious attack from the outside world, the coming of the spring cured her wound and revived her. As Hardy described in the novel: “The season developed and matured. Another year’s instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles. Rays from the sunrise drew forth the buds and stretched them into long stalks, lifted up sap in noiseless streams, opened petals, and sucked out scents in invisible jets and breathings” (Hardy, 195). Tess also prepared herself to embrace the new spring with refreshing mental and physical state. “Tess had never in her recent life been so happy as she was now, possibly never would be so happy again. She was, for one thing, physically and mentally suited among these new surroundings. The sapling which had rooted down to a poisonous stratum on the spot of its sowing had been transplanted to a deeper soil. Moreover she, and Clare also, stood as yet on the debatable land between predilection and love; where no profundities have been reached; no reflections have set in, awkwardly inquiring” (Hardy, 195). Tess was just like a flower ready to bloom in the gentle breeze of the spring.

In the first summer, everything changed after the family lost the horse, Prince. Tess had no choice but to claim the kinship because of the financial problems of the family. The future was uncertain for the family and Tess. In the second summer, Tess cannot help being attracted by Angel, while she can not accept Angel’s sincere love due to her unforgivable past, and she had no choice but to step back in front of Angel’s passion. Tess can not embrace a bright

future in the summer, summer brought her more confusions and uncertainties than certainties and happiness.

Autumn was never a harvest time for Tess, and it only brought sadness and grievance. In the first autumn, Tess was seduced and raped by Alec which implied the decline of Tess' life, from that moment, Tess lost her virginity, and her life experienced a dramatic drop. As described in the novel, "It was still early, and though the sun's lower limb was just free of the hill, his rays, ungenial and peering, addressed the eye rather than the touch as yet. There was not a human soul near. Sad October and her sadder self seemed the only two existences haunting that lane" (Hardy, 157). Autumn made herself decline and sadder, the seemingly bright future came to an abrupt end because she was not a maiden any more, she completely lost herself. The only choice for her is to alienate herself in the house and seldom went out in seek of inner peace and comfort. In the second autumn, Tess was in Talbothays where she was utterly lost in dealing with Angel's proposal, she dared not confess her unforgivable past to Angel because she loved him so much, and she was tortured badly inside. To Tess, autumn only means the upcoming of a cold and harsh winter.

Winter was the most difficult time for Tess, in the first winter, Tess lost Sorrow, her poor little baby. She isolated herself completely, and she even thought about death in the sad winter, as Hardy put it in the novel, "She remained in her father's house during the winter months, plucking fowls, or cramming turkeys and geese, or making clothes for her sisters and brothers out of some finery which d'Urberville had given her, and she had put by with contempt... Why did she not feel the chill of each yearly encounter with such a cold relation? She had Jeremy Taylor's thought that some time in the future those who had known her would say: 'It is the - th, the day that poor Tess Durbeyfield died'; and there would be nothing singular to their minds in the statement. Of that day, doomed to be her terminus in time through all the ages, she did not know the place in month, week, season, or year" (Hardy, 106). She lost herself and the bright future, winter was the tomb for Tess. The second winter was even harshed for Tess, she was abandoned by Angel, her true lover. With broken heart, she had to support herself and the whole family by her own hands, hence, she went to work in a farm and spent the most miserable winter there. "There had not been such a winter for years. It came on in stealthy and measured glides, like the moves of a chess-player" (Hardy, 342). All of her sufferings happened in the bitterness of winter, winter implied death and doom to Tess. To conclude, in the novel, Tess, as a daughter of the nature, her fate is closely linked with the alterations of four seasons.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, as a suffering daughter of nature, Tess D'Urbervilles displayed an uncanny relationship with nature, she is "naturalized" throughout the novel, and her destiny coincides with the changes of seasons as the story progresses. As a long suffering woman in the patriarchal society, Tess has no escape in the society which has been dominated by the men, she can only find comfort and consolation in the nature. Tess also distinguished herself by her understanding of the nature. In this paper, the novel and Tess D'Urbervilles have been analyzed from a feminist perspective which aims to call on a deep reflection on the

relationship between nature, women, and men. The mutual respect between men and women, mankind and nature is hoped to be provoked.

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