Hardy's Tess: a pure woman? The notorious subtitle of Tess of the D'Urbervilles is often thought to be ironic or defiant. Mark Asquith argues that we can understand Hardy's complex intentions better if we read the novel in a Darwinian context.

Author(s): Mark Asquith


Document Type: Article

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2004 Philip Allan Updates
http://www.philipallan.co.uk/englishreview/index.htm

Full Text:

Hardy felt strongly enough about his heroine's purity to allude to it in his full title, but in so doing he highlights his own doubts concerning responses to his fictional creation. For how can Tess, a liar and a murderess, be considered a pure woman?

Modern criticism has tended to locate Tess's purity in her struggle against a harshly patriarchal society. Her father is a drunk with delusions of grandeur. Her seduction by the cad, Alec D'Urberville, echoes that of Hetty Sorrel by the young aristocratic Arthur Donnithorne in George Eliot's Adam Bede (1859)--in both 'the woman pays', the seducer blaming his inability to control himself on the beauty of his victim. Angel abandons her, masking his prurient disgust at her sexual history with spurious Christian principles. Tess is ground down by punishing work on machines designed by men, and finally sacrificed on the altar of Stonehenge before a group of converging anonymous men.

Such a reading has much to commend it. However, it is significant that Tess's female companions fare little better: her mother is a schemer who abandons Tess when most needed; Mercy Chant is a prig exhibiting little in the way of Christian charity; and those of the other milkmaids who are not actively hostile are characterised by little more than an obsessive need to secure a husband. It would seem that Hardy's assessment of his heroine's purity is not simply a matter of gender, but is based on other aspects of her social conditioning and character. These are signalled by Hardy's insistence on his heroine's dislocation from an environment to which she has evolved a heightened degree of sensitivity. Her home, for instance, is described as a 'Malthusian nightmare' (p. 62), which 'struck upon the girl's senses with an unspeakable dreariness' (p. 45), prompting a patrician Hardy to demand what right Wordsworth had to talk of 'Nature's Holy Plan'.

The explosion of 'Nature's Holy Plan'

In the early part of the nineteenth century, to take a walk with William Wordsworth among the bobbing daffodils was to experience the majesty of a beautiful nature shaped for the delight of man by a benevolent god. Flowerpressing and butterfly netting were more than just hobbies, they were a means by which gentlemen amateurs and clerics the length and breadth of the country could provide evidence of God's grand design. Such a cozy romantic view was exploded by the publication of Darwin's The Origin of Species (1859). This replaced the idea of a divine plan with the principle of natural selection,
according to which the universe is governed by the impulse to feed, procreate and dominate other species. Overnight the hedgerow was transformed from proof of God's grandeur to a savage struggle for existence, the brightest blooms simply ensuring success over competitors.

Hardy was an avid reader of Darwin, extrapolating such a dark view of nature that he could claim later that the only way to defend its good name is by assuming 'that she is blind and not a judge of her actions or that she is an automaton, and unable to control them'. Nowhere is this blindness more apparent than in the tyranny of Darwinian sexual selection, which reduces romantic notions of love to the needs of the species to reproduce itself acting through the unconscious individual. This can be seen clearly in Tess of the D'Urbervilles in the way in which love is transformed into an 'oppressive' emotion 'thrust on [the milkmaids] by cruel Nature's law'. The sense of a unified and ambivalent agency is apparent, as each maid is transformed into a mere 'portion' of the 'organism called sex', which causes them to 'writhe feverishly' in their cots at night (p. 174).

This is the brutal world into which Hardy casts his heroine. His novel is in many ways an artistic exploration of the belief articulated in The Life (nominally a biography written by his wife but really his autobiography) that 'the emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it'. Tess, too, is burdened by 'Nature's law', but unlike the other milkmaids she has evolved a heightened sensitivity to the whole business of sex. It is in her struggle to control this primitive element of her character that attempts to locate what is meant by her purity should focus. This struggle, however, is complicated by Hardy's addition of another force acting against his heroine, its importance being signalled by its inclusion in the title.

Durbeyfield becomes D'Urberville

The concept of a hereditary disposition, that individuals may acquire certain characteristics of personality from their ancestors, emerged with a more general interest in evolutionary theory. Again, it is an idea that seems to have captured Hardy's imagination. His late poem, 'Heredity', transforms this mysterious process into the speaker who asserts 'I am the family face; Flesh perishes, I live on'. The possessor of the face is therefore turned into a puppet playing out the lives of its ancestors, a state of affairs which leads the speaker of another late poem, 'The Pedigree', to exclaim in despair 'I am the merest mimic and counterfeit!—Though thinking, I am I.'

The face of Tess is, as her mother observes with no hint of irony, her 'trump card' (p. 77). In fact it is just the opposite: its beauty makes her prey to predatory males, her only means of escape being de-feminisation through self-mutilation. More significantly, Hardy makes it clear that her 'fine features' are carved out from a long line of barbarous ancestors, her beauty being 'unquestionably traceable' in the portraits of her female ancestors, whose lineaments were 'so suggestive of merciless treachery' (p. 244).

It is, of course, this face that she shares with Liza-Lu, which is why Angel can transfer his affections with such apparent ease at the end of the novel.

Hardy's insistence on her lineage transforms Tess into a puppet through which her ancestors continue to live their barbarous lives. This point is emphasised through Hardy's development of a symbolic web within the novel, which projects Tess towards her final crime. This web of symbolism includes the D'Urberville coach (which appears whenever a 'crime' is committed), and the colour red (introduced in Prince's fateful wound, reappearing in the hostile Queen of Diamonds and the blood stain made by Alec like an ace of hearts).

A tale of two dances
Like her primitive sexual desire, Tess's hereditary disposition becomes another aspect of 'Nature's law' against which she must struggle in order to maintain her moral scrupulousness. The importance of both aspects is signified by their prominence in the opening sequence of the novel—the Marlott dance. What better way to indicate the forces motivating the behaviour of his heroine than the metaphor of the dance, the movements of which have been prescribed for generations?

This particular dance is a fertility ritual, marking the passage of the girls to sexual maturity. The sensitivity of Tess is signalled by her non-participation, her timidity preventing her from being selected by the young Angel Clare, who has been so successful in disciplining his emotions according to the ascetic religious tradition of his family that his momentary indulgence is brought to an abrupt end through his obedience to the mechanical chiming of the church clock. It is an oversight that is to have tragic consequences. The dance is complicated further by Hardy's introduction of a new musical motif in the form of Mr Durbeyfield's performance of a 'slow recitative' concerning the family ancestry. Thus, from the very beginning the two forces that will test Tess's scrupulousness are unified in a world with which she is out of tune.

Hardy makes this point more forcefully at the Chaseborough dance, the Darwinian theme of which is anticipated by the dance of 'innumerable winged insects' in the 'low-lit mistiness' outside the venue of the barn (p. 90). Inside, individuals are transformed into pagan fertility gods, writhing in a mist of 'floating, dusty debris of peat and hay, [that] mixed with the perspirations and warmth of the dancers, and form[ed] together a sort of vegeto-human pollen'. As they dance, Hardy emphasises the element of Darwinian selection, describing how the exchange of partners simply 'meant that a satisfactory choice had not as yet been arrived at by one or other of the pair', and finishing their performance in an orgiastic twitching of limbs amid the pollen (p. 92). Significantly, we are informed that Tess 'did not abhor dancing, but she was not going to dance here' (p. 91).

The plucked harpstring

It is left to Alec to awaken her sexuality, which he does by teaching her to whistle. Her innocence is continually represented through her association with birds, although the singing lessons delivered to Mrs D'Urberville's bullfinches appear to offer little more than a bucolic interlude amid the darkening plot. However, Darwin noted in The Descent of Man (1871) that birds sing for no other reason than to attract a mate during courtship ritual. Tess has forgotten how to whistle, leaving it to Alec to teach her, thereby metaphorically awakening the primitive sexuality that he will later exploit among the primeval forests. Tess's seduction is shrouded in a haze of sleepiness, when she is least equipped to fend off his advances and control her own sexual nature.

It is reawakened in the garden of Talbothays' dairy, a scene which has a corollary in the sword display of sergeant Troy before Bathsheba Everdene in Far From the Madding Crowd, his swinging, thrusting arm making a scarlet haze 'like a twanged harp-string' before his petrified, yet appreciative audience (p. 204). In this more reserved scene, it is Angel's badly played harp that plucks Tess's heartstrings. Perhaps only Hardy could get away with calling his hero Angel before furnishing him with a harp. Here, however, he is more an Adam playing opposite to Tess's Eve, a relationship that Hardy invokes repeatedly to characterise their courtship. If they are the first two people on the earth, then Tess has already been expelled from the sanitised Eden of the creationist myth to an uncultivated portion of the garden where a Darwinian nature oozes with sexuality, and 'rank ... juicy grass' sends up mists of pollen (p. 150).

Darwin argued that the musical element of courtship ritual had evolved into the tones of modern complex
music, which moves the listener precisely because it evokes the same emotions aroused by man's distant progenitors during the mating season. Angel's harmonies are not simply heard, but 'passed like breezes through her', evoking the same intensely sexual reaction that marks Hardy's description of the garden (p. 151). Tess becomes a 'fascinated bird, [which] could not leave the spot', and then a cat that stealthily moves through the garden towards the source. As she progresses, the garden adorns her with its juices and stains, affirming her as part of that nature which 'writhes feverishly' under the governance of the laws of sexual selection.

Conclusion

It is in Tess's struggle to resist Angel, thinking that marriage to him would be a crime, that Hardy locates the purity of his heroine. Her failure derives not from a lack of personal scrupulousness, but from the way that Hardy loads the dice against her. For in addition to an unfavourable hereditary disposition and a Darwinian impulse that sees the lovers converging with the gravitational force of two rivers in one valley, luck is against her (exemplified by her note going astray).

Tess remains pure because she struggles, not because she wins. Angel, of course, learns this truth too late, blaming her fall on her connection to 'effete aristocracy' when he thought that she was a 'new-sprung child of nature' (p. 259). She is--but not of the nature that convinced Wordsworth of the existence of a holy plan, but the harsh nature that Angel will find in Brazil. As his harp is transformed into the 'one stringed harp' (p. 415) of Stonehenge, a pagan monument which announces Tess's sacrifice on the altar of male desire, Hardy's exoneration should be ringing in our ear. Tess is condemned by 'an arbitrary law of society which has no foundation in Nature' (p. 303).

References


Mark Asquith teaches English at Trinity School, Croydon.

Asquith, Mark

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Asquith, Mark. "Hardy's Tess: a pure woman? The notorious subtitle of Tess of the D'Urbervilles is often thought to be ironic or defiant. Mark Asquith argues that we can understand Hardy's complex intentions better if we read the novel in a Darwinian context." The English Review 14.3 (2004): 12+.


Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com.briagg.rbc.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA112647063&v=2.1&u=pete44701&it=r&p=LitRG&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE/A112647063