In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, the inexorable passage of time forms a metronomic bass note against which Hardy juxtaposes the ups and downs of human life. By placing human events against a background of unchanging eternity, Hardy shows those events to be ephemeral and far less important than the actors involved in them believe. Hardy achieves this effect by subtly weaving images and symbols of time into the narrative. By this device, he shows that the tragedy of Tess's life is her inability to place her personal history in the context of a larger historical sweep. By overvaluing her importance in the scheme of things, she proceeds from one unnecessary sacrifice to another, beginning with her voluntary trip to sell the beehives and concluding with her death. Nor can Tess understand and use time for her own benefit. She cannot see and take advantage of the fact that although time destroys, it also heals.

The passage of time is noted early in the work, during the description of the May-Day dance. Hardy describes it as one of the "old customs," "metamorphosed" (49). Angel joins the dance until "The church clock struck" (54), after which he leaves, obeying his own sense of time.

Later, Tess must go and fetch her parents from the tavern. The tavern keeper, ignoring the artificial constraints of legal time, has kept the bar open after hours. For the bar owner, time is a servant, not a master, malleable to her own desires. Tess makes her way up "... a street laid out before inches of land had value, and when one-handed clocks sufficiently subdivided the day" (62). The implication is that time has become more valuable but that it also exercises tyranny over the lives of rural people, unless they are able to keep it in perspective as does the innkeeper.

Mrs. Durbeyfield also has a flexible attitude regarding time. She sees nothing wrong with spending "an hour or two" at the pub and dismissing "all thought and care." By taking time out, "Troubles and other realities took on themselves a metaphysical impalpability" and "no longer chafed body and soul" (60). Joan postpones housework indefinitely (58). While this may seem like a fault, every housewife knows that, as housework is never finished anyway, a casual attitude does no harm. Tess never learns this ability to step outside of temporal life and relax.

Tess has her first chance to develop a less-egocentric view of herself on the road to sell the beehives. She and her brother look up at the stars, "cold pulses ... in serene dissociation from these two wisps of human life" (69). Instead of achieving a sense of the vastness of time and space compared to their own relative unimportance, however, Tess and Abraham can only equate the mysteries of the universe to their limited mortal concerns. Tess says the stars are "like apples on our stubbard-tree" (69).
Later, Tess attempts to gain perspective. When she finds field work after the birth of her child, Hardy has Tess reflect, "The past was past.... Whatever its consequences, time would close over them; they would all in a few years be as if they had never been ..." (141). Hardy supports this view, "She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure... to anybody but herself." But when her baby dies, Tess is once more cast down in despair, losing, as the bereaved must, any comfort in the notion of the unimportance of one's own affairs compared to the immensity of the universe. Although "her trouble, never generally known, was nearly forgotten in Marlott" (150), she still feels the need to leave. But by trying to escape the past, she only succeeds in drawing more attention to it.

All of the rural world is a synonym for time because it is bound up with the seasons, with planting, growing, and reaping. But when Tess moves to Talbothays dairy, the images of time are intensified. From Valley is full of streams, and the major artery is "clear as the pure River of Life" (157). There, the passage of time is measured in the twice daily milking of the cows. Hardy writes of the waiting cows, with full udders, oozing milk, which "fell in drops to the ground" (60). The dripping liquid is an aural reminder of the ticking away of moments. This image is repeated later in the "measured dripping of the whey from the wrings downstairs" (168). It is echoed again by the dripping of Aley's blood (471).

Hardy also shows Mrs. Crick dragging the heavy breakfast table out from the wall for each meal, "the same horrible scrape accompanying its return journey when the table had been cleared" (188). The back and forth motion of the table is like a pendulum, which is a common symbol of the sweep of time, as is the revolution of the earth around the sun. The book is filled with sunrises and sunsets. Often the comings and goings of Tess and the others are associated with dawn and dusk.

Hardy illustrates the ravages of time by the decline of the wealthy families of the region, along with their mansions and, partially, the reputation and respect in which they were once held. Yet just as time has destroyed her family's history, it could heal Tess's personal history, if she would only give it a chance. As the narrator says, "Let the truth be told--women do as a rule live through such humiliations, and regain their spirits, and again look about them with an interested eye" (158). Even religion would not have power over Tess's self-esteem if she believed, as Hardy does, that although the mill survived to feed the body, "the abbey had perished, creeds being transient" (304).

The final image of Stonehenge, which is believed to be a primordial calendar, is foreshadowed by the stone monument called "Cross-in-Hand" (389). After the passage of years, nobody really remembers what it signifies, or who built it. So it is with Stonehenge, whose builders are now nameless, faceless, and lost in history. By having Tess lie on the sacrificial altar of Stonehenge, Hardy is saying that she, too, and all of her struggles and trials, will soon be forgotten. Her death by hanging is, appropriately, not only marked by the striking of a clock, but also takes place at the dawn of a new day. This final reminder of the inevitable passing of time startles Angel and Liza-lu, Tess's sister (488). Even they cannot lift themselves out of time. "Walking onward yet a few steps, they reached the first milestone."

Hardy's message is that we humans are prideful to think ourselves important in the grand scheme of things. This is not a moral sin, however, but a flaw of character that, if left to guide our lives, causes grief, sorrow, and separation from those we love, from life's joys, and from peace of mind.

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