Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: Tragedy, Sacrifice and the Fallen Woman

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Inception

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Abstract

This essay argues for an understanding of the main character, Tess Durbyfield, as a Classical tragic character, taking on the role of sacrifice to encourage the reader to think about the ways that the figure of the Fallen Woman is portrayed and treated within the confines of Hardy's contemporary Victorian society. It makes connections between Ovid's *Poetics*, and the Tragic framework outlined therein and draws on Classical examples such as Persephone in classical myth, and Euripides' Iphigenia to demonstrate the ways the Tess's situation throughout the narrative echo that of Classical tragedy. Further, this essay explores how Tess herself embodies the Classical role of sacrifice.

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In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess is a tragic character, contextualized by the construction of the narrative's framework and the recurring allusions to ancient Greek culture and religion. Hardy's novel gestures to Classical tragedy through narrative elements such as prophetic happenings, reversals of

fortune, and erroneous judgements that lead to downfall—all familiar conventions used by Classical tragedians.

Tess's role as a tragic character echoes Classical tragic characters such as Persephone and Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon. While Persephone's tale is not one that is tragic *per se* (at least in the version that survives to the present), her role as a sacrificial figure is significant. By returning to Hades every autumn, Persephone enables the cycle of growth to continue and ensure the prosperity of life and growth. Iphigenia, on the other hand, is a tragic sacrificial character. In Euripides' version of the narrative, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, while initially appearing at Aulis under the untrue pretense of marriage to Achilles, Iphigenia ultimately decides to appease Artemis with her sacrifice to ensure the victory of the Greek army (329). Tess mirrors these self-sacrificial acts when her family is evicted from their home, by returning to Alec as his mistress to ensure her mother's and sibling's prosperity. This self-sacrifice is emphasized further at the end of Tess's story: by eliciting the promise from Angel for him to be with her sister, she once again puts her family's needs above her desires, even in the face of death.

The significance of Tess as a tragic and sacrificial character is fundamental to the moral and social questions that Hardy grapples with throughout the narrative. Understanding Tess as a tragic sacrificial figure buttresses the novel's overarching idea that the human condition does not fit cleanly within the confines of Victorian society nor Christian morality. Through Tess's sacrifice, Hardy creates the opportunity for the reader to question the accepted norms of Victorian society, and to reconsider their views on the "Fallen Woman."

Hardy's novel follows Tess Durbyfield through the different phases of her life and explores what it means to be a woman in Victorian society. Tess's attempts to assist in providing for her family after the death of their horse makes it impossible for the Durbyfields to

survive. Tess's mother, Joan, pressures Tess into seeking out a possible affluent relation, Alec d'Urbervilles-Stokes, to aid them in their monetary struggles. However, the aid provided by Alec comes with an ulterior motive: his sexual interest in Tess. Tess's sexual violation at the hands of this so-called "cousin" marks her as unchaste and impure—or as a "Fallen Woman."

The relationship between Alec and Tess, further complicated by Angel Clare, enables Hardy to grapple with the "Fallen Woman" discourse and the control that Christian morality holds in Victorian society. The novel works with the ideas of "natural marriage" and "legal marriage" and places an emphasis on a woman's chastity before legal marriage. Since Tess withholds her background from Angel Clare until after they marry, he ultimately abandons her, leaving her open, once again, to the threat of Alec. After the death of her father, following the abandonment of her husband, Tess must become the sole provider for her family. When that proves impossible, and her family must leave their home, Tess is left with no one to turn to but Alec. The relationship between Alec and Tess ends with the return of Angel Clare. Tess frees herself from her rapist and manipulator by killing him, ultimately leading to her arrest and execution, and thus bringing Tess's story to a close.

Thomas Hardy began writing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1888. The novel was published serially, having undergone heavy censoring, in the *Graphic* in 1891 (Maier 28). After its publication, Hardy faced criticism due to the content of the narrative, Tess's rape, and the murder of Alec, especially since he subtitled the novel, "A Pure Woman" (Maier 28). The full novel was published for the first time in one volume in 1892 (Maier 31); however, it was not until the 1912 publication that Hardy felt he had finally achieved the "definitive edition" (Maier 31). The objections to the novel's moral sensibilities stemmed from contemporary discourse regarding women and their sexuality. The conversation was rooted in the Victorian concern with the figure of the "Fallen Woman," and the threat she posed for

civilized society through her sexual experience and aggressive behaviour. The conversation extended to the literary world, resulting in several novelists depicting women of the “Fallen” type.

When it comes to the literary representation of the “Fallen Woman” in the Victorian period, there are two dominant ways this character type is represented. Nina Auerbach delineates these two approaches in her essay, “The Rise of the Fallen Woman.” First, the conventional representation, in which the woman is condemned as an outcast for her “unchaste” behaviour and dies at the end of her story; death is the only “honourable symbol of her fall’s transforming power” (35). Second, there is the social reformation approach: framing the woman as a victim, unable to protect herself or forced into sexual exploitation because of a lack of options—this representation functions to encourage sympathy with and understanding of “Fallen Women” (Auerbach 32).

Tragic Patterns and Tess

Hardy’s character Tess fits into the second approach to representing “Fallen” female characters. The framework of Tess’s story and the construction of her character encourages the reader to have sympathy and understanding of her situation. The sympathy the reader experiences is promoted through the classic tragic pattern that Tess’s life is made to echo. The traditional tragic pattern, as outlined by Aristotle in *Poetics*, includes the reversal of fortune, recognition of the reversal, and the error or flaw in the character that leads to their downfall (32). As for the type of character that is the best suited for tragedy, Aristotle identifies high-born or upper-class characters who are neither completely good nor completely bad. Hardy engages with the different aspects of tragic patterns and character construction to frame Tess in such a way that her audience is willing to receive her as a tragic character.

Hardy uses the reversal of fortune in a few different ways throughout the novel. The first example arguably takes place before the novel begins. The suggestion that the Durbyfield family derives from the noble d'Urberville family (Hardy 40) implies a reversal of fortune for the d'Urbervilles. Some significant error and reversal had to have happened for their downfall, which brought them to such a humble living, where their nobility is no longer recognizable.

The revelation of the possible noble connection to John Durbyfield, Tess's father, is a reversal of fortune from bad to good. Tess's parents' belief in this opportunity of good fortune seems to be supported when they need to call upon the aid of these noble relatives after the death of their work-horse, Prince. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the reversal sets off the events that lay the path to Tess's downfall. Because of the good news of his nobility, John Durbyfield goes to celebrate at the public-house, Rolliver's, leading to him becoming so intoxicated that he is unable to make the delivery to Casterbridge market for the next day; he leaves this responsibility to an exhausted Tess. Tess falls asleep while driving the cart, causing Prince to end up on the wrong side of the road and to receive a fatal wound from an oncoming cart (Hardy 64). The process of events leads to the death of the family's work-horse, which makes it impossible for the family to earn a living. Thus, the news of the Durbyfield nobility is, contrary to John and Joan's beliefs, a reversal from good to bad. Tess claiming kin with Alec d'Urbervilles-Stokes to seek aid for her family, under the pressure of her parents, brings about her downfall, rather than the prosperity for which John and Joan hope.

Furthermore, the idea of Tess herself as a tragic character is interesting when considering *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and the attendant possibility of Tess having noble ancestors. Because of this possible ancestry, Tess fits into a version of the ideal tragic character. She is neither wholly good nor bad, and she hails from a family that was once noble. Tess, while not a morally perfect

character, is certainly not a person whom the average reader would find deserving of her devastating circumstances. Tess is respectable, as even Angel proclaims after she reveals her past: “I wish half the women in England were as respectable as you” (Hardy 255). Tess makes erroneous judgements, e.g., falling asleep and causing the accident that killed Prince (Hardy 64) and getting on the horse with Alec when walking home from the town dance (Hardy 99). Tess is a character capable of making mistakes, and that failing, in part, makes Tess more accessible to the reader.

Tess’ relatable character echoes that of Sophocles’ tragic character, Oedipus. Born into a noble family, and raised by another, he is of a good upbringing but is neither a perfect man nor an evil one. A terrible fate is laid out to his parents, and later Oedipus by the oracle, that Oedipus will have a hand in his father’s murder and then marry his mother (Sophocles 89). The irony of Oedipus’s lack of recognition that he killed his father and married his mother makes his situation more tragic (64-80); furthermore, Oedipus’s actions in an attempt to avoid his foretold fate ultimately lead to his downfall.

As for the repercussions of Tess’s errors, Tess experiences a downfall in two parts. The first part occurs with her loss of virginity through rape. Tess’s error is that she decides to get on the horse with Alec, something that she had avoided doing before for her lack of trust in him earlier that same night (Hardy 95). Thus, in Chapter 11, they end up alone together in The Chase, creating the opportunity for Alec to take advantage of Tess. The second part of Tess's downfall is her active decision to withhold her past from Angel until after they are married. Tess attempts to inform Angel through a letter in Chapter 32 of her relationship with Alec, but the letter never reaches him:

> "she stooped to the threshold of the doorway, where she had pushed in the note two or three days earlier in such excitement. The carpet reached close to the sill, and under the edge of the carpet she discerned the faint white margin

> of the envelope containing her letter to him, which he obviously had never seen, owing to her having in her haste thrust it beneath the carpet as well as beneath the door" (Hardy 228).

Tess attempts again to address her past with Angel through a discussion before they are married, but Angel stops her: “No, no, - we can't have faults talked of - you must be deemed perfect to-day at least, my Sweet” (Hardy 228). These deterrents lead to Tess making the decision not to tell Angel. Both decisions manifest irony in the narrative through Tess’s lack of recognition of where her choices lead. Again, irony harkens back to the ideal classic tragic framework that Aristotle outlines.

Tess’s circumstances arise out of her actions; her choices create the events. As for Tess’s death, her tragic condition is complicated further by the fact that Tess redeems herself from her “Fallen” state through an act of murder. Tess runs to Angel after he finds her staying with Alec d'Urberville to tell him that she has killed Alec.

> I have done it—I don't know how...Still I owed it to you, and myself, Angel...will you forgive me my sin against you, now I have killed him?...It came to me as a shining light that I should get you back that way. (Hardy 384-5)

Tess’s act of murder is also an act of redemption. Ironically (once again, tying Tess's story to classical tragic patterns), her violent action is what allows Tess to achieve the cleansing of her “Fallen” state. Not only do Tess and Angel reconcile after she reveals her act to him, but there is a sense that while Tess's emotions unsteady her, she has achieved an alternative balance. By the laws of Nature, justice must occur. She redeems herself by killing Alec and therefore removes the obstacle which punctuated her downfall. Angel says to Tess: “How can we live together while that man lives? —he being your husband in nature, and not I. If he were dead it might be different...” (Hardy 256). Tess releases herself from the dependency she has on Alec and removes the natural ties that remain between them; Tess clears the wrong between her and Angel.

Prophecy and Fate

Fate and prophecy are two devices that are fundamental to Tess's story. Further, these two devices are critical to the heightening of the tragic pattern Hardy engages with in the novel. From the beginning, there are different devices Hardy employs to foreshadow the path that Tess's life takes. Hardy uses prophetic imagery through Prince's death and cursed vision with recurring mention of the d'Urberville family curse. The earliest occurrence of prophetic symbolism is through the death of the Durbyfield family work-horse, Prince. The imagery surrounding the event is prophetic of Tess's fate:

> The morning mail cart...had driven into her slow and unlighted equipage. The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword, and from the wound his life's blood was sprouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss into the road. (Hardy 64)

Prince's death foreshadows Tess's death. The horse whose purpose it was to pull their wagon was "only a degree less rickety than the wagon" (62). The horse bears a noble name, Prince, while being a workhorse who is past his prime; not unlike Tess, when she begins to identify herself as a d'Urberville, Prince is also not really what his name implies. Because Tess falls asleep, they end up on the wrong side of the road, and Tess is splashed with Prince's blood, marking her, and signalling the future loss of her innocence at the hands of Alec d'Urberville-Stokes, and later, the loss of her life. Like the horse, Tess's fate is to die.

Throughout the novel Hardy uses prophetic visions to foreshadow Tess' fate; in particular, the d'Urberville family carriage emphasizes Tess's fate: "It is that this sound of a non-existent coach can only be heard by one of d'Urberville blood, and it is held to be of ill-omen to the one who hears it" (Hardy 356). Tess is not necessarily plagued by the vision of the carriage since sheis only thought to have seen it once or twice. However, every time a carriage or carriage-adjacent-vehicle appears for Tess's use, there are adverse events that swiftly

follow. Arguably then, the development of Prince's death functions doubly as a prophetic event. Not only does it predict Tess's fate, with the loss of her innocence and life, but also operates within the ongoing ill-fated circumstances that take place when Tess engages with a vehicle.

The very first example of the curse, however, is at the beginning of the novel. Tess's father takes a carriage home and brings the news that the parson relayed to him of the Durbyfield's possible family connections. One of the girls points out Tess's father as they are walking to their May Day dance: "The Lord-a-Lord! Why, Tess Durbyfield, if there isn't thy father riding hwome [sic] in a carriage?" (Hardy 47). Tess's father leans languorously out of the window, singing about how they have family buried in Kingsbere (Hardy 47). The sighting of the carriage carrying home Tess's father, with his news of their family, is what sets Tess's ill-fate in motion.

The next sighting of a carriage is the scene when Alec d'Urberville arrives to pick up Tess in his dogcart. This encounter, in the end, leads to the loss of Tess's virginity. Alec arriving to receive her is ill-fated, and a bad omen, as implied by the d'Urberville family curse. The vision alerts the reader that there is an ill-end awaiting Tess each time she climbs into or engages with a carriage. The curse's prevalence in Tess's life is further supported when Angel and Tess are married: "A close carriage was ordered from a road-side inn, a vehicle which had been kept there ever since the old days of post-chaise travelling" (Hardy 229). The encounter triggers Tess's memory of a dream she had of such a carriage, and the legend of the d'Urberville curse is brought up by Angel. Not only is the physical carriage bringing attention to the ill-fated marriage vows that have just taken place, but the invoking of the legend by Angel also emphasizes the adverse effects of Tess's future confession to her husband.

The prophetic events function to heighten the classic tragic patterns with which Hardy engages in the text. By engaging with ideas such as prophecy and fate, Tess, on a large scale, cannot be found guilty for specific events in her life: Prince's death, her rape, and the negative outcome of her marriage. Prophecy and fate work to highlight the agency that Tess does have in her own life, decisions like agreeing to take the wagon with Prince to market despite being exhausted, getting on the horse with Alec despite not wholly trusting him, and finally deciding not to speak of her past until she is married; but in addition, prophecy and fate also highlight where that agency ends. Tess cannot stop Prince from dying, does not get to decide how Alec conducts himself, nor how Angel will feel about her rape once revealed. By using prophecy and fate in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy constructs a series of events that could take place in the real world, doing as Aristotle says, creating “something that *would* happen—that is to say, what is possible in terms of probability” (28). Tess’s “Fall”, her fate, is prophesized through Prince’s death, and the d’Urberville family curse. There is very little in Tess’s control that she could do to turn away from her predestined path. Understanding of the lack of control that Tess has over fate, encourages the reader to remain sympathetic to the character—even in circumstances that may be shocking to their moral sensibilities.

Tess as a Sacrificial Figure

Tess’s construction as a sacrificial figure only further spurs the sympathy that is encouraged by Hardy's use of prophecy and fate. Tess places herself in the role of sacrifice at different times throughout the novel to provide for or protect her family. As a sacrificial figure, Tess seems to echo characters such as Persephone, and Iphigenia, the eldest daughter of Agamemnon. There are several points throughout the novel, where Tess acts as a sacrifice. Sacrificial figures often serve a higher purpose greater than themselves.

In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Iphigenia appears at Aulis under the pretense of marriage to Achilles, which turns out to be a lie. After Iphigenia and her mother's arrival at Aulis, the truth is revealed: Iphigenia is to be sacrificed to Artemis to ensure the victory of the Greeks. At first, Iphigenia is shocked and fearful; however, she ultimately decides to appease Artemis with her sacrifice, to ensure the success of the Greek army: "For I am departing to give the Greeks salvation and victory" (Euripides 329). Iphigenia's sacrifice is more significant than herself and rather than merely thinking of herself and her family, she thinks of her community and wants to ensure its victory and survival.

This service through sacrifice for a higher purpose can be seen in another Classical character: Persephone. Felicia Bonaparte draws on the parallel between Persephone and Tess . Bonaparte argues that Tess is a manifestation of the ancient Greek goddess Persephone: she aligns Tess's experience with Alec with Persephone's experiences with Hades (415). The story of Persephone in the forms we receive it from Classical Antiquity is not a tragedy—and Persephone herself is not a tragic heroine. Nonetheless, there are several allusions to the myth that allows reading *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as an "enactment in modern dress of [Persephone's] mythic rites and history" (415).

Bonaparte argues that the novel aims to redress the myth of Demeter and Persephone, with the characters unaware of their roles. However, reading the novel as such ignores the possible contemporary political and social ideas put forth by Tess as a tragic sacrificial character. Bonaparte's comparison of Tess and Persephone is helpful in recognizing the sacrificial characteristics that Tess has. But, while Tess and Persephone share many qualities, Tess is not a direct reconstruction of the Classical goddess. Persephone must remain with Hades for one third of the year (Homer 463-4), while she spends the other two thirds of the year with her mother (Homer 465); Tess, on the other hand, has no

such return to her natal family. Demeter's anger at having been separated from her daughter, and her prevention of the natural cycle of growth has no clear parallel in Tess's story. Only in Persephone's yearly return to the underworld, her death, a sacrifice so that she can return to her mother again and with her return ensure the prosperity of the world, is there some parallel to the story of Tess: Tess sacrifices herself to Alec in order to ensure the prosperity of her family.

Tess acts as a sacrifice in several ways; however, the situation that reoccurs the most for Tess to sacrifice herself is for the protection and prosperity of her family. The implications of the prophetic structuring of Prince's death, for the loss of Tess's innocence, is punctuated by the narrator's invocation of the d'Urberville ancestors at Tess's violation:

> Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of their fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature: and therefore does not mend the matter (Hardy 104).

Tess's ancestors are called forth by the narrator to conjure the idea of balancing the moral scale. The ancestors leaving "a fray" (Hardy 104) echoes the scene from which Tess had just removed herself with the help of Alec and his horse. Tess's situation acts as a mirror to that of her ancestors; the "measure" (104) her ancestors dealt against other peasant girls is shifted and enacted against her by Alec. To balance the scales, Tess must pay for what those who came before did. The loss of Tess's virginity means the death of her innocence, and the end of Tess's life up to that point. The sacrifice through the death of Tess's innocence is the result of her hope to assist in the prosperity of her family; the precariousness of the Durbyfield family's economic circumstances begins Tess's journey to seek aid for them. Tess plays the role of virginal sacrifice for Alec,

to fulfill her family's needs, which brings about the death of her innocence. Tess playing the role of virginal sacrifice again echoes Iphigenia, who is also typically presented as an unmarried and virginal girl. Tess repeats her sacrifice to Alec once again, after the death of her father and her abandonment of Angel, to ensure the survival of her remaining family.

Alec's murder is another form of sacrifice that Tess acts out; a sacrifice to Angel. By ending all possible ties with Alec through his murder, Tess is righting the wrong she enacted against Angel when she withheld her past. When she catches up to Angel at the station, Tess states, "I feared long ago...that I might do it [kill Alec] someday for the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me" (Hardy 384). These events, Alec's murder, and the subsequent attempts that Angel and Tess make at escape, finally brings the reader to the final scene at Stonehenge and the most poignant image of sacrifice in the novel.

The state of precarity that Tess reaches after the murder of Alec is fundamental to the way that Hardy constructs Tess as a sacrificial figure. Being on the run brings Angel and Tess to Stonehenge, where Tess lies down on an altar, quite literally taking up the role of the sacrifice:

> ''Sleepy are you, dear? I think you are lying on an altar.'...
> 'Did they sacrifice to God here?'
> 'No,' said he.
> 'Who to?'
> 'I believe the sun.' (Hardy 329-3)

It is here that Tess pleads with Angel to take care of her sister. She implores Angel to marry Liza to ensure that Liza has a better life than she: "If you would train her and teach her, Angel, and bring her up for your own self! ...She had all the best of me without the bad of me; and if she were to become yours it would almost seem as if death had not divided us" (Hardy 393). Tess understands that she faces a looming punishment for Alec's murder. Rather than putting

herself first and trying to evade custody, she thinks of her family and ensures that there will be someone who can protect and provide for them. Tess puts her family before her own life, again, in the most literal way possible. She sacrifices herself to her fate, death so that her family can have stability through Angel.

Tess the "Fallen Woman"

Tess, as a character, bolsters the argument against the treatment of the "Fallen Woman" in the Victorian period. By constructing Tess as a Classical tragic sacrificial figure, Hardy creates the opportunity for his readers to question the accepted norms of Victorian society. Moving Tess through tragic patterns, all the while having the narrator keep a commentary of the divide between nature and society, Hardy allows for the reader to reconsider the accepted norms of the time.

In "'Pure Woman' And Tragic Heroine?" Lynn Parker discusses the use of Hardy's subtitling *Tess* as *A Pure Woman* an "invitation" (237) to his readers to evaluate Tess's character as they move through the story with her (231). Parker observes that many of Hardy's contemporary critics assessed Tess by her actions with the biases of their society (273-5). Parker cites Hardy's response to his critics of the subtitle and the character of Tess, and she points out their "inability to associate the idea of the title-adjective [pure] with any but the licensed and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization" (qtd. in Parker 274). Hardy is pointing out that the critics are viewing the character of Tess and her actions with the very same narrowmindedness that he is potentially trying to combat or question with the novel. Hardy's critics were missing the point of Tess's character; i.e., that the norms of their society would not allow for the full human condition. The idea of humanity not being confined in a civilized society is supported, especially in the scene Tess returns home after the loss of her virginity:

> …[T]his encompassment of her characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices

> antipathetic to her, was a sorry mistaken creation of Tess's fancy—a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she…She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (Hardy 115)

It is not as simple as Tess being "Fallen" and immoral. This passage brings forward the idea that society and its rules are far too confining for the human condition, which is a part of nature. Tess is pure in the world and laws of nature and has done nothing wrong. Reading Tess as a tragic figure allows the reader a more extensive understanding of the confinements of Victorian society for women who were considered "Fallen."

Through the events of the prophetic moment of Prince's death, the violation of Tess, the cursed vision of the carriage, Tess on the altar at Stonehenge, and Tess's desire to help and protect her family, it becomes clear that she can fit into number of common narrative elements and patterns that were used by Classical tragedians. Tess navigates a space that is difficult to define—she is a "Pure Woman," a "Fallen Woman," and a sacrifice. Hardy complicates the norms of the way "Fallen Women" were perceived and treated in the Victorian period. The use of Classical literary devices and a tragic framework to construct Tess as a Classical sacrificial figure gives her purpose both within Hardy's literary worlds and our own. By moving the empathy of the reader, Tess as a character complicates the understandings and assumptions of the "Fallen Woman" in Victorian society.

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