

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a novel in which his protagonist and other characters are confronted by an almost endless array of moral and socially acceptable choices. Thomas Hardy makes the reader to take a critical look at the character's situation, the character's thought process and the impact of the character's decision making in the society in which they live.

Thomas Hardy presents his reader with three major characters. They are the protagonist Tess Durbeyfield, Angel Clare (Tess's longtime love and husband) and Alec D'Urberville (Tess's seducer and husband). It is these three major characters whom Hardy chooses to place in the most precarious moral and social dilemmas. It is through these characters and their dilemmas that Thomas Hardy displays the social issues found in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Hardy's protagonist seems to have been born in a dilemma. Tess was the oldest of a very large family and she had the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. Young Tess had many concerns to cope with in her life. Her father who drank too much came to understand that the Durbeyfield family could very well be the descendants of a royal family known as D'Urberville. Motivated by greed of becoming part of a higher class, with no thought for Tess, her mother and father made the conscious choice to send Tess to the D'Urberville mansion to acquire work and marry a wealthy man.

While employed at the D'Urberville mansion, Tess was confronted with her first major social dilemma whose name is Alec D'Urberville. The young Alec is portrayed as a spoiled, almost evil person; a high class snob. From the first time he laid eyes on Tess, he begins to seduce her. Hardy's use of Alec D'Urberville and his relationship to Tess, sets the standard for the cruelty of society in this novel. We (the reader) come to know that Alec D'Urberville is the cause of Tess's social problems. That is, he has no conscience, no morals and above all feels no remorse for his actions and it reflects upon Tess. His seduction of her results in her pregnancy and she chooses to leave the D'Urberville mansion. Hardy tells the reader that the moral sin which Tess has experienced is taboo in her society and she becomes the object of ridicule and rejection. Although she is a "fallen woman", she maintains her high moral standards as well as her beauty and innocence.

In analyzing the above mentioned scenario, can the reader hold Tess completely blameless. Was she not a conscious participant in her own seduction? The answer is certainly yes, however, Hardy does a wonderful job of exonerating her and her social sins. Hardy (if not Angel Clare), is convinced, not only of her purity but also of her capacity for ascendancy. Although her society chastised such behavior, Hardy bestows upon his protagonist the ability to overcome the moral and social stigma and thus Tess maintains her dignity and sense of self.

Through what could be labeled "divine intervention," her baby dies. The priest would not give it a proper Christian burial because of the social rules regulating religion. The baby had not been properly baptised at birth. The priest says that if it were up to him, he would, but he must follow the social laws surrounding him.

The years pass and we find our lovely, innocent protagonist once again canvassing the countryside in search of serenity and work. She is hired as a milkmaid on a large dairy farm and it is here that Hardy places his protagonist as well as her future husband in their most troublesome and disturbing moral and social dilemma.

While working on the dairy farm, Tess happens to meet Angel Clare, the man she will eventually marry. Angel and Tess fall in love and make plans for their marriage. As their courtship continues, Tess knows in her heart that she must tell Angel about her past. However, she fails to do so for fear of losing him. She feels that the moral sin that she has experienced will most certainly drive Angel away from her. One can argue that there is no evil in this deception, only a young girl's fear of losing her the man she loves and her future husband. The question here is that of society's acceptance of this union. Would Angel accept her even though she is not accepted in society?

The novel now takes a very interesting turn. Concerning Tess's relationship with Alec and the moral and social sins committed, Angel feels that the sins are not only sins against man, but also God. The reader would most certainly state that Angel's reaction to his dilemma placed much pain and hardship on his wife. Hardy is exposing the hypocrisy of his time by pointing out that a man could divorce his wife for committing adultery; however, a woman could not divorce her husband for it. Here the reader can see what is wrong in nineteenth century society's norms and values compared to those of today.

Alec D'Urberville returns into her life, this time not as a spoiled young man, but as a "preacher." He explained to Tess that he had received a calling from God and was compelled to preach the gospel to the sinners around him. He pretends to realize what he had done wrong and now wants Tess to forgive him and return to him. Tess confesses to him about their child and also about her marriage to Angel. Alec, who has already been perceived as the social evil, literally haunts her until she agrees to marry him. Her seduction by Alec is slow and methodical, much like his seduction of her early in the novel. He used his profound art of psychological manipulation to persuade Tess that Angel has left her forever. He further enhanced the seduction by telling her that even if her husband returned, she should never look upon him as a husband.

The reader, no matter how naive, now knows that Angel will return and attempt to find his beloved wife Tess. Angel searches diligently for Tess and finds her at her home with her husband Alec. Tess reacts to Angel in a manner of anger and resentment. However, Tess knows in her heart of hearts that she is still in love with Angel and decides to confess her love for him to her husband Alec.

Alec does not take the news very well and proceeds to cast insults toward Tess. Tess, in a fit of emotional passion kills Alec with a knife and flees the area with Angel. For the first time in this novel, Hardy has our protagonist committing a deliberate act of social evil. She has taken a human life. Even now after Tess has committed murder the reader asks, but was the murder not committed for the sake of love? Could it not be justified? The reader remembers the innocence of Tess Durbeyfield. The reader understands the sacrifices she made for her beloved Angel. The reader knows what an evil man Alec D'Urberville was, but society does not care.

Would not love, innocence and purity justify the taking of a human life? Thomas Hardy has exposed Tess D'Urberville to many evils of society and of mankind. He has placed upon her every conceivable moral and social dilemma that mankind could experience. Through all of her trials she has remained a saint, a pillar of virtue, spirit and self-reliance. Tess is not evil, those around her were evil. By placing their moral and social evils upon her, her demise was the murder of a human being.

The novel reaches its climax when Tess and Angel reach the area known as Stonehenge, a heathen temple known for its immense healing powers. How ironic that Hardy would have his heroin and heroines complete their life's social journey at such a mystical temple. For Tess, the site is a destination, a sanctuary, and the ancient court seems to pass judgement and absolve her, for she awakens completely at peace. Tess is apprehended by the local townspeople and subsequently executed for her act of murder.

Hardy, through moral and social manipulation places Tess in situations that we all have experienced. Can we as human beings confess to maintaining the high standards of dignity, purity and innocence that Tess D'Urberville held? Would we have not sought revenge on Alec, Angel or even our parents for the wrong they had done to us? Tess is not at fault in her story. The fault lies in the constant moral and social demands placed upon her by Hardy's peripheral characters and their roles in society.

