

## ARTISTIC FEATURES OF THOMAS HARDY'S NOVEL "TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES"

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**Abstract:** This article highlights a relationship that exists between the symbolical sacrifice of Tess at Stonehenge and her association with fertility, ritual, and mythic cycles of seasonal death and rebirth in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles.

**Keywords:** Mythology, hitherto, omnipotent, benevolent, incarnate, deity, kinship, garner, cart, reckless.

“Tess of the d'Urbervilles” is Thomas Hardy’s most well-known novel, and to this day still attracts analytical attention. Literary scholars and critics have found many different subjects of interest, mainly that of destiny in contrast to free will and the novel’s condemning exposé of Victorian double standards.

J.T. Laird is one literary historian who has addressed the mythological symbolism in his book “The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles”, wherein he draws attention to the mythical elements that recur throughout the story. According to Laird, the previously cited rape scene carries with it, as he puts it, “overtones of mystical sacrificial rites deriving from classical and Druidical sources,” while the images of roosting birds and hopping rabbits are suggestive, according to him, of “the helpless vulnerability of the victim and the relentless drive of Nature to reproduce the species” (Laird, 54). Laird also makes an interesting point when he refers to how Angel responds to Tess in the first stages of their acquaintance, when Angel cannot see the real Tess, a mere mortal

woman, but a goddess. In his point of view she is like a goddess of chastity (the virgin Artemis), or a goddess of fertility like Demeter, a frequently recurring mythical allusion in the novel:

It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman — a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names, half-teasingly — which she did not like because she did not understand them. (103)

Greek mythology underwent a kind of revival in the nineteenth century, when Christian mythology had hitherto been dominant, primarily because, as Margot IC. Louis explains, of “a shift in sensibility that made the pain of life seem incompatible with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent God” (Louis, 23). The general pessimism of modernity made room for a more complex mythology that incorporated primitive rituals, flawed gods and, perhaps most significantly, female deities. But there is one legend in Greek mythology with which Tess bears a more than passing resemblance; that of Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld. Having up till now compared Tess with Mother Earth, or Demeter, the goddess of fertility who is intrinsically linked with every living thing in nature, I will now show the connection that Tess has to Persephone, who is also Demeter’s daughter and a goddess herself (in the same way that Jesus is God’s son and simultaneously God incarnate).

In its basic concept, the myth of Persephone is an ancient method of explaining the natural changing of seasons. Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, the earth goddess, and when she was abducted by Hades, Demeter was so stricken with grief that she caused a terrible drought in an attempt to coerce her brother Zeus to save her daughter from Hades, which he did. However,

Persephone was tricked into consuming food in the land of the dead, which bound her to it forever, so she had to spend half or a quarter of the year with Hades, during which time Demeter did not cultivate the land. In Homer's version the myth is, according to Louis, "a tale primarily of the relationship between the great goddesses, mother and daughter, and secondarily of the tension between female and male: the mother struggles with the father and uncle to determine the daughter's fate; the daughter escapes her rapist- consort for a time, but not altogether" (Louis, 25). But, unlike Demeter, it is Tess's mother who has pushed Tess into abuse at the hands of Alec d'Urberville, although unintentionally, through her scheming over Tess's marital prospects:

Well, Tess ought to go to this other member of our family. She'd be sure to win the lady — Tess would. And likely enough 'twould lead to some noble gentleman marrying her. In short, I know it. (17)

Persephone is the archetypal fallen woman, the virgin who loses her pure quality under the cruel dominance of men, in this case Hades, who is also her uncle. Tess's connection with Persephone is hinted at here, for her Hades, Alec d'Urberville, is her cousin. Although the kinship is in name only, and although Alec's family has acquired the name d'Urberville, the relationship is nevertheless an imitation of shared ancestry. During their first encounter, Alec conjures Tess to accept his offering of a strawberry, similar to Hades tricking Persephone into eating of his pomegranates. Strawberries are often synbolical of fertility and sensuality, but also of goodness and purity (particularly in Christian mythology), which makes the fact that Alec gives her strawberries rather ironic. The way in which Alec feeds her the strawberry gives the scene subtle yet explicitly sexual overtones, particularly in respects to the close proximity of his fingers to her mouth and the way in which she parts her lips to

accept it: “I I he held it by the stem to her mouth [...] and in a slight distress, she parted her lips and took it in” (29).

By taking the fruit in such an intimate way, she inadvertently invites her subsequent rape by accepting Alec’s advances, however unwillingly. When Persephone consumed the pomegranate seeds offered her, Hades managed to put her under his power and she was henceforth prevented from permanently escaping the Underworld, similar to Tess’s inability to completely escape her relationship with Alec, even though she comes very near when she agrees to become Angel Clare’s wife. In the last part of the book, she finds herself forced to accept Alec d’Urberville’s offer to come and live with him.

The previously mentioned image of Tess garnered with roses after her first acquaintance with Alec (see page 13) mirrors Ovid’s rebelling of the Persephone myth, in which she is out gathering flowers when Hades suddenly appears and steals her away. The second time she meets Alec, he picks her up in his cart and drives to Trantridge with reckless speed in a manner that, as Louis observes, “parallels Hades’ seizing of the unwilling Persephone and bearing her away in his chariot to the underworld” (88).

Tess takes part in a May-Day dance performed in honour of the agricultural goddess Ceres, the Roman counterpart to Persephone’s mother Demeter. In this way, Hardy frames the novel’s mythological character, by first introducing his heroine in a pagan ritual and finishing the story with her asleep in the middle of another ritualistic and mystic symbol, Stonehenge. The reverential and naturalistic portrayal of Tess in the light of her likeness to Persephone and Demeter conveys a modernist revision of an archetypal myth. In Ovid’s interpretation of the myth, Ceres (Demeter) is less powerful than the Greek original; as Louis puts it: “Ceres herself is made to beg Jove for help rather

than compel him as in the [Homeric] Hymn; she is a figure of anguish rather than of potent rage.” Furthermore, Hardy subverts the conservative view of fertility, in celebrating the moral strength of Tess even in the light of losing her virginity, her purity, thereby evoking the rural deity of Persephone, who ultimately symbolizes death and rebirth, rather than simply classifying her a fallen woman

In lieu of a proper mother divinity, like Demeter, Tess assumes that role herself. With her baby about to die, she suddenly reveals a maturity and independency and christens it herself. With courage and determination she performs the act denied her illegitimate child, in a final attempt to save its soul, appearing to her gathered siblings, not as a tragic figure but as a proper matriarch; even more than that:

The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a will for questioning. She did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering and awful, a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common. (75)

Herein, the two aspects of Tess are connected, as she conclusively stands as a revision or modernization of the myth; simultaneously an earth goddess and a daughter of nature.

Louis here points out that she is a “goddess bereft of power” (90), but I disagree on that point. True, she is unable to save her child from death and from a common Christian salvation, but as she manages a burial, appropriating the Christian tradition to suit her ends, without the help of the local parish, I find her coming through the experience with an awakened sense of worth and proper self-knowledge. The experience shapes her and gives her divine simile substance, a palpable force that the other participants in her life lack; Angel Clare, for instance, although striving for a supreme and noble existence, shows little

angelic quality in comparison with Tess. She even has the nerve to defy the proper Christian approach in the face of the vicar, who refuses to give her child a proper burial. “Then I don’t like you!” she says, “and I’ll never come to your church no more!” (76). This behaviour is proof of more earnest and moral capacity than even Angel Clare would have evinced, who defied the Christian tradition in a more awkward manner by seeking to become a farmer instead, and shows that Tess exists beyond and above sacrilege as a pure divinity in herself.

Just like Persephone is bound to return to the Underworld for a couple of months a year — the exact amount varies depending upon which of the various sources of the myth one reads — Tess too is bound to return to her Underworld, i.e. Alec d’Urberville. In the novel’s final act, when she has again descended to the Underworld, she finally frees herself from her bond to Alec by killing him, a release that Persephone was never permitted, whose bond was everlasting. In her first (and final) act as a free woman, Tess lies down on a slab in Stonehenge, suspiciously similar to a ritual altar; and there the circle of pagan rites that began with the Cerelian May-Day dance is complete.

Apart from baring a striking resemblance to a goddess of fertility and protector of nature, Tess is also reminiscent to the daughter of one such goddess, Persephone, through her tragic experiences at the hands of domineering patriarchy. As previous, this is yet another aspect of mythological reinvention from Thomas Hardy, whose love for Tess is the engine of the story and the ultimate reason why one closes the book not feeling disappointed or heartbroken at the fact that she is turned murderess and faces incarceration, but morally uplifted. One is left with a feeling of poignant satisfaction because Tess survives the cruellest of experiences and is spiritually strengthened by them. In the end, she proves to us that she is deserving of the comparison to a goddess. We read

of a woman who has gone through hell but ultimately achieves freedom of mind and body, and not through any means other than self-reliance and honest love.

Thomas Hardy is one of the best English novelists of the late 19th century. Along with Henry James and Samuel Butler, his work aroused persistent interest among aspiring young writers for his new ideas and consonant mood, which gave rise to the development of modernist experiments in the novel of the 1920s and 30s of the 20th century by such writers as David Herbert Lawrence, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In the era of "English technological progress" Hardy proved himself to be a sensitive but pessimistic philosopher. Knowing the "material" perfectly, he was the first who managed with special attention and excitement to reveal the tragedy of the simple peasant people, their hopes and disappointments, class oppression, completely speaking on their side and sharply criticizing the perpetrators of the fatal events. Thanks to such skill, T. Hardy can be safely put on a par with such famous writers as Charles Dickens, Emilia Bronte, Jane Austen, William Thackeray, George Eliot, Henry James, Samuel Butler.

Of particular interest to researchers of his work is the image of the main character and the main conflict in the novel by Thomas Hardy "Tess of the D'Urbervilles". The author conveys psychological analysis not through "internal dialogues", but with the help of special methods of description: democratism of characters, reference to a biographical plot, socio-psychological experiments, national history, composition, variety of language means. Thanks to the unusual form of transferring the state through nature, T. Hardy created an amazing work of "verbal landscape".

- Being a representative of "late" realism, his novel contains a number of basic features inherent in this direction, since without them it is impossible to understand the importance that had for the writers of the "Victorian era":

- Democracy of character.

- Writers (including Hardy) saw their positive ideal in peasants and ordinary workers as honest, kind people.

- Objective reality.

Unlike the romantics, realists considered the main thing to depict real life with its typical problems.

- Social analysis, historicism of thinking.

It is understood that the real properties and phenomena of life cannot be explained without historical analysis. More specifically, life cannot be understood unless its historical structure is examined for the sake of certainty in detail.

- Critical portrayal of life.

- Writers openly expressed their hypotheses and negatively described reality, thereby denouncing the capitalist and some religious orders. However, in the works of the realists expressed sympathy for the poor, faith in the restoration of justice, patriotism for the country.

- typical characters in typical circumstances.

The main character was portrayed in the social environment in which he grew up. She also determined his upbringing and the connection that can be traced between them throughout the story.

- the relationship between the individual and society.

- An important feature for representatives of realism. Here the relationship between an outstanding character and society was expressed. Having resigned himself externally to the established laws, internally he does



not maintain such order and in the culminating part he challenges society, which often leads to a dramatic outcome.

- versatility of characters.

- A favorite technique of realists allows readers to consider the complex structure of the character, from the position of a detailed analysis of emotional experiences and psychological problems that reveal his character.

- The expressiveness and brightness of the literary language with elements of live colloquial speech.

- A variety of genres (dramatic, lyrical, lyrical-epic, satirical).

Such wealth is explained by the expansion of the boundaries of the explanation of reality.

- Of all the features, biographical moments occupy the main place in the work of "Tess". Because when creating the main character and describing his life, the author focuses primarily on the events that happened to him. Therefore, if we compare the biography of the author with the life of the main character, we can see a number of significant similarities:

- knighthood.

- The writer's family descended from the ancient Norman family of Le Gardie, whose ancestors moved from Fr. Jersey to Dorchester. Hardy repeatedly said that he wanted to restore the lost "le", but as a sign of respect for the peasant people, he did not do this. His Tess, also descended from the impoverished Norman family of D'Urberville. The writer specifically introduced origin into history in order to show the tragedy of the case on which human fate depends. Making "de" a symbol of honor and downfall of his heroine, he referred to his own "le".

- place of events.

According to the story, Tess was born and raised in a rural area in Wessex, which, in fact, never existed in England. But the name was not invented by the author, since it is not a fictional geographic area. Wessex was once the largest Anglo-Saxon kingdom, uniting the rest of the kingdoms into the future England. This historical role excited the imagination of the writer. He created his Wessex by bringing together southwestern counties such as his native Dorset and Somerset to expand the book's setting. For the writer, Wessex is a multifaceted symbol of the ancient way of life, imbued with lyrical poetry. Landscapes play a special role in the work. Born and raised in the village, Hardy remembered its picturesque lands, after being transferred to the pages of the novel. Thanks to this technique, the author reveals the inner world of the heroine by changing the light colors of the day to cold ones without further ado.

- principle of determinism.

Determinism is the belief in otherworldly higher powers that can influence human destiny.

Having absorbed the superstitious culture of the village people from an early age, Hardy believed that fate controls people. His pessimistic attitude towards life is clearly expressed in the dramatic line of the main character. Not succumbing to the machinations from above, in Stonehenge she accepts her fate. It is worth noting that in the book, Father Angela was also a determinist, whose philosophy was very different from other clergymen:

«He loved Paul of Tarsus, liked St John, hated St James as much as he dared, and regarded with mixed feelings Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The New Testament was less a Christiad than a Pauliad to his intelligence—less an argument than an intoxication. His creed of determinism was such that it almost

amounted to a vice, and quite amounted, on its negative side, to a renunciative philosophy which had cousinship with that of Schopenhauer and Leopardi.»

- customs and manners.

In the homeland of the writer, in Dorsetshire and neighboring counties, many of the rites, manners and customs of "jolly old England" continued to exist for a very long time. As a child, Hardy enjoyed playing the violin at rural weddings, and he also managed to visit the harvest festival, where old ballads were performed. There were small landowners and tenants who by the end of the century had become wandering laborers, and nothing remained of the ancient way of the village. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the author transferred all the events with accuracy. One can recall in the first chapter the harvest festival in honor of the goddess Ceres, where rural girls, including Tess, danced. She, like Hardy, loved old melodies, listened to ancient psalms in church, even music plays a role in relations with Claire.

«Tess had heard those notes in the attic above her head. Dim, flattened, constrained by their confinement, they had never appealed to her as now, when they wandered in the still air with a stark quality like that of nudity. To speak absolutely, both instrument and execution were poor; but the relative is all, and as she listened Tess, like a fascinated bird, could not leave the spot. Far from leaving she drew up towards the performer, keeping behind the hedge that he might not guess her presence».

Having singled out the main features of the "realistic novel" in the work "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*", we can conclude that he really is a representative of his genre.

"Tess" is a book whose philosophical basis is based on the principles of determinism, which assigns a person the role of a victim, who is in the grip of fatal circumstances.