

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Exploring Feminist Themes in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: A Modern Lens****Dr. Janet Paul****Article Received: 10/11/2024; Article Accepted: 20/12/2024; Published Online: 22/12/2024****Abstract**

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is an influential text that invites feminist literary analysis through its portrayal of gender, power, and societal norms. This study explores Hardy's critique of Victorian morality, focusing on the double standards and patriarchal values that oppress women. Through the character of Tess, Hardy examines themes of purity, agency, and the constraints imposed by societal expectations. The novel's use of the "male gaze" and its commentary on sexual politics highlight the tension between progressive and traditional views of gender roles. By situating the novel within the broader context of the New Woman movement, the rural-urban dichotomy, and societal norms, this analysis underscores Hardy's engagement with socio-political issues of gender and power, affirming *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a powerful and enduring exploration of feminist themes.

Keywords: Feminist Criticism, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Victorian Morality, Double Standards, New Woman, Sexual Politics, Women's Oppression

Introduction

Feminist criticism examines literature from a female perspective, focusing on the representation of women, their roles, and the power dynamics between genders. In the works of Thomas Hardy, particularly *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, these themes are prominent, sparking debates about Hardy's stance on gender and his portrayal of women. Shires (1999) aptly describes the novel as "not only the richest novel that Hardy ever wrote, it is also the culmination of a long series of Victorian texts which identify, enact, and condemn the alienated condition of modernity" (159). This article delves into feminist readings of the novel, exploring whether Hardy's narrative supports or critiques patriarchal ideologies.

Thomas Hardy's Perspective on Women and Victorian Society

Thomas Hardy was deeply dissatisfied with the restrictive Victorian ethos that suppressed women's personal desires and aspirations. As Carpenter (1964) aptly observes, "On many sensitive issues Hardy had firm opinions which ran against the Victorian current, especially on sex and marriage" (24). Hardy's works often portray oppressed female figures trapped within patriarchal structures. As Morgan (1988) explains, "In doing this he broke the convention of feminine presentation and threatens the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of society itself" (xii).

Boumelha (1982) identifies two predominant critical perspectives on Hardy's portrayal of women: "Either they have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views about women and their spheres of action or else they have remarked on his particular interest in and sympathy with women" (2). Virginia Woolf anticipated modern feminist concerns by pointing out a fundamental divide in Hardy's portrayal of male and

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female characters. Similarly, Rogers (1975) argues that Hardy's novels reveal the "tenacity of sexist assumptions even in so humane and enlightened a man as Hardy" (257).

Some critics, however, emphasize Hardy's empathetic approach toward women. Mickelson (1976) suggests that Hardy's examination of gender roles "anticipates much of the thinking in the 1970s on men and women, especially on women," and that his approach to the role of women in society is "often searching, sometimes speculative, frequently perceptive, and always compassionate" (2). Similarly, Morgan (1988) contends that Hardy transcended the gender stereotypes of his era by crafting "active, assertive, self-determined women" who engage in "their frustrating struggle to define themselves in a world that denies them the right to shape their own lives, control their own bodies, explore their own needs, and express their own desires" (x).

In recent years, Marxist critics have incorporated gender analysis into their studies of Hardy's works, focusing on the interplay between femininity and power. Goode (1988), for instance, demonstrates how Hardy's narrative style reveals the ideologies shaping his texts. Such perspectives suggest that Hardy's women cannot be understood in isolation but must be contextualized within the broader intellectual and ideological movements of his time.

Hardy's portrayal of women reflects the dominant ideological framework of Victorian England, yet he was intellectually attuned to the social transformations of his era. The evolving themes in his later novels reflect these changes, as his characters grapple with the conflicts and contradictions of a shifting society. Hardy wrote during a period when the "woman question" was gaining prominence, and the feminist movement was challenging traditional notions of femininity and women's roles. Although Hardy was not directly engaged with the feminist movement of his time, he was deeply sympathetic to its ideals, as evidenced by his nuanced and complex female characters.

Reclaiming Agency: Tess and Hardy's Critique of Victorian Morality

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period marked by industrialization, social change, and deeply entrenched conservative values. Gender roles were rigidly defined, confining women to domestic spheres and valuing them primarily as wives and mothers. Female sexuality was heavily policed, with a societal double standard demanding chastity and obedience from women while excusing similar or worse behaviour in men. Within this oppressive framework, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* emerges as a radical critique of Victorian norms, challenging societal hypocrisy and exploring the complexities of gender and morality.

Victorian attitudes toward women were deeply patriarchal, with rigid expectations that reinforced their subordination. As Harvey (2003) observes, "The Victorian middle-class image of women was culturally controlled. They were denied political and economic power, and were expected to conform to the idea of separate spheres for men and women" (34). Hardy's achievement lies in his ability to portray this oppressive social structure while simultaneously critiquing it. Tess begins the novel as a naive girl, but her journey becomes one of growth, resilience, and defiance against a male-dominated world intent on controlling her. A central feminist reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* focuses on the exploration of the male gaze. As Mitchell (1994) argues, "The heroines of Hardy's early novels are presented primarily as objects of erotic interest not only for the narrators and for the male characters ... but also for the implied reader/voyeur" (155). In *Tess*, this dynamic is evident in how male characters such as Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare perceive and treat Tess. Alec's predatory behaviour reduces Tess to an object of exploitation, while Angel's idealization of her hinges on an unattainable notion of purity. Mickelson (1976) notes that Angel "succeeds in violating Tess's spirit as thoroughly as Alec rapes her body" (117). Both men represent societal structures that reduce women

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to simplistic symbols of either purity or corruption. However, Hardy subverts this trope by granting Tess a voice and agency, enabling her to challenge these oppressive expectations.

Tess's resistance to societal norms is most evident in her rejection of Alec's dominance and her eventual decision to murder him. As Meisel (1972) states, "Tess's leaving Alec is an 'eminently modern idea'—of a woman's not becoming the chattel and slave of her seducer" (124). This act of defiance underscores Tess's refusal to be defined by the injustices inflicted upon her. Hardy uses Tess's journey to critique a society that seeks to control women through rigid, patriarchal frameworks, ultimately presenting her as a symbol of resistance against Victorian morality.

Beyond the Gaze: Tess's Defiance of Patriarchal Constraints

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy portrays Tess as a figure of resilience, navigating a world dominated by patriarchal norms and shaped by the male gaze. Feminist critics have long recognized Hardy's nuanced portrayal of his female characters, particularly Tess, who resists objectification and asserts her identity in defiance of a male-dominated society. Tess's journey from victimhood to agency highlights Hardy's critique of societal constraints and his sympathy for women trapped within the rigid ideologies of Victorian England.

Tess's character development underscores her resilience. As Sankey (1965) observes, "Tess is young and resilient; and Hardy's purpose is to demonstrate the natural power of a healthy young person to recover from a painful experience" (14). Although her rape and the subsequent societal condemnation deeply affect her sense of self, Tess does not entirely succumb to despair. Instead, she evolves, carving out an identity distinct from the oppressive norms that attempt to define her. Law (1997) emphasizes this transformation, stating, "Her body is natural and is hers—a source of vitality, regeneration, and pleasure, which does not acknowledge social law or its inscriptions...an attitude she is forced to adopt in response to the social fate of her gendered body" (252).

A central theme in feminist readings of the novel is the male gaze and its impact on Tess's identity. As Grossman (1993) argues, Hardy oscillates between portraying Tess as an object of male desire and allowing her to transcend these limitations: "Hardy repeatedly shifts between fixing the image of Tess as a particular object of male vision and permitting her to defy the male gaze by escaping into an all-powerful incorporeal conception of femininity" (442). Hardy's portrayal of Tess reflects both her struggles against societal objectification and her attempts to reclaim her identity, highlighting his complex critique of gender roles and societal expectations.

Rewriting Womanhood: Tess as a Precursor to the New Woman

The *New Woman* movement of the late 19th century advocated for independence and equality for women, challenging traditional gender roles and societal constraints. While Tess Durbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is not a conventional *New Woman*, her character embodies many of the ideals associated with this progressive shift. Tess's defiance of societal norms, her independence, and her resilience align her with the spirit of the movement. As Cunningham (1978) notes, "Tess is not a *New Woman*, but the novel which is built around her embodies essential features of the *New Woman* fiction" (103).

Tess stands apart from her mother's generation, which uncritically accepted patriarchal norms. Hardy highlights this generational divide early in the novel, describing how Tess's education and modern perspective set her apart: "Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folklore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood" (*Tess of the*

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d'Urbervilles, 44). Tess's progressive outlook is evident in her refusal to marry Alec d'Urberville, despite societal pressure. Her decision reflects moral integrity and a determination to maintain her autonomy. Unlike the passive heroines typical of Victorian literature, Tess challenges societal expectations and carves her own path.

The *New Woman* ideal, as articulated by thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, emphasized autonomy and the rejection of oppressive gender norms. While Tess's life does not fully align with their feminist manifestos, her character reflects these ideas. Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), considered "the bible of the feminists" (Cunningham 7), critiques the constraints imposed on women by patriarchy. Similarly, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) advocates education and independence as pathways to equality. Tess's pragmatic choices and emotional strength resonate with these philosophies. For example, she sees through the illusions of marriage, recognizing its constraints and compromises. Despite her deep love for Angel Clare, Tess acknowledges his weaknesses, stating that he is a "slave to custom and conventionality" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 304). Her acceptance of harsh realities is strikingly modern: "I am almost glad — yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 443-4).

Hardy portrays Tess as a figure of defiance, unafraid to express her individuality despite societal judgment. Her bold reply to Alec's comparisons between women — "My God! I could knock you out of the gig! Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says some women may feel?" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 105) — demonstrates her refusal to be categorized or diminished. This spirited response, unusual for Victorian heroines, positions Tess as a modern thinker ahead of her time. As Carpenter (1964) observes, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a "frontal attack on some of the bastions of Victorian mores" (127).

Tess's resilience is further underscored in her interactions with Angel Clare. Although Angel is portrayed as a man of intellect and idealism, Tess recognizes his limitations. When he condemns her past, she insightfully replies, "It is in your own mind what you are angry at, Angel; it is not in me" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 268). Despite her lack of formal education, Tess emerges as emotionally and morally superior to Angel, whose adherence to societal conventions ultimately weakens him. Hardy's portrayal of Angel as weak and conventional contrasts with Tess's strength and modern outlook, reinforcing the idea that Tess embodies qualities associated with the *New Woman*.

The Decline of Rural Life: Nature and Society in Hardy's Vision

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* delves into the profound tension between the purity of the rural landscape and the oppressive structures of Victorian society. The countryside, depicted as a space of harmony and simplicity, contrasts sharply with the corruption and moral decay associated with urban life. Tess's deep connection to nature underscores her authenticity and resilience but also isolates her as she struggles within a patriarchal world that devalues her individuality.

Raymond Williams describes this dichotomy as a clash between the simplicity of rural life and the ambition and noise of industrialized cities. For Hardy, the countryside represents a realm of natural beauty and timeless traditions, while the city symbolizes societal progress that often marginalizes women and the working class. Through vivid depictions of rural life, Hardy critiques the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and urbanization, portraying the countryside as a fragile sanctuary under siege by encroaching societal forces.

Nature in Hardy's works often assumes a dual role, serving as both a source of solace and a reflection of the harsh realities faced by his characters. Carpenter (1964) notes that Tess is portrayed as "the helpless

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victim not only of society but also of principalities and powers for which no human agency can be held responsible” (128). This duality is evident throughout *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as Tess finds moments of peace in nature but is also subjected to its unforgiving cycles and the societal forces that intrude upon her life. Brown (1954) interprets Tess as a symbol of a larger tragedy, asserting, “Tess is not only the pure woman, the ballad heroine, the country girl: she is the agricultural community in its moment of ruin” (91). This perspective highlights how Tess embodies the plight of rural life itself, as industrialization disrupts the traditional agrarian way of life, forcing individuals like Tess to confront new and often insurmountable challenges.

The city's influence is portrayed as destructive to both individuals and the rural way of life. Williams (1973) emphasizes the symbolic weight of the “country” and the “city,” stating that the city is often seen as a “place of noise, worldliness and ambition,” while the countryside is perceived as “a place of backwardness, ignorance and limitation” (1). Hardy critiques this simplistic perception by showing how industrialization uproots rural communities, severing their connection to the land and eroding their traditional ways of life.

Through Tess's journey, Hardy examines the consequences of the widening divide between nature and society. The rural landscape, while a source of purity and strength, is increasingly vulnerable to industrial and social encroachments. Tess's struggles serve as both a personal tragedy and a broader commentary on the destruction of the agricultural community. Hardy's narrative ultimately emphasizes the fragile balance between nature and societal progress, urging reflection on the human cost of modernization.

Judged and Condemned: Tess and the Hypocrisy of Victorian Morality

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* explores the harsh realities of moral double standards, gender inequality, and societal judgment in Victorian England. Women like Tess were often condemned for their supposed transgressions, while men were excused for similar behaviour. Hardy uses Tess's story to expose these injustices, offering a powerful critique of the rigid expectations imposed by Victorian society. The hypocrisy of Victorian double standards is particularly evident in the behaviour of Alec and Angel, who represent contrasting forms of male dominance and societal judgment. As Irving Howe (1966) observes, “Angel comes to seem the complement of Alec ... Alec assaults Tess physically. Angel violates her spiritually” (122). Alec's exploitation of Tess illustrates the predatory power that men wield over women, while Angel's rejection of Tess after learning about her past underscores the moral rigidity of Victorian ideals. During this period, men enjoyed significant freedom, while women were confined to subordinate roles within a male-dominated society and deprived of real authority. Men were rarely held accountable for their immoral behaviour, which society viewed as a natural entitlement of their gender. Stone (1977) highlights this imbalance: “Among the upper classes for most of the Early Modern period, ‘The double standard’ of sexual behaviour prevailed. According to this convention, the husband enjoyed full monopoly rights over the sexual services of his wife, who was expected to be a virgin on her wedding night. ... On the other hand, the man was expected to have gained some sexual experience before marriage, and any infidelities after marriage were treated as venial sins which the sensible wife was advised to overlook” (501-502).

Hui-Zhen (2007) emphasizes that the sexual double standard is central to Tess's victimization, stating that it “makes the heroine's tragedy possible, and thus serves as a mechanism of Tess's broader fate” (70). Hardy, constrained by societal norms, crafted a tragic ending for Tess to align with Victorian moral expectations, yet he simultaneously used this conclusion to challenge those very conventions. By subtling the novel *A Pure Woman*, Hardy issued “a deliberately provocative challenge to conventional notions of purity” (Cunningham 18).

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For Hardy, Tess's purity is not defined by societal standards but by her inner moral strength. Despite being labelled "a fallen woman" and "a kept mistress," Tess remains "pure of heart" (Pinion 47). Her resilience, intelligence, and loyalty to her family elevate her above the narrow definitions imposed by Victorian society. Yet, Hardy also highlights the societal pressures that shape her fate, particularly her family's poverty and reliance on her. Carpenter (1964) notes that "the constant need for steady income to support the family later takes Tess far away from home, and turns her into an itinerant farm labourer" (127). These circumstances force Tess into vulnerable situations, such as her fateful encounter with Alec.

Angel Clare exemplifies another facet of Victorian double standards. Despite confessing to a similar past transgression, he cannot forgive Tess for hers. The near-identical situations are treated differently due to pervasive gender biases, with women bearing the brunt of societal condemnation. Cunningham observes, "in Angel's case, because he is a man, the triviality is obvious" (100). Angel's reaction to Tess's confession starkly reveals the hypocrisy of Victorian morality, as he perceives her as "a species of impostor; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 265). Carpenter critiques this disparity, arguing that it "enables Angel to palliate his own sins while condemning Tess" (126).

Tess's tragic ending further underscores the consequences of these double standards. By killing Alec and effectively condemning herself to execution, Tess enacts a form of self-destruction that serves as penance for her past, seemingly crafted to satisfy the moral expectations of Victorian readers. Her despair and resignation are evident in her plea to Alec: "Now punish me! ... Whip me, crush me ... I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim—that's the law!" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 374). This statement reflects Tess's internalisation of societal oppression, as though she accepts the inevitability of her tragic fate. Despite her prolonged resistance to societal double standards, Tess ultimately succumbs, resigning herself to the role of perpetual victim.

Through Tess's story, Hardy critiques the moral hypocrisy and gender inequality of Victorian society, illustrating the devastating effects of these double standards on women's lives. By challenging societal norms and redefining purity, Hardy crafts a narrative that remains a powerful indictment of patriarchal values.

Purity and Power: Sexual Politics in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Through the tragic trajectory of Tess's life, Thomas Hardy critiques a patriarchal society that objectifies women, denies them agency, and perpetuates systemic inequality. The novel's exploration of sexual politics intertwines with broader issues of class, gender, and identity, offering a profound critique of Victorian social norms.

Tess's struggles begin with her treatment as a sexual object in a male-dominated society. Hardy's portrayal of Tess as a complex character, marked by both innocence and sensuality, is deliberate. While her beauty is described in sensual terms—her "mobile peony mouth" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 35) and "ever-varying pupils" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* 203)—this is not merely a celebration of physical allure. Instead, it critiques how such traits render her vulnerable in a patriarchal world. Morgan (1988) argues that Hardy engages with the "intimate life of feminine sensations" (91) to underscore the broader societal constructions of femininity and sexuality.

Alec d'Urberville epitomizes the coercive dynamics of male authority. His predatory behaviour, particularly in the infamous strawberry scene, highlights the imbalances of power between genders. Tess's reluctant compliance in this scene symbolizes the broader societal pressures that restrict her autonomy. Butler interprets Alec's insistence as reflective of male dominance, foreshadowing the later rape: "a reflection of male dominance, comparable to Satan offering Eve an apple" (101). Hardy's metaphorical depiction of the

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rape emphasizes its emotional and societal consequences. Tess, described as “sensitive as gossamer” (*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* 102), bears the irreversible scars of a patriarchal world that fails to protect or vindicate her. Angel Clare’s reaction to Tess’s past exemplifies Victorian moral hypocrisy. Although Angel confesses a prior indiscretion, he judges Tess harshly when she reveals her history with Alec. His inability to reconcile his idealized notions of purity with her lived experiences reveals the rigid moral binaries of the era. D. H. Lawrence critiques Angel’s response, attributing it to “generations of Ultra-Christian training” (71) that blind him to the complexities of human relationships. Feminist critics emphasize how Tess’s identity is shaped and constrained by such societal narratives. Boumelha observes, “Tess’s tragedy stems from her inability to fit into the rigid binaries of Victorian gender roles, as she is simultaneously idealized and condemned” (123). Despite these constraints, Tess asserts her agency in pivotal moments. Her decision to baptize her child herself, and later to ensure its burial, reflects her rejection of institutional authority and her determination to act according to her own values. Similarly, her ultimate confrontation with Alec and her decision to kill him signifies a desperate reclamation of her autonomy. Though extreme, Tess’s act represents her refusal to remain a passive victim in a world that continually seeks to define her.

Challenging Victorian Gender Norms: Feminist Readings of Hardy’s *Tess*

Feminist critiques of Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* have long debated the complexities of his portrayal of women. While some scholars accuse Hardy of perpetuating patriarchal perspectives, others commend his sympathetic depiction of female struggles against societal injustices. Tess Durbeyfield, the novel’s central character, embodies both vulnerability and resilience, making her a focal point for examining Victorian society’s oppressive gender norms, particularly its sexual double standards.

Hardy’s use of the “male gaze” has drawn significant scrutiny from feminist critics. The narrative often emphasizes Tess’s physical attributes, which risks overshadowing her interiority. Tess is repeatedly objectified, her identity fragmented and shaped by the interpretations of others. Mitchell (1994) critiques this portrayal, noting, “Tess takes on any shape for those she meets, but it is a conveniently empty shape, ready to be filled in and then longed for” (190). Despite this objectification, Hardy allows Tess moments of defiance and individuality that resist both the constraints of the gaze and societal judgment. Her ultimate act of killing Alec signifies a dramatic rejection of the patriarchal forces that have defined and constrained her life.

Hardy demonstrates profound sympathy for women trapped in a male-dominated world. Cunningham argues that Hardy’s heroines, even when “seduced and betrayed,” retain his full support (88). This empathy is evident in Hardy’s portrayal of Tess’s dignity and inner strength, even as she endures relentless societal condemnation. As Harvey (2003) observes, “Tess embodies a fierce impulse to self-determination against daunting, and ultimately insurmountable, odds” (186). Although a victim of Alec’s abuse and society’s judgment, Tess inspires admiration for her resilience and integrity.

Hardy’s portrayal of gender reveals a tension between critique and complicity with Victorian norms. Boumelha highlights the contradictions in Hardy’s work, noting that his narratives critique Victorian society while grappling with the deeply embedded gender biases of his time. Harvey underscores this complexity, explaining that “Hardy’s radicalism in overtly raising the issues of both gender and class is emphasized by Boumelha’s New Historicist approach, which situates his writing within the scientific, medical, and legal discourses of the time, as well as the ‘New Woman’ question” (183). This duality underscores Hardy’s struggle to navigate societal conventions while challenging the institutionalized oppression of women.

Ingham emphasizes Hardy’s exploration of societal ideologies through his narrative construction, arguing that his later works, including *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, endorse spontaneous female sexuality and

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depict women as complex, autonomous individuals. Harvey adds, “Hardy allows another discourse to emerge which speaks of how a sensitive woman may experience social and individual pressure upon her” (185). This duality in Hardy’s narrative approach reflects his nuanced engagement with feminist themes.

One of the most debated aspects of Hardy’s portrayal of Tess is the absence of her interiority in certain parts of the novel. Grossman critiques this narrative choice, suggesting that Tess is often portrayed as “the helpless object of a cruel male gaze” (609). However, Harvey counters this view, arguing that both Tess and the narrator resist male characters’ attempts to impose restrictive categories upon her. This resistance reflects Hardy’s broader critique of societal norms that seek to define and constrain women.

Angel Clare’s character further illustrates Hardy’s critique of gender roles. Although Angel initially appears progressive and empathetic, his inability to accept Tess’s past reveals his complicity in patriarchal structures. Angel’s rejection of Tess underscores Victorian moral rigidity and double standards, as he holds Tess to an impossible standard of purity while excusing his own flaws.

Hardy’s broader views on gender and marriage challenge Victorian norms. He rejected conventional representations of women in literature, directly opposing societal ideologies that denied women independence. As Morgan (1988) notes, Hardy treated female emotions and sensations with the same physical and narrative detail he afforded to men (xi). Hardy’s representation of womanhood did not conform to traditional ideals, bringing him into direct conflict with conservative critics. He criticized institutionalized marriage, projecting a gloomy vision of matrimony in his major novels. Like radical feminists, Hardy believed that marriage, in its current form, must be abolished to liberate women from male-dominated sexuality.

Despite criticism, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* remains a landmark in Hardy’s feminist critique of Victorian society. Tess’s resilience, moral strength, and ultimate defiance challenge the rigid binaries of Victorian gender roles. Her final act, though tragic, underscores her refusal to be defined solely by the injustices she has endured, solidifying her as a figure of resistance against patriarchal oppression.

Conclusion

Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* remains a cornerstone of feminist literary criticism, offering a profound exploration of gender dynamics, societal hypocrisy, and the struggle for agency within a patriarchal framework. Through Tess, Hardy critiques the rigid moral codes and double standards of Victorian society, exposing how women were confined, objectified, and denied autonomy.

Although Tess does not fully align with the New Woman archetype, she embodies many of its ideals, such as independence, resilience, and defiance of societal norms. Hardy’s nuanced depiction of her journey—from victimhood to moments of agency and resistance—illustrates his progressive critique of Victorian expectations. The novel’s engagement with the ‘male gaze’ and its implicit critique underscores the tension between Hardy’s representation of women and his sympathy toward their struggles, creating a layered and complex narrative.

Furthermore, Hardy’s exploration of the dichotomy between nature and society situates Tess’s experiences within a broader critique of industrialization and societal progress. Tess’s connection to the natural world serves as both a source of solace and a reflection of her alienation, emphasizing her fight against societal oppression and loss of individuality.

By intertwining themes of gender, morality, and societal constraints, Hardy positions *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as a timeless commentary on women’s enduring struggle for recognition, agency, and justice. Tess’s tragic yet resilient character challenges readers to reconsider conventional notions of purity and morality, leaving an indelible mark on literary and feminist discourse. Through Tess, Hardy not only critiques

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the societal structures of his era but also crafts a heroine whose story resonates across generations, making the novel a lasting exploration of the human spirit and its capacity to resist oppression.

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