

On the Natural Environment in Tess of the d'Urbervilles an Environment and Character Novel

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Abstract: Tess of the d'Urbervilles, the masterpiece of Thomas Hardy, is one of the "Novels of Character and Environment". The tragedy of Tess is caused by a diversity of factors, ultimately the combined power of character and environment. This paper aims at studying the natural environment in Tess of the d'Urbervilles in demonstrating the characters' personalities and the theme to help readers understand them and the conflicts which lead to her death.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy; Tess of the d'Urbervilles; Environment and Character; Tragedy

Introduction

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Thomas Hardy's masterpiece, is one of the "Novels of Character and Environment". Hardy stresses the depiction of the environment. His observation of the environment is impressive, accurate, precise and expert. "His structure is essentially an organism in which action is unified by his preoccupation with the conflict between man and his environment."^[1] Therefore, for one thing, it serves as a backdrop against which the actions take place; for another, it has a remarkable influence on the forming of Tess's personality, which results in her tragedy in the end. It is rather an integral part of the novel. Furthermore, the description of the environment, the natural environment in particular as the means of symbolism and metaphor, makes an important contribution to the readers' understanding of the characters and the theme. It further enables us to fully comprehend the core of the novel.

1. Brief Analysis

Natural environment brings reality to the novel. It helps Hardy to display the real situations, such as the decline of the peasantry and their hard and tragic lives in the late Victorian period. In fact, serving the background, natural environments including the time and animals foretell Tess's tragedy and add many tragic elements to almost every plot of the novel. Without natural environments, the novel will not be persuasive. Hardy, in his boyhood, knew the names of birds and flowers so well that nearly all the names of natural objects are the original ones in Wessex. Thus, he skillfully portrayed Tess's personality and arranged her tragedy through natural environments. Consequently, the reality triggers off strong emotions.

2. Time

Time can be considered as the clue bringing Tess to the tragedy step by step. A series of special time draw our close attention.

The story opens on a May evening when everything is vague. In the darkness, one can not see clearly, thus causing the death of the horse, the Durbeyfield's only dependent means of living. This evening, an uncommon point of time, leads all the tragic stories later on. As a consequence, she feels guilty about it and at last, agrees to go to the d'Urbervilles. On June 1st, she sets out to visit Trantridge. Then, she is ruined in the hands of Alec. Hardy sets this time because the day when Tess is arrested at Stonehenge is just five years after she goes to Trantridge. The "club-walking", a kind of activity inheriting from an ancient custom, also takes place in May, which is filled with joy and directness of feelings. Tess and other women in town are cheerful and gay as well in accordance with the May time. Especially, Tess dresses in white, which symbolizes purity, simplicity and sincerity. People in May are full of confidence and hope. In addition, it is on a glorious May morning that Tess

sets out on foot for Talbothays dairy. In warm May, people can enjoy the beautiful sunshine at ease. In the meantime, they are engaged in working in the field, looking forward to the harvest in autumn. The new valley, Valley of the Great Dairies, which is intrinsically different from Tess's native valley, is clear, bracing and ethereal, just as the fine day in May. In fact, Hardy here expresses Tess's feeling to Alec and Angel respectively and depicts their personalities. Alec is rich, handsome, bold, dashing and sensual while Angel, who is also like the characteristic of May, shares the supreme emotions and passion with Tess before marriage.

Besides the May time, the characteristics of the four seasons are applied to reflect the personalities of the protagonists and describe how Tess's tragedy occurs. Seasons, the components of a year with different climates, play essential roles on this novel. Tess's fortune is just similar to the characteristic of the season. It changes with the transition of the season. For instance, in spring when all people begin finding new jobs and working diligently to earn their living, Tess goes to the d'Urbervilles. It is in Spring the beginning of the whole year that Tess's tragedy starts. In summer, she is ruined by Alec. As the year declines, so does she. One Sunday morning in October, shortly after her "experience" with Alec, Tess packs her bags and leaves the d'Urbervilles household. She returns home and the barren winter is the time of her misery. Gradually she revives as the world of nature does. In light of the majority of people, the world is full of fruits and harvests in autumn when people are engaged in harvesting. They are so delightful to see themselves achieving great progress through a whole year's industrious work. However, autumn is also the time when the temperature falling, leaves getting off, winds blowing much stronger and winter coming fast. Tess's fate is a sharp contrast with the golden harvest time. Although she spends the happiest moment with Angel in autumn, it is quite ironic to say that her happiness is based on great misery and even her death. Tess fixes their marriage day in winter. Winter is the final season of the year. Plants are dead because of the cold weather, while animals are hibernating in caves or underground. December 31st, their marriage day, is the time when the old year ends and the new one begins. It suggests Tess's previous life will be ending and something new will take its place. In her confession to Angel, Tess looks like a small rabbit in winter, too fragile and gentle to face any attack or even a pat. For Angel, Tess is dead. Being cold-hearted, he never thinks the Tess in front of him is as simple and pure as before. His indifference towards Tess is in accordance with the characteristic of the winter. In a word, her life seems to follow the course of the year, improving in spring and declining in autumn. The ongoing season suggests that Angel would not forgive her in the end and Tess's love would be doomed to a tragedy. It also means that just as winter ends the year, their happy days will end as well.

Time, which has been carefully planned by Hardy, leads readers to the clue of the story's development and helps them understand better. "He was familiar with the cycle of the seasons and the duties attached to each time of the year in each rural occupation."^[2] He adopts the time so skillfully as to reflect completely the characteristics of Tess and Angel and push the story till Tess's death. To sum up, the life of Tess changes with the time, especially the seasons, and her fate declines as time goes by.

3. Animals

Animals, essential parts of the nature, are deliberately arranged in almost every possible spot. Not only do they become the sign of the decline of Tess's life, but they also serve as the role of betokening her tragedy.

At the very beginning of the novel, the horse attracts our great attention. Indeed, it is the horse that causes the whole story and leads to Tess's tragedy. In the old Victorian times, horses are the basic and major means of living and without them, people are unable to work. Since it is the same case with Tess's family, Tess feels guilty of the accident. Has she been more attentive, it would never happen, so she thinks of herself as a "murderess". But at this hard time, the death of the horse means their life will be even harder with little hope. On the whole, the death of the horse splashing her with blood triggers her tragedy.

In this novel, birds seem to be the symbol of Tess. Hardy compares Tess to the bird. In Chapter 31, Tess spends her exciting time with Angel in Talbothays and they are preparing for the marriage. Tess's helplessness in the face of her impending doom is indicated in the imagery used by Hardy. She is said to be "a girl of simple life, not yet one-and twenty, who had been caught during her days of immaturity like a bird in a springe."^[3] Birds are the sensitive animals which can be easily horrified. They are sentimental, simple, unstable and are easily caught. Tess, just like the bird, is afraid of Angel's

unforgiveness after telling him the truth. As she is simple and innocent, she is going to be loyal to Angel and is ready to do so, and just as the bird can be caught with ease, Tess is trapped at the hands of Alec. In Chapter 41, Tess rushes into a wood. After sleeping for the night, she sees several birds, wounded and dead and realizes that the birds are driven into this wood by a group of hunters the day before. Tess remembers having seen hunters when she is a girl and having been frightened by the blood-thirsty light in their eyes. She feels ashamed of herself for being having thought of herself being miserable when the birds are in true misery. Tess is the bird controlled, overwhelmed and manipulated by Alec and Angel till her death. Hunters are cool and cruel bourgeois religious and moral rules that govern sexual behavior and the position of women in society. Tess, the representative of the peasantry, suffers great torture in the decline of the rural economy of the bourgeoisie. It is now March, the time of the threshing of the last wheat rick. Tess is to stand on the platform of the machine, close to the man who feeds it. At this moment, Alec comes. She looks at him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck. After Tess strikes Alec with the glove, she is again compared to a bird in a trap, this time to a sparrow about to have its head twisted. Her words, "once victim, always victim-that's the law!"^[3] seem to sum up Hardy's attitude. After she is ruined by Alec and abandoned by Angel, she has undertaken so much suffering both physically and mentally.

Besides horse and birds, Hardy also depicts chickens to serve as the prediction of tragedy. In Chapter 33, Tess and Angel are preparing for their marriage. After the goodbyes have been said to all the farm folk at Talbothays and just before the wedded couple depart for Wellbridge Mill, the cock crows. The farm people are dismayed. The cock crows in midafternoon, which is certainly an unusual, even an unnatural phenomenon, and which is felt by everyone to be a warning of evil. It forebodes that their marriage will not last long. Consequently, Tess tells the truth to Angel, but Angel can't forgive her and they depart soon.

4. Summary

All in all, natural environment are not aimlessly used by the author but are fixed up so well that readers indeed know what will happen next, thus adding brilliance to every scene. "Nature has its darker side, and much has been written about Hardy's sense of the hospitality of nature, and his use of it as a dramatic ingredient in his novels."^[2] Natural environments' negative side and some uncommon phenomena are deployed to serve for affecting Tess's disposition to influence much on her tragedy. To readers, with natural environments including the precise and suitable time setting, animals and real sites with symbolic and metaphorical meanings, the novel is more persuasive and Tess's tragedy becomes more tragic and pitiful.

References

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