

## **Analysing Hardy's Portrayal of Tess Through Christian Feminism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article, through considering the main images of Christian feminism: sin, salvation and Eve, analyses Thomas Hardy's portrayal of his female protagonist, Tess, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). It is significant that through the portrayal of Tess, Hardy conveys the same images of females as the Evangelicals do. The way Hardy portrays Tess does not pave way for any changes in the unfortunate position of the female protagonist in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Through reading this article, a reader will discover more about the prevailing notions during that time and also about the way Hardy portrays Tess as a typical woman in the Victorian society, who is directly under the control of the existing notions in that patriarchal society. The notions of 'angel in the house' or the 'relative creature' make Tess a direct example of a typical woman in Victorian society, whose destiny and life are under the direct control of the male characters in her life. As these concepts of womanhood stress Tess's purity and selflessness, her sins become very significant through the story, and the way she is compared to Eve as a temptress emphasises her sinfulness. She is also portrayed as the character that needs salvation more than any other characters in the story, but ironically there is no salvation and way up for her and she sinks to her tragic death. Considering the main tenets of Christian feminism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* suggests that Hardy's portrayal of Tess is not different from the Evangelical notions of his time and does not champion women's disadvantaged status.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Thomas Hardy was born into a religious family. He studied religion deeply and was later much influenced by the Evangelicalism of his time, at least in its given notions of women which were the popular images of

womanhood such as the 'angel in the house' or the 'relative creature' who maintains the home as a heaven (Williams 17). The main ideals of a good woman were brought to the Victorian Era through Evangelicals, which defined women with recognizable characteristics, which included being modest, unassuming, unaffected and rational. Being 'rational' meant not to be 'sentimental' or have violent feelings. To Evangelicals, it was clear that man was the wiser partner and could guide woman into the appropriate area (Evans, 2001, p.11). While men could introduce women to new ideas, women were considered as private property, who had their main household duties (More, 1858, p.23). Thomas Hardy is known as a writer who knows women and has many female protagonists in his novels; this is why, many readers consider him as a feminist writer. Nevertheless, this article tries to go beyond these assumptions and analyse Hardy's portrayal of Tess through the lens of Christian Feminism.

As for introduction, it is helpful to know the main definition of Christian feminism. Christian feminists are in agreement on the essential definition of feminism as a devotion to the humanity, decorum, and equality of all the people around the world; thus, all the feminists look for equal rights for women, but their final goal is a social direction in which women and men of all races and classes can live together in justice and harmony. According to them, human relationships have been blemished by sin, but the sexism, racism, and classism present in our world are not God's will (Japinga,

1999, p.13). Christian feminists argue that as the Christians believe that salvation sets individuals free from the outcomes of sin and allows their souls to enter heaven when they die, while the unsaved person is separated from God, the saved person has a relationship with God that offers happiness and security. The definitions of salvation and sin are closely connected. Sin is a broken relationship between God and an individual and the evident key for their reunion is the individual's salvation. Salvation takes place by the individual's regret, change, 'getting right with God', and developing a personal relationship with Christ. As sin is considered to be rebellious against God through pride, self-seeking, and haughtiness, salvation then requires a breaking of the self. Therefore, sinful people must distinguish their weakness and failure, and try to admit their inability to save themselves or their world and finally confess their need for God (Japinga, 1999, p.107). Also, Christian feminists have two main goals; first is to provide a critique of the tradition, pointing out the ways the Christian tradition has been limiting or destructive for women, and second, to recover women's stories from the past and the present in order to demonstrate the gifts and insights of women throughout history (Japinga, 1999, p.21). Through this, the main clues of Christian feminism – sin, salvation and the image of Eve – are tracked in this article to analyse Hardy's portrayal of Tess. Accordingly, this article also tries to examine whether Hardy's portrayal of Tess is in accordance with the mentioned feminists' tenets or not.

## DISCUSSION

In this part, Hardy's portrayal of Tess is examined based on the main tenets of Christian feminism by considering the main clues of 'sin', 'salvation' and the image of 'Eve' as a temptress to show how Hardy's portrayal of Tess is related to deep Evangelical Christian beliefs and the so-called Victorian notions ('the angel in the house' or 'the relative creature'). To start with the image of 'sin', a reader finds out that in most of the situations Tess feels very sinful even when somebody else has to be. Whenever Tess is alone or when she wakes up early in the morning, she feels bad: "Her depression was then terrible, and she could have hidden herself in a tomb" (106). Although it is Alec who committed sin and raped her, it is Tess instead who feels sinful and attempts to purify herself by going to church. Tess struggles a lot and at the same time tries to be happy and enjoy the company of her female companions, but it is a feeling that does not last long for her. One day, on her return home, she faces her sick child who is going to die, but her biggest worry is that the child has not been baptized. Her fear increases because she knows her child has a double doom – lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy. She cries and says, "O merciful God, have pity; have pity upon my poor baby! Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!" (118). A close reading makes the reader realise that for Tess, happiness does not last long for she considers herself guilty, and deserves these miseries in order to be saved. At last,

she tries to baptize her child herself, and she does this only out of fear of God, for she considers God as a powerful Almighty who seeks revenge. In a way, Hardy shows that whatever bad that happens to Tess is because she is not as pure as a real Christian female should be. The tragedy for Tess is that although she is innocent and is as pure as she can be, all through the story, she is judged as guilty and sinful by others. Hardy reinforces this in the way she portrays Tess, and it is significant that even Tess knows herself guilty and in need of salvation. Even through Angel's relationship with Tess, Hardy shows that sheer purity and virginity are the most important factors for males to pay attention to females. Ironically though, despite Tess' true innocence and purity and the fact that she does not commit any sins, later in the story, she is judged by the sins of others and nobody sees her for what she really is, as if she needs salvation more than the other characters (especially the male ones). Initially, Hardy portrays Angel as a true lover who very deep inside loves Tess, and cannot ignore his feelings towards her and marry Mercy Chant (a devoted virgin, who is suggested by Angel's parents). Angel thinks it is not necessary to be a faithful Christian as Mercy but at the end, he himself ignores all his feelings towards Tess, and this is ironic because of the Christian perceptions. This is just because Tess is not a virgin and pure as a fine, Christian girl should be, so once again, Hardy defines a frame for a pure and Christian lady. While Angel at first considers Tess as a very honest girl and accepts her as she is, in the end,

it is Angel himself who forgets all about Tess' real purity and honesty and ignores her just because of his religious biases. This reminds Margaret Elvy's (2007) idea that Christianity divides women into two main sexual types: the 'Virgin Mary' who is considered as the worshiped Mother and 'Mary Magdalene the whore'. As she concludes, "Tess may be seen as a latter-day form of the ancient 'Mary Magdalene the holy whore', the sacred prostitutes who serves Goddesses such as Cybele and Isis. What's clear is that Tess is not allowed to be both, mother and sexually active woman" (67). Thus, a reader may presume that a man can do everything because he is a man and is forgiven, as when Angel confesses his sin to Tess, very gently she forgives him, but when it is Tess' turn, Angel cannot accept her for her past, and eventually, he leaves and ignores her very severely. Despite all Tess' struggles to make him aware of her secret before their marriage, he cannot accept her because she is not as pure as he thought. It would appear that Hardy defines a limit for females' attitudes and relationships before their marriage. On the one hand, he wants to make them aware of all the consequences of their intentional or unintentional affairs before their marriage but on the other, he portrays the males' situation completely different from the females'. He gives males more freedom and shows that they may commit sins but they can expect the females to forgive them. This reminds us of the old patriarchal and religious belief that, because Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, females are doomed to suffer more than men

so they need more salvation (Japinga, 1999, p.111). That is why all through the story it is Tess who suffers more and finds out that the punishment is brutal for those who eat the apple.

As Tess's fall starts with Alec, her salvation also begins with her sufferings through Alec's rude behaviour. As a male character, Alec is an example of male superiority and dominance, who does whatever he wants and later turns into a preacher and is socially accepted. In contrast is Tess, who has been innocent all her life but rejected by both her family and love. All these are reminiscence of the theory of Christian feminism, which suggests that historically, men, who were the main authors of theological books and pamphlets, wrote for themselves and for their own benefit, and in this case women are seen by men as merchandise: "women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another" (Irigaray, 1985, p.107). According to Elvy (2007), this exactly happens in Hardy's novels, and in most of these novels, women are traded by men as the marks of possession. Having sex with women is the stamp of this 'possession' (49). When confronted again by Tess, Alec realises his weakness and cannot control himself and so he, knowing it as her guilt, exploits it, calling her a 'non-believer'. Although Tess does not profess to be devoutly religious and Christian, she knows her religious and social responsibilities and commitments much better than Alec. In admirable contrast to the male characters in the novel who so easily forget their own commitments, oaths

and beliefs, Tess sticks by her loyalty to religion and society. At this stage of her life, she has even been strengthened enough to make Alec swear to his 'Christianity'. Even in his seclusion with her, he denies his weakness and his wrong when he says, "Tess, as God is my judge, I meant no humbug in taking your hand!" (405). Alec wants to cheat her, himself and even God, and still he is hopefully exploitative of women when he describes Tess as Eve (411). Tess' salvation starts with male characters' control on her life as if they are representative for God, that is why Tess considers herself as Angel's 'wretched slave' and insists him to stay with her, and the admission that her life and destiny are under his sheer control are enough reasons to make her disadvantaged. As Elvy argues, Tess is traded between Angel and Alec and they both possess her. Alec possesses her physically and sexually, while Angel possesses her sexually by a 'negation of eroticism'. Angel emphasizes her virginity, and Alec emphasizes her eroticism (Elvy, 2007, p.49). This 'possession' can be a good reason for Alec and Angel's dominance on Tess' life, for they both consider themselves as Tess's owner and lord. That is why, Angel becomes very angry when he discovers Tess's secret and considers her as Alec's wife. Consequently, he behaves in a way that Tess feels she has ruined his life, so she asks him to punish her in any way he wishes, "I agree to the conditions, Angel; because you know best what my punishment ought to be; only – only – don't make it more than I can bear!" (323). The fact is that Alec and

Angel both have ruined Tess's life, but it is Tess who has to feel guilty and to suffer for the sins of others. Through Alec and Angel, Tess suffers as a guilty woman has to for her salvation – according to the Christians – but unfortunately even after all her miseries and suffers, there is no way up for her and she is doomed to suffer to her death.

The other significant image which is very dominant in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, is the image of Tess as Eve – a temptress. Almost all the main male characters in the story consider young women as Tess to be dangerous as Eve. Tess' real story starts when she steps into Alec's house and becomes shocked by his unconventional behaviour. Although Tess does not have any sexual tendencies towards Alec, he wants to possess her sexually. In order to do this, he confronts her with various unexpected sexual situations and despite Tess's effort to resist him, eventually she fails. As Elvy argues, Hardy shows how difficult it is for women to have economic independence, more like Tess who is a woman cast off by men and yet remains dependent on men and patriarchy. She really works hard but still cannot be successful (Elvy, 2007, p.48). Once, when Alec kisses her, she wipes off the spot of his kiss and wants to undo the kiss, although spiritually it is impossible, she wants to be rid of Alec and all the irritating feelings he brings on her. On the contrary, it is Alec who is exactly different from Tess and has no morals, as all his reactions are

aggravating and he says, “You shall be made sorry for that! Unless, that is, you agree willingly to let me do it again, and no handkerchief” (65). Alec calls her ‘hussy’ to convince her that she is not innocent, and this is because he knows her as a fragile girl who is doomed to be neglected and misused. That is why, he swears at her and curses her, and his only reaction to her anger is his heartily laughter. All Alec’s reactions towards Tess indicate that he considers her as a weak and fragile person, who does not have any other choices, so she submits and he continues as he wishes. It is not just Alec and Angel that consider Tess a temptress as Eve, even a slogan-writer considers Tess dangerous and says, “Ah - there’s a nice bit of blank wall up by that barn standing to waste. I must put one there - one that it will be good for dangerous young females like yerself to heed. Will ye wait, missy?” (102). Here again, the representation of a man in the position of a preacher is tangible, who considers ‘young females’, as Tess, dangerous. The reader could be led to believe from reading these lines that the male characters in this story are portrayed as responsible characters, who preach and lecture, while they expect female characters to act and behave religiously but from the perspective of the males. This is why, the male characters in this story know the female characters responsible for males’ sins and weaknesses, and it is as if they want to suggest that if women are

good, then the world will become good. It is totally ironic that on the one hand, Hardy introduces Tess as a miserable person who does not have any control over managing her life without a man’s supervision, and on the other, he shows that most male characters in her life consider her as ‘dangerous’. Therefore, Hardy seems to suggest that Tess is a temptress simply because she is a woman and can tempt men. The male characters consider Tess a ‘temptress’ and they compare her to ‘Eve’, for they think they are very firm and this is Tess who all the time tempts them. In this way, Alec and Angel are self-righteous, not seeing the wrong of their own ways but blame Tess for their own weak points. Also, when Tess is with Angel, Hardy compares her to Eve and considers them as Adam and Eve (167). It is significant to note that Hardy indirectly wants to make the readers aware of a temptation, which is going to be proffered by Tess. Even the name ‘Angel’ is very ironic here, as firstly the reader considers him as a saviour, but sadly ‘Angel’ is not going to save Tess’ life from the past darkness, rather he is going to ruin the rest of it. Much in line with the thinking of the time, Hardy gives a good religious name to the male character while the female is described as ‘Eve’ – seen in religious texts as a temptress. It is noteworthy that Tess in this story is the most innocent character and at the same time, she is the most miserable one. To the end, she tries to be pure and innocent without

any pretensions, but Alec and Angel, in contrast, merely pretend to be religious and moral. It is fair to surmise that if they both were sincere and meant what they had said about being good Christians, Tess's life would not have such a tragic ending. Males like Alec and Angel behave the hypocritical way they do because it has been historical practice, similar to the way history has judged Eve through religious books.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed above, it can be concluded that, Thomas Hardy's portrayal of Tess proves that he conveys all his Evangelical beliefs in the case of their notions on women, and this explains why Hardy takes the same route in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in female portrayal. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is the story of a typical woman in the Victorian era who does not have any control over her life, but is yet introduced as a temptress many times through the story. As Elvy argues, "Men in Hardy's world want women to stay in their place....men are active, women are passive, men act, and women are acted upon." And when women want to usurp this status quo, they are punished (Elvy, 2007, p.50). Tess is born in this patriarchal society, with men always on the top, to serve her family, her lover, her husband and whoever in the state of power and her character is portrayed without any attempts to change her situation and make it different from the former images and stereotypes of the female characters of her time. Based on Kristin Brady (1993) viewpoint, feminist

criticism questions the 'masculine pleasure of the text', according to her, "Hardy's narrators persist in constructing and interpreting female characters according to standard notions about women's weakness, inconstancy, and tendency to hysteria" (94); therefore, through portrayal of Tess, Hardy does not attempt to champion the cause of the oppressed females or even pave the way for females' equality with males and the pleasure of the text is a masculine pleasure. On the whole, by reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the reader is made to believe that women are disadvantaged and remain miserable just because of their gender and their so-called religious status. Bearing in mind the images of Christian feminism has once more made this matter tangible that Tess is considered as the origin of 'sin' in this novel, who most needs salvation, that is why several times during the story she is exemplified as 'Eve' who is religiously the symbol of temptation. Thus, it is evident that in reading Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, one can confirm that Hardy's portrayal of Tess does not pave the way for new and promoted images for women. Hardy portrays Tess so miserable and disadvantaged that even after her salvation, there is no way up and no remedy for her and she sinks to her tragic end. To end up this article, it is noteworthy to mention Rosalind Miles view point that says, "Hardy really is a lover of women in the fullest physical sense" and according to her, Hardy has an intuitive and exalted view of women in the fullest physical sense and in better words he is a 'womanist' (Miles,

1979, pp.25-26). As it was mentioned in the introduction, although Hardy has many female protagonists and – as many readers believe – he shows the disadvantaged status of women to have sympathy with them, it cannot be a good and acceptable reason to consider his portrayal of Tess in accordance with feminists' tenets. As for the main tenets of Christian Feminism, it is shown that in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, there is no sign of equal rights for women, no harmony and no justice, and unlike Christian Feminists' main goals, all the situations for Tess are limiting and destructive and there is no effort through Tess' portrayal in order to demonstrate her gifts and insight.

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