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THE CRISIS OF 'FIN-DE-SIÈCLE' AS REFLECTED IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

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**THE CRISIS OF “FIN-DE-SIÈCLE” AS REFLECTED IN THOMAS HARDY’S
*TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES***

Thomas Hardy was a late Victorian writer. He could be regarded as a transitional figure because his long career straddles two different periods: the last decades of the Victorian era and the advent of modernity. As Fred Reid explains (2013: 177-187), the fact that he was born in a poor rural area in Dorset, where it took industrialization a long time to arrive and peasants lived in very hard conditions, made him quite aware of the existence of rural poverty, and this is reflected in his novels. The novel that is going to be analysed perfectly depicts the transition from an old rural world, which was gradually crumbling away, to a new industrial one emerging from a profound crisis of values, which imbued people with unprecedented feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Although Hardy can undoubtedly be labelled as a realistic writer, he was not a typical Victorian. In fact, his attitude towards life anticipated the Modernist movement, as he questioned most of the values which were the basis of the Victorian era. Among other things, he was an atypical Victorian because he was ahead of his time, mainly as regards his sharp critique of the unfair and hypocritical society he lived in.

Hardy was born when Victoria had been on the throne for only three years, and survived to welcome her great-grandson (as the Prince of Wales) into his home. He began his schooling in the year in which the Communist Manifesto was published, and he lived to see the Russian Revolution; he was already a young man when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appeared, and in his old age he took an interest in the theories of Einstein; he belonged to the generation which was overwhelmed by the poetry of Swinburne, he heard Dickens read, and met Tennyson and Browning; but

he lived to ponder the poetic techniques of T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, and to discuss his work with Virginia Woolf. In studying Hardy and his writings, therefore, we study the two or three generations in which modern England, and modern literature, came into being. (Page 1980: 3)

This quotation perfectly sums up the so many strands of thought that conflate and collide in Hardy's works. Although he was born in the Victorian era and therefore inherited the Victorian ideology, he lived long enough to question it. Moreover, he was a self-taught man who, to some extent, was acquainted with the theories of Marx, Freud, Darwin and Einstein, which undoubtedly contributed to precipitating the radical changes that were to shake the Western world, and to questioning things that had never been challenged before. Although Hardy wanted to see the positive side of Darwin's evolutionist theories (see Mallett 2013: 316-327), it is also a fact that Schopenhauer's influence often led him to adopt rather pessimistic views about society's future.

The Victorian period was, on the whole, a time of prosperity, industrialization, expansion and technological progress, especially from 1848 to 1870. Hardy and his contemporaries enjoyed a period of unprecedented political stability (*Pax Victoriana*); Queen Victoria was on the throne for more than six decades. On the other hand, the emergent middle classes gradually imposed their conservative views, especially as regards morals, family values and social and religious institutions.

All of these changes had their echo in the literature of the times. One of the consequences of increased mechanization was the spread of the printing-press, which in turn brought about the growth of literacy. However, only the bourgeoisie and the affluent middle classes could afford to buy books, and novels were accordingly written to satisfy the moral and aesthetic taste of this social sector. The following quotation by

Trevor Johnson clearly explains this idea:

Because magazines were for family reading the moral tone had to be impeccable; in other words vice had to be punished and virtue (if it hadn't met a noble death) rewarded. The more wealthy Victorians were also afraid of poverty, or rather the effect of it on the poor, since they thought, with considerable justification, that it might lead to revolution. [...] They wanted stories about people like themselves, about people living in a solid, comfortable world [...]. It wasn't the function of novelists to interfere with what had been ordained from the beginning. (1975: 24-25)

As Paul Poplawski explains (2008: 424-29), the working classes only had access to free libraries and periodicals. As a consequence, serialization practices became very common. Novels were published in instalments or serial form in the periodical press. Each chapter ended up with a climactic situation, and this suspense made readers intrigued and willing to buy the next instalment. Dickens and Hardy's novels were published in this way and became quite popular. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the novel under analysis, was first published in *The Graphic*, a popular family magazine (1891). However, as was stated before, conservative middle-class values also conditioned these publications. Hardy himself suffered the bowdlerization of his serializations, and had to remove some passages from *Tess* because the editors considered them to be inadequate. Later on, he would manage to include the 'forbidden' words from chapter X in a later edition of the novel, which came out in 1912. Nevertheless, the humiliation that Hardy suffered as a result of the bad reception of his last and greatest novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* (see Maier 2013: 73-83), finally led him to give up writing fiction and devote himself to poetry. Hardy's liberal and polemical personality

granted him a tremendous amount of popularity, but he also suffered the pain of being harshly criticized and misunderstood. For this reason, it could be said that Thomas Hardy is to be found among the key precursors of current modern thought.

Thomas Hardy was born in the village of Upper Bockhampton, near Dorchester. He also lived in London, although he eventually came back to Dorset for good. As a consequence, he experienced in his own flesh the ever-increasing tensions between the rural and the urban worlds, and saw the romantic notions of the countryside, so present in previous decades, gradually vanishing. His idealized notion of Wessex, Hardy's fictional setting, could no longer be sustained. Hardy took this name from the medieval Anglo-Saxon Kingdom prior to the Norman Conquest. Although Hardy's Wessex is basically fictional, in practice it extends itself towards the South West part of England, to the East of the Tamar. It could be said that his creation of the fictional Wessex as the main setting for his novels was an attempt to evoke and preserve the traditional rural life of the last decades of the nineteenth century, threatened by the new times that were about to take over. As Simon Gatrell argues, in one way or another, Wessex was a part of himself: "From the start Hardy depended upon the places amongst which he grew up, and upon the people who lived there, for the texture of his novels" (2003: 20). A deep sense of nostalgia permeates Hardy's writings, which desperately tried to preserve a pastoral lifestyle and the values attached to it. According to Trevor Johnson, "Hardy must have seen this clash of an ancient way of life with a newer one, more ruthless one, and he makes it a major element in much of his writing" (1975: 14).

Although *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a Wessex novel, a fictional portrait of that part of England, it is not a one hundred per cent rural novel. The idealized countryside that the novel strives to preserve never existed as such. Moreover, the rural world was already suffering the consequences and bad effects of the industrialization process. It

was becoming more and more fragmented and vulnerable. The novel presents the clash between the agricultural and the urban modes of life. Although the countryside that it depicts is anything but idyllic (poverty is omnipresent), this hard life is pitted against wonderful descriptions of nature –Chapter one, to give but one example, opens up by describing the vale of Blackmore as a beautiful place preserved from the industrial world. There was a lot of rural poverty in the South of England. There were no industries, and farm labourers had short and precarious contracts. As a consequence, they had to go from farm to farm in search of labour, as is revealed in *Tess*:

It was the eve of the Old Lady-Day, and the agricultural world was in a fever of mobility [...] annual migrations from farm to farm were on the increase [...]. When Tess's mother was a child the majority of the field-folk about Marlott had remained all their lives on one farm, which had been the home also of their fathers and grandfathers; but latterly the desire for yearly removal had risen to a high pitch.
(435)

The landowners made the most of the new machinery, and the railway helped them to transport their goods in a cheap and fast way. In Chapter forty-seven, the threshing of the last wheat-rick at Flintcomb-Ash Farm is described with bitterness. The newly introduction of the threshing-machine, depicted as a “red tyrant that the women had come to serve” (414), marks the end of the old ways, and thus of a whole way of life. To quote Jakob Lothe's words:

A sense of pastoral is evoked by the suggested affinity of the scenery and traditional, manual work, whereas the contrastive metaphor of “red tyrant” not only introduces the threshing-machine but also adumbrates the characterization of the

engineer as an intruder. (2003:126)

The new technical advances do not respect nature, as they are not part of it; they are intruders, and the peasant cannot help questioning the benefits of this new kind of agriculture:

The old men on the rising straw-rick talked of the past days when they had been accustomed to thresh with flails on the oaken barn-floor; when everything, even to winnowing, was effected by hand-labour, which, to their thinking, though slow, produced better results. (416)

Another technical advance depicted in *Tess* is the railway. Although it does not play an important role in the novel, it is used to mark the beginning of the degeneration process that was gathering more and more strength, and that was definitely doing away with old rural England. To give another example, in Chapter thirty, on the occasion of the milk delivery by Tess and Angel, the narrator establishes a sharp contrast between the machine and Tess. The railway is shown as an alien and threatening element in that natural environment, represented by the fragile and helpless girl:

No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl, with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause, the print gown of no date or fashion, and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow. (239)

Tess's secluded world is linked to the city by this machine. Tess is aware of the

fragmentation and ending of her world, which is being swallowed up by another that does not even know anything about hers.

Tess was so receptive that the few minutes of contact with the whirl of material progress lingered in her thought.

‘Londoners will drink it at their breakfast tomorrow, won’t they?’ she asked.

‘Strange people that we have never seen’.

‘Yes – I suppose they will. Though not as we send it. When its strength has been lowered, so that it may not get up into their heads’.

‘Noble men and women, ambassadors and centurions, ladies and tradeswomen, and babies who have never seen a cow’.

‘Well, yes; perhaps; particularly centurions’.

‘Who don’t know anything of us, and where it comes from; or think how we two drove miles across the moor tonight in the rain that it might reach ‘em in time?’

(240)

The novel insists upon the fact that the railway does not belong in this rural landscape. It is a frightening element that threatens to destroy the world it has suddenly entered. As Simon Gatrell states:

Everyone in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* walks or rides or drives a horse; when Tess encounters the railway engine that will carry Talbothays milk to London. Hardy stresses the unbridgeable gap separating the girl from the impersonal machinery. It is only at the end of the novel that Angel Clare actually takes a train out of Old Wessex to Sandbourne. (2003: 29)

In addition to these new technical advances, people belonging to the new

industrial England are also depicted as strangers in Tess's rural world. This is the case of the man in charge of the previously mentioned threshing-machine at Flintcomb-Ash: "He was in the agricultural world, but not of it" (415). According to Dorothy Van Ghent, Hardy's characters belong to one of these two types: either they are 'members of the folk' or 'individuals'. Whereas the individuals are mainly associated with the new urban/industrial world, the members of the folk are very close to nature, to the point that they become one with the land they work and inhabit.

The folk are the bridge between mere earth and moral individuality; of the earth as they are, separable conscious ego does not arise among them to weaken animal instinct and confuse response [...]. the folk, while they remain folk, cannot be individually isolated, alienated or lost, for they are amoral and their existence is colonial rather than personal. [Their characteristics are] folk instinctivism, folk fatalism and folk magic. (1961: 205)

Van Ghent's contrast between *members of the folk* and *individuals* is closely related to the dichotomy countryside vs. town that is being analysed. The members of the folk and the individuals coexist in constant tension. The Wessex people are members of the folk, in contact with the earth, living in community, and attached to the old rural traditions. On the other hand, the individuals are people coming from the new industrial England, polite, cultivated, but belonging to no community. These two worlds are clearly confronted; the rural world is the traditional and known one, whereas the industrial world is a modern, unknown and alien one.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* an individual, that is, a stranger, suddenly makes his appearance. He comes from a world foreign to Wessex. This stranger is Alec, an aristocratic villain, an impostor whose father bought the d'Urbervilles surname when he

retired to the South of the country. Alec, a fake member of the ancient and knightly family of the d'Urbervilles, is an intruder who is going to destroy Tess's life. He is a good representative of Van Ghent's individuals, since he is endowed with all the negative characteristics that they seem to have.

As regards these two worlds coexisting in Hardy's universe, the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* have often been used to refer to them. These two words, Lawrence Lerner suggests, encapsulate the main characteristics that define and confront these two worlds. To quote Lerner's words:

Traditional rural society, as seen by Hardy, is surely a *Gemeinschaft*. Everyone belongs to it in a completely unquestioned way, from birth: no conscious decision is needed to join, and an outsider would not normally be thought to belong. It is a hierarchical society that accepts unquestioningly the relations between strong and weak as institutionalized in property. Kinship and locality are the two dominant modes of association, for most people the only two. The change that comes over this world, the change to modernism, progress, and discontent, is the advent of the *Gesellschaft*. (1975: 90)

As can be deduced from this quotation, a *Gemeinschaft* is a rural community, ruled by Nature, whereas a *Gesellschaft* is a different kind of association, institutionalized and exclusively based on economic terms. A sudden change is impending in Hardy's old rural world, which is going to dissolve and be replaced by "modernism, progress, and discontent, that is, the advent of the *Gesellschaft*" (Lerner, 1975: 90), where the members of the folk are going to disappear by turning into individuals, uprooted people who have neither blood ties nor contact with the earth. They lack the strength that Nature provides in Hardy's fictional universe.

Tess suffers enormously throughout the novel, but she is a strong woman, who belongs to the *Gemeinschaft*, so her strength comes from her direct contact with the earth. She is Hardy's heroine, for many critics her favourite one. As Trevor Johnson affirms: "Hardy was once asked, 'Which of your novels is your favourite?' He thought for a moment and replied, simply, '*Tess*'" (1975: 142). According to the dominant Victorian mentality she is a sinner, a fallen woman, but she is "a pure woman" in the eyes of the author, as the subtitle of the novel clearly shows. Tess was Hardy's favourite heroine in spite of the fact that it was the publication of this novel that brought him much trouble. As Norman Page states:

The treatment to which *Tess of d'Urbervilles* was subjected [...] might have seen a source of bitter humiliation even to a younger and less eminent author. To a man of Hardy's deeply sensitive nature, capable of being wounded by even moderate criticism, the situation must have been intolerable. (1980: 14)

It was this humiliation that led him to give up fiction for poetry, as has been previously stated.

Tess wonderfully embodied Hardy's attack against the established Victorian society and its double standard of morality, which went hand in hand with the belief that society should be radically divided into two clearly separate spheres: public and private. The private sphere was quintessentially female. The idealized woman of this period was seen as an 'angel in the house', that is, as an asexual being whose main mission was to protect the rest of members of her home. Her chastity had to be preserved at all costs until marriage, and purity was her most valued virtue. On the contrary, the public sphere was male. Men were considered to be superior to women,

and they were consequently in charge of dealing with all kinds of public activities, involving danger and action. It was in the private sphere that they found security and protection; their home was their shelter, and hence their most precious property.

This notion of the two separate spheres corroborated the double standard of morality. However, these ideas were by no means new, since they were part of the Neoclassical legacy inherited from the previous century. According to this double standard, a man could have sex outside marriage. But, if a woman were to have it, she would automatically become a “fallen woman”, an outcast, and would carry such a social stigma forever. Victorian society would never forgive her. There was no halfway position in this puritan mentality; women were either pure or damned, either exemplary wives or corrupting whores.

As is well known, this puritanism had had its origin in Hobbes’s pessimistic attitudes towards man. Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* should have been a scandal, mainly provoked by its subtitle: “a pure woman”. The heroine does not stand for the ideal woman of her times. On the contrary, according to all of the ideas previously explained, she is a sinner, a “fallen woman”. In Penny Boumelha’s words:

What made Tess so controversial was not the relatively harmless plot [...] but this new element of polemic. [...] There was, first, the context of an increasing questioning, both in fiction and in public discussion, of sex roles and of the double standard. [...] But above all, there was the sense (reinforced by that aggressive afterthought of a sub-title, ‘A pure Woman’) that Hardy was presuming to offer a moral argument in the shape of a structured defence of his central character, and the passionate commitment to Tess herself. (1984: 119-120)

Tess was a socially marked character. However, she was a pure woman in Hardy's eyes. He was quite aware of the fact that such polemical subtitle was going to scandalize Victorian society. In spite of being a Victorian, Hardy had quite an advanced vision of feminine sexuality. He was some sort of pioneer in the movement in favour of women's liberation. Once again, his transitional character is made evident. In Trevor Johnson's words: "But Hardy had gone further; he had sailed in to attack the iron convention that, in assessing a woman's character, virginity outweighed all other considerations" (1975: 142). Other critics like Kristin Brady made use of Anne Z. Mickelson's words to state that "Hardy anticipates much of the thinking in the 1970s on men and women, especially women" (2003: 98). This double standard of morality is clearly reflected in the novel, but it reaches its climax in the wedding night scene, when Angel is unable to forgive Tess for having lost her purity. Tess feels relieved after their mutual confession, as they had committed the same sin. However, whereas Tess can easily forgive Angel, Angel's male mind cannot cope with it, and ends up repudiating her:

'Forgive me as you are forgiven! I forgive you, Angel'.

'You-yes, you do'.

'But you do not forgive me?'

'O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another...'(292)

The text shows that Tess's sin was not to be forgiven, because she was a woman. She could never be the same woman in Angel's eyes again. He had idealized Tess from the very first moment he saw her at Talbothays, "What a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!', he said to himself" (155). In Angel's ethereal world, Tess

could not be seen as an individual, but as a virginal deity. It was this attitude that Tess had shortly felt and feared when their relationship began:

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.

‘Call me Tess’, she would say askance; and he did. (167)

Although Tess does not understand very well the meaning of Angel’s words, she knows that she does not want to be reduced to a couple of odd names. She wants to assert her individuality because she is not the ideal woman that Angel had conjured up. In fact, Angel had compared her with a goddess. He is unable to see her as a plain woman. For this reason, he cannot possibly accept her loss of virginity and look deep into her pure soul. His wife was not his idealized Tess any longer. Poor desperate Tess begs Angel:

‘I thought, Angel, that you loved me-me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? [...] Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?’

‘I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you.’ (293)

Indeed, Tess is not the woman he had dreamed of. His sleepwalking towards the “empty stone coffin” of the Abbey-church, where he “carefully laid Tess”(318), symbolizes the end of his love, the end of his dream. In clear contrast with Angel’s bigoted vision, Tess was a pure woman for the author. After being rejected by her

husband, she becomes a fallen woman in the eyes of the world, and also a mythical representative of the human race on her trip across Wessex, which starts at Trantridge and ends up at Stonehenge. When being confronted with Tess's tragic destiny, one cannot help wondering: which was the origin of this tragedy? Was fatality to blame for it?

The answer to these questions is to be found at the very beginning of the novel, when Parson Tringham met Jack Durbeyfield quite by chance and told him about his noble origins: the ancient and nowadays extinct d'Urberville family. The heroine, Tess Durbeyfield, is then introduced as a "fine and picturesque" sixteen-year-old country girl, with "peony mouth" and "innocent eyes". She was "a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience" (12-14). Tess's conspicuous sensuality can be said to be partly responsible for her catastrophe at the Chase. However, as Penny Boumelha argues, Tess's sexuality "remains unknowable and unrepresentable" (1984: 121).

Her parents' ambition and sense of guilt after Prince's death is the origin of Tess tragedy. Tess is sent to Trantridge to claim kinship with a branch of their d'Urberville relatives. She is reluctantly forced to undertake this journey from innocence to maturity. Once there, she is seduced and raped by Alec d'Urberville, her fake cousin. Without realizing it, she suddenly becomes a "fallen woman" in this ruthless and hypocritical society. The novel depicts a naive and destroyed heroine returning home only to reproach her mother for not having warned her about men. The following passage depicts her agony:

'O mother, my mother!' cried the agonized girl, turning passionately upon her parent as if her poor heart would break. 'How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was

danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me! (104)

Joan Durbeyfield accepts her daughter's fate with resignation and apathy while exclaiming: "Well, we must make the best of it, I suppose. 'Tis nater, after all, and what do please God!" (104). The mother seems to think that it was meant to happen: "It was to be" (91). This fatalistic idea is common in the rural world. Joan is a member of the folk and, as Van Ghent argues, "In their fatalism lies their survival wisdom" (1961: 206). The novel makes it clear that mother and daughter belong to different worlds. Tess is not a resilient member of the folk. The little amount of education that she has received has turned her into a hybrid figure, halfway between the world of Wessex and that of the individuals.

Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, 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. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (24)

The previous excerpt discloses the great generational divide between both women. This is the reason why Tess's mother accepted her daughter's destiny whereas Tess felt guilty of her ignorance and eventually left her home in search of a "hopeful life", thus attempting to "escape the past" and refusing to accept a life already stigmatized (125,126). Tess's share of Wessex ancestral survival knowledge allows her to follow "the invincible instinct towards self-delight" (127). However, in spite of Tess's effort to

escape her fate, all of her attempts end up in failure, which corroborates the pessimistic/fatalistic tone that presides over the novel as a whole. As Trevor Johnson explains:

There is another force at work which we can only call destiny or fate. This force acts upon all characters, but especially upon Tess, so that intentions are continually frustrated by unexpected turn of events, of which the failure by Angel Clare to discover Tess's written confession before their marriage (it had slipped under his door-mat) is typical. (1975: 143)

These words may lead readers to think that Hardy's *Tess* is a fatalistic novel, since fate is rendered a major topic, but a closer reading will reveal that Tess is not a victim of her destiny. In fact, all her problems with Angel could have been avoided if she had had the courage to confess to her "secret past" before, notwithstanding Angel's failure to find an appropriate moment for such an overwhelming confession, which he insisted on regarding as a mere triviality. Tess should have insisted on that and be more resolute. Her naivety made her think that her past might be ignored only by not mentioning it. Having this in mind, it could be argued that Hardy's heroine was endowed with free will, and it is Tess and only Tess and her ignorance that is ultimately responsible for her decisions and their consequences. However, her parents' pride, together with society's hypocrisy, are also to be blamed. The same could be said of Alec's murder. Nobody forced her to stab a knife in his heart. Her heroic act of love would cut the ties with her past with Alec, but would also condemn her to death. Although she knew that, she freely chose the option of belonging to Angel (although only for a few hours). She deserved being his wife, after all her sufferings. And, for this reason, when the policemen reach Stonehenge, she is prepared to die, and calmly replies: "I am ready" (505).

Taking this into account, it can be concluded that Tess is not a victim of her fate, despite the fatalism displayed throughout the novel. As Mark Asquith explains (2013: 285-295), Thomas Hardy was undoubtedly a pessimistic man, much influenced by the *fin-de-siècle* crisis and the disturbing theories that emerged during that transitional period. The late Victorian period saw a rise of agnosticism, as so far unquestionable religious beliefs and universals were being put to the test by the new scientific discoveries, such as Darwin's evolutionist theories, which radically challenged previous ideas. The literal interpretation of the Bible was also questioned, and there was even a philosophical debate about the possibility of claiming absolute truth. According to Robert Schweik:

Hardy's letters and notebooks make it clear that he had the deepest respect for Darwin and Huxley as representatives of the best scientific thought of his day. It is possible that Darwin's views on heredity may have influenced Hardy. (2003: 62)

Thomas Hardy testified to these changes in *Tess*, and attacked the church as an institution. Many Victorians were great churchgoers. At least once a week, especially on Sundays, they went to church, where the Bible was read. Robert Schweik explains Hardy's problematic position as regards religious matters:

Yet although Hardy became an agnostic, he remained emotionally involved with the Church [...]. One manifestation of the way Christianity remained a persistent influence on Hardy's writing is that his fiction is saturated with biblical allusions. [...] And in *Tess*, and *Jude*, where he was particularly concerned with the inimical relationship of religious mores to human lives. (2003: 55-56).

In spite of the fact that, in his novels, Hardy “tended to treat clergymen and Christianity with increasing hostility” (Schweik, 2003:56), there is an exception with old Mr. Clare, who is portrayed with respect and sympathy: “his father looked what in fact he was –an earnest, God-fearing man” (202). However, his snobbish sons Felix and Cuthbert are ironically ridiculed as “unimpeachable models” in the novel (204). Another example of a religious character can be found in the “fanatical text painter”, which warns the parishioners against temptation. Alec’s sudden conversion also sounds suspicious, especially his rejection of faith after meeting Tess for the second time. Churchgoers are also depicted as hypocritical. Tess lacks knowledge of traditional Christian doctrine and Angel teases her, calling her a heathen when they are at Talbothays. Although Tess frequently goes to church, she does not understand many of the things she hears. The following quotation takes place after Tess returns to Marlott. She goes to Church on a Sunday morning in search of refuge and peace. She takes a back seat, trying to go unnoticed by the parishioners, and this is what she observes:

Parishioners dropped in by twos and threes, deposited themselves in rows before her, rested three-quarters of a minute on their foreheads as if they were praying, though they were not; then sat up, and looked around. The people who had turned their heads turned them again as the service proceeded, and at last observing her they whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more. (107)

Tess thought she could find refuge in the church after her fall but, on seeing how people were whispering about her instead of praying, gave up going to church altogether. To make matters worse, the new parson refused to give Tess’s little son a Christian burial. By introducing all of these facts and scenes, Hardy’s novel shows the

decay of Christianity; many of these church-goers lack the main Christian virtues: charity and mercy. The members of the folk do not worry about official religion; their saying “what will be, shall be”, is deeply rooted in their ancestral fatalistic beliefs, so distant from those enforced by the established Church. The scene of the christening of Tess’s baby describes an immaculate “girl-mother”(119), almost supernatural, surrounded by her little brothers in pious attitude:

Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist. The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted her from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed [...] having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. The little ones kneeling round, their sleepy eyes blinking and red, awaited her preparations full of a suspended wonder which their physical heaviness at that hour would not allow to become active. (119)

This ethereal description accounts for Tess’s ultimate innocence and purity. When it comes to choosing the name for the baby, Tess remembers a phrase in the book of Genesis, “[...] and now she pronounced it: ‘SORROW, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’” (119). The Book of Genesis is frequently mentioned, especially in relation to the triangle Alec-Tess-Angel. Allusions to the original sin, Paradise, Adam and Eve are also recurrent. Here is an example of the so many found as regards the relationship between Angel and Tess:

The spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead,

impressed them with a feeling of isolation, as if they were Adam and Eve. (167)

Another relevant example is the scene when Alec says to Tess, “A jester might say this is just like Paradise. You are Eve, and I am the old Other One come to tempt you in the disguise of an inferior animal” (445). Significantly enough, both Angel and Alec are related to the figure of Adam. No matter with which of the two Tess happens to have a relationship, both of them will accuse her of being the fatal temptress, thus putting all the blame on her Eve condition.

Tess of d'Urbervilles also depicts “the ache of modernity”. Hardy’s view of progress seems to be pessimistic, as social conventions take time to change. The so many silences that his novels contain offer abundant food for thought. Hardy’s intentioned silences allow for multiple interpretations. The scene that takes place in the Chase is a wonderful example. Other significant instances of the narrator’s silences are Tess’s pregnancy and labour, Tess’s confession at the wedding night, and Alec’s murder. According to Linda M. Shires, Hardy’s use of silences signal him as a precursor of modernity:

Hardy’s subversion of language and use of silence, like his contortions of plot and intertextual mixing, help shatter the novel form as readers had previously known in the nineteenth century.[...] *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is 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. (2003: 158-159)

Having said all this, it can be concluded that the so-called “*fin-de-siècle*” was a transitional period spanning the end of the Victorian era and the advent of modernity, and Hardy was an undoubtedly transitional figure who wonderfully reflected all of these

changes in his late novels, especially in *Tess of The d'Urbervilles*, the object of this study. The novel anticipates the following era, mainly as regards the nature and treatment of its subject matter. The progressive decay of old Victorian values, together with the new technological advances, brought about an instability that Hardy could not possibly ignore, since he experienced it in his own flesh. The old and extinct d'Urberville family represents the decline of the Victorian era and its values. Tess would become a scapegoat between two opposed worlds that began to collide and fight against each other for survival: on the one hand, the past, which was gradually disappearing, and on the other hand the modern era, which was about to take over. For this reason, she had to die. Hardy's dearest heroine, his "pure woman", encapsulates Hardy's harsh critique of his own age. As Johnson claims, "to Hardy purity was not something merely physical, but a state of mind" (1975: 28). Hardy attacked "the arbitrary laws of society", which make Tess impure, although "nothing in Nature condemns her" (1975: 145). Tess consequently becomes a symbol of the human race. Her pilgrimage echoes mankind's journey towards integrity. All along her journey, Tess matures and learns the meaning of life. She lives her short life as intensely as any other human being. Her immense love for Angel makes her even stronger, to the point that she is eventually ready to face up to her unfair destiny at Stonehenge. She feels connected with these ancient stones, with the earth, and this association makes her feel at home in this mysterious pagan environment: "So now I am at home" (502), she finally says. It is this conviction that allows her to cope with death, the end of all her pain and suffering.

'What is it, Angel?' she said, starting up. 'Have they come for me?'

'Yes, dearest', he said. 'They have come.'

'It is as it should be', she murmured. 'Angel, I am almost glad -yes, glad! This

happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough; and now I shall not live for you to despise me!

She stood up, shook herself, and went forward, neither of the men having moved.

'I am ready', she said quietly. (505)

The ending is quite moving, and at this point readers cannot but surrender to Tess's integrity. After all, the novel is right, the heroine is a pure woman (in despite of the fact that she has just murdered Alec!). Moreover, she is not alone at Stonehenge. In one way or another, many readers have empathized with her and seen her through till her final destination: prison and death. She is innocent but guilty in the eyes of the world and, like Jesus Christ before her, she is going to pay for all mankind's sins. The novel's final words speak for themselves:

'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. (508)

Tess's ephemeral happiness with Angel testifies to Hardy's ephemeral hopes in the justice of this world. In Hardy's pessimistic cosmovision, man was nothing but a tiny speck, a transitory being who, like Tess, is forever trapped in an indifferent world that will eventually annihilate him. Not in vain have critics often claimed that Hardy's writings wonderfully embody the battle between the old and the new, between self-confidence and anxiety, between hope and desperation, in a word, the *fin-de-siècle* crisis that was doing away with the world as it had been conceived for many centuries, only to give way to the uncertain abyss that was to represent modernity itself.

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