

# Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: The Other Self of Nature

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## **Abstract**

*Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles exhibits the life of Tess, a representative of the Victorian woman, who discovers herself in the midst of nature. She concurs with nature both physically and psychologically. Almost all the momentous incidents of her life have a close association with nature. The natural atmosphere, the landscape, the cycle of seasons, and the nocturnal animals introduced in the novel echo the inner rhythms of Tess. She, in fact, acts and reacts in a way that one can metaphorically relate her to nature. Her association with nature raises the question of whether she is a distinguished human being or a part of nature or just another self of nature. This paper, therefore, aims at addressing the metaphorical identity of Tess and reconsidering the relationship between nature and Tess in the light of ecocriticism.*

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, nature, relationship, Tess

Tess, in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, has a close association with nature. One notices the depiction of her gradual development and/or struggle to live under the close influence of nature. It shapes her lifestyle and remains in close contact in each phase of her life. Tess, likewise, accepts herself as a true self of nature, and finds herself almost always in nature's lap. The cycle of the seasons, for example, affiliates with the vicissitudes of her life, and, similarly, the disposition of the landscapes covertly concurs with the vital events of her life. In addition, she finds herself evidently associated with different animals, sometimes literally and sometimes figuratively. To be more specific, Tess finds herself merged with nature. Hence, this paper aims at addressing the relationship between Tess and nature in the light of ecocriticism that evaluates the prevalent human-nature connection in literature, and attempts to elucidate Tess metaphorically as the other self of nature.

One of the main qualities of Tess's character is her consistent concern for her family. Like nature, she takes care of her family. This care is, in fact, inevitable because she, as the elder child of her parents, finds herself responsible for the well-being of the family in critical situations, especially after the accidental death of the horse, Prince. Her strong sense of responsibility directs her to the physical and mental struggle that she faces throughout her life. Her sacrifice for her family is no less important than that of nature. Although nature provides human beings with the necessities of life, the latter exploits it by being disloyal. Similarly, Tess intends to do a lot for her family, but ironically, the wrong and overambitious decision of her parents pushes her towards the extreme anguish that she faces. She is a sharp contrast to her mother in ideology and temperament, because "[w]hen they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed" (Hardy 29). These contrastive standpoints contribute a lot to push Tess towards an uncertain future. Tess is very much akin to nature, and receives maltreatment from human agents, just as nature is often mistreated by human beings. In contrast, Hazel Williams views Tess and nature as opposite to each other, and states that "Tess,

the protagonist, Nature, the antagonist, have fought a grim and deadly battle" (40) to win. He also finds that "Tess's struggle to maintain her decency against the forces of her environment is always the cycle of human destiny, a cycle in which man comes out the inevitable loser" (40). I do not concur with him, because they do not exist in contradictory positions, but are closely associated with each other. Tess, in a sense, is an organ of nature and possesses the same qualities as nature – even though sometimes metaphorically. Of course, she has been trying to prevail over her circumstances, and nature never entraps her. Rather it tries to protect her. On the contrary, it is the force of human law that entraps her, and gradually, thrusts her into a distressful and vulnerable situation. However, Tess, as a self of nature, attempts to spring back after every tragic incident in life, yet she fails every time because of the harsh treatment of human beings. Similarly, nature tries to surmount the ill-treatment it receives from human beings, but cannot. In this way, a unity between Tess and nature is established. To explain further, after every poignant incident, like the death of Prince, her seduction by Alec, the birth and death of her son, the desertion by Angel, the displacement of her house, she tries to start her life anew, but every time, human beings thwart her.

Elliott B. Gose, Jr. observes that Hardy, in the novel, "brings together the evolutionary view of man as a product of nature with the anthropological findings about early man's attempt to control nature through primitive rituals" (261). Unlike Gose's observation, my findings posit Tess in close contact with nature, though I support the first portion of the statement: Tess, as a human being, is a part of nature, but she never tries to control it. She tries to survive in the harsh situations that are neither her nor nature's doing. Alternatively, nature treats her as a true representative of itself, and, in response, she merges with nature, and becomes its true self.

An ecocritical interpretation of the relationship between Tess and nature show Tess as another self of nature. "As a critical stance," ecocriticism "has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between human and nonhuman" (Glotfelty xix). An ecocritical thought of this text, in a sense, provokes one to see Tess and nature as a surrogate of each other. Tess holds all the values of nature and expresses her nature-like identity throughout the novel. She is entirely devoted to her own identity and to other people, especially to her family members and Angel. Such dedication is, I think, one of the salient features of nature. The other characters, sometimes, admit Tess's strong sense of loyalty and responsibility. For example, Izz assures Angel that "[s]he would have laid down her life for 'ee" (Hardy 289). Likewise, nature is responsible towards human beings who are, in fact, part of it. In this respect, J. Claude Evans mentions Taylor's belief that:

the human species, along with all other species, are integral elements in a system of interdependence such that the survival of each living thing, as well as its chances of faring well or poorly, is determined not only by the physical conditions of its environment but also by its relations to other living things. (qtd. in Evans 84)

My understanding of the prevailing human-nature relationship in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, however, harmonizes with Taylor's opinion. Similarly, Donald A. Crosby, in his characterization of nature, opines, "[n]ature is metaphysically ultimate, that is, there is nothing outside, beyond,

or behind it. This statement includes human beings, who must be regarded as an integral part of nature” (21). In the light of this proclamation, I perceive a perfect picture of nature in Tess. Her every aspect of life has, in fact, a fusion with nature. All the natural circumstances – cycle of seasons, landscapes, and animals – bear a close resemblance with the happenings of her life. Among others, one of the direct references of Tess’s association with nature is when she works as a field worker. Hardy equates her with the other workers where:

she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature, and is not merely an object set down therein as at ordinary times. A fieldman is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it. (Hardy 100)

Additionally, submissiveness and forgiveness are two of nature’s important qualities, which are prevalent in Tess. For instance, in chapter thirty five, Tess pardons Angel for his past affair with someone else without any hesitation. However, when Angel’s turn comes, he does not forgive her. Tess even prays, “I will obey you, like your wretched slave, even if it is to lie down and die” (Hardy 249). Seeing such references and perceiving Tess’s inevitable attachment with the environment, one can question whether Hardy wants to posit Tess in the midst of nature. The question remains, however, why Tess’s path is not smooth, and what the ending of Tess does suggest. In this regard, I find Crosby’s comment worth mentioning. He reminds us that though “nature clearly is not utterly indifferent to the accomplishments, values, and prospects of human beings” (141) and takes care of them in every possible way, nature also reacts against the maltreatment it receives from human beings. “Nature,” Crosby mentions, “also has a destructive side that we should not ignore” (21). The reproachful side includes nature’s tendency to take revenge on its exploiters. If Tess is a part of nature, she possesses the quality to take revenge on her exploiters. The murder of Alec is, therefore, a demonstration of that revenge. Though nature endures mistreatment by humans a lot, the fortitude ends at one point. Likewise, Tess’s patience ends and she reacts violently by killing Alec. Tess’s reaction is similar to that of Moby Dick’s. In Melville’s *Moby Dick*, one notices that nature takes revenge by killing all the crew of the *Pequod*, except Ishmael, because of the maltreatment they have meted out towards Moby Dick, an agent of nature. In Frank Schatzing’s *The Swarm*, nature punishes human civilization, because they destroy the marine ecosystem. Likewise, Tess, another form of nature, punishes Alec by killing him, because he is the main body who is responsible for her sufferings.

Throughout the novel, Tess has a strong association with the landscape. The natural places have an inescapable influence on many of the significant events in Tess’s life. One of the most important and sad episodes of her life is her seduction by Alec. This incident occurs in the midst of nature. Like some other distressing incidents of her life, during this one, nature signals something menacing. Nature itself creates a gloomy atmosphere, and “the moon had quite gone down, and, partly on account of the fog, The Chase was wrapped in thick darkness” (Hardy 82). The seduction is a landmark – though negative – in Tess’s life, and leaves a long-lasting scar on her life. The components of nature witness the transition of Tess – from a virgin to a sexually experienced girl, and lament over this. As the narrator states, “[d]arkness and

silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares" (Hardy 82). Surrounding this incident, one notices no cheerful impression in nature, rather there prevails an all-encompassing obscurity. This dimness and stillness of nature, in a sense, represents Tess's own anguish. One can find an obvious relationship between this forced sexual incident and nature, by considering queer ecology, which asserts that:

there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically, and it is our task to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding. (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5)

Therefore, the seduction scene asserts that Tess is really a part of nature. However, this is not the only case when nature bemoans Tess's sufferings. When Prince, the only means of their income, dies in an accident and Tess becomes pale in horror and regret, nature also showcases a depressing atmosphere. After the incident, the narrator states, "[t]he atmosphere turned pale, the birds shook themselves in the hedges, arose, and twittered: the lane showed all its white features, and Tess showed hers, still whiter" (Hardy 39). This attitude of nature is a clear indication of Tess's nature centeredness and vice versa – both Tess and nature have established a reciprocal relationship. Similarly, when Tess starts her journey to her in-laws' house, the landscape remains tranquil and colorful. It may be said that since she is going there to win her in-laws' heart, and is in a pleasant mood, nature remains in a fine mood. On the other hand, when she returns with a broken heart, the view of nature also changes.

This tendency – the association between nature and Tess – is prevalent in the text from the beginning. Marlott, Tess's birth place, according to Silverman, is a "“virgin territory”" (5). Silverman's interpretation depends on Hardy's description of the village:

The village of Marlott lay amid the north-eastern undulations of the beautiful Vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor aforesaid– an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape-painter, though within a four hours' journey from London. (18)

This description of the virgin landscape matches with Tess. When she is in Marlott, Tess remains a maid, and after leaving the village she loses her virginity. Though the question of whether or not the change of place has any direct connection with Tess's seduction may arise, the novel indicates a clear association between the incident and nature. One can think that the novelist tries to establish an inevitable bond between the aforementioned two through this narrative.

Talbothays, the dairy where Tess spends the most cheerful episode of her life, is another landscape which exhibits a close tie between Tess and nature. Tess enjoys her life there, and, in fact, no depressing events occur during her stay at Talbothays. She even dreams of beginning a new life with Angel and advances thereby. When she returns from Alec's house after the seduction, she realizes that she will never be happy in Marlott, and therefore, aspires for a

new place to live in; Talbothays is such a place, and she finds contentment here – though this happiness is momentary. However, my focus is on the inseparable bond that Tess has with the landscape. On the one hand, a soothing and pleasant atmosphere prevails here, and on the other hand this place is productive enough to support human beings: “the valley in which milk and butter grew to rankness, and were produced more profusely, if less delicately, than at her home – the verdant plain so well-watered by the river Var or Froom” (Hardy 118). Therefore, one can clearly notice that nature has a close bond with Tess’s life. When she passes blissful days, nature also remains pleasant and vice versa.

However, as time passes, some crucial incidents – her marriage to Angel, her confession of the past, and her sad desertion by her husband – happen in Tess’s life, and she now takes shelter in Flintcomb-Ash, another farm. Life in this farm is very hard because of the crude nature of the land. Here Tess finds herself in an unwelcome situation, both psychologically and physically. She can only think of her recent past happy days in Talbothays, but cannot experience that any more. One can find that the sufferings of Tess are inherent in nature also: the farm is sterile and very displeasing to live in. Marian rightly observes that it is a “starve-acre place” (Hardy 304). Tess stays here only to bypass her ongoing existential crisis. Flintcomb-Ash is a place that has a close association with Tess’s current state.

Actually, nature wants a safe and pleasant position for Tess in the midst of it, and therefore, it teaches Angel a lesson for rejecting Tess. After abandoning Tess, Angel visits Brazil as an “emigrating agriculturist” (Hardy 280), and intends to set up a farm. He lies to his parents about the reason for discarding Tess, where they, specifically his mother, admit Tess as an element of nature: “there are few purer things in nature than an unsullied country maid” (Hardy 280). As he approaches Brazil, without thinking of forgiving his wife, he is “... drenched with thunderstorms and persecuted by other hardships” (Hardy 294). However, he cannot succeed there because of the harsh treatment of nature, and his health cannot endure the atmosphere of the environment. Nature, at this point, is unfriendly to him perhaps because he thrusts Tess towards an uncertain and insecure future. Gradually, a sort of transformation occurs in his mind, and he begins to realize that he has done an injustice to Tess. Through Angel’s realization, one can comprehend the teaching of nature, and the association of nature with Tess. Though Angel has a very positive attitude towards nature – he wants to become a farmer, no matter what the inspiration was – nature does not entertain him because he has maltreated Tess, a wing of nature.

Another point worth making is the direct relationship of the cycle of seasons with almost all the important events in Tess’s life. The way the landscapes of the novel have a close tie with Tess; in the same way, the seasons concur with Tess’s existence. For example, in the summer she feels that her passion is at the highest level, while in the winter she falls in some inevitable problems, yet, in the spring she sees some hope of getting rid of the problems, and tries to do so accordingly. In this regard, Penny Boumelha rightly remarks that the “cycles of season and fertility are everywhere apparent” (xxv) in the novel, and to be more specific, these are prevalent in Tess’s everyday life. In the eleventh chapter, Tess loses her maidenhood on a foggy and “chilly” (Hardy 81) September night. This incident shakes her world and she returns to her

native village. Now she lives in the broken world and sees no hope. During that winter, she stays in her parents' home and passes time in absolute depression. However, as time passes and a new season is about to come, this condition changes, and a hopeful feeling comes to her mind: "Tess felt the pulse of hopeful life still warm within her; she might be happy in some nook which had no memories. To escape the past and all that appertained thereto was to annihilate it; and to do that she would have to get away" (Hardy 112). Her optimistic sense to obliterate the sad past comes with a positive outcome in the following spring. She finds a way to forget the past and to live afresh. The narrator states,

She waited a long time without finding opportunity for a new departure. A particularly fine *spring* came round, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her as it moved the wild animals, and made her passionate to go. At last, one day in early May, a letter reached her ... a skilful milkmaid was required at a dairyhouse many miles to the southward, and that the dairyman would be glad to have her for the summer months. (112, my emphasis)

She joins the dairy and peacefully lives among other milkmaids for the entire season. This is the most pleasant time in her life. She adapts herself to the new setting and the landscape interiorizes her as well. She forgets her past and hopes to live with Angel in a place where her past is unknown. Her relationship with Angel begins to grow in this dairy. Her sense of love and passion grows high. In a sense, the contentment in Tess's life is now full to the brim. Likewise, the surrounding is also pleasant and compassionate to Tess. The narrator tells us; "Tess had never in her recent life been so happy as she was now, possibly never would be so happy again. She was, for one thing, physically and mentally suited among these new surroundings" (Hardy 144). However, this season changes and in the following winter Tess finds herself in the cruel Flintcomb-Ash, where she has to struggle both psychologically and physically to survive – in the meantime, Angel abandons her, and she falls in a hazardous situation. The nature of the season, in fact, echoes the present condition of Tess. In this respect, Hazel Williams appropriately observes that "[t]he story moves through the seasons, spring, summer, fall, and winter. As the seasons grow stormier, Tess's life also grows stormier" (54), and vice versa.

Tess's nature-centeredness is not limited only in the association with seasons and landscapes. Rather the novel presents Tess's connection with the animals as well. The portrayal of the animals, in fact, represents Tess's actual condition. For example, on her way to Flintcomb-Ash she finds many injured pheasants, feels pity for them, and tries to cease their agony by killing them. At that time, Tess is in a vulnerable position, because her husband has already abandoned her, and she has to support herself and her family. These wretched birds show the internal anguish of Tess, who comforts herself by comparing her plight to theirs:

"Poor darlings – to suppose myself the most miserable being on earth in the sight o' such misery as yours!" she exclaimed, her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly. "And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me." (Hardy 298)

Earlier, when in the eighth chapter, Tess tries helplessly to stop Alec from kissing her, one notices the semblance of an animal in her: “she cried at length, in desperation, her large eyes staring at him like those of a wild animal” (Hardy 61). Then there are moments when Tess wanders at night just like the nocturnal animals, “[w]alking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough,” in order to avoid the backbiting of people (Hardy 97). At that time, as the narrator comments, “[h]er flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene” (Hardy 97). To be more specific, she becomes an essential part of nature. Likewise, in Talbothays, the most pleasing place for Tess, one finds that Tess “wore the look of a wary animal” (Hardy 212). There is a shadow of an animal in Tess’s yawn also, and in one particular incident, Angel notices “the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake’s” (Hardy 187). Besides these references, there are some additional indications of her nature-centeredness. For example, she is compared to “a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length” (Hardy 120), which perfectly suits her situation. The aforementioned figurative relations between Tess and nature posit her as a true self of nature, and Angel, therefore, sees her as a “daughter of Nature” (Hardy 136).

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is replete with abundant references that indicate Tess’s inseparable relationship with nature. She is just like another form of nature. The text displays Tess’s association with nature at different levels: almost all the important incidents that happen in her life have a direct connection to nature; the natural landscapes concur with Tess in their attitude; the condition of her life changes with the change of the seasons; and she has an inevitable connection with the animals. Thus the paper tries to shed light on Hardy’s representation of Tess not only as a mere component of nature but also as a metaphorical self of nature.

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