

ESSAY TWO

Discuss the 'Fallen Woman' as a Familiar Feature of Victorian Writing

Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton in Dorset on the 2nd June 1840. His father was a builder. He trained as an architect in Dorchester, the local town, but gave up this career to write novels. His first novel was published in 1871, and he went on writing them until 1895. "Tess of the Durbeyvilles", published in 1891, is his most famous novel.

When we first meet Tess, she is at a sort of dance in the village. She is described in a lot of detail.

Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience. The dialect was on her tongue to some extent, despite the village school: the characteristic intonation of that dialect for this district being the voicing approximately rendered by the syllable UR, probably as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech. The pouted-up deep red mouth to which this syllable was native had hardly as yet settled into its definite shape, and her lower lip had a way of thrusting the middle of her top one upward, when they closed together after a word. Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along today, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in

her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then.

She meets Angel Clare and they are attracted to each other. Then Tess goes to work for her cousin Alec, and he rapes her. It isn't clear whether Alec rapes Tess or seduces her. This is how she becomes a 'fallen woman'. After being raped, Tess has a baby, which dies, and she goes to work at a dairy called Talbothays.

At the dairy, Tess falls in love with Angel Clare, and they get married. Tess tells Angel about her past, and he deserts her and goes to Brazil. Tess has to work at a cruel and harsh farm called Flintcomb-Ash. Hardy describes Flintcomb-Ash as a very harsh place.

They worked on hour after hour, unconscious of the forlorn aspect they bore in the landscape, not thinking of the justice or injustice of their lot. Even in such a position as theirs it was possible to exist in a dream. In the afternoon the rain came on again, and Marian said that they need not work any more. But if they did not work they would not be paid; so they worked on. It was so high a situation, this field, that the rain had no occasion to fall, but raced along horizontally upon the yelling wind, sticking into them like glass splinters until they were wet through. Tess had not known till now what was really meant by that. There are degrees of dampness, and a very little is called being wet through in common talk. But to stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rain-water, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front and sides, and yet to work on till the leaden light diminishes and marks that the sun is down, demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valour.



Alec comes on the scene again, and Tess goes to live with him. Then Angel returns from Brazil, and Tess stabs Alec and goes off with Angel. She is arrested and hanged.

When Hardy wrote 'A Pure Woman' as the subtitle to "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" he meant that Victorian society had a double standard about sex for men and women. Tess is a victim of this double standard. She is pure because she does not mean to harm anyone, and also because she is a child of nature. Sex is a natural thing. Alec is the real villain. He seduces Tess and makes her into a fallen woman. Victorian society was cruel to fallen women and rejected them. Angel in his way is just as cruel. He believes in the double standard and this is why he deserts Tess after they have got married. In this way, Hardy was trying to attack middle-class Victorian society and criticise it. The middle-class readers didn't like this, and criticised Hardy for it. He was a victim of middle-class society just as much as Tess.

Tess has to die because she is a fallen woman. The middle-class readers would not allow a writer to create a character who was a fallen woman and still lived. Another example of a fallen woman in Victorian literature was Hetty in Adam Bede by George Eliot. Hetty is a beautiful young woman who works on a farm. She falls in love with the squire and he seduces her. She is sent to Australia as a punishment. Adam Bede was written before Tess of the Durbervilles (Adam Bede in 1859, and Tess in 1891) but they are the same. The authors want the reader to sympathise with a fallen woman, but they are not allowed to show a "fallen woman" living and being a success.

Feminist critics have criticised Victorian society for the way it treated fallen women. Mary Poovey says that the contradiction between a sexless, moralised angel and an aggressive, carnal magdalen was therefore written into the domestic ideal as one of its constitutive



characteristics (M. Poovey, "Uneven Developments" p.9). This is true. There are lots of fallen women in Victorian novels. Many writers wanted to write about fallen women, but middle-class society didn't allow them to. Or on the other hand, they wrote about fallen women but the fallen women died. Some of them became prostitutes. Some others were hanged, or died of diseases. Some were killed by men.

The readers of Victorian novels were middle-class people and belonged to a middle-class society. They lived in a time of great social change. There had been the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, trade unions, a fear of revolution in the Victorian period, and diseases like cholera and typhoid. Many writers in the Victorian period were afraid of change. It was easy for men to blame women for the problems of the time. Middle-class readers lived in comfortable families, but there was also a lot of poverty. People starved and children had to work in factories and mines. Many women had to work as prostitutes, and middle-class men paid to have sex with them. So there are different stereotypes of women in the Victorian period. There is the 'Angel of the House', who looks after her children and goes to Church. This is the middle-class ideal., where religion and family life go very closely together. Religion was under attack in the Victorian period, and one reaction to this was to describe idealised family life as if it were a religious experience. But the reality for most women was very different. They had to work in factories or become prostitutes. Writers like George Elliot and Thomas Hardy criticised this state of things and wanted to make their readers think about fallen women more sympathetically. But they were restricted by their middle-class readers. In "Tess" Hardy only looks at Tess from the outside; he never writes about how she feels from the inside. And in "Adam Bede" George Elliot looks down on Hetty. She describes Hetty as 'vain' and silly.



In conclusion, it is true that fallen women are a familiar feature of Victorian fiction. Tess and Hetty are blamed for being poor; they are the victims of middle-class society. Because they are fallen women, they have to die at the end of the book. There are lots of fallen women in Victorian novels, and they all have to die because middle-class society will not let them live.



5 | *This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.*

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