

Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 9  
Issue 5 *March*

Article 5

---

March 1971

## Existential Failing in Tess of the D'Urbervilles

Robert D. Tarleck

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.5, March 1971, p.256-259

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## 256 Colby Library Quarterly

Hardy will be remembered. When the author's hidden patterns and deceptive art are revealed, the reader is pleasantly surprised but still only moderately satisfied with the poem. For Hardy uses metrical patterns and rhythms to ornament or adorn conceptual meaning or to provide a sensuous element that is too often extraneous to meaning. Much of the patterning is done for its own sake, almost as if for the private enjoyment of the author.



### EXISTENTIAL FAILING IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

By ROBERT D. TARLECK

TESS'S STABBING OF Alec is one of the most enigmatic gestures in all of Thomas Hardy's fiction. Arnold Kettle sees the murder as an inevitable act of self-sacrifice by a betrayed woman who is attempting to regain her self-respect.<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, on the other hand, emphasizes the mythological dimension of the act, seeing it as Tess's "heroic return through the 'door' into the folk fold, the fold of nature and instinct, the anonymous community."<sup>2</sup> And Lionel Johnson suggests that it is in obeisance to the law of nature, even though it violates social law.<sup>3</sup> Common to each of these interpretations is the view that Tess is the victim of circumstances external to herself, that she is chiefly a subject rather than an agent of destruction. Since an understanding of this act is crucial to any critical estimate of the novel, I think it worthwhile to examine Hardy's own comments on the matter. The year following initial publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy described the murder this way:

The murder that Tess commits is the hereditary quality to which I more than once allude, working out in this impoverished descendent of a once noble family. That is logical. And again, it is but a simple transcription of the obvious. Many women who have written to me have forgiven Tess because she expiated her offence on the scaffold. You ask me why Tess should not have gone off with Clare and 'lived happily ever after.' Do you not see that under any circumstances they were doomed to unhappiness? A sensitive man like Angel Clare could never have been happy with her. After the first few months he would inevi-

<sup>1</sup> *An Introduction to the English Novel* (New York, 1960), II, 53.

<sup>2</sup> *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1961), 209.

<sup>3</sup> *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1894), 250.

## Colby Library Quarterly 257

tably have thrown her failings in her face. He did not recoil from her after the murder, it is true. He was in love with her failings then, I suppose; he had not seen her for a long time; with the inconsistency of human nature he forgave the greater sin when he could not forgive the lesser, feeling perhaps that by her desperate act she had made some reparation. She had done exactly what . . . one of her nature under similar circumstances would have done in real life. It is led up to right through the story.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most informative part of this passage is Hardy's suggestion that "She had done exactly what . . . one of her nature under similar circumstances would have done in real life." In other words, the author believed Tess's behavior to be determined less by circumstances than by temperament and especially by what he called "the hereditary quality." I do not intend at this point to begin a lengthy examination of Hardy's views on heredity. But this much is clear: Hardy saw Tess's failure as the consequence of a passivity which she shares with John and Joan Durbeyfield, as well as with much of humanity. An important effect of the novel on the reader is a progressive awareness that Tess is, in essential matters, more like her parents than she is like her distant ancestors, the d'Urbervilles. Since her father believes that lineage alone should guarantee him a comfortable existence, and her mother is also a "waiter on Providence," it seems not unusual that Tess should employ self-pity to disguise her own shortcomings.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, my interpretation of Tess's murder of Alec as a passive gesture contradicts much of the criticism on the subject. Yet, given the ending of the novel, I believe my conclusion is consistent with the text. The most obvious point made by Tess's behavior following her murder of Alec is that she has been passive in the most destructive way possible; her act of rebellion is clearly intended to free her not only from a repressive dimension of her life but also from life itself and, more precisely, from her existential commitment to a universe in which an individual must exercise the freedom of choice available to him. Rather than confront the essential questions of her existence, Tess attempts to make Alec the scapegoat for her destruction, failing to recognize that it is she herself who insures the impermanence of her physical life with Angel, or

4 Raymond Blathwayt, "A Chat With the Author of *Tess*," *Black and White*, IV (August 27, 1892), 238.

5 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (New York, 1960), 41.

## 258 Colby Library Quarterly

with any man, for that matter. Because she ignores the possibility of choice and the possibility of defining her own physical and moral life, she is unable to realize the immense possibilities of her personality.

Ray Morrell notes that Hardy demonstrated the disastrous consequences of being either too little or too much concerned with time.<sup>6</sup> Tess's inability to exist within the limitations which time imposes on human life is another aspect of her existential failing. Ironically, she is at fault for being both overly concerned and insufficiently concerned with time. One of the convictions underlying Tess's murder of Alec, for instance, is that happiness is merely a momentary illusion. If she had not thus surrendered herself to despair Tess might well have severed her relationship with Alec in a manner which would have left her free to live with Angel Clare. Or if, as Hardy suggested, Angel were incapable of forgiving her intimacy with Alec, she would be free to find another man better suited to the nature of her personality.

In counterpoint to this oversensitivity to time, and perhaps a reaction to it, is Tess's desire to arrest time. This, also, is a technique for evading reality. Whenever Angel suggests that they should leave the mansion they had taken refuge in following the murder, Tess is curiously reluctant to act, though the possibility of reaching Southampton or London and then booking passage to the Continent is still before her. " 'Why should we put an end to all that's sweet and lovely!' she deprecated. 'All is trouble outside there; inside here content.' " There is an unmistakable parallel between Tess's peeping through the shutter chinks at the world outside, which she wants no part of, and an episode in Hardy's childhood. While lying on his back with a straw hat over his eyes, Hardy noticed that the sunlight penetrated the interstices of the straw and concluded that he did not want to grow up.<sup>7</sup> Like the young Hardy, Tess prefers to remain in her own unreal world, sheltered from sunlight, time, and the haunting awareness that her idyllic happiness with Angel is threatened by the pursuing officers.

The old woman who discovers the lovers in the mansion represents the inevitable penetration of reality into Tess's sheltered world. Her appearance is no more accidental than the

6 *The Will and the Way* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, 1965), 31-32.

7 Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1928), II, 15.

## Colby Library Quarterly 259

penetration of the sun through young Hardy's straw hat. Tess and Angel are therefore compelled to flee from the mansion only to stop at the remnants of a Druid temple where Tess insists on remaining. There she lays herself across what she believes is a sacrificial stone to await the arrival of the ritual priests, in this case the police officers, to complete the sacrifice. In her neurotic way, she wishes to be apprehended at this spot because she sees her stabbing of Alec as an essential self-sacrifice. In the final minutes of Tess's freedom it seems almost as if the death of Alec is incidental, as if he were a mere appendage or extension to her physical life which is really the intended victim of the murder. When the officers arrive, Tess is ready, almost eager, to surrender herself to them because she has embraced the Albigenian belief that sacrifice of bodily life is a short cut to eternal life.

The self-sacrificial mood evoked in the Stonehenge scene is reinforced by Tess's final request through which she gives Liza-lu, her own spiritual image, to her husband. Some readers have been disturbed by the ending of the novel, in which Angel dutifully takes Liza-lu as his wife. At first it seems too symmetrical, too much like the stock ending of a Hollywood production. But this is exactly the point Hardy wished to make: this final romantic gesture is intended to demonstrate in a most vivid manner the absurd unreality of Tess's self-sacrifice, and to demonstrate that self-sacrifice is no substitute for the exercise of choice. Tess's failure is a failure in existential commitment in the sense that it represents her refusal to confront reality in the most creative manner possible, and thus it is a denial of the rich possibilities of human existence.

