

A Probe into the Reasons for Tess's Tragic Fate and Her Salvation

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Abstract

This paper aims to reveal the reasons for Tess's tragic fate, labeled by her suffering and pain, from external and internal perspectives, pointing out that society, family and religion are elaborated as the external reasons and Tess's tragic flaw as the internal one. Furthermore, the measures for salvation are also analyzed, by which a conclusion is reached: only death can end all Tess's pains and suffering.

Keywords

Tess; Tragic fate; Reasons; Salvatio.

1. Introduction

As an "ache of modernism" writer, Hardy depicted Tess as a pure woman with tragic fate, which was characterized by the suffering and pain that Tess experienced in her life. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, suffering and pain are valuable. Man's body is to suffer, while spirit is to enjoy the sublime beyond it. In Nietzsche's eyes, a man's value lies in the suffering and pain that he experiences in life. Therefore, the significance of Tess's suffering and pain is thus seen. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1968:480-481)

Though death ultimately ends Tess's suffering and pain, the reasons that cause her tragic fate deserves a deeper thinking.

2. External Reasons

The social context cannot be neglected in this respect. During the process of social transformation from agricultural to industrial, many peasants went bankrupt, including Tess's family. The economic transformation not only caused the decline of people's material life, but it also changed the ideology and way of thinking.

In the Victorian period, women were supposed to be the "angels in the house", and they were excessively restricted by the social norms. In other words, the Victorian society did not tolerate a lady who acted against the conventional code of conduct. When Tess is seduced by Alec, losing her virginity before marriage, she is determined to be ostracized by the strict Victorian society. On the Victorian social ladder, the lower-class people are not usually accepted by the upper classes. Tess belongs to the lower class, while Clare family belongs to the upper middle class. The gap between the classes is deeply rooted in the mind of Clare family. Therefore, although Angel Clare doesn't mind Tess's being from a lower class, the conflict between the two classes is still the impediment for her to step in, which finally causes Tess's downfall step by step.

From the point of view of religion, a Christian family cannot accept an "impure" lady. What's more, Clare's family is religious. According to Christianity, Tess is sinful. Although Angel is open-minded and differs from the mainstream ideology of the time, he is more or less affected by his religion-rooted family in which he is brought up. Thus, when he gets to know Tess's past, he can do nothing else, but escape, leaving Tess to suffer in her life. Therefore, no matter whether she is considered by the social mainstream ideology, or by the religious standard, Tess cannot be accepted by Angel due to her past.

From the point of view family, Tess's painful life is partially made by her parents. According to Hardy, what the children are, depends on their parents. "All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship--entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence." (p. 24). For Tess, Family is not a shelter of safety and warmth, but a burden.

Tess is the oldest child of the uneducated peasants John and Joan Durbeyfield. Her family lives in an awkward situation, especially after his father gets the news that he may be the descendent of noble blood. Tortured by the inner guilt over the death of the horse, which is one of the main economic assets of the family, Tess accepts her parents' requirement to visit Mrs. d'Urbervilles to "claim kin", which leads Tess on the path of suffering. As a matter of fact, the real intention of her parents is to gain wealth without working and to satisfy their own vanity.

At the time, women occupied a lower position in the society. The way to change their social status was mainly by marriage. Thus, her mother always urges her to marry "some rich man" to change the family's awkward situation, without being concerned at all about Tess's own affections. Her mother even says directly to Tess: "Why didn't ye think of doing some good for your family instead o' thinking only of yourself?" (P103). Moreover, under the influence of their parents, the other children in the family also believe that their family is going to become rich by Tess's marriage. From this viewpoint, it can be concluded that her parents' aspiration to climb up the social ladder and their living at leisure leads Tess on the path of suffering and misery. From the time Tess steps in Mrs. d'Urbervilles family, her life is doomed.

To support her family, she is forced to accept the job as a poultry keeper on the estate. Tess dislikes Alec but endures his persistent unwanted attention in exchange for the money that the family lost with the death of the horse. If it hadn't been for this job, her whole life might have been different. To support her family, she has to work on the farm where she is treated badly. Also, to support her family, against her own will, she is forced to live in the out-of-wedlock relationship with Alec, which causes her death. What her family offers is not love and support, but pain and burden.

What has been mentioned above are external reasons for the origin of Tess's suffering and pains. In addition, the internal reasons of her suffering are also addressed in this paper. Tess's own tragic flaw also contributes to her suffering.

3. Internal Reasons

Without any doubt, Tess fights against all the hardships and setbacks that life bring on her. However, her own character does not allow her rebellion a full play. She knows her parents value too much noble blood, but she doesn't do her best to warn them that this is wrong. She knows that her mother cannot get her father back from the bar, but she doesn't go there on her own at the very beginning. If her father hadn't been drunk that night, she might have not gone to send the hives and the horse might have not died. Moreover, there hadn't been a need for her to work as a poultry keeper, and she might have not been raped by Alec. There might have been thousand possibilities, but her reality cannot be changed any more for her own weakness.

Lack of persistence is the vital tragic flaw of her character. She accepts her parents' suggestion to "claim kin" without adhering to her own will. She is seduced by Alec, for she doesn't fight back persistently. If she had persisted to refuse Alec's pursuit, she might have not died for killing him. She goes to Mr. Clare's family, but self-abasement makes her stop at the door. That she doesn't wait for Angel persistently makes her miss the chance of reuniting with Angel. She is together with Alec, but not persistently due to her urge to kill him. Ultimately she murders him, which leads to her death at the end. If she had been persistent in any of the above steps in her life, there might have been a different ending.

In most cases, Tess starts with rebellion, but ends with compromise. Her lack of persistence prevents her from giving her rebellion a full play. I don't deny that she is forced to make her choice in a dilemma, but her tragic flaw contributes, at least partially, to her choices.

4. Ways of Salvation

Although life is not fair to Tess, she does not give in. She tries to save herself and her family from the bad situation. Her different measures for salvation can be traced in the novel.

The first measure is to work hard. During her whole life, Tess works hard to support both her family and herself. When her father is drunk, Tess drives the wagon overnight to send the hives. When the whole family has no income, Tess goes to Mrs. d'Urbervilles to work as a poultry keeper. She also works as a milkmaid, and a laborer on different farms. Tess fights against suffering, especially the economic downfall on her own. However, it turns out that it is not helpful. Although the burden of life doesn't beat her down, the burden on her spirit caused by it, does.

The second measure that she takes is "marriage". However, "marriage" here mainly denotes Tess's out-of-wedlock relationship with Alec. The general view at the time was that women could climb up the social ladder only through marriage. However, it seems that Tess doesn't agree much with that. Notwithstanding, the harsh reality makes Tess yield. When her family is forced to move out, she has to choose to be together with Alec to deal with her family's poor situation. In this way, she receives the house so that her mother and her siblings can live in it.

The third measure she takes is escape. When she is spiritually hurt, Tess also chooses to escape to heal her emotional wound. When she is pregnant, she hides in the room. When she kills Alec, she also chooses to run away to escape from her arrest. When Angel gets to know Tess's past, he escapes to Brazil. Escaping is by no means a good method to deal with the problems, but it provides Tess with temporary serenity.

Last but not least is sacrifice as a measure for salvation. Death is the last measure to end all her troubles and suffering. What's more, it is also the only way to relieve all the pains in her life. When Tess is on the road to Flintcombe-Ashe, she kills some wounded pheasants to end their suffering. This already foreshadows the end of Tess. When Tess's child dies, she thinks of it as a relief. The night before she is arrested by the police, she willingly lies down on a stone, seemingly like a human sacrificial offering. When she wakes up, peace comes on her face, because she knows that all her sufferings is brought to an end.

5. Conclusion

During her entire life, Tess confronts with suffering and pains, either physical or spiritual. The pain she suffers comes from different sources. From the external point of view, the pain comes from the confinement imposed on her by the society, family and religion. From the internal point of view, Tess has her own tragic flaw. Her lack of perseverance always makes her missing one step on the way that she wants to pursue. Facing suffering, Tess fights back bravely. Different measures are taken by her to deal with different problems. However, although she has reconciled and made some unwilling choices due to her dilemma, it is proved at the end that only death can end all her pains and suffering.

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