

CLASS CONFLICT AND CHANCE IN THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*: A MARXIST INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

This study sets a Marxist lens to explore class conflict and the interplay of fate in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The paper examines Tess's representation as a victim of the Victorian class system and sexual oppression, investigating whether her tragic downfall results from chance or her subordinate social position. The evolving social statuses of central characters like Tess, Angel, and Alec add various dimensions to the narrative tension of the book. By utilizing the qualitative-descriptive method and Marxist concepts of class conflict and capitalism, the analysis accentuates how economic stability, or the lack thereof, intricately influences personal lives and relationships in Victorian society. Tess exemplifies the oppressed working class, while oppressors like Alec and Angel exercise their predatory dominance over her. Moreover, the research article aims to highlight the pivotal role of fate and chance in shaping Tess's destiny, with coincidences and unexpected events intensifying her misfortunes. Ultimately, the research paper posits that economic fragility not only subjugates the working class but can also precipitate the downfall of the oppressors themselves.

Keywords: chance, class conflict, Marxist lens, Tess, Victorian society

Introduction

Class conflict is a cause of tension in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). Tess, Alec, and Angel are Hardy's representatives of the different social classes. Hardy's presentation of Tess as a victim of the Victorian class system and sexual oppression is noteworthy. In addition, fate plays a significant role in Hardy's fiction. The notable point is whether the destruction of Tess is a matter of chance, or if it is her subordinate class position in relation to both Angel and Alec that caused the tragedy. Another aspect of the novel is the changing social positions of the central characters. Tess Durbeyfield, a girl from a working-class family, is said to be descended from a noble family called the "d'Urbervilles." Her marriage to Angel makes her social position slightly more confusing. Angel, a representative of the clergy class, is determined to be a farmer instead of joining the ministry along with his father and brothers. In addition, Alec, the representative of the merchant class, ends up being a missionary preacher. The



narrative tension in *Tess* becomes more intensified because of the transforming social positions of the central characters. However, “class struggle,” “capitalism,” and the emergence of the new ruling class are some of the central ideas explored in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. This study attempts to analyse Hardy’s representation of class conflict in the novel in association with Marx and Engels’s ideas of “class struggle” and “capitalism.”

The first argument of this study is that Tess is oppressed as a result of the Victorian class system and “social construction” (Bukhari, Asgher, & Parveen, 2021, p. 37). The impact of capital and the attitude of the capitalists towards the other part of society, such as the working class, who possess neither capital nor land, created class struggle. At the macro level, the class struggle is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but the impact of this struggle is also visible even at the micro level. This means that economic stability or instability plays a part in the personal lives and relationships of Victorian people. In this economic system, the financially insolvent class is oppressed by the solvent class, and Tess is a representative of the oppressed class. The second argument focuses on the role of fate and chance. Hardy’s feelings about capitalist society and oppression in *Tess* are not raised directly. Instead, fate and chance are his narrative devices that weave events where the working class is the victim of chance. On the other hand, the capitalist class keeps showing its “predatory” nature. The capitalist class subjugates the working class because, with the guidance of intellectuals, the working class is a potential threat to the capitalists.

Method

This research paper was a qualitative-descriptive study based on a close analysis of Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Articles, books, and videos related to this topic were some of the secondary sources of this study. Marx and Engels’s concepts of “class struggle” and “capitalism” were studied to provide a theoretical dimension in this paper. The relationship between the oppressed class and the oppressors, and the social and economic dynamics related to this “class status” (Peng & Yan, 2018, p. 71), were visible in Hardy’s *Tess*. The Marxist ideas mentioned here were used to create a thread between facts and fiction concerning class oppression in the Victorian age. In addition, the socio-scientific aspects of the oppressed-oppressor relationships were evaluated in this research paper. As the narrative of *Tess* centered around a female character who had been “suffering terribly” (Saeed, Shaikh, John, & Haider, 2020, p. 55), readers could not overlook feminist ideas in the novel. However, feminism was not directly included in this study, but women’s positions in a capitalist society were incorporated.

Graham Handley, in *Critical Studies: Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1991), noted that both Alec and Angel were “predators.” Alec was a predator of flesh, and Angel was a predator of spirit (p. 47). Speaking of Tess’s relations with Alec and Angel, Handley noted, “If each man is seen in contrast to the other, both are seen in contrast to Tess” (p. 47). According to Handley, Angel was supposed to be a “protector and instructor” for Tess, but Angel’s inconsistency of “the ideal and its practice” was noted as his fault, which was responsible for Tess’s suffering (pp. 49-50). Handley noted the interrelation between the seduction of Tess and her economic condition: the daughter of a peddler (a representative of the working

class) was seduced by “the son of a retired manufacturer” (a representative of the merchant class) (p. 19). Alec, in the progress of the plot of *Tess*, repeatedly exploits Tess because of her poor economic condition (p. 52). Handley pointed out the vulnerability of women and the insecurity inherent in “casual labor” (p. 88). He mentioned the transformation of social and economic positions for Tess, Alec, and Angel in the chapter “The Past and the Present” (pp. 102-104). Tess’s ancestral identity, revealed by Parson Tringham (the vicar of Marlott), created a thread of interrelated incidents. This revelation was a matter of chance, eventually connecting with Tess’s social position and her sufferings.

Moreover, Handley gave an account of the chances and coincidences and the role of luck, which shaped Tess’s destiny. He noted that “minor fateful occurrences qualify the departure and the arrival” (p. 100), emphasizing the point that Hardy was a fatalist. Another author, Kalyannath Dutta, in *A Short History of English Literature* (2010), had a chapter on “Literature of the Victorian Age” (pp. 381-458). He noted the expansion of industrial and commercial enterprises in Victorian England and mentioned the exploitation of the working class by these enterprises. The price of labor in that era was cheap; the explicit focus of the industrial and commercial enterprise was to generate profit for the capitalist class. Speaking of Hardy, Dutta mentioned that Hardy’s fiction was about the “tragic pessimism” (p. 405) of characters. The role of “chances and coincidences” in Hardy’s fiction was repeatedly pointed out by Dutta. Furthermore, he noted that “Hardy’s tragic vision of life is his perception of a mighty force, shaping and directing human fortune” (p. 407). In his brief section about *Tess*, Dutta mentioned the role of chance in leading Tess’s family to know about their noble ancestry, which raised their hopes for a better future. According to Dutta, this revelation led Tess’s parents to send her to Alec’s house, which unfortunately led Tess to destruction. Dutta’s notes on the Victorian age were useful. However, the problem with his representation of Hardy was that Dutta explicitly pointed out the role of fate and chance in Hardy’s fiction. He overlooked Hardy’s representation of the different classes and the exploitation inherent in the class system. He noted Hardy’s storytelling expertise, which “tells the story of human life as well as [the] human mind” (p. 408). However, Dutta ignored Hardy’s depiction of class consciousness and capitalism as elements of narrative tension.

Shadab Fatima, however, attempted to interpret *Tess* concerning the class system in “Economic Realities, Classicism, and Exploitation: A Marxist Study of Thomas Hardy’s Novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*” (2016). According to Fatima, Tess’s misfortune was primarily influenced by her poor socio-economic conditions and her submissive nature of “resistance and compromise” (Chen & Shi, 2020, p. 21). She noted that Alec’s sense of economic superiority led him to seduce Tess. In the later part of the novel, Alec sheltered Tess’s family, but this showed another kind of exploitation, as it led Tess to once again surrender to her exploiter. The dominant position of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat was taken into account by Fatima. She mentioned that Tess was “a commodity for her family” (p. 119) and was sent to Alec’s house by her parents because they believed that it would bring them economic stability. Fatima criticized Tess’s mother for treating Tess as a commodity. Fatima mentioned the role of prosperous marriages as a vehicle of economic stability for Victorian women, but Tess’s

marriage to Angel was not a prosperous one. Fatima criticized Angel because she believed love was not the reason behind the marriage of Angel and Tess.

Angel found Tess a commodity as well. Tess could serve as a farmer's wife; thus, she was useful to Angel. According to Fatima, Tess was seen as a commodity by her family, her husband, and her exploiter (Alec). So, she had been repeatedly betrayed by those who should have protected her vulnerable position as a woman without financial stability. The issue with Fatima's framework was that, unlike Dutta, she focused on capitalism and class exploitation, ignoring the role of fate and chance. Hardy's narration in *Tess* carried class conflict and chance in a synchronized manner, which Fatima overlooked in her article. Another scholar, Md. Murshikul Alam, noted in "Hardy's Social Concern in *Tess*" (2010) that Tess's exploitation by Alec was an exploitation of the weaker class in the economic structure. He pointed out the socio-economic transformation that occurred in the Victorian age when capitalism engulfed agrarian society. Karl Marx provided a model of "base and superstructure." Alam took that into account and explained how the bourgeoisie class had power over both the base and the superstructure of society. The role of the legal system in the exploitation of the working class was mentioned by Alam. Moreover, he mentioned the socio-economic and cultural forces of the society (the ones portrayed by Hardy in *Tess*) as "negative and destructive" (p. 83). Alam described Tess as a "social alien" (p. 84) who did not have a safe position in her family or the workplace. Angel's social superiority over Tess was noted in Alam's article, and Tess's marriage to Angel was mentioned as a curse for her. Instead of securing Tess's social stability, this marriage increased her suffering. Alam claimed, "religion as a means of social control," which, instead of forming social harmony, served "the purposes of the ruling class" (pp. 87-88). All of these social institutions (marriage, law, and religion) were favorable to the bourgeoisie, so the working class could not overcome the vicious circle of exploitation.

Gilmartin (2016) and Wadhwani (2024), in a lecture video on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, mentioned that many events came together like coincidences and social influences to create suffering in Tess's life. She mentioned Tess's letter of confession to Angel, which was lost. This was responsible for the unsuccessful marriage between Tess and Angel. She pointed out Parson Tringham's revelation of the noble lineage of Jack Durbeyfield (Tess's father) as one of the coincidences that shaped Tess's misfortune in the progress of the novel. Then, Gilmartin talked about the death of Tess's horse, Prince. This accident was mentioned as the first sign of blood and violence by Gilmartin. Furthermore, she mentioned that Hardy never cleared Tess's position in the seduction scene, but Gilmartin indicated the seduction scene as a rape. A representative of the merchant class, Alec (Gilmartin called him a fake d'Urberville, his father simply changed the family name from Stokes to d'Urberville), a son of a wealthy tradesman, used his power to exploit a working-class woman, Tess.

Furthermore, the issue of gender was raised by Gilmartin, which pointed towards Angel's double standards where the chastity of a woman was questioned but the chastity of a man remained unquestioned. These mentioned events were put together in a thread that shaped Tess's fate, said Gilmartin. In a critical web blog article, "My Fictional Nemesis: Why Thomas Hardy's Angel Clare Is the Worst" (2017), Rachel Vorona Cote explicitly blamed Angel for the misfortune of

Tess. Angel, after knowing Tess's past with Alec, the predator of "sexual desire" (Trotter, 2020, p. 21), could not forgive her. Cote wrote Angel's reaction as "emotional violence" (par. 7), whereas Alec's violence was a physical one for Tess. She noted Angel as a "fraudulent Nice Guy" (par. 11), who claimed himself as a man of conscience but could not prove his consistency of character. Angel was self-conscious of his class superiority over Tess, and his reluctance towards her proved his superiority complex. Cote mentioned Angel's patriarchal position as Angel thought of him as a "second man" (par. 12) in Tess's life. Angel's attempt to reconcile with Tess was noted as an act of "self-pity" (par. 13) by Cote. She blamed Angel as a faithless benefactor, whose cold behavior toward Tess led "her to the scaffold" (par. 16). Cote's reaction to Angel's character was justified as in the previously noted books and articles Handley, Fatima, and Alam also noted Angel's reluctance towards Tess.

To sum up, to conduct this research with the primary text, some other relevant papers were scrutinized. The study looked into the books written by Graham Handley and Kalyannath Dutta to gain a deeper perspective on Victorian class conflict. To add to the in-depth analytical approach, this paper also incorporated scholarly research papers by Shadab Fatima and Md. Murshikul Alam. Moreover, to add a different dynamic, various literary blogs and papers were surveyed and critically evaluated. Many videos on the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* were also infused into the research (Kalin, 2016; The Library, 2023). To be precise, this research was a blend of library research and digitally available documentaries.

Findings and Discussion

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* exhibited an intersection of capitalism, class conflict, and the role of fate in shaping the destiny of its protagonist. Tess was struggling for "status and self-identity" (Zhang & Li, 2020, p. 988). The narrative described the background of Victorian society, where "economic problems" (Basavaraju, 2023, p. 2) influenced familial relationships and social standards. Tess's journey had been manifested by exploitation, abandonment, and the relentless grasp of fate. The paper found that capitalism impacted Tess as "an innocent victim" (Badinjk, 2021, p. 1354), with economic vulnerability shaping her relationships. Angel Clare's double standards exposed gender superiority, exploiting Tess's economic, "physical and mental" (Nuruzzaman, 2017, p. 153) struggles. The novel accentuated Tess as a victim of preordained fate, contrasting her tragic journey with the relatively unscathed destiny of her male counterpart, Angel. Here, the readers got the sense that Hardy represented Tess, the working-class woman, as a victim of both fate and the class system, and her troublesome life was preordained. On the other hand, Alec and Angel, representatives of the wealthy class, did not become victims of chance. Alec was the victim of his choices, as his exploitative nature was the reason behind his destruction. Angel did not face any serious consequences in the novel, except for mental trauma. However, this trauma was not a matter of chance but a result of Angel's double standards.

If the readers looked at Hardy's *Tess* from a Marxist point of view, there were several noteworthy issues. The novel was attuned to Marxist ideas of class conflict, the base and superstructure, and the commodification of individuals

within a capitalist society. The Marxist framework theorized that the economic base encompassed the means of production. Essentially, the means of production shaped the superstructure, including culture, ideology, and social institutions. In the context of *Tess*, the base was represented by the agrarian economy. The capitalist structures that governed the base dictated the lives of economically fragile characters like Tess and her family.

Tess's journey was marked by unceasing exploitation, first by Alec d'Urberville and later by Angel Clare, each representing different aspects of bourgeois power and hypocrisy. Alec's exploitation of Tess was a direct exercise of economic power, where his wealth and social standing allowed him to dominate and abuse her. This showed the Marxist concept of the bourgeoisie's control over the proletariat through economic means. In contrast, Angel's abandonment of Tess after learning about her past exposed the deeper, often unconscious, class prejudices that persisted within the superstructure. Angel's initial attraction to Tess's simplicity and beauty turned into a shattering rejection once she revealed her victimization by Alec. This reflected the bourgeois hypocrisy in exploiting the proletariat while upholding class barriers. Tess's ultimate downfall proved the inescapability of class oppression and the fatal consequences of a society structured around economic disparities. Thus, Hardy's narrative echoed the capitalist system's exploitation and dehumanization of economically vulnerable individuals.

Capitalism and class conflict in Tess

Some incidents in *Tess* that bring class struggle, capitalism, and oppression related to the economic system can be taken into account. First of all, Jack Durbeyfield's transition after the revelation of his noble ancestry is surprising. After knowing about his noble ancestry, he starts behaving like a king. He stops working and starts drinking as if he were a wealthy person, but his attitude makes the economic condition of the family more miserable. Here, the readers can get a vibe of the attitude of the bourgeoisie. Just the name of a noble family has transformed Jack Durbeyfield into Sir John d'Urberville and utterly changed his attitude towards his family and society. That is, too, when he does not own any excess "property"; it is only his infatuation with noble blood that makes him proud. His sense of pride is notable in his conversation with a young lad: "Sir John d'Urberville—that's who I am..." (p. 17). Then, another incident of class consciousness is seen in "The May-Day Dance" (p. 19). Angel, on that "The May-Day," dances with some village girls, whereas his elder brothers try to stop him from doing so. Angel's brothers are aware of their social class, but Angel seems to be different from them. So, class consciousness has different definitions within a single family.

Hereafter, Tess's mother, Joan, has an attitude towards Tess that leads her to send Tess to the house of their distant relatives (in reality, they are not relatives) because of their poor economic condition. Joan aspires that the d'Urbervilles will arrange a good suitor for Tess. That marriage will bring economic stability to Tess's life and secure their family a better life as well. This shows Tess is a means of economic development for her family. So, in her own family, she has been treated as a commodity. From this scenario, the readers will have an idea that the Victorian capitalistic society created a situation where some people are

marginalized to the extent that they are treating their family members as commodities. The readers may blame Joan for her attitude towards Tess. However, it is a matter of fact that in that era, industrialization and capital related to it brought all types of properties under the power of the bourgeoisie, and the agrarian society was under the control of the petty bourgeoisie. Families like Tess's, the representatives of the proletariat, who live by manual work and physical labor, are left with no option but to work for minimal wages for the capitalists. Tess works for Alec's family, and later Tess, Retty, Marian, and Izz work for Angel at the Talbothays. In the social setting where Tess and her family live, the relationships between men and women, and even the relationships between family members, are controlled by external factors such as capital, because in that society the capitalists accumulate "private property" (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 22), which controls most of the social norms. Tess's family hopes Mrs. d'Urberville will ease their family situation, but the opposite happens. Alec, by exploiting Tess, makes the family more miserable.

Tess's relationship with Angel also shows an inner conflict that goes on in her mind. Angel presents himself in such a way that he does not like noble families and the wealth related to them, though he is a son of Reverend Clare, a wealthy clergyman. Angel refuses to marry Mercy Chant because of this. Tess faces two kinds of conflicts. One is her financial position, which differs from Angel's, but Angel's distaste towards wealthy families eases Tess's position. Another conflict is Angel's distaste for noble blood. Tess knows about her noble ancestors; thus, she finds it difficult to express her feelings towards Angel. Tess is stuck between poor economic conditions and her noble blood, which creates a conflicting class identity. Her secret of exploitation by Alec and having a baby (Sorrow, who dies soon after his birth) makes her situation more problematic in confronting Angel.

However, Angel's reaction after Tess discloses her identity as a d'Urberville does not create any problem in their relationship. Angel's first sign of duality is visible in this act. His distaste for noble families is not a truth; instead, Tess's poor economic condition is favorable for Angel in the sense that she can be a perfect farmer's wife. So, his idea of using Tess as a commodity is visible, and as Tess is beautiful as well, she becomes potentially a perfect wife for Angel. If he had married Mercy, she could not have been a perfect wife as she would not have helped him in his farming and dairy business. So, Angel's character is like that of the petty bourgeoisie. After the marriage, Angel confesses to having had a relationship with an elderly lady when he was in London. Tess also confesses about her past with Alec. Tess forgives Angel for his past deed, but Angel instantly becomes reluctant to forgive Tess. Angel says, "O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another" (p. 259). Then, Angel leaves Tess alone and departs for Brazil. This is a significant sign of Angel's double standard, which shows the gender superiority of men. However, had Angel married Mercy instead of Tess, he could not have reacted in this manner because Mercy is from a wealthy family. Angel shows he does not care about family background or wealth, but his reluctance and abandonment of Tess do not align with his words. Subconsciously, he is aware that a poor girl like Tess can hardly object to his decision. So, both male dominance and pride in family wealth are visible in Angel's reaction.

Tess's economic condition is once again the cause of misery because of the abandonment by Angel. She takes a job on a farm, but the wage she gets from the owner of the farm shows another example of class oppression. Her situation calls for "deep sympathy" (Memeti, 2018, p. 2379), as it becomes worse after her father's death, leaving her family without shelter. The eviction of the Durbeyfield family from their home shows a discrepancy in Victorian property law. Hereafter, Alec shelters Tess's family. That means the economic instability once again turns Tess into Alec's prey. Before the death of her father, Alec tells Tess: "Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man's wife, you are mine" (p. 373). Tess denies his proposal, but after her father's death, she is left with no option. That is how Alec's capital becomes his tool of exploitation.

The contribution of fate and chance in Tess's destruction

Fate and chance shape several conflicts in Hardy's narrative to present Tess's "multifaceted identity" (López-Narváez, 2021, p. 177). The first point to focus on is the elevation and degradation of identities. Alec's father, Simon, changes the family name from Stokes to d'Urberville. This creates confusion in Tess's family, leading them to believe that Mrs. d'Urberville is their relative. If Simon had adopted any other noble name instead of d'Urberville, that confusion would not have occurred. Simon's adopting the name "d'Urberville" is a coincidence. However, capital plays a significant role here in the conversion of identities. Simon Stokes's capital ensures him the chance to adopt a noble identity; on the other hand, the poor economic condition of Tess's family snatches their ancestral identity. Thus, capital creates and distorts identities, and the coincidence of the name change shapes Tess's destiny.

Another coincidence occurs in the initial part of the novel with the death of Tess's family horse, Prince, who dies unnaturally while Tess is riding him. Tess's family never blames her for this accident, but Tess herself feels guilty. The family tries to persuade her to go and meet Mrs. d'Urberville, but Tess keeps denying it. However, after the death of Prince, Tess agrees to meet Mrs. d'Urberville. The death of Prince is significant because this horse was an important part of "the haggling business" (Hardy, p. 44). Therefore, Prince was economically essential to Tess's family. The horse's death is a matter of chance that leads Tess to Alec's house.

After that, Tess's lost confession letter is another coincidence that results in her unfortunate marriage with Angel. That bad marriage leaves her with no option but to take a job on a less prosperous farm, where class conflict is visible between the owner of that farm and the people working there, Tess being one of those workers. If the letter had not been lost, the relationship between Tess and Angel could have been different. In that case, Tess could have worked at the Talbothays and avoided being further exploited. Another irony is that, even when Tess's mother is sick, it is her father who dies unexpectedly. "Yes; the Durbeyfield couple had changed places; the dying one was out of danger, and the indisposed one was dead" (p. 394). This incident seems preordained, leaving Tess with no option but to take Alec's help for her family's survival. We are not told about the later relationship between Alec and Tess. However, Angel, an example of "rigid inflexibility" (Qureshi, 2021, p. 1), then arrives in Tess's life once again, and

Tess, because of a “natural instinct” (Benyoucef, 2021, p. 61), kills Alec to reunite with Angel. Unfortunately, Tess is executed for murdering Alec. Hardy writes, “‘Justice’ was done, and the president of the Immortals, in Æschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess” (p. 446).

Conclusion

In Thomas Hardy’s *Tess*, the readers find some contending classes, the rise of some new classes like Alec’s family—the class that changes their identity and adopts a new one—and new conditions of oppression where both Alec and Angel create different types of traumas for poor Tess. Those who have private properties oppress the girl whose family does not hold any excess property, one sexually and another mentally. Here, possession of private property gives a class the power to marginalize property-less people. Marx and Engels’s proposal for the abolition of private property shows a promise of elimination of class conflict. However, that was not applicable in Victorian England, where machine and industrial domination were in triumphant march. Though Hardy’s *Tess* does not contain that industrial setting, oppression created by the possessors of capital is visible. In *Tess*, only the poor Tess becomes the victim of chance. The readers may find the destructive coincidences in the novel only happen to this poor representative of Hardy. It seems that the rich characters are immune from the stroke of chance. The readers may also note that the coincidences that happen to Tess make her economic condition more unstable. Her unstable economic situation and suppression by men who are economically superior to her make her fragile. This fragility causes the loss of her rationality; thus, she kills Alec. So, the economic fragility is not only problematic for the oppressed class, it can also bring destruction to the oppressors.

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