The Tragedy of Tess Durbeyfield

Critics are mainly agreed that Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a tragedy, but they are not agreed about what makes it tragic or what kind of tragedy it is. Lionel Johnson, the earliest serious critic of Hardy, described the novel as a "long tragedy, upon the striving of that modern spirit, among the ancient Wessex places." David Cecil, on the other hand, sees little that is "modern" in Hardy and affirms that his tragedy is "village tragedy, composed of the drama of broken love and wronged girls, the feuds and the hangings which filled his early memories." Specifically, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is simply a "folk-tale tragedy." More recently, Ted R. Spivey has related this and other Hardy novels neither to the strivings of modernity nor to the folk, but to certain specifically literary trends in the nineteenth century. "Tragedy for Hardy is the defeat of the romantic hero's desire to reach a higher spiritual state." Hardy's tragic figures are "romantic heroes" in the line of Manfred, Faust, Prometheus, and Heathcliff, and Tess Durbeyfield belongs in this company because of her "Shelleyan" capacity for exaltation.

If we follow Professor Frye in searching for the "source of the tragic effect" in the "tragic mythos" or "plot structure," we get still another view of the novel. We find that the fundamental plot is that of the revenge story. Alec wrongs Tess, Tess suffers, Tess kills Alec. The novel has in Frye's terms, the "binary structure" characteristic of tragedy (stroke and counterstroke, as in the *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*). This view is akin to the "folk-tale tragedy" view in stressing the relations of Tess and Alec. The complicated story of Tess and Angel Clare must be seen as merely a part of the suffering Alec's wrong makes Tess undergo; it results inevitably from the original wrong and leads inevitably to the final murder. This is partly true; the revenge-story view puts needed emphasis on the heroic side of Tess's character. It calls attention to the freedom and courage of her actions, and particularly to the murder of Alec as an act of defiance and protest. It reminds us of what we can easily overlook in our concentration upon Tess the victim: that she is, as David

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Cecil says, a figure out of “epic or tragedy” in much that she does. Yet the shortcoming of this view, and of the folk-tale view also, is that it leaves out of account virtually the whole middle of the novel. It ignores Tess’s attempt to re-establish her life after the fall, all the months at Talbothays and at Flintcomb-Ash, and her love for Angel Clare. It emphasizes the folk-tale motif of revenge, in which Tess displays little or no interest until the very last chapters. It is true, in Dorothy Van Ghent’s words, that the stabbing of Alec is Tess’s “heroic return” to the realm of “nature and instinct,” but we must not forget that most of Tess’s life is spent in another.

What gives the novel its tragic quality, I believe, is not the involvement of Tess’s fine spirit in a degrading story of seduction and revenge. Rather, it is the meaningfulness of her life considered as the story of a victim of society, a scapegoat, a martyr. Or, distinguishing these, the story of a scapegoat rather than a martyr since Tess does not actively seek the end that comes to her and does not deliberately sacrifice herself in the name of a higher good (though this motive does actually come into play in the last eight or nine chapters.) In considering Tess of the D’Urbervilles a scapegoat tragedy I have in mind the following pattern: (1) the society in which Tess suffers and dies is “sick” with evil; it worships the false idol of chastity; it is committed to a set of attitudes toward the “fallen” woman and toward sexuality in general which are unnatural and harmful in the extreme, contrary to nature and to the spirit of Christianity alike; (2) Tess’s sufferings, which arise in and are caused by this social context, are at the very center of attention, and the novel is to a great extent simply the story of her suffering; (3) there are no villains, no really evil characters—Alec and Angel, who between them destroy Tess, are merely mediators of attitudes, habits, and values current in their society; (4) Tess’s suffering produces a good—if not the immediate regeneration of society, at least the regeneration of Angel Clare, who spoke and acted for the conventions of society and who is said to be a “sample product of the last five-and-twenty years.” Though Tess of the D’Urbervilles is essentially the tragedy of a victim or scapegoat, this does not mean that the central figure is merely weak and helpless. On the contrary, though Tess’s circumstances make her a

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5 Cecil, p. 36.
7 Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, ed. William E. Buckler (Boston, 1960), p. 235. The text is that of the Wessex edition of 1912. All subsequent references will appear in the body of the essay.
victim, her nature is fine, courageous, and heroic. Hence, the tragic, not the pathetic, effect of the whole.\(^8\)

Precisely because Hardy was writing a deliberately controversial and polemical book—one which attacked some of the "merely vocal formulæ of society" as he said in his Preface of 1892—it was not necessary for him to belabor the topical aspect of the novel or to document for posterity the kind of social evil he was writing against. The moral values and assumptions in the background of the action would be clear and familiar to his readers.\(^8\) What we get along these lines therefore is not realistic documentation of the moral condition of contemporary society but rather a cluster of hints and suggestions, a set of individually striking symbols. One of the most sinister of these is the Calvinist sign-painter whom Tess meets in Chapter XII. The sternness and fanaticism of the man, the fearfulness of the Biblical mottoes he paints (Thy Damnation Slumbereth Not, Thou Shalt Not Commit ———), frighten and appall Tess, yet he is nothing more than an embodiment of the essential spirit of the society they both belong to. He represents the harsh, uncompromising, Old Testament morality which, in various forms, plagues Tess throughout the novel. Another symbolic figure is Farmer Groby, who appears and reappears to insult and revile Tess, and who is almost beaten up by Angel. His attitude toward the fallen woman, mixed as it appears to be with a strong element of sexual desire for her, is typical, Hardy implies, of the kind of treatment, at once abusive and hypocritical, the fallen woman can expect to receive in this supposedly Christian society. The same social ethos which produces these figures also produces the itinerant fundamentalist preachers whose company Alec joins for a time. These figures with their narrow, conventional notions of sin and damnation, and their vivid visions of hell-fire, are apparently familiar ones in the world Hardy describes, accurate indices of its mistaken values and beliefs. And Angel's brothers are no better; possessed of holy orders, the sons of a clergyman, they are unpleasant snobs without a jot of Christian compassion or moral understanding—yet they are representatives in the novel of the Church and of Cambridge. These and other evidences of the harsh, hypocritical, and brutal "morality" of Tess's society lie behind, condition, and support Angel's treatment of Tess. They point to its ultimate cause, the ethos of the period.

\(^8\) For a development of this distinction, see Francis E. Sparshott, *The Structure of Aesthetics* (Toronto, 1963), p. 160 ff.

\(^9\) One assumption, that sex was evil and, as a topic of conversation or knowledge, forbidden, was challenged by Hardy and others in a symposium on "The Tree of Knowledge" in *The New Review* (June, 1894).
It need hardly be said that Tess’s suffering is strongly emphasized. Nearly half the novel is devoted to describing the instances of rejection, ostracism, misfortune, and hard times related to her “sin” (roughly, phase two and phases five through seven). Tess is a scapegoat because she alone suffers for what many other girls have gotten away with through compromise or secrecy. Her “sin” is a commonplace one, a “well-known catastrophe” Hardy calls it in the Preface, yet she is made to suffer and die for it. Ironically, it is the very fineness of Tess’s nature that brings this suffering upon her. As her mother says, only Tess (with her odd moral principles) would fail to force Alec into marriage after he had gotten her with child, and only Tess (with her odd scrupulousness) would inform Angel of her past “trouble.” Tess’s refusal to follow the dishonest but prudent counsel of her mother’s letter (Chapter XXXI) is the mark of her moral distinction, of course, but it also forces the scapegoat’s role upon her. In her very candor and openness Tess becomes an easy target for persecution. The ordinariness of Tess’s “sin” is suggested most pointedly in the fact that Angel himself has sinned in the same way. His own sin of “dissipation with a stranger” in London is “just the same,” Tess says, as the sin of her yielding to Alec (p. 199). The wedding night confessions are in fact a ritual moment in which sin is transferred from one to the other (in accord with the prevailing morality of the double standard), after which Tess is deserted and later “cast out” upon the deserts of Flintcomb-Ash. The enormity of all this is emphasized, and the scapegoat pattern confirmed, in the scene of the arrest at Stonehenge. A barbarous setting, a pictorial comment on the crude “justice” accorded Tess, Stonehenge is pictured as a place of ritual sacrifices. Tess, lying on the altar, and described as a “lesser creature than a woman” (p. 353), is like a sacrificial animal, not merely slaughtered but killed in the name of some higher good. That higher good is the moral progress of society, already dramatized in the particular case of Angel Clare, who learns and grows through Tess’s unjust suffering and death. One’s hopes at the end of the novel are focused upon the possibility that society at large will follow Angel’s example in accord with Hardy’s general philosophy of “evolutionary meliorism.”

Like the traditional scapegoat, Tess is “neither innocent nor guilty,” she is a purely “typical or random victim,” and her suffering and death bring about a purification of society or at least lead in that direction.

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11 Frye, p. 41.
Though we may agree that Tess Durbeyfield is a victim and scapegoat, this by itself does not mean that her story is necessarily a tragic one. Perhaps Tess of the D'Urbervilles is only pathetic. A philosopher of art has recently written, apropos of the "tragic" and the "pathetic": "Three modes of sensibility can be distinguished in this area: the horrific, in which the fact of disaster attracts interest; the tragic, in which the destruction of something or someone good or powerful compels attention; and the pathetic, in which it is the destruction of something weak that holds us." 13 There has been some tendency in recent criticism to regard Tess as "weak." She has been called a "Griselda figure." 13 She has been identified with her "class," and the very "subject" of the novel has been declared to be simply "the destruction of the peasantry" of which Tess is the symbol. 14 She has been grouped together with other "wronged maidens" by those who think of Tess of the D'Urbervilles as "folk-tale tragedy." 15 As I said above, there is some truth in all these formulations, but none does real justice to Tess. There is more of the heroic and tragic in her, more of the "good or powerful," than these critics have seen or acknowledged. 16

Tess's own statement about herself may stand as the keynote of the discussion: "I am only a peasant by position, not by nature!" (p. 206). Indeed, we are constantly aware of Tess's moral and spiritual superiority to her parents, the other Marlott folk (seen at the club-walking and at Rolliver's), the dairymaids and fieldworkers, and even to Angel, his brothers, and the people at Emminster generally. At school Tess had shown "great aptness" and was told she would make a "good teacher" (p. 166); only poverty prevents her from pursuing such a career. The whole intent and direction of her life in general is up and out of her confining milieu as the daughter of "shiftless" John Durbeyfield (p. 15) toward greater freedom, knowledge, fulfillment, and love. 17 The first clear sign of this tendency is Tess's refusal to accept aid from Alec, let alone to marry him, after the discovery of her preg-

12 Sparshott, pp. 154–155.
16 Except David Cecil, who does write of the kinship of Hardy's novels with epic and tragedy.
17 This is her strength, not her tragic flaw as John Holloway implies in The Victorian Sage, The Norton Library (New York, 1965), p. 285.
nancy and the departure from The Slopes. She insists on having nothing further to do with Alec simply because she does not love him, though it would be eminently prudent and practical to get from him what she could. The heroic dimension Tess is beginning to acquire in this section of the novel is perhaps best seen in the magnificent scene depicting the baptism of little Sorrow: "Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown...her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal" (pp. 82–83). Tess possesses a similar dignity, and a similar forceful independence, in her protest against the sign painter's harsh Biblical mottoes (p. 70) and in denouncing the Marlott vicar for refusing a Christian burial for her baby (p. 85). Professor Frye has said that the sources of dignity are courage and innocence, and these are precisely Tess's qualities. Like many tragic figures, Tess draws strength from her very hardships. Her life exemplifies the paradox of the Fortunate Fall: "Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman. Symbols of reflectiveness passed into her face, and a note of tragedy at times into her voice. Her eyes grew larger and more eloquent" (p. 87).

The two actions which reveal Tess's heroic nature most clearly and memorably are the wedding night confession and the murder of Alec. The first, the turning point of the novel, shows Tess risking everything she has so far gained for a moral scruple, for honesty, and for "conscience." To a prudent and practical woman like her mother, Tess is merely a "simpleton" (p. 227) for doing this, but Tess, though she soon loses Angel, does not regret what she had to do: "'He was so good—and I felt the wickedness of trying to blind him as to what had happened! If—if—it were to be done again—I should do the same. I could not—I dared not—to sin—against him!'" (p. 227). Far from being a simpleton, of course, Tess is, in Sparshott's terms, "good," "powerful," to tell. The telling is the crucial event of the novel. As Dorothy Van Ghent has said, "Tess's tragedy turns on a secret revealed, that is, on the substitution in Tess of an individualizing morality for the folk instinct of concealment and anonymity."19

This "individualizing morality" is important to the tragic effect, but Tess's heroic stature is most decisively affirmed in the murder of Alec. He is no longer a real human being in the reader's eyes (and perhaps never was), he is only the symbol of Tess's fate, its agent; in killing him Tess makes a heroic protest against it. The murder is of course irrational

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18 Frye, p. 219.
19 Van Ghent, p. 206.
and impulsive, removing forever the possibility of happiness implicit in
Angel’s return. But precisely its irrationality and futility make it, as a
gesture of defiance, more moving, more heroic, more “pure.” In these
ways, I suggest, Tess presents herself to us as a genuine heroine, and her
destruction (of the strong, not the weak) is therefore tragic.

Tess’s name (D’Urberville) and her aristocratic lineage also con-
tribute subtly to our sense of her nobility and dignity. The point is not
lost upon Angel, and certainly not upon Tess’s father; both these men
are in a way corrupted by the news of Tess’s ancestry, the one subtly,
the other grossly. The Cricks sense that Tess is “too good for a dairy-
maid” (p. 175), and Tess herself believes that some “strange good
thing” may come to her at Talbothays because it is situated in her “an-
cestral land” (p. 88). Again and again there is the unspoken assump-
tion that Tess is really a lady after all. “I am only a peasant by position,
not by nature!” (p. 206). In short, through the device of the D’Urberv-
ille-Durbeyfield connection Hardy is able simultaneously to have his
heroine be a woman of the people and also have her fulfill Aristotle’s re-
quirement that the tragic hero be of “noted” family.20 At the same
time, Hardy suggests, somewhat in the manner of the Greek tragedians,
that there is a tragic fatality even in being connected with the erring and
fallen family of D’Urberville. In particular, being a D’Urberville means
inheriting a certain aristocratic recklessness, a certain superiority to
fortune, a strong aversion to ordinary prudence and caution. Tess is, in
Hardy’s words, an “almost standard woman, but for the slight incau-
tiousness of character inherited from her race” (p. 79). This “incau-
tiousness” is in fact Tess’s tragic flaw. Incautiousness can be and is often
a noble trait, but it is also likely in the long run to be injurious. In Tess
the incautiousness of the D’Urbervilles is a form of pride. It carries with
it a refusal to compromise, a refusal to be “practical,” a refusal even to
seek help or acknowledge the need of it. Such pride is the motive be-
hind many of the noble things Tess does: abruptly leaving Alec, con-
fessing her “sin” to Angel, enduring the hardships of Flintcomb-Ash
rather than seeking help from Angel or the elder Clares, and, finally,
rashly murdering Alec. These acts, fine and noble as some of them are,
nevertheless define the downward course of Tess’s fate and lead on to
the final catastrophe. Pride and recklessness are the qualities in Tess
which, together with other causes, bring suffering and defeat upon her.
In that sense they are the ingredients of her tragically flawed nature.

The flaw works its destructive effects most damagingly in the third
and fourth phases of the novel. Here Tess first “drifts” into love with

Angel Clare, then marries him precipitately without having told of her past—both in violation of her own explicit resolutions. In allowing herself to marry Angel before "confessing" to him, Tess is, of course, strongly under the influence of what Hardy calls "love's counsel" (p. 157), but in a character less proud and less reckless "love's counsel" would not have prevailed so easily. The matter is crucial, as Tess well knows, yet she allows the marriage to go forward before the truth of her past has been told. Tess's failure is all-important, I think, because, as Angel later says, "'O Tess! If you had only told me sooner, I would have forgiven you!' " (p. 237). Some critics refuse to believe Angel, but surely he speaks truly on this point. Not that he would have accepted the confession easily or happily, but had Tess confessed earlier there would have been only delays and new arrangements, not tragedy. Ignorance is no excuse either, because Tess knows very well how important chastity is to Angel. She even sees that Angel is deluded about her—"she you love is not my real self" (p. 189)—yet she fails to act in time. The events of the third and fourth phases largely determine the course that the rest of the novel is to take, but even after the confession Tess's flaw continues to plague her. Her very submission to Angel's harsh treatment is itself, as Hardy says, "a symptom of that reckless acquiescence in chance so apparent in the whole D'Urberville family" (p. 225). Later, after the hard months at Flintcomb-Ash, Tess is "one of the few" who didn't look for other work at the Candlemas Fair, "having a vaguely shaped hope that something would happen to render another outdoor engagement unnecessary" (p. 285). Thus Tess is unemployed when further troubles strike her family, and more vulnerable to Alec's blandishments—indeed, she is then quite helpless, the result of her own improvidence. Finally, Tess commits her most reckless act in murdering her seducer, sealing her own fate in a last rash gesture. The murder of Alec is the culminating act and proof positive of Tess's "tragic flaw."

Although I have stressed Tess's pride and recklessness in the preceding discussion, I must say again that Tess has an heroic and noble nature. Her story is truly a case of the "worthy" being "encompassed by the inevitable" (in the language of Hardy's formula). Tess's flaws may make her imperfect, but they do not make her unworthy. Though Tess and her father share the D'Urberville recklessness, Tess's mettle is far superior to his: "Tess really wished to walk uprightly, while her father did nothing of the kind" (p. 92). In contrast to her parents, the other Marlott folk, the dairymaids at Talbothays, and, indeed, in con-

The Tragedy of Tess Durhemyfield

Tess stands out as a superior person. Her flaw does not destroy our faith in her essential worthiness, or even our sense of her distinction, any more than the flaws of Hamlet, Lear, or Oedipus do. Nor can the flaw be used to "justify" her suffering in a moral sense. Rather, the function of the flaw is, I think, to make Tess's suffering seem more intelligible or probable. We bring to literature a conviction that people are at least in part responsible for what happens to them, and we are not inclined to take seriously the case of the completely good person who is overwhelmed by evil from the outside. Such, at least, is not the stuff of tragedy; it is the stuff of melodrama or of the "horrific" (Sparshott). Tess is flawed just enough to allow us to say, as we say of all the great tragic figures, that she brings some of her suffering on herself.

III

A properly critical understanding of Tess opens the way for a more sympathetic appreciation of Angel Clare, because we can then stop simply denouncing him and begin to see him as he is. Indeed, I want to suggest that contained within Tess's tragedy is another tragic story centering on Angel. This is the story of a young idealist's fall and suffering. It culminates, not in death, but in the final and permanent loss, through death, of Angel's beloved Tess. The moment of loss is vividly dramatized in the last chapter, where Angel and Liza Lu witness from afar the execution of Tess. Hardy is concerned here, at the very end of the novel, not with Tess primarily but with Angel Clare. This concern shows, along with other things in the story, that we ought to allow Angel a larger and more sympathetic role in the book than he has been generally accorded. He is, to anticipate my conclusion a bit, a tragic figure himself, albeit a secondary one.

But before we can deal convincingly with Angel Clare as a tragic figure, we must first rescue him from several recent critics who have, I think, put the case against him far too strongly and, indeed, crudely. It is true that Angel shares Tess's belief in what Hardy at one point calls the "moral hobgoblins" flying about her liaison with Alec (p. 75). The tragedy derives from the combination of her mistaken sense of guilt with his mistaken and overly harsh judgment of her guilt. But we must remember that both are mistaken about it, not Angel alone, and by the same token we must remember that the love idyl at Bramshurst Court (indeed Angel's very return from Brazil) shows Angel as well as Tess

22 Tess's recklessness causes her to make mistakes that contribute to the tragedy; in that sense, and only in that sense, is she "flawed." See Grube's introduction to the edition of The Poetics cited above, pp. xxiv–xxv.
transcending the conventional valuation of things which had plagued them both before and had caused all the suffering. I do not deny that Angel does Tess a serious wrong, but more attention should be given to Angel’s good qualities and acts. It is certainly unfair to see Angel exclusively in negative terms and to stigmatize him with phrases like “prudish perversity” and “conceited impotence” and with a word like “nasty” as two critics have recently done.\footnote{Albert J. Guerard calls Angel not only “insufferable” but also “nasty” in \textit{Thomas Hardy}, A New Directions Paperbook (Norfolk, 1964), pp. 22, 80, and 117; Dorothy Van Ghent refers to Angel’s “prudish perversity” and to his “conceited impotence” in \textit{The English Novel}, pp. 199–201.}

Hardy’s own view of Angel is, I believe, essentially a divided one. He admires Angel’s agnosticism, his independence, and the democratic instincts in him which carry him to Talbothay’s dairy, and, finally, to his marriage with the peasant Tess. On the other hand, of course, Hardy is critical of the conventional side of Angel, the side which causes him to see Tess’s “sin” wholly in terms of those social customs and conventions which he himself, at other levels of his mind, knows are wrong and seeks to revise. To a great extent Angel’s flaw is simply innocence. He has a naïve faith in ideals and principles and a confidence that things are what they seem. His first impression of Tess is that she must be a “fresh and virginal daughter of Nature” (p. 106), and he sticks to this view throughout the crucial third and fourth phases in the face of many hints and demurs thrown out by Tess. He scoffs at the notion that Tess might have something to “confess” (p. 157). Here he seems to embody the \textit{hubris} of classical tragedy, secure in himself and in the validity of his perceptions, yet standing on the very brink of the further revelations and disclosures which will shatter all his well-being. Angel’s pride, unlike Tess’s pride of race, is an intellectual one, and it is vulnerable because Angel’s intellect and judgment have never really been tested. He is a pure product of Emminster vicarage, and when he arrives at Talbothay’s dairy he is as naïve as Tess had been when she arrived at The Slopes. There he enters a new moral world, a world of “aesthetic, sensuous, pagan pleasure in natural life and lush womanhood” entirely unknown to his previous life among his parents and brothers (p. 139). And when he is required to make a crucial moral judgment in this, the real world, he inevitably falls back upon his “early teachings” (p. 235)—and they cause the mischief. It must be insisted upon that what Angel does here is in no way unusual; he acts entirely in accord with the moral norms of the time. It is Tess who springs the surprises in the novel. Angel had every reason to assume that Tess was chaste—such was in fact simply the “social norm” (p. 303)—and Tess,
in Hardy's words, exhibited a "culpable reticence" in concealing the truth from Angel (p. 189).

On the particular issue of his response to Tess's confession, Angel is presented in the most sympathetic light possible. Hardy is not concerned to blame Angel as an individual; rather, through Angel Clare, he attempts to get at the "early teachings," the customs and the conventions which underlie and govern the behavior of Angel and other young men like him in late Victorian England. In all other respects Angel Clare is a more appealing and positive character than has been ordinarily allowed. He represents the best that his time and class have to offer. He is an "advanced and well-meaning young man" (p. 235). In his refusal to serve the Church without believing in it—despite the great material and social advantages of doing so—he shows an integrity comparable to Tess's. In his love for Tess and for Talbothays he shows an openness, a liberality, and a democratic spirit that are attractive. Like Hardy, Angel is essentially a humanist, and he can speak dramatically for his positive ideals. When his father asks why he thinks he should have a Cambridge education when it is not to be used for the honor and glory of God, Angel replies, "'Why, that it may used for the honour and glory of man, father' " (p. 102). Admittedly, this exchange shows Angel at his best, but, using Sparshott's terms again, Angel is "good," in his attempt to represent the kind of ideal implied here, "powerful," insofar as he succeeds in doing so. And this is rather far, because Angel does pursue a career of his own, he does live and work as a hand at Talbothays, and he does see that the men there are not just "Hodge" but individual human beings, "every one of whom walked in his own individual way the road to dusty death" (p. 104). Beyond this, he does marry the peasant Tess, a miracle in the social circumstances of the time as the attitudes of Izz and the others show (p. 175), and he does, at the end, return to her full of forgiveness and remorse. It is easy to quote the novel against Angel Clare, because what he says often sounds stuffy and awkward. But we must also think of all that Angel does, and of what he stands for in general, and of how much he is able to learn.

We have in Angel Clare, I believe, a character essentially strong and good, though far from perfect. Though this character is not destroyed, as Tess is, he does suffer and he does "fall." Not, like Tess, a victim and scapegoat, Angel is nevertheless a man "like ourselves" who, largely through his own error, moves downward from prosperity and self-confidence to suffering and defeat. Angel errs, is plunged into suffering, and is finally "reborn" as he returns from Brazil a changed man. In his story, too, the confession is the turning point. With it Angel's suffering begins, extending down to the last pages and including his
sickness in Brazil, his growing sense of having done a grievous wrong to Tess, his desperate return, and the final scenes of flight, capture, and execution. Before the confession Angel’s life seemed fortunate; after some confusion, his new career was firmly beginning, he seemed to have a flawless bride, and the future lay all before him. But with the crowing of the cock on the wedding day (an ill omen), Angel’s passion, like Christ’s, begins (p. 190). He is stunned by the confession that evening, breaking out into peals of hysterical laughter at first, then settling down into a more sober and reflective agony (p. 202). In the following days Angel is nearly torn apart by the conflicting impulses that urge him to react this way or that to the terrible revelation. “His thought had been unsuspended; he was becoming ill with thinking; eaten out with thinking, withered by thinking; scourged out of all his former pulsating flexuous domesticity” (p. 215). The remarkable sleepwalking sequence (borrowed perhaps from Macbeth) is only the most obvious symptom of the mental turmoil Angel suffers at this point. At bit later, his proposal to Izz Huett is an equally obvious symptom of his confusion and desperation, so plainly an effort to “take back” his decision about Tess (p. 239). His state of mind is epitomized in the brief scene at Wellington when he revisits the scene of the honeymoon shortly after the separation from Tess: “In the incoherent multitude of his emotions he knelt down at the bedside wet-eyed. ‘O Tess, If you had only told me sooner, I would have forgiven you!’ he mourned” (p. 237).

More could be said about Angel’s “fall,” his real and deep suffering, his remorse, and his consciousness of error. His general movement downward culminates in his nearly fatal illness in Brazil. There his recovery from physical illness coincides with a mental rebirth; he fully realizes his mistake, and he determines to return to Tess. “Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisments of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman?” (p. 303). The complete change of mind and heart experienced by Angel is represented in physical terms. In Brazil, Angel had “aged a dozen years,” and when he returns to England he is physically almost unrecognizable: “He matched Crivelli’s dead Christus. His sunken eye-pits were of morbid hue, and the light in his eyes had waned. The angular hollows and lines of his aged ancestors had succeeded to their reign in his face twenty years before their time” (p. 328). Morally and emotionally, the wasted Angel has been reborn; his mind is alive again, and so is his heart. For him the only tragedy is that such a rebirth was necessary, and also that it comes too late. Like Hamlet, Angel returns from across the sea a new man, resolved to do what he should have done before; like
Hamlet also, he comes too late to save the situation or even himself. Or like Othello, Angel sees too late that his wife is pure after all, and he can only say, turning against himself, "'Ah—it is my fault'" (p. 338). Angel does not, of course, kill himself, but after the execution he turns sadly away in defeat, preparing to face an uncertain future. He goes the way of many tragic figures, though he may not have the full tragic stature. He goes from innocence to redemption through suffering.24

IV

Both of the tragic figures, the one a victim and scapegoat, the other a man "like ourselves" who "falls," are moved in various ways by forces over which they have no control (natural instinct, the mechanisms of heredity, social conditioning, and, to a lesser extent, chance). But because Tess Durbeyfield is the central and commanding figure, it is mainly in and around her life that we feel the workings of those great universal forces and intentions that give this tragedy its characteristic tragic "terror." I say "characteristic" because, as Northrop Frye has written, "The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it."25

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles that "something else" is Nature, which is felt in various forms as the moving force behind the action.26 Tess's "fall," her drift into marriage, her failure to confess, the hastiness of the wedding itself—all of these important events are manifestations, as Hardy sees it, of nature in the form of sexual instinct, that "appetite for joy" which "pervades all creation" (p. 168).

The power and universality of this instinct are marvelously communicated in the chapters centering on Talbothays (phases three and four, the heart of the novel). The main point here is the continuity of vegetable, animal, and human life; we sense this continuity powerfully and continually as we watch the human figures at work or play among the cows, the fields, and the flowing streams. All life, all nature, is one, Hardy makes us feel, and all obeys one law, the law of procreation. Here is a characteristic passage: "Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Var Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the

24 Tragic Themes in Western Literature, ed. Cleanth Brooks (New Haven, 1955), especially the essays by Knox, Tinker, and Martz.
25 Frye, p. 207.
most fanciful love should not grow passionate. The ready bosoms existing there were impregnated by their surroundings” (p. 130). This passage is connected with other sentences which explain how Angel’s “fanciful love” became, under the influence of the Var Vale and the “season,” a “waxing fervour of passion for the soft and silent Tess” (p. 130). Similarly, Tess, though she had promised herself never to love or marry, finds herself swept along unexpected and unwished-for paths by the force of natural instinct: “Every see-saw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears, was a voice that joined with Nature in revolt against her scrupulousness” (p. 157). And the other dairymaids too, loving Angel, are helpless victims of Nature: “The air of the sleeping-chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature’s law—an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired” (p. 129). Even when due weight is given to the element of social criticism in the novel, one realizes that Hardy is as much concerned with the “oppressiveness” of Nature’s laws—and their “cruelty”—as with man’s. The harshnesses of men to each other are “tenderness itself when compared with the universal harshness” out of which they grow (p. 304). Nature is the major antagonist in the novel, a powerful and inscrutable one, and Nature is the “something else” Tess and her tragedy “mediate” for us.

I should like to be emphatic on this point because it is one of the persistent delusions of Hardy criticism that “chance” rather than Nature is the really important superhuman force or influence in his novels. This amounts to saying that he believes in universal chaos, whereas the reverse is actually true. He believes in a rigidly structured natural order and could better be called a scientific determinist, and, where fiction is concerned, something of a naturalist in his handling of character (note the stress both on irrational instinct and on environment in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and the later novels generally).27 One critic’s argument that three of the most important crises in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* are controlled by chance seems to me to break down under close examination.28 First, the original seduction. It is true that a number of circumstances conspire to bring it about, but it is not specifically a chance event. Once Tess arrives at The Slopes she is to a great extent in Alec’s power; an opportunity for seduction is bound to come up sooner or later; Alec has merely to wait for it, which he does. It is thus not chance


but Tess's innocence and her "want of firmness" (p. 206) that are the primary factors here. Second, the letter going under the carpet. Here Hardy specifically attributes this unfortunate event not to chance but to Tess's "haste" (in the Freudian view, itself a symptom of her real desire not to tell). Angel never sees the letter, Hardy tells us, "owing to her having in her haste thrust it beneath the carpet as well as beneath the door" (p. 186) [italics mine]. Third, the failure of the trip to Emminster. It is true that by chance Tess over hears Angel's brothers talking of her and that this has something to do with her abrupt turnabout. But Hardy puts the emphasis at this point not on the element of chance but upon certain weaknesses within Tess herself, a "feminine loss of courage" and a miscalculation about the elder Clares (p. 267). Of course, there is an element of chance in the novel, and even in the events I have just discussed, but Hardy does not emphasize it or attribute pre-eminence to it in the way that criticism has often done. In all the "intrusive" commentaries that Dorothy Van Ghent has analyzed so well, Hardy never discusses the notion of chance in any serious way and never himself accords it a position of pre-eminence in his "philosophy." On the contrary, the point of view of the narrator here is thoroughly deterministic; the stages of the action are even called, with what sounds like scientific precision, "phases."

To return to Frye's terms, we find that Tess and Angel "mediate" nature for us the audience by making us more aware of the presence of natural instinct in our lives. We become more conscious of the "one life within us and abroad" and recognize our place in the natural order and our subjection to its laws. The sooner and the more completely we make this realization, Hardy seems to say, the more harmonious, well-adjusted, and free our lives shall be. But as long as there remains an antagonism between nature and civilization, a contradiction between natural law and social law or custom, men and women are doomed to be torn by conflicting allegiances. Man is both a natural and a social being, and these two sides of his nature must be kept in harmony. In Tess of the D'Urbervilles one can say that Tess represents the natural, Angel the social, side, and the tragic story is essentially the persecution of the one by the other. It is the story of the passion, or martyrdom, of the natural self under the conditions of Victorian moral attitudes and sexual customs. This is not to say that Hardy advocated any sort of primitivism, a return to the laws of nature pure and simple or an immersion of the human self in the sea of instinct and procreation. Hardy wanted an accommodation of the social to the natural but not a total surrender. He was a meliorist because he thought such an accommodation possible within the framework of civilized life and without sacri-
JAMES HAZEN

fice of distinctively human ideals. He was a tragedian because his vision allows for the great difficulty of such an accommodation and is perpetually conscious of the profound and continuing antagonism between what is natural in man and what is distinctively human. Tess of the D'Urbervilles is tragic because it shows the suffering and destruction of the natural self, but it is melioristic because it shows the regeneration of the social self (Angel Clare) in and through the tragedy. Insofar as we share Angel Clare's experience—and I think Hardy suggests that there is a little of Angel Clare in all of us—we are regenerated, too.

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