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Author(s): Robert C. Schweik
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can gain a provocative perspective on our own problems. Let us emulate his courage in holding fast to what is good. Let us borrow his refreshing boldness, along with his scorn of mere novelty; let us share his readiness to adjust education to the known needs of an age. Above all, let us talk more often among ourselves about what concerns us so closely.

Moral Perspective in
Tess of the D'Urbervilles

ROBERT C. SCHWEIK

The "very meaning" of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, J. O. Bailey has recently observed, is that "Tess, though impure in act, was a pure woman in the tendencies of her mind and heart." Equally explicit generalizations about the ethical implications of the novel have been expressed by earlier commentators—that Hardy's defense of Tess was a "frank appeal to the law of nature," for example, or that Hardy was preaching a "superior moral law" through the mouth of the repentant Angel Clare.1 To find language in Tess which seems to support some general moral argument is certainly not difficult, for although Hardy insisted that the novel was an "impression," scattered through it are passages which can be read almost as though they were abstract propositions in ethics. In fact, some recent critics like Dorothy Van Ghent and G. D. Klingopulos have concluded that is exactly what such passages often are—abstract "bits of philosophic adhesive tape" loosely attached to the surface of the novel and neither integral with its structure nor clearly related to the impression it renders.2 But it is as unnecessary, I think, to conclude that many passages in Tess of the D'Urbervilles are structural excrescences as it is mistaken to assume that one or another of them epitomizes Hardy's defense of Tess.

Consider, for example, a group of comments which come near the conclusion of the novel, when Angel Clare begins to question the basis for his judgment of Tess:

Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. He thought they wanted readjusting. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? (432)3

An answer to Clare's question follows at once—or, rather, a series of answers, and each from a different point of view. Angel Clare himself sees moral reality in the private history of Tess's mind and answers his own question by concluding that the "beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements,


Robert C. Schweik is an assistant professor of English, Marquette University.


3All quotations are from Tess of the D’Urbervilles, ed. Albert J. Guerard (New York, 1950), and page numbers are inserted parenthetically in the text.
In effect, the comments which follow Clare's question function as devices of perspective: they present the same situation from different points of view, and each new viewpoint reveals a world of different dimensions and different moral implications. Many passages scattered throughout *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* have a similar effect; they call attention to the moral implications of Tess's seduction as it appears in perspectives which emphasize the importance of contrasting aspects of reality—the external world of biological forces and the internal world of subjective consciousness. Hardy sometimes describes Tess as if at an immense distance, from which she appears reduced to the size of "a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly"; in other places in the novel he implies a correspondingly distant moral point of view, from which Tess's seduction appears to be no more than a minute and inconsequential event in a vast world of irresistible biological forces. After her seduction, Tess herself considers the consequences of her violation in terms which reduce the problem to a question of biological recovery: "Was once lost always lost really true of chastity? she would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil bygones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone" (126). During Tess's stay at Talbothays, Hardy traces the operation of that recuperative power as it works on her. Even earlier there are moments when a beneficent sun seems to shine on Tess like a "golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed God-like creature, gazing down in the vigour and inten tness of youth upon an earth that was brimming..."
with interest for him” (109), and times
when she feels moved by an “invincible
instinct toward self-delight” (127).
After her journey to Talbothays, what
Hardy describes as Tess’s “passing cor-
poreal blight” gradually succumbs to a
simple biological urge for pleasure; he
observes that Tess has been mastered by
the “irresistible, universal, automatic
tendency to find sweet pleasure some-
where, which pervades all life from the
meanest to the highest” (134), and when
she finally consents to marry Angel
Clare, Hardy pointedly invites the
reader to see the event in a perspective
which diminishes to insignificance all
but the irresistible biological forces
which dominate the universe:
She might as well have agreed at first.
The “appetite for joy” which pervades
all creation, that tremendous force which
sways humanity to its purpose, as the
tide sways the helpless weed, was not
to be controlled by vague lucubrations
over the social rubric. (244)
In this last comment, and from time to
time elsewhere in the novel, Hardy ex-
plains a viewpoint which takes in “all
creation” in order to minimize the im-
portance of the social code which con-
demns Tess. The obvious biological facts
within the world of nature are treated
as though they were the only apparent
realities, and social distinctions are de-
scribed as if they were purely arbitrary
constructs without any visible basis in
actuality. When, for example, Tess
thinks that her social guilt is reflected in
nature, Hardy calls this a “sorry and
mistaken creation of Tess’s fancy” and
remarks that such notions of guilt are
“out of harmony with the actual world”
and imply a “distinction where there
was no difference” (108). Again, when
Tess finds a flock of wounded and dy-
ing pheasants, the obvious reality of
their physical pain reminds her that the
social code has no corresponding basis
in reality:

“Poor darlings—to suppose myself the
most miserable being on earth in the sight
of such misery as yours!” she exclaimed,
hers tears running down as she killed the
birds tenderly. “And not a twinge of
bodily pain about me! I be not mangled,
and I be not bleeding, and I have two
hands to feed and clothe me.” She was
ashamed of herself for her gloom of
the night, based on nothing more tangible
than a sense of condemnation under an
arbitrary law of society which had no
foundation in Nature. (355)

There are passages in Tess, then,
which in effect invite the reader to see
Tess’s seduction as if from a viewpoint
which renders visible only a world of
biological realities—organic soundness,
physical pain, the universal instinct to
seek pleasure. In this perspective Tess’s
seduction appears to be a “passing cor-
poreal blight” that is quickly overcome
by the instinct for pleasure which dom-
inates all living things, and any other
significance which society attaches to
her past seems merely arbitrary. But the
extreme naturalism implicit in such pas-
sages is elsewhere countered by an
equally extreme idealism implicit in
others. If Hardy sometimes pictures Tess
as though she were only a minute and
inconsequential organism caught up in
a vast world of natural forces, he else-
where reverses the image so that the
whole world appears to be a part of

Tess.

The shift from one image of reality
to another can occur with startling
abruptness; Hardy’s remark that Tess’s
fancied guilt is “out of harmony with
the actual world” stands only one para-
graph from a comment with precisely
the opposite implications: “At times her
whimsical fancy would intensify natural
processes around her till they seemed
a part of her own story. Rather, they
became a part of it; for the world is
only a psychological phenomenon, and
what they seemed they were” (108).
Such an inversion of reality implies a
corresponding inversion of proportion;
reduced to a “psychological phenomenon,” the world of external forces seems to shrink in significance while Tess, on the other hand, acquires a special importance and magnitude when reality is equated with her subjective experience:

Many besides Angel have learnt that the magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements but as to their subjective experiences. . . . Tess was no insignificant creature to toy with and dismiss; but a woman living her precious life—a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself. Upon her sensations the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born. (198-199)

Consistent with the emphasis which such passages place on the reality of subjective consciousness are other comments which serve as invitations to the reader to consider Tess's character not in terms of external facts but in a perspective which focuses attention on psychological realities like “will,” “intention,” and mental “tendency.” When, for example, Tess's confession surprises Angel Clare “back to his early teachings,” Hardy observes:

No prophet had told him, and he was not prophet enough to tell himself, that essentially this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement, but by tendency. (338)

Later, Tess complains of Angel's treatment of her on the same grounds—that hers were “not sins of intention, but of inadvertence” (545)—and Angel Clare finally comes to take the same point of view when he concludes that Tess should be judged “constructively rather than biographically, by the will rather than by the deed” (473).

In short, what Hardy provides in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is not an answer to Clare's question but answers which imply limited views and conflicting assumptions about moral reality. Furthermore, those assumptions are themselves qualified (if not contradicted) by other elements in the novel. What the action of *Tess* suggests—that Alec D'Urberville can be mastered by an “instinct towards self delight” as well as his victim—is made explicit in Hardy's comments to the effect that nature has no “holy plan” (24), that nature's law is “cruel” (187), and that natural forces work indifferently at cross purposes, the “inherent will to enjoy” being opposed by the “circumstantial will against enjoyment” (365). An image which suggests the beneficent recuperative power of nature—a “God-like” sun gazing down “upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him”—will elsewhere be countered by an even more elaborate image suggesting nature's indiscriminate working (136), and the frequency with which Tess's surroundings signify their moral irresponsibility lends support to her complaint that “the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike” (162). Similarly, Hardy treats Tess's subjective consciousness as if it were as grim and morally irresponsible as the world of nature. The “structure of sensations” that is reality for Tess is a jumble of confused moral attitudes, and within it her subjective sense of guilt takes on a compelling reality which at times completely overshadows the purity of her intentions. Although she is hardly responsible for the accident which kills the Derbyfield horse, Tess regards herself as a “murderess” after his death (37-38), and the sense of moral responsibility which troubles her after the accident and prompts her expiatory trip to the Stoke-D’Urberville mansion prefigures the more profound sense of guilt
which from time to time returns to torture her after her seduction. Tess comes to think of herself as a “figure of Guilt intruding in the haunts of innocence” (108), and after meeting Clare, she feels that she is “not worthy of him” (250), that she should “confess” her sin to him, and that she should be punished for her “wickedness” (269). Paradoxically, if within her own mind Tess is innocent, she is also most guilty there; for what Hardy reveals of Tess’s “mental tendency” is conflicting and ambiguous, and one important aspect of it is suggested by her repeated impulse to punish herself. It is this tendency which prompts Tess to make the wedding night confession which precipitates her final tragedy; Tess feels that she “deserved worse” than the other milkmaids whom Clare had rejected, and she determines, because it was “wicked of her to take all without paying,” that she will “pay to the uttermost farthing” (284). When we are attentive, then, to what Hardy reveals about Tess’s “aims and impulses” we are brought into contact with something more complex than simple purity—and in particular with what Evelyn Hardy has described as Tess’s “insidious need to imitate herself”:

Tess, for all her simplicity, is a subtly-drawn character with contradictory traits. Her simplicity and purity are adulterated with a strain likely to bring about her downfall; and in whatever circumstances attend her—the tendency towards martyrdom and self-sacrifice which Hardy has touched on in his feminine characters in previous novels.

Hence, those passages in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which when taken by themselves seem to be little more than abstract moral arguments, appear rather in the context of the novel to provide recognizably limited moral perspectives—partial insights into a much more complex moral reality revealed by the novel as a whole. Of course such limited views have a rhetorical effect—they direct attention to moral dimensions beyond the narrow ethic which condemns Tess. But Hardy seems to have taken pains to avoid imposing some “new ethic without dogma” upon the novel; rather, he leaves the impression that clear-cut answers to moral questions depend on insights which only partly comprehend and more or less distort and simplify reality. What *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reveals, then, is not only Hardy’s feeling about the shallowness of certain Victorian social mores but his sense of the general limitations of moral vision and the common arbitrariness of moral formulae. Significantly, at the conclusion of the novel, Angel Clare no longer troubles himself with questions about the basis for his judgment of Tess; his response after she reveals that she has murdered Alec is only a “tenderness” which dominates him. That, I suspect, is the final response which Hardy wished to produce in his readers as well. And if Clare’s simple and unqualified “tenderness” toward Tess seems clearly more appropriate than his earlier efforts to explain her purity by appealing to “nature” or to “will,” this is at least partly because Hardy leaves the impression that such explanations are not only unnecessary but inadequate.