Chapter V

Angst and Pain in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

The novels which preceded *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* show Hardy’s continuous preoccupation with estranged human consciousness in its conflict with itself and its environment. As one novel followed another, Hardy’s sense of estrangement continues to characterize the inner self of the individual and his outer relationships with society and the world he is living in. By the time of *The Woodlanders*, Hardy was able to present a clear picture of separation from the self, denial of identity and estrangement from society.

In that novel, Hardy traces out the lonely courses which were part of the great web of human deeds, and these human deeds are characterized by the unfulfilled Intention which makes life what it is. Hardy's writing often explores what he called the "ache of modernism", and this theme is notable in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. In depicting this theme Hardy uses imagery associated with hell when describing modern farm machinery, as well as suggesting the effete nature of city life as the milk sent there must be watered down because the town people cannot stomach whole milk. Hardy has said that young Gertrude was the true incarnation of the Tess he had imagined. Hardy had been inspired by the beauty of her mother Augusta Way, then an eighteen year old milk-maid, when he visited Augusta’s father’s farm in Bockhampton, which made him to write *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. The novel was published in the year 1892.


In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Hardy concentrates the conflict that, in the earlier novel, had been widely presented, on the single character of Tess. The temptations of Puke Samson, the endurance of Marty South, the divided consciousness of Grace Melbury and the sexuality of Felice Charmond – all come together and coalesce in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Tess, the protagonist of this novel gets estranged from her family and society finds herself in
a world where she questions faith, looks for meaning in life, and searches for the truths that mankind has sought for centuries.

Tess Durbeyfield is the eldest child of the Durbeyfield family living in the village of Marlott. John Durbeyfield, the father, is a haggler by profession. He is a careless head of the family who loves drinking. Joan Durbeyfield, the mother, is a hard-working lady, always trying her best to see the family happy. The poverty of the family has deprived the children of schooling. Even Tess has been able to reach up to sixth standard. John Durbeyfield passes most of his time in drinking in a local inn. Like many other poor Wessex rustics, he too likes to forget drudgery of poverty and consequent worries and anxieties related to their families. One evening in May, the local priest parson Tringham informs John Durbeyfield that he is the last descendant of the noble knightly family of d'Urbervilles, who once had their seat at Kingsbere and owned many of the fields and hills around. This news startles John Durbeyfield and like a noble knight, he hires a carriage to ride on, singing a ridiculous song about his knightly ancestry. He is noticed by the companions of Tess who are engaged in club-dancing on the village green. Tess who is happy in the company of friends grows anxious about the peculiar behaviour of her father. She soon hurries to the squalor and gloom of her home to find out what is the matter with her father.

Joan Durbeyfield is no less elated at the revelation. When Tess returns, her mother informs her that they have been found to be the greatest gentlefolk in the whole country. In the meantime Tess’s father has gone to the village inn to celebrate the news. Under the pretence of bringing him back her mother also goes to the inn. Joan has started to imagine some grand schemes for the glorious future of their daughter, Tess. However, Tess has to go to the inn to bring her parents back. On the way back, her brother tells her that her mother wants to send her to Trantridge to claim kinship with the rich Mrs. d’Urbervilles, who lives with her son Alec d’Urbervilles at the big house at Trantridge. Mrs. Durbeyfield is
ignorant of the fact that these d’Urbervilles are not the genuine d’Urbervilles. She however sends Tess to them in the hope of making a rich match there. Moreover in an unexpected accident, the horse, named Prince, used by the family for haggling business, has died.

Faced with financial difficulties, Tess ultimately decides to go to Trantridge. When she reaches there she finds that Mrs. d’Urbervilles is an invalid woman and she has a son Alec who does not appear to her a good person. Anyhow, Tess is engaged to look after this family’s poultry. Alec begins to take liberty with Tess and as she goes about her duty, he follows her about pesters her with his love making. One evening Tess falls into a quarrel with some drunken women when she is returning from Chase borough with a party of other field-folk. Alec comes to her rescue and carries her off on horseback in to the woods. He puts her down and goes to find the right path which he has forgotten by accident or intentionally. In the mean time, being tired, Tess falls asleep. Soon Alec returns, and finding her sleeping, rapes her. Thus Tess loses her virginity. Horrified at this event, she leaves the place in spite of Alec’s persuasions not to leave.

On returning home, Tess is rebuked by her mother. At home, she leads a very dull and dreary life, living within four walls of the house. In due course of time, she gives birth to a child who soon dies. She herself christens the child as Sorrow, the Undesired, for the vicar refuses to christen him. After this tragic incident, Tess decides to go to some far-off place where her troubles may not be known to the world. Besides this she resolves to remain unmarried all her life.

With the help of a friend, Tess gets a job as a dairy maid at Talbothays dairy. In the idyllic atmosphere of the valley, Tess soon forgets her worries and it is here that she meets Angel Clare, who is the son of the vicar of Emminster. Soon the two come closer. In the company of Angel Clare, Tess seems to have come into her own; Angel looks upon her as a symbol of pristine purity. Other girls of the dairy Izz, Catty and Marian also love Angel, but
Tess is the main object of his attention. He woos her relentlessly and proposes for marriage but Tess persistently refuses. However, finally, she yields and gives her assent to marry. But she wants to reveal her past to Angel before marriage for this purpose, she writes a letter stating all that happened to her in the past and slips it into Angel’s room. But as luck would have it, the letter slips under the carpet and remains concealed. On the wedding day, she finds the letter but silently and sadly destroys it. The two are married. Angel takes Tess to an old farm house to spend their honey moon. The house is incidentally dismal.

The two life-size portraits of D’Urbervilles’ ancestors in the room frighten Tess. During their first conversation after marriage, Angel recounts his story of his forty eight hours’ dissipation with a stranger in London. He asks Tess to be forgiven, which she does gladly in her turn, Tess too, narrates her past to Angel. On hearing this, Angel is shocked. His impression about Tess is totally changed. He is not ready to forgive her. Tess weeps bitterly and begs to be forgiven, but he refuses. One night he walks in his sleep, carries Tess in his arms crosses a dangerous bridge, lays her in a coffin and then utters the words ‘Dead! Dead! Dead’.

After a few days Angel and Tess decide to separate for some time. Angel asks her to come to him till he came to her, and to write to him only when she was in utter need. He also gives her fifty pounds for her immediate needs and advises her to contact his parents whenever she liked. Tess returns home and Angel sails for Brazil some time later. Before leaving, he meets Izz and offers to take her along with him. But Izz tells him that Tess loves him with the depth of her heart, so Angel changes his mind and leaves alone. Tess has to face her mother’s reproaches, for she had advised her not to disclose her past to anyone. Her father has doubts about her marriage she is not able to bear the doubts of her father, so she gives half of her money to him and leaves the home a third time to try her luck else where she gets casual employment now and then in the summer but with the coming of winter her
difficulties increase. She has spent all her money, so she has to do the hardest work for her living. Her sense of self-respect forbids her from going to Angel’s parents. She also does not write to Angel about her plight. Angel, on the other hand, is ill in Brazil. He is amazed at Tess’s long silence. He feels she has forgotten him.

At the suggestion of Marian, Tess goes to Flint comb ash and gets an employment there. But here her employer is a hard task master and has an old grudge against her. So he criticizes her for slow work. Here Marian tells Tess how Angel had asked Izz to accompany her to South America. This news saddens Tess all the more. So she decides to go to Emminster Vicarage to get Angel’s whereabouts. As she reaches the vicarage, she finds that he has gone to the church. While she is deciding what to do, Angel’s brothers appear and pass adverse remarks against her. This encounter frustrates her hopes and she leaves without meeting any one. When Tess is returning, she comes across Alec d’Urbervilles who has become a preacher. She tries to slip away, but he follows to overtake, her. He tells that he is making amends and insists on renewing old acquaintance with her. He is still charmed by her beauty. But she does not encourage this. She returns to Flintcomb ash and does not tell anyone about her result of her visit. Alec pays her several visits and offers to help her. He frankly admits that he is in love with her. Tess is troubled by Alec’s dogged persistence, so she writes a pathetic letter to Angel requesting him to come to her or to send for her.

Angel is now repentant. He is fed up of his wanderings, so he wants to return to England. He once confides his troubles to a companion English man who frankly tells him that Angel has acted wrongly towards Tess and suggests that he should go back to her and make amends. Angel still loves Tess so he decides to go back to her. In the meantime, Tess’s mother falls sick. So Tess has to come home and look after her younger brother and sister. The mother recovers, but the father dies. The lease-holder deprives the family of their house
and small farm. The family moves to Kingsbere where they camp near the tombs of their ancestors. Alec again appears and begins to take advantage of the family financial hardships. He offers to help the family, but Tess refuses. She finally writes to Angel. Izz and Marian also write to him to come at once and rescue Tess. In the meantime, the pressures of the family compel Tess to surrender before Alec. Alec takes her to Sandbourne, a gay watering place. Angel returns, but he is almost broken in body and soul. He learns that Tess is not staying with her mother. He sets out to search Tess. He goes to Flint comb Ash from where he again comes to Marlott. He succeeds in getting the information that Tess is in Sandbourne. Angel reaches there by train. He learns from a postman that the d’Urbervilles live at the Herons, a fashionable house. Angel goes there but finds Tess in a very changed condition. Tess asks him to leave her alone. Angel goes out to wander hopelessly.

Soon after Angel’s departure, Tess begins to weep bitterly and accuses Alec of deceiving her. Alec speaks harshly to her. In a fit of anger and desperation, she kills Alec with a kitchen-knife. Soon she leaves the boarding–house and follows Angel. Breathless, she has murdered the villain who had ruined their life. Angel consoles her and promises to protect her. Leaving the main road, they walk into the forest. In a secluded place they stay for five days in an unoccupied manor house. Anyhow on the sixth day they have to come out and reach Stonehenge at midnight. Tess requests Angel to marry her sister Liza Lu if anything happens to her. Soon she falls asleep but wakes up the next morning to find policemen to arrest her. After a formal trial, Tess is sentenced to death on charge of murder. Thus ends the tragic story of Tess. About the plot of a novel, Hardy had his own opinion. According to Hardy, a novel is an impression, not an argument. Hardy also believed that, briefly a story should be an organism.

In the first place, the novel is full of melodramatic elements. As Irving Howe remarks, it is a well-known fact that Hardy’s characters are drawn from Wessex. They
are poor, village people. But the significance of a novel depends largely on its characterization. Hardy’s mastery in this sphere is unquestioned. Hardy loves to depict men and women of strength and stability of character, of a somewhat pagan severity, grand in suffering, simple and resolute. He takes for his chief characters men of powerful natures, men of the country, with little acquired virtue, but disciplined by the experience of life. He surrounds them with men of less strong character and mental refinement, the average country labourers. A third group of men is introduced to contrast with the first-men of superior education and social position but inferior in strength and fineness of nature. To make the plot more complex and varied, a curious group of braggarts and swaggerers is often present, as against this simple and ignorant village folk.

In Tess of the d’Urbervilles, also there are three main set of characters. Tess is the chief character. Alec, Angel and Tess’s parents are like the ‘cogs’ in the machinery. The three milkmaids and the diary labourers are the rustic bystanders. All these characters can be grouped as ‘round’ and ‘flat’. Tess, Angel and Alec are ‘round’, as Hardy shows their gradual evolution. These characters are dynamic and interesting. Tess is vital, full-blooded and essentially fine-hearted. But the minor characters are ‘flat’ or less dynamic. John Durbeyfield and the father of Angel Clare are such characters.

Hardy presents the working of Tess’s mind through his own commands. He records the minutest fluctuations of her emotional experiences. Thus Tess is made real. Hardy emphasizes the emotional life of his chief characters and the actual life of the minor ones. Mostly Hardy exhibits his characters first by their actions, then by their words. Their inner life is left to our imagination. Hardy’s female characters are more finely portrayed than male characters he shows a greater penetrating power by which he delineates his woman characters better than men characters. Hardy’s knowledge of female psychology is superb. His loving female characters, Tess, Bathsheba, Elfride Swan court, Eustacia Vye and others are much
more impressive than Henchard, Angel, Gabriel Oak, Knight, Clym, etc. In Tess, the
classic character of Tess eclipses all other person. Apart from her extraordinary beauty, grace and
vitality, she has mental qualities of a rare and delightful kind. She is sensitive,
impressionable, poetic and heroic. Tess is, in fact, the most charming and loveable of Hardy’s
heroines.

In Hardy’s novels Nature plays a very vital role. To him the earth and its eternal
expression, Nature, are the permanent background against which man lives his brief life of
pleasure and pain, and passes away making room for his successors. In *Tess of the
d’Urbervilles*, Hardy gives a superb background of Nature in order to describe the incidents
of the novel. In fact, for Hardy the use of scene is essential to determine the lives of his
characters. Hardy strongly believed that man’s life is conditioned by his natural surroundings.
Another remarkable feature of Hardy’s treatment of Nature in Tess is that he achieves a
remarkable rapport between Nature and human emotions and moods. In a majority of cases
the natural scenery shown to us at any point in a story will be found to have an emotional
connection with the events happening at that moment.

Characteristically for Hardy, the first chapter introduces us to themes which
will subsequently be fully explored in the central figure of Tess. The novel opens, as it ends,
with two wandering figures. John Durbeyfield’s encounter with Parson Tringham along a
lonely road raises the theme of history, the presence of the past behind and in the present, it
introduces the theme of the fall, “how are the mighty fallen”, and it initiates the theme of the
conflict of impulse and judgement, “However, our impulses are too strong for our judgement
sometimes”. (Tess 28)

Chapter two begins with a description of Marlott which “lay amid the north-
eastern undulations of the beautiful vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor… an engirdled and
secluded region ….. untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape-painter.” In Marlott we are first
introduced to Tess through her participation in the “local Cerealia”. She appears like a living symbol carrying white flowers and a peeled willow-wand and recalls the ancient fertility rites. Tess’s white dress represents her innocence and virginity, while the red ribbon she wears in her hair and her “pouted-up deep red mouth” suggest her sexuality. (Tess 41)

Tess appears in this scene as a tabula rasa on which experience is yet to be written, “a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience” (Tess 42); but the tensions already present within her life and her psyche also first manifest themselves here. Tess is seen both as withdrawn – it is because of her “backwardness” that Angel Clare does not notice her in the dance – and as proud. She is mortified by the ludicrous appearance of her father, and responds aggressively to the derisive laughter of her companions. Tess’s tone here is both defensive and aggressive, and the club-walkers are silenced, but the narrator also suggests the potential danger of a loss of self-control in Tess.

A more important passage that shows Tess’s implicit sense of separation from the world of custom and communication at this stage is the following:

Mrs. Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the sixth standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality… Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (Tess 48-51)

In this stage of her life at Marlott, and throughout most of the novel’s crucial events, Tess is insistently described as in a state of unconsciousness, reverie or sleep, linked with mist and halo imagery. Her dreamy distraction reinforces her estrangement and makes
her look like a real alien in the surrounding world. As Tess drives the cart toward Casterbridge in chapter four, she lapses into contemplation of her place in the universe. The association of Tess’s fall into sleep with that of little Abraham provides both a parallel and a contrast with their parents. John and Joan D’urbeyfield escape reality by their drinking and romantic notions, while Tess and Abraham fall into nightmarish visions of that same reality. They all lapse into defense mechanisms to shun responsibility, they are all escapists. In her pride, Tess rejects all the help she could have got to do a job which she was not able to do herself. The scene shows Tess’s lack of realism. It is the exact opposite of her parents’ irresponsibility. Tess also assumes too much blame when things go wrong. After telling Abraham that they live on a blighted planet, thus suggesting that they are not responsible for what happens to them, she sees the death of prince as entirely her fault. The novel demonstrates a full explanation of human experience both external events and personal responsibility which converge in the life of Tess.

The trip to Trantridge comes immediately out of the circumstance surrounding the death of Prince. It is the sense of guilt at having killed the family’s bread winner that chiefly compels her to go there. Thus Hardy expresses Tess’s division of consciousness and her separation from her parents, but again her own pride is also an issue. Tess is forced to choose between the shameless opportunism of the one and the feckless vanity of the other. Coaxed by her mother, pricked by her sense of guilt and pressed by the hard economic realities of her family, she decides to go.

Tess’s arrival at the d’Urbervilles’ estate represents a new crucial stage in her life, for she is confronted for the first time with both wealth and sexual aggression. Her response is predictably ambivalent. The Club-walking had already revealed her attraction to men of a different class from her own, and so Alec d’Urberville represents a new world that Tess cannot entirely resist. She seems like the chaste lady in Comus or the Eve of paradise
lost. In both of Milton’s narratives the woman is offered dangerous food. Here, Tess accepts a strawberry from Alec, in a scene that anticipates her seduction.

The pattern of their relationship is established at this first meeting. Just as she has submitted to her mother’s scheme, she is expected to submit to Alec’s advances. On their second meeting, after she is forced to hold on to his waist, her submission is symbolized when she receives “the kiss of mastery”. Tess, clearly, underestimates the danger and decides against returning home and abandoning the scheme to rehabilitate her family. The ambivalence of Tess’s relations with Alec in these scenes is always complicated, too, by her financial reliance on Alec. This economic dimension in Tess’s very complex relations with Alec will figure again in the chase scene, as well as in the later scenes at Flintcomb – Ash and Sandbourne.

The Chaseborough dance and its aftermath are very important precursors of the seduction scene in The Chase. Although Tess had first resisted the invitations of her fellow-workers to go to Chaseborough, she follows them “again and again” to escape from her “monotonous attention to the poultry-farm all the week” The dance itself is portrayed as another possibility of escape into a dream. Changing partners simply meant that a satisfactory choice had not as yet been arrived at by one or other of the pair, and by this time every couple had been suitably matched. It was then the ecstasy and the universe, and matter of the universe, and matter but an adventitious intrusion likely to hinder you from spinning where you wanted to spin. (Tess 97)

As she stands watching the dance, Tess is beset by the temptation to participate. She resists and, as she returns home with the Trantridge revellers, she continues to keep aloof from the drunken atmosphere surrounding her. But as “a black stream of [treacle] glisten[ing] like a slimy snake in the cold still rays of the moon” trickles down Car Darch’s neck, Tess finally joins the communal ecstasy and bursts into laughter. (Tess 99-100)
Tess’s laughter makes her the focus of her companions’ jealousy and antagonism. Her response is characteristic. When Alec d’Urberville arrives on his horse and invites Tess to jump behind him, Tess takes the opportunity to satisfy all her conflicting impulses. Tess “abandoned herself to impulse”, a danger to which we have been altered in the novel’s opening scene. (Tess 35)

Tess is driven by impulse to her tragic course, just as Bathsheba is driven by impulse to send Boldwood a valentine. Hardy seems to suggest that a person can release destructive forces when his impulses are not in harmony with or controlled by his judgment. Nowhere is Tess’s self-division clearer than when her ultimate impulse delivers her from car Darch into the far more dangerous company of Alec d’Urberville. On the way to The Chase borough, Alec gradually and intelligently reduces her mood of aggressive triumph over her companions to one of defeat and submission to him. She “expressed no further negative” to his advances. When he mentions the horse and gifts he has given her family, Tess is reduced to tears. She has become completely passive.

The seduction scene is one of the most controversial in Hardy not only because what happens in the darkness and silence of The Chase is ambiguous, but also because Tess’s feelings about Alec are ambivalent. Tess’s “Violation” is not directly described. “It exists in the gap between the paragraphs in which the event has not yet occurred and those which see it as already part of the irrevocable past”. (JHM 117) None of the crucial acts of violence in the novel are directly described; the killing of the horse, the murder of Alec, the execution of Tess, all happen off-stage. But whether Tess was raped or seduced by Alec is a particularly crucial question because on it rests the meaning of the novel, as a history of “a pure woman faithfully presented”. The novel does not provide any conclusive answer to the question. As Penny Boumelha has remarked, Tess’s sexuality is ultimately ‘unknowable and unpresentable’ by the narrator, and he withdraws completely
from her consciousness at the most crucial moments in her life, the moment when she was wakened to Alec’s return in The Chase, the weeks following that scene when she was his mistress (if she was), the time of the discovery of her pregnancy and the birth of her child, the moment when she decided to return to Alec and then to murder him and flee with Angel. (PB 121-126)

Indeed, Tess’s “real” thoughts and feelings are rarely presented in the novel, except when she suffers the consequences of her actions. Her moral choices seem suffers the consequences of her actions. Her moral choices seem obscured in ambivalence, while their results are vividly portrayed. Ian Gregor sounds more reasonable when he says, “it is both a seduction and a rape … we could say that as a woman, Tess feels it to be a seduction in the way the strawberry scene hints at; as an individual person, she knows it was rape, there were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in The Chase. (IG 182)

While Hardy relies on subtle and indirect techniques for building ambiguity, the scene in The Chase, on the other hand, reveals Tess’s emotional confusion about Alec. Though she admits she does not love him, she has remained there for about three months. When he rails at her for playing with his feelings and eluding him, and wants to treat her as a lover, Tess is unsure of how to respond: We know each other well; … Mayn’t I treat you as a lover?” She drew a quick pettish breath of objection, writhing uneasily on her seat, looked for ahead, and murmured, ‘I don’t know – I wish – how can I say yes or no when – ’He settled the matter by clasping his arm round her as he desired, and Tess expressed no further negative. (Tess 104)

Tess’s subsequent account of their relationship confirms her ambivalence with Alec. She insists she had never sincerely loved him, but “My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all.” Tess is attracted to Alec, not because of his charm and flattery, but essentially because of what he is. Alec d’Urberville is not simply a stereotyped villain of
Victorian melodrama, with attributes like his “full lips, badly moulded”, his moustache, cigar, reckless driving and plotting. Nor is he the unregenerate human villain enlarged into Satan. Doubtless in the presentation of Alec there are diabolical hints which we should not ignore, but equally we should not give them too much weight. Alec is rather the ordinary, sensual, willful and intelligent man who wants his own way. Hardy may have started by thinking of Alec as a villain – rapist who preys upon innocent girls. But Hardy’s creative imagination sees in these man qualities that make him more than a figure of disgust.

Tess’s guilt so overpowers her that she speaks of loathing and hating herself for her weakness. Alec tries to shake off her melancholy, yet the depth of her feeling is indicated in her wish that she had never been born. If there is a leitmotif in Tess’s life henceforth, it is the reiteration of her wish to die. We see her back in her father’s house, feeling terribly depressed and wanting to hide herself in a tomb: Hardy describes Tess in the following passage at the end of chapter 13:

The only exercise that Tess took at this time was after dark; and it was then, when out in the woods, that she seemed least solitary. She knew how to hit to a hair’s breadth that moment of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty, It is then that the plight of being alive becomes attenuated to its least possible dimensions. She had no fear of the shadow; her sole idea seemed to be to shun mankind – or rather that cold accretion called the world, which, so terrible in the mass, is so unformidable, even pitiable, in its units. On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part after own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were. The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly- wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulae of
bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the
mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not class definitely as the god of her
childhood, and could not comprehend as any other. (Tess 120)

Tess has been transformed into a miserable estranged woman. She has come to
feel “the ache of modernism”, she is to be “a true inheritor of the modern world and to
receive what for Hardy is its distinctive legacy, that interior conflict which he describes as
‘the mutually destructive interdependence of flesh and spirit’. (IG 183)

The line which separates the world from her consciousness of the world becomes
difficult to draw, ‘the world is only a psychological phenomenon”. Her habit of reverie, of
self-withdrawal is now carried to an extreme. Her baby is born, she works as a field-woman:

Tess ….. somewhat changed - the same, but not the same ; at the present stage
offer existence living as a stranger and an alien here, though it was no strange land that she
was in. after a long seclusion she had come to a resolve to undertake outdoor work in her
native village. (Tess 124)

Tess is in a state of trance, in a state of weightlessness, present but unseeing,
benumbed and moving mechanically and perfunctorily. Around her, other field girls feel
sympathy for the “estranged”:

There were they that heard a sobbing one night last
year in The Chase ; and it mid ha’ gone hard wi ‘a
certain party if folks had come along…
‘twas a thousand pities that it should have happened to
she, of all others. But ‘tis always the comeliest! The
plain ones be as safe as churches –…(Tess 126)

The already existing gap between Tess and Marlott is now at its widest, and
Tess reaches her most extreme isolation with the death of her baby, Sorrow. The scene of the
solitary candle – lit figure of Tess performing the sacred religious rite of baptizing her baby, taking sole responsibility for the baby’s salvation, is really most heart-rending. The scene is moving because the “act of approximation” is made divine and meaningful not by virtue of the rite itself, but by the intrinsic value of a wronged individual human being standing at the centre of Christian religion:

The ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her, it set
upon her face a glowing irradiation, and brought a red
spot into the middle of each cheek…. The children
gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no
longer had a will for questioning, she did not look
like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering,
and awful – a divine personage with whom they had
nothing in common..(Tess 131)

Tess is also baptized in the scene as a suffering human being. “Conception in sorrow, toil for daily bread, frailty, and awareness – of human estrangement are to define the newly-created woman in place of nobility, human and divine, and innocence lost.” (JB 52)

Tess at an instant begins to reconsider her life more detachedly. Her powerful vitality struggles against her despair. Urged by the pulse of hope, she tries to forget the past. Tess’s decision to leave shows the complex woman she has become since her education at Trantridge. On one point she was resolved: “there should be no more d’Urberville air-castles in the dreams and deeds of her new life. She would be the dairymaid Tess and nothing more.”(Tess 135) For all the wisdom of such a resolve, it is simply impossible for one with her emotional nature and intellectual potential to achieve.

The gradual development of Tess’s relationship with Angel Clare – particularly the triumph of Tess’s loving nature over her self-repressive reluctance – is one of
the finest creations in all of Hardy’s novels. Though she loves him, her sense of his superiority leads her to the self-abnegation of encouraging him to choose one of the other milkmaids for his wife. Eventually, Angel’s persistence overcomes her determination never to be tempted to marry again.

From the start Tess tends to see Angel as more than a man, she idealizes him:

There was hardly a touch of earth in her love for Clare ‚” he was all that goodness could be … She thought every line in the contour of his person the perfection of masculine beauty, his soul the soul of a saint, his intellect that of a seer … He would sometimes catch her large, worshipful eyes, that had no bottom to them, looking at him from their depths, as if she saw something immortal before her.(Tess 234)

Angel, too, idealizes Tess and sees her “a visionary essence of woman”, each idealizes the other. In her wedding night Tess perceives Angel’s idealizing attitude. As soon as she consents to marry Angel, she remains undecided whether or not to tell him of her relationship with Alec, “she dismissed the past – trod upon it and put it out, as one treads on a coal that is smouldering and dangerous”. When she decides to inform Angel of her past relationship with Alec, all her attempts fail. Tess must be seen as responsible for this failure which is at the very heart of her story. It is the kingpin of the plot for it is the direct cause of her tragedy; it is an irreparable error, and leads, in the end to her murder of Alec and to her execution. Tess’s inability to reveal her past to Angel corresponds with his inability to sense that she has something to say, this inability to communicate proceeds from deep uncertainties within themselves.
Tess’s sense of guilt at concealing her weakness with Alec convinces her that she does not deserve her good fortune and calls for punishment. With Tess’s confession at Welbridge Manor a new phase of Tess’s alienated consciousness begins. It is quite easy for Tess to forgive Angel for his “eight-and-forty hours’ dissipation with a stranger” (Tess 267) because he is the object of her idolatry; the god before whom she placed her guilt and to whose judgement and punishment she willingly submits. Her feeling of his superiority over her not only rules out her condemning him but also reinforces her sense of unworthiness and her tendency toward self-pity and self-sacrifice. Tess’s real terror is apparent as soon as Angel begins to see her as she sees herself “a guilty woman”. (Tess 272)

Tess’s dire need to love and be loved by Angel makes her immolate herself. This is starkly clear when, moments after her confession, Tess suggests that she does not belong to Angel. This passivity and inaction can sometimes be as destructive as action. Tess’s sense that she has no right to tamper with his life, her refusal to anger him made his way easy for him. Because Tess persists in considering Angel her lord, and therefore, she must endure humiliation and deprivation. After she is abandoned by Angel, she cannot return to her father’s home and she is forced to seek work on Flintcomb – Ash farm to support herself.

Angel’s middle-class fastidiousness makes him reject Tess, a woman whom Hardy presents as a sort of Wessex Eve, in harmony with the natural world. When Angel parts from her and goes to Brazil, the handsome young man gets so ill that he is reduced to a "mere yellow skeleton". All these instances have been interpreted as indications of the negative consequences of man’s separation from nature, both in the creation of destructive machinery and in the inability to rejoice in pure and unadulterated nature. If Tess’s life at Talbothay’s is characterized by illusion and dream, her life at Flintcomb – Ash is characterized by physical hardship. Flintcomb-Ash brings sharply to the senses the bleak sterility of life without hope, without love. The severity of the weather and its physical effects
on Tess and Marian, the inhumanity of Farmer Groby, the infertility of the land and the obduracy of the earth all suggest the obliteration of human identity. Tess in the fields is the typical isolated worker who works on the farm mechanically and without the least interest or enthusiasm. She is inhumanly exploited by Farmer Groby in return for a few pence that hardly sustain life. We see her in the fields barely distinguishable from the land or the land from her.

Nothing could be more reductive of the size and significance of the human being. Flintcomb-Ash is associated with the impersonal threshing machine which has changed the reaping ritual into a meaningless process. The horses and local driver, who understood every stage of the reaping ritual, have been replaced by the itinerant Northern engineer, described less as a person than as a mechanical function, who “had nothing to do with preparatory labour” and remained isolated from the agricultural scene. Flintcomb-Ash, too, has been invaded by the “ache of modernism”. The thresher is a soulless ‘red tyrant’ that gears the workers to its insatiable demands, and the dominance of machinery in late nineteenth-century Wessex was one of the factors which exiled men from work rooted in nature and defined them by the profit motive and the production schedule.

In the valley of the Great Dairies, the division in Tess’s consciousness had thrown her into the world of reverie and illusion. Flintcomb-Ash threatens her with physical suffering which she has to endure, like the strange birds, with “dumb impassivity”. In her physically exhausting and spiritually demeaning existence, Tess takes advantage of her position as Angel’s wife to see Angel’s parents. The attempt fails and Hardy goes on to rebuke her and suggest that it is Tess who is at fault here.

In order to repel all other men she “mercilessly nipped her eyebrows off and thus insured against aggressive admiration”. (Tess 328) She even hates all other men and likes them to think scornfully of her. All this is done to sustain her love for Angel to whom
she still hopes to be reconciled. Unfortunately, Alec appears and renews his importunities before Tess hears from Angel. When Alec taunts Tess with accusing her of his backsliding and tells her “to leave that mule you call your husband forever”, (Tess 379) instinctively “she passionately swung the glove by the gauntlet directly in his face…. and in a moment the blood began dropping from his mouth”. (Tess 379) Then she tells him:

Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people

Under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim,

always victim – that’s the law. (Tess 379)

Tess challenges Alec with the whole of her being, she sees him not just as her seducer, but as a whole complex of interrelated forces. Like the young men at Chalk-Newton, Alec attacks Tess in lust for her body which she values only because it belongs to Angel.

It is now that Hardy explicitly introduces the agricultural and economic crisis that has overtaken Wessex and turned families, like the Durbeyfields, into migratory ‘labour’. The last phases of the novel are dominated not only by Tess’s consciousness but also the money, changing methods of work and migration of families. The social and economic conditions in Wessex give a new dimension to Tess’s alienated consciousness. On the other hand Marxist critic Raymond Williams in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* questions the identification of Tess with a peasantry destroyed by industrialization. Williams sees Tess not as a peasant, but an educated member of the rural working class, who suffers a tragedy through being thwarted, in her aspirations to socially rise and her desire for a good life (which includes love and sex), not by industrialism, but by the landed bourgeoisie (Alec), liberal idealism (Angel) and Christian moralism in her family's village (RW 112).

These social and economic conditions produced people like Alec who is associated with the world of Flintcomb-Ash and the threshing machine. This world is “inseparable from nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism, it is the triumph of the
individual bourgeois ethic, what is wanted can be bought”. (IG 192) Alec wants Tess’s body and her estrangement from Angel leaves her spiritually dead. Alec’s victory over Tess now is the result of her accepting this division within herself to such an extent that, when Angel meets her at Sandbourne, he feels “that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers—allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will” (Tess 429). Alec has mastered Tess twice, in the first time, she was a victim of her ambivalent nature, in the second, and she is a tragic heroine. Her body, which has caused her so much misery and which, she thinks, no longer seems desirable, is worthless. This is symbolically indicated when she kills the wounded peasants to put them out of their misery. When she exchanges her flesh for Alec’s economic help for her and her family, she ceases to recognize her body. As Hillis Miller rightly comments,

Tess has also been seen as a personification of nature and her association with animals throughout the novel emphasizes this idea. Tess's misfortunes begin when she falls asleep while driving Prince to market, and causes the horse's death; at Trantridge, she becomes a poultry-keeper; she and Angel fall in love amid cows in the fertile from valley; and on the road to Flintcomb-Ash, she kills some wounded peasants to end their suffering. However, Tess emerges as a powerful character not because of this symbolism but because Hardy's feelings for her were strong, perhaps stronger than for any of his other invented personages. (JHM 119)

Tess suffers, not only because of inner divisions in herself, but also because of her society’s unwillingness to accept her attempts to achieve perfect harmony of being with Angel. She is thwarted by the attitudes of the society in which she lives. The conventional view of her as an unmarried mother affects her tremendously and causes latent psychological disturbance to come to surface. Society is the real agent of destruction, and it is represented both as something outside Tess and as a part of her personality. Hardy lends breadth to Tess’s
experience in her wanderings over the face of England, from the lush, rural farmland of the
south to the flinty, harsh soil of the north, but the forces that pursue her are endemic to her
whole world and are grounded in the personalities of Alec, Angel, and Tess’s parents.

Hardy makes Angel’s rejection of Tess quite convincing by relating it to his
idealization of her. He shows him withdrawing from reality by refusing to admit that she is
the woman he loved. Then Angel is no longer able to disguise the fact that he has been
treating Tess as his inferior and begins to despise her:

Don’t, Tess; don’t argue. Different societies,
different manners. You almost make me say you are an
unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been
initiated into the proportions of social things. (Tess 275)

Angel’s attempts to justify the rejection are largely concerned with “what people
will think”. The coexistence in Angel Clare of “the man of advanced ideas” and the “slave of
customs and conventionality” splinters his consciousness dividing him against himself. (Tess
285)

Failure to understand Angel’s rejection of Tess makes us miss the whole
character of Angel Clare. In Angel’s view, Tess had concealed from him a fact of such
fundamental importance that she misrepresented her nature and her character to him. From
this Hardy broaches a very serious issue, that extent to which one’s past history affects the
present, particularly when that history involves moral choices. Hardy’s explanation is very
clear that the individual’s self conceptions reflect social opinion and that the Society is woven
firmly into the fabric of individual psychology.

Hardy, on the one hand, is challenging the conventional views of his
contemporary readers in persuading them to accept Tess’s purity; on the other hand,
suggesting that this acceptance does not justify condemnation of Angel who, for social and
psychological reasons, cannot grasp this idea. The conflict in Angel between his “advanced ideas” and received attitudes of his “early teachings” has produced Angel Clare’s alienated consciousness, a symptom of the ache of modernism. Thus through Tess and Angel Hardy has emoted the reader a real sense of estrangement. These bitter sentiments define the angst and pain which Tess has evolved throughout the novel. To reinforce, the sense of estrangement, so powerful and pervasive in the novel from beginning to end Hardy draws lavishly on the ironies of the plot.