

“Now All Was Contrary to Her Expectation”: Destructive Expectations in Tess of the d’Urbervilles

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ABSTRACT

Up until now, scholars have not analysed the destructive role that expectations play in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. This article will therefore attend to this subject by exploring a series of relationships depicted in Thomas Hardy’s novel. To do so, this study will begin with the “fatal love” of Tess Durbeyfield and Angel Clare (Garson 130). Both individuals share confessions upon their wedding night that challenge the very foundations upon which their relationship was built. Having both held idealised perceptions of the other, Tess and Angel are forced to either adjust to these new parameters or see their relationship destroyed. Where Angel adopts a rigid inflexibility of conviction, Tess adapts her opinions and expectations, extending this behaviour to her relationship with Alec d’Urberville. In doing so, Tess is able to accommodate the changing and sometimes contradictory elements of the other characters’ identities. However, Tess fails to extend this courtesy to herself when presented with situations that she cannot control. Instead, Tess internalises perceptions of her behaviour that result in unjust opinions and unreasonable expectations of herself. Therefore, through critically examining these events and characters, this article will demonstrate how the perpetuation of rigid expectations can be detrimental to individuals and relationships alike.

Simple Tess Durbeyfield stood at gaze, in half-alarmed attitude, on the edge of the gravel sweep. Her feet had brought her onward to this point before she had quite realized where she was; and now all was contrary to her expectation. (Hardy 44)

In describing Tess Durbeyfield’s movements here, Thomas Hardy metaphorically represents the unconscious process through expectations are formed and abruptly challenged by reality. This figurative interpretation of this quotation epitomises a central tenet of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* that has previously been ignored by scholars, the role of expectations in the novel. With this in mind, this article shall attend to this gap in the scholarship by arguing that the role is predominantly a destructive one. This can be seen in the ways that preconceptions influence (and in some instances govern) the characters’ relationships, through the imposition and enforcement of expectations. When these expectations are challenged, so then are often the very foundations of the relationship. Therefore, to successfully maintain healthy and mutually-beneficial relationships, the participants need to be able to adapt to change. Not least because the individuals involved are themselves changeable and fluid in their identities. In Hardy’s novel, the most obvious example of this necessity is exposed in Tess Durbeyfield’s relationship with Angel Clare. Angel perceives Tess to be “a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature” (Hardy 136). However, this is suddenly disproved when Tess confesses to her illegitimate pregnancy on the night of their wedding (Hardy 136). Upon receiving this information, Angel leaves Tess and travels to Brazil. Thus, Tess becomes one of many women who are fatally “accused of betraying the form in which men love them” (Childers 331). On the same night of Tess’s confession, her idealised perception of Angel is also challenged.

As such, these events serve to represent marriage as “no longer the goal toward which everything inevitably tends; it is, instead an object of the text's ethical scrutiny” (Larson 44). Simultaneously, love is portrayed as “a condition to be illustrated, scrutinized, anatomized” and further scrutiny of Tess’s love for Angel reveals that she, unlike him, is open-minded and flexible in her opinions and expectations should the situation require it (Irwin 194). Tess also exercises this with respect to her relationship with Alec d’Urberville, whom she initially idealises and then becomes cautious of. In doing so, Tess is able to accommodate the changing and sometimes contradictory elements of the other characters. This quality appears to be valued in Hardy’s work given that the literature is grounded in the notion “that people cannot be construed as stable, unitary selves” but rather are multiple selves in a single being (Mitchell 277). With such a flexible model of identity, self-definitions might be considered the most accurate in instances of conflict and contradiction. This argument is implicit in Marjorie Garson’s interpretation that will be both explored and subsequently contested below. To do so, Tess’s intrapersonal relationship will be analysed, revealing that her interpretations of herself are just as fallible and flawed as those that her peers have of her (if not even more so). From this investigation, the benefits of disregarding the pursuit of singular and fixed notions of identity will be demonstrated, with particular reference to the establishment of expectations. Tess accomplishes this, except when being presented with behaviour outside of her control. Here Tess fails to adapt her expectations of herself to that which is fair and reasonable given the circumstances. As such, this article will analyse the characters and events outlined above to exhibit the problematic nature of expectations in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

Upon engaging in all types of relationships, it is only a natural and expected practice to form opinions and expectations of each other based upon one’s preconceived notions and prejudices. In Angel’s case, for example, he “falls in love with Tess [...] because for him she epitomizes the innocence and beauty of the natural way of life that he has chosen in turning from religion to agriculture” (Irwin 200). This is evident in Angel’s perception of Tess as “a woman who possessed every qualification to be the helpmate of an agriculture”, “a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names” (Hardy 180; 146). Tess attempts to reject Angel’s characterisation, replying “Call me Tess”, “[r]epudiating pseudonymity, she quietly asserts her own identity when Angel would condense her to a type” (Hardy 146; Morgan, “Passive Victim?” 73-74). Rosemarie Morgan argues that Tess therefore “seeks at once to ‘cleanse’ him of his illusive vision of her and to resist his appropriation, by renaming, of her person” (“Passive Victim?” 74). Unfortunately, Tess is not successful and Angel continues to expect Tess to be “honest-hearted, receptive, intelligent, graceful to a degree, chaste as a vestal and in personal appearance exceptionally beautiful” (Hardy 181). The severe extent to which Angel holds onto these views is revealed when they are fundamentally challenged during his wedding night. Having disclosed his “forty-eight-hour dissipation with a stranger” to Tess, she responds in kind, telling him about her illegitimate pregnancy (Huang 150). Tess asks for forgiveness, having “forgiven [him] for the same”, however Angel is quick to state that “forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another” (Hardy 248). Angel’s behaviour here might seem somewhat unreasonable, particularly in a modern context. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that Angel “is speaking [his] truth” (Irwin 201). The chastity and honesty with which Angel classifies Tess is unquestionably destroyed by these revelations. Whilst of course his attachment to his opinions (and the opinions themselves) can be seen as fundamentally flawed, the idealised version that Angel has “been loving is not” the Tess she is revealed to be (Hardy 248). Through Angel, the readers are therefore encouraged to understand “that most of us are born with, or proceed to acquire, romantic predilections of a certain cast, and that our longing to satisfy them can lead us to project that preferred image onto some unsuitable object” (Irwin 201). As exemplified by Angel, this means that infatuation with “a subjective image [...] is doomed to die once the image is confuted and effaced by the real personality of the individual in question” (Irwin 206). In other words, Angel typifies the potential dangers and damages that the strict adherence to idealised perceptions (and by extension expectations) can have upon relationships.

This night also provides the setting for the destruction of Tess’s idealised perception of Angel. Much like Angel’s idolisation of Tess, she adores him like a “godlike deity” (Shakury 93). This is evident when Tess reflects upon her pre-confession self as someone who was “amazed and enraptured” by Angel, tending towards an “excess of honour for Clare” (Hardy 211). Given the reference to “excess”, readers are led to see not only the vast depths of

Tess's love, but also its potential to be(come) disproportionate and overpowering. This intense and ultimately "fatal love for Angel" prevents Tess from being able (or even willing) to see the more unpleasant elements of Angel's character (Garson 130). Consequently, Angel's harsh reaction to Tess's confession is unexpected for Tess. This is illustrated in her exclamation

"I thought, Angel, that you loved me – me, my very self! If it is I you do love, O how can it be that you look and speak so? It frightens me! Having begun to love you, I love you for ever – in all changes, in all my disgraces, because you are yourself. I ask no more. Then how can you, O my own husband, stop loving me?" (Hardy 248)

Yongliang Huang highlights how naïve this is of Tess given that Angel's actions are consistent with his characteristically "dogmatic and obstinate" outlook (150). This is apparent in Angel's "[e]arly association with country solitudes [that] had bred in him unconquerable, and almost unreasonable, aversion to modern town-life" (Hardy 132). Whilst Tess may not have been privy to the entire extent of his aversions, Angel unmistakably makes clear his expectations of Tess in his openly-stated judgements (as detailed above). For these reasons, Tess appears "improbably naïve" to assume that Angel will forgive her (Garson 137). This is substantiated by the observation that "[s]he was awestricken to discover such determination under such apparent flexibility. His consistency was, indeed, too cruel. She no longer expected forgiveness now" (Hardy 262). Tess appears to have seen "flexibility" where it was not, whilst failing to recognise the most dependable quality of Angel's, "[h]is consistency". It is only at this moment that Tess realises that her forgiveness of Angel will not be traded for her own. Under this interpretation of forgiveness as an exchange, readers can infer Tess's flexibility to adjust her expectations to the circumstances and behaviour around her. Similarly, when Tess ultimately meets Alec d'Urberville, he "displaces [her] idealized anticipation of him" (Nunokawa 78-79). This is most evident when Tess's dreams "of an aged and dignified face" are shattered by the young Mr. d'Urberville's "swarthy complexion [... and the] barbarism in his contours" (Hardy 45). Tess's surprise is exposed by the statement, "[t]his embodiment of a d'Urberville [...] differed [...] from what Tess had expected" (Hardy 45). Whilst it does not take any particular strength of character to adjust one's expectations of another appearance upon meeting them, Tess is markedly quick to adapt her expectations of Alec's "dignified faced" to the perceived "barbarism in his contours". The point being, Tess personifies an alternative to Angel's inflexibility in her ability to concede and accept a disparity between the expected and existing personality traits of Alec d'Urberville.

At the core of these tensions between expectation and reality is that permanent and immovable ideas of the former are being placed upon identities that are fluctuating and unfixated in the latter. The ambiguous nature of identity is reflected in Judith Mitchell's characterisation of Hardy's work as having an elliptical style, inconclusive endings and the production of a "narrative stance [that] cannot be pinned down" (275). This is achieved in part by Hardy's ability to construct "eloquent and copious evidence on either side of the case", but ultimately leaving "the reader to decide which of the extreme positions is the more persuasive" (Irwin 208). In fact, Hardy arguably goes even further than this, encouraging his readers not to adopt one "extreme position" or another, but rather to allow for a more complex and seemingly contradictory stance. At the same time, there are several paratextual techniques used that also contribute to the novel's overall ambiguity. For example, there were several editions of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* published that differed in plot. In some cases, these amendments were quite drastic, particularly with respect to the "seduction/rape of Tess [... that] is carefully presented so as to have an ambiguous character" (Baron 126). Having generated vast scholarly debate on the content that is consistent across the editions, the discourse has been further complicated by decisions like the removal of "all references to intoxicating liquors in the 1892 edition" (Davis 107). More specifically, Tess's identity in particular is represented to be fluid and changeable with the replacement of "the customary literary demarcation, 'Book', with 'Phase' ('Phase the First', 'Phase the Second', and so on)" (Morgan, "Passive Victim?" 70). This is because, implicit in the term "Phase", is that these are mere stages in the ever-changing development and evolution of the character. As such, Tess is a particularly convincing mechanism through which the unfixated nature of identity is demonstrated. Given that one's identity is proven to change, questions of subjectivity and

reliability of interpretation are raised. These ideas are reflected in Marjorie Garson's suggestion that Hardy "set[s] up his narrative in terms of the dangers of misreading his heroine", and that the "novel as a whole is a plea for a specific reading of Tess" (140). Importantly, implicit in the notion of misreading is the concept of a real Tess who must be differentiated from [...] the inner Tess, the Tess as she herself experiences herself, to which we as readers are apparently given a privileged insight (Garson 140).

But what exactly differentiates a "misreading" from Hardy's "specific reading"? Are either of these the so-called 'correct' reading? Does such a thing even exist? In this instance, for example, Tess's interpretation of herself is privileged over those formed by others. However, as the next section will show, Tess's perceptions and expectations of herself are arguably just as problematic as those held by others about her. It will therefore be shown that readings and interpretations are incredibly complex and cannot be reduced to mere self-identification or notions of 'correct' and 'incorrect'.

The flaws in Tess's self-perception are rooted in her failure to extend the adaptability of her mindset to her opinions and expectations of herself. Essentially, Tess is depicted as having internalised the belief that the victim of sexual assault is in partially complicit or responsible. Previously in this article, it has been outlined that there is ambiguity as to whether Tess is raped or seduced. Here, it will be argued that whilst Hardy does attempt to achieve this ambiguity, the argument for the former is indisputably more compelling. This will involve extending Marcia Baron's interpretation of Hardy's work as an attempt to challenge "the assumption that women who do not resist to the utmost are to some extent responsible for what happened to them and are at any rate not properly viewed as victims of a rape" (140). It is specified that Alec calls to Tess, "[t]here was no answer [h]e knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face", at which point it is noted that "[s]he was sleeping soundly" (Hardy 82). Devoid of graphic detail, the reader is informed of the sexual intercourse through the transition implied by the section titles, "Phase the First: The Maiden" to "Phase the Second: Maiden No More" (Hardy 83-87). As is clear above, Tess is asleep and thus unable "to consent to Alec's advances", undeniably meaning that what follows is rape (Davis 106). Victorian law confirms this definition, stating that an asleep woman is "incapable of consent, and although no violence [might have been] used, the prisoner may be convicted of rape, if he knew that she was asleep" (Davis 106). "English courts upheld the idea that a sleeping woman was incapable of giving her consent to sexual intercourse" in the cases of *R. V. Mayers* (1872), *R. v. Young* (1878) and *R. v. Ryan* (1846), for example (Davis 106). Hence, it is not only obvious that Tess is asleep, but that Alec was aware of this fact and therefore unquestionably raped her. Despite these incontrovertible facts, Tess still fails to apportion blame where it is due, instead blaming her mother for failing to raise and educate her properly.

Tess turns passionately upon her parent as if her poor heart would break. "How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!" (Hardy 94)

Underpinning these criticisms is the belief that young and inexperienced Tess needed to have been taught better by her mother to have been safe from Alec, and men in general. However, it is of significance that Tess already displays signs of caution towards Alec, without the education that she expected from her mother. Tess's first verbal interaction begins with Alec asking, "Well, my beauty, what can I do for you?" (Hardy 45). Upon the hindsight that the reader is permitted to possess, this introduction has considerably disturbing undertones. However, even at this early stage, Tess has already noted the aforementioned "barbarism in his contours" (Hardy 45). Where Tess might have recognised Alec's sinister intentions, her family are delighted in his apparent fondness of her and thus try to convince Tess to work for the d'Urbervilles with the intention that she would get closer to the family and later marry Alec. To this Tess responds, "I don't know what to say!" answered the girl restlessly. "It is for you to decide. [...] But – but – I don't quite like Mr d'Urberville being there!" (Hardy 53) "Under pressure from her mother [in particular ... eventually] Tess very reluctantly accepts employment on the d'Urberville estate" (Baron 132). Tess's reluctance exemplifies her instinctive distrust of Alec who she presumably sees as potentially dangerous, or at the very least unsettling. It is important to note here that Mrs. Durbeyfield's intentions for her daughter mean that had she educated

her daughter better; she still would have been unlikely to do anything to endanger the potential connection between the pair. Tess's mother later admits as much in the aftermath of Tess's rape, "I thought if I spoke of his fond feelings, and what they might lead to, you would be hontish wi' him, and lose your chance," she murmured, wiping her eyes with her apron" (Hardy 94). Mrs. Durbeyfield here appears remorseful for withholding Alec's "fond feelings, and what they might lead to" when she presumably wipes her tears away. However, just because Tess's mother might feel sorry for her part in what happened to Alec, does not make her responsible for it any more than Tess is. Importantly, however, other than Tess's intuition, her mother had no reason to suspect Alec of predatory behaviour, irrespective of how beneficial the relationship could have been for the family. Furthermore, in spite of Mrs. Durbeyfield's best efforts, Tess never fully embraces Alec and instead remains wary of him throughout their interactions. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Tess acted with the same (if not similar) caution that she would have, had she had been taught about the "danger in men-folk". In fact, Tess's mother inadvertently encourages her daughter to be wary of Alec given that Tess's "unease is compounded by her mother's eagerness for her to marry the wealthy Mr. d'Urberville" (Baron 132). However, even if this had not been the case, the fact remains that a woman's awareness of the danger that men can pose, does not protect or prevent her from being violated. But rather than adapt her expectations of herself and Alec, Tess instead unreasonably expects her mother to protect and prevent her from any harm done onto her by a man. In doing so, Tess also internalises her mother's claims that she "ought to have been more careful, if [she] didn't mean to get him to make [her] his wife!" (Hardy 94). Notably Tess does not challenge the central premise that acting differently would have caused a different outcome. Instead, Tess merely argues that she was not equipped with the tools to act differently. As such, Tess fails to recognise that she was raped because of how a man chose to act and not because of any of her behaviours. Both Tess and her mother place the burden of expectation wrongly, which not only is destructive to their relationship but to Tess as an individual. As a result of these opinions and expectations, Tess comes to believe herself complicit and responsible for something that quite simply was not her fault. This materialises in Tess's aforementioned desire for forgivingness from Angel and the subsequent anguish that she suffers when she doesn't receive it. Tess therefore misses the most essential point; she does not need to be forgiven because she has not done anything wrong. Instead, Tess is influenced by those around her and subsequently formulates uncompromising opinions and expectations of herself. These prove to not only be inaccurate and thereby unjust, but most importantly, incredibly damaging for her. With this in mind, Tess's opinions and expectations of herself are proven to be just as fallible and harmful (if not more so) as those held by others of her.

To surmise, this article has exhibited the varying ways that expectations are a destructive force in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. With reference to the discussion of Tess and Angel's relationship, for example, the discovery "[t]hat the virginal milkmaid of Angel's imagination is no longer 'pure' [appears] as tragic for him as for her" (Jacobus 332). Conversely, Tess demonstrates the ability to alter her expectations with changes to circumstance in her encounters with Angel and Alec. In doing so, Tess is able to allow for the changing and varied identities existing within these characters. Unfortunately, Tess fails to extend the same courtesy to herself, internalising the perceptions of others to form a series of opinions and expectations that are both unreasonable and harmful. Together, these become the complex and potential "role models [and] lessons" that Hardy provides, fulfilling readers pursuit of such whilst encouraging a critical approach towards them (Higgonet 127). This is executed through the provision of characters' innermost thoughts of both others and themselves. As such, readers are given a detailed and sometimes contradictory depiction of characters that reflect the fluidity and flexibility of their identities. It is therefore argued that Hardy's novel promotes and encourages systems of perception, interpretation and expectation that are accommodating to the changing and flexible people that they relate to.

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