

*Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>1</sup> and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>2</sup> by Thomas Hardy are both novels in which the female protagonists face problems that arise from how women were treated at that period of time. Both novels are set in the Victorian era, which was a period of time when women were seen as inferior to men and it was expected of them to stay at home, clean and raise the children while their husbands went to work. It was also expected of them to always listen to their husbands and remain 'pure' until marriage. Women were controlled by their fathers until they were married, then they were controlled by their husbands. It was also unheard of to see a woman have a powerful role in society, apart from the Queen. Thomas Hardy is able to relate to women at this time as he too was treated unfairly, yet because of his class, not gender. He grew up in a family that were not of a high class, so just like women were restricted by their gender, Hardy was restricted by his class. He and his wife, Emma fell in love, yet her father was not pleased as he was not from a wealthy family. Throughout both novels' characterisation shows how women were treated at that period of time, this is reinforced by symbolism and key events.

Characterisation is a major aspect of the novel which shows the mistreatment of women in the Victorian era. Tess, the protagonist in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>3</sup> is also very different from the conventional woman in the Victorian era as she had a child out of wedlock, which was loathed. However, unlike Bathsheba, Tess did not have a choice in being unconventional as Alec took advantage of her which made her fall pregnant. Tess was able to realise that she was a victim, whereas at that time a lot of women would have just blamed themselves because society and men would say it is their fault. In the novel we see women like Izz, Marian, and Retty, Tess's roommates at Talbothays, love Tess to the point where they saw her as a leader because Tess was always so kind hearted towards them as she never lay emphasis on the fact that Angel chose her. Tess also loved Angel the most out of the four women:

"Because nobody could love 'ee more than Tess did!... she would have laid down her life for 'ee. I could do no more"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "*Far from the Madding Crowd*", Wordsworth Classics, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*", Wordsworth Classics, 1993

<sup>3</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>4</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*", Wordsworth Classics, p. 237

However, you would expect them to hate Tess or be jealous as Angel gives Tess the most attention, yet this shows how Tess represents how the ideal female should be, even though she is considered unconventional.

At the beginning of the novel, Tess was so innocent that she barely understood what sex was before Alec took advantage of her as sex was not something to be spoken so openly about in the Victorian era.

"I say in all earnestness that it is a shame for parents to bring up their girls in such dangerous ignorance of the gins and nets that the wicked may set for them, whether their motive be a good one or the result of simple indifference."<sup>5</sup>

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>6</sup> was subtitled 'A Pure Woman' which shows how Hardy believes that Tess is innocent and she wasn't at fault for what happened to her or did not commit any sins.

Bathsheba, the protagonist in *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>7</sup> is very different from the stereotypical Victorian woman as she is independent in the sense that she does not want to be married, knowing her husband would try control her:

"I hate to be thought men's property in that way—though possibly I shall be had some day."<sup>8</sup>

Her independence is also presented to us when she takes control over her uncle's farm after he passes, and on the many occasions, when she does not want help from Gabriel Oak, the 'hero' of the novel. This could be a major reason as to why she is not treated the same as other women, as men want to tame her because she is strong willed and not a damsel in distress. This is displayed by how outspoken Bathsheba is, as she is not the type of person to keep her thoughts to herself. Although, certain characters do not have great views towards their new female boss, Bathsheba proves herself capable of running the farm. She also has a narcissistic nature, as she thinks she is too good for some men. We are shown this with Gabriel Oak:

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<sup>5</sup> Hardy, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", p. 276

<sup>6</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>7</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>8</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics, p. 24

"He wasn't quite good enough for me."<sup>9</sup>

Bathsheba also has qualities of the stereotypical Victorian woman as she is emotional which can lead her to being too impulsive. This is a reason why men thought they were greater than women because they believed that women thought with their heart rather than their brain, which the suffragettes were accused of doing. We know this as Bathsheba speaks before she thinks, for example, when she calls Mr Boldwood a,

"Chubby-faced-child"<sup>10</sup>

This shows how impulsive Bathsheba can be, which was thought to be an inadequate quality by men as they believed that women were too irrational and acted without thinking.

Fanny from *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>11</sup> is the obvious victim of the novel, like Tess as they both get pregnant, although Fanny never got married. She is also very poor and the reader has pity for her. She is completely different to Bathsheba as she displays what could happen to women who were not financially stable in the Victorian era. She was mistreated by Troy because she was the stereotypical woman who would do anything for the man she loves, we see this when she travels miles by foot to see him. Troy takes advantage of that knowing entirely well that she loves him.

"O Frank—you thin me forward I am afraid! Don't dear Frank—will you—for I love you so. And you said lots of times you would marry me, and—and—I—I—I—" <sup>12</sup>

Alec in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>13</sup> is the clear villain as his obsession with Tess ruins her life. He can be compared to Hades and the devil according to Lisa Bruno in '*The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Literature*', Alec can be perceived as Hades, the Greek God of the underworld and Tess as Persephone, the Goddess of spring. Persephone is unwillingly abducted by Hades, and Alec takes advantage of Tess in the woods. He takes advantage of Tess and gets her pregnant, which is the main reason for her downfall. When Tess finally stands up to him and kills him, she is punished for it although he took advantage of her.

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<sup>9</sup> Hardy, "Far from the Madding Crowd", p. 60

<sup>10</sup> Hardy, "Far from the Madding Crowd", p. 145

<sup>11</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>12</sup> Hardy, "Far from the Madding Crowd", p. 69

<sup>13</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

Alec is also very deceitful as he acts very warm and kind towards Tess, only to then take advantage of her when she is sleeping and very vulnerable.

Alec believes he holds a claim over Tess just because he was the first man she had sex with:

"Remember, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man's wife you are mine!"<sup>14</sup>

Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>15</sup> is also the villain of the novel. He was cocky and a womanizer. He mistreated Fanny by getting her pregnant and promising to marry her, yet then marrying someone else. When he marries Bathsheba, he takes control of her farm and is unable to cope, but because he is a man, he does not want Bathsheba to do better than him. This is displayed when he gives the workers alcohol, which enables them from working. Troy only realises that he loves Fanny when it is too late and she has passed away:

"But never mind darling [...] in the sight of heaven you are my very very wife"<sup>16</sup>

This hurts Bathsheba as she loves Troy but knows he will never love her the way he loves Fanny. This shows how he mistreats both women, as he does not fully think about his actions and hurts both Fanny and Bathsheba.

Unlike Alec and Troy, not all the men in the novels are villains, for instance, Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>17</sup>, as although he does ask Bathsheba to marry him, he does not pressure her into marrying him or cause any problems for her. Oak is a reliable and good man, as he is always calm and helps Bathsheba instead of mistreating her, as this shows how some male characters did truly care for the heroines. He in fact saves Bathsheba a few times, one of those times is when her farm is on fire.

Angel in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>18</sup> is not a villain or a hero, as he refuses to forgive Tess for her past, although it was not her fault. He thought Tess was perfect yet she could not live up to his expectations, as she was not 'pure'.

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<sup>14</sup> Hardy, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", p. 326

<sup>15</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, "Far from the Madding Crowd", p. 237

<sup>17</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>18</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

"She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman- a whole sex condensed into one typical form."<sup>19</sup>

He also had an affair and Tess was able to forgive him for that, this presents the double standards that existed. At the end of the novel when Tess meets her unfortunate death, he is already riding off into the sunset with another woman, which also displays how women were treated differently from men.

There are many key events which contributes to the characterisation and displays how women of the Victorian era were treated unfairly compared to men. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>20</sup> this is presented to us when Tess shares her past with Angel, he had an affair in the past which was fully consensual; whereas Tess was taken advantage of by Alec, as he manipulated her and she was so innocent that she didn't fully understand what sex was. Although what happened to Tess was not her fault and Angel had done something similar, he refuses to forgive her for what she had 'done'.

"O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another."<sup>21</sup>

When Alec takes advantage of Tess in the woods it is foggy, so the reader cannot 'see' what is happening. This leaves it more to the reader's interpretation, and a scene like this would not have been well perceived at that time as it was a very sensitive topic and still is to this day. Even though the novel does not specify if Alec raped Tess or not, this could symbolise how Tess was unable to fully comprehend what was happening, which shows how she was mistreated.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>22</sup> the mistreatment of women is also displayed when Fanny Robin is walking to the poor house. Fanny Robin is the victim in this novel. She is not independent, which we can see when Oak offers her money. Yet she is very generous and caring. This is shown when she gives Oak directions. During her walk, she is alone with crutches made from nothing but wood. She is also pregnant and starving. This is where the reader has the most pity for Fanny and this scene shows how she is the true victim of the novel. This presents how women were mistreated as she had no support from anyone and

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<sup>19</sup> Hardy, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", p. 115

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>21</sup> Hardy, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", p.

<sup>22</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classic

had nowhere to go apart from the poorhouse. Even though for a majority of the novel Fanny remains nameless and we only see her five times in the novel, she is the epitome of how women were treated poorly at that time period.

This is also displayed by the ending of the novel as Bathsheba does not have a happy ending. Although she ends up with Oak, who is the best man out of the three as he does not create more hardships for Bathsheba and he actually helps her. For example when he saves her farm from a fire, and she then offers him employment. Bathsheba did not want to get married and we see this throughout the majority of the novel as she refuses proposals, yet she eventually got 'tamed' which was not something she ever wanted.

This shows how women at that time were thought of having to act a certain way and that their opinions didn't matter, all they were good for was marriage and having children. It is also shown how women were not protected by rights, as when Bathsheba marries Troy, he is given possession of the farm that she owed and is unable to cope. This is displayed to us when a storm is coming and Gabriel has to single handily save all of the produce as Troy gave the men working at the farm hard liquor and they were all unable to work because of it.

Both endings of the novels display how women were mistreated as neither novel gets a happy ending. Tess did not get to ride off into the sunset with Angel and Bathsheba did get married, so in a sense she did get 'tamed' in the end. The two victims of the novels, Fanny and Tess both died, which could show how they were not strong enough to survive Hardy's harsh world. This also shows how harsh the consequences of inequality can be.

The use of the symbolism also contributes to conveying Hardy's criticism of the way women were treated in the novels. This shows in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with Angel's name, as you would assume that he would be Tess's saviour, because of his name and also when we see him at the dairy, he is wearing all white, which represents purity and is associated with angels. He also is descending from the loft at the dairy, which also fits in with the symbolism of him being an 'angelic' figure as angels are stereotypically seen descending from heaven, which is above humanity. This is very ironic symbolism as Angel is actually a major aspect of Tess's downfall as his views towards Tess no longer being 'pure' made Tess feel worthless and guilty. These views he had are no different from the views of a harsh Victorian society. Alec, the antagonist of the novel, is described as twiddling his moustache throughout the novel, which is a very stereotypical thing for a villain to do. Alec is associated with the devil as when he first meets Tess, he keeps making advances

towards her, popping up out of nowhere as if he is haunting her, in an inhumane way, trying to evoke Tess of her purity. When they are reunited Alec believes it is fate:

"I couldn't help your seeing me again!"<sup>23</sup>

He then becomes obsessed with Tess again. Alec also makes Tess commit a 'sin' in the eyes of society as she will no longer be pure for marriage, which is what the devil is known for. We can see this when Alec goes to Flintcomb Ash to try to exploit Tess, as when we see him there is fire behind him, which has obvious connotations to the devil.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>24</sup> we can also see angelic connotations with the character Gabriel Oak as the name Gabriel has obvious connotations to the angel Gabriel. This fits with Oak's character as he treats Bathsheba the best in the novel. The name Oak could symbolise an oak tree, which is known for being very stable and trustworthy. We see this as Oak comforts Bathsheba after the death of Troy, the antagonist of the novel and when he saves her farm from a fire. Both characters Angel and Gabriel have connotations to being angelic figures, they are both viewed as being the kinder men in the two novels, although Angel does mistreat Tess, he does not manipulate and take advantage of Tess like Alec does. Gabriel is also a shepherd, which has Christian connotations.

The use of nature in both novels also helps us understand characters better, and is used as a symbol to help Hardy convey his disapproval of the way women were treated. as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>25</sup> the nature around Tess can often be used to describe how she is feeling. We can see this at her lowest points in the novel, as it is a dark and cold winter, whereas when she is having a fresh start it is spring. This makes the reader sympathise with Tess and shows how Hardy was on her side because, as stated before, he has a love for nature and Tess can be compared with the nature around her. Tess's fate mirrors the fate of the countryside, for example, when her family are homeless and need to go looking for jobs, which is because machines were starting to be developed. This is also displayed in chapter 20, when the nature is described as being more developed and mature, just like Tess.

The use of nature in *Far from the Madding Crowd* shows how the countryside is not always peaceful with no conflict. We see this when Troy gets all of the workers at the farm drunk

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<sup>23</sup> Hardy, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", p.

<sup>24</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>25</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

to the point they cannot work, then Gabriel and Bathsheba need to save as many crops as they can from an incoming storm.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*<sup>26</sup> and *Far from the Madding Crowd*<sup>27</sup>, Thomas Hardy successfully displays the way women were mistreated in the Victorian era as in both novels we see how the two female protagonists are mistreated because they are not like the conventional Victorian women. Bathsheba is different as she does not want to be married and is financially independent, although at that period of time, it was believed that the purpose of women was to be married, have children and listen to their husband. Tess is different as she had a child out of wedlock, although she did not fully have a choice in it, and in that time period it was frowned upon to have a child before marriage. Both of these women are mistreated by men and society, which shows how there were certain expectations for the way women were to act. In both novels the mistreatment of women is displayed through characterisation, symbolism and key events.

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<sup>26</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles", Wordsworth Classics

<sup>27</sup> Hardy, Thomas, "Far from the Madding Crowd", Wordsworth Classics



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