

Thomas Hardy's Goddess:

A Mythological Reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*



Carl Nimrod Åhrman
C-Essay
Department of Languages and Literatures / English
Gothenburg University
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Supervisor: Fereshteh Zangenehpour

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Introduction

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is ostensibly a bittersweet coming-of-age story about an innocent farm girl whose discovery that she is of noble descent leads her into a series of rough experiences and romantic entanglements, a life that shifts back and forth between luck and misfortune, designed to degrade her virginity and bring about a premature demise. But Thomas Hardy's most well-known novel has a more complex nature than that of a simple morality tale. Depending on how the novel is approached, the reader can possibly identify in the story the author's comments and concerns on modernity, a time in which title and nobility, previously only inherited, could now be bought; the novel can also be read as an emotional outrage against the double standards of a Victorian society on the wane. Founded upon and driven as it was by pride and prejudice, Hardy condemns the hierarchical society by giving his heroine a simple peasant's life and upbringing, which sparked some objective reactions on the book's publication in 1891. Tess "violates the standards and conventions of her day," as Irving Howe phrased it. Thomas Hardy presented his protagonist, the eponymous Tess, not just as a peasant girl but as a Madonna-like figure who suffers and endures. More than that, Tess is a strong and noble person, with as much goodness and intelligence as the average Victorian gentleman hero.

But the reason for the novel's status as one of the great works of English nineteenth-century literature does not stem from the aspect of its avant-garde attitudes and controversy alone. There are deeper reasons for its cultural significance, as is usually the case with literature that obtains status as classic; it did not merely capture the theretofore unvoiced spirit of the time, it also captured something profound that still appeals to individuals over a century later, something that stimulates an inert curiosity and excites an almost subconscious interest in any reader of any era. I believe that its mythology makes it ageless, because that subliminal theme connects it to stories and beliefs of ancient times. It is arguably the intrinsic

relationship between the intellectual and the mythological that has been a driving force for literature all over the world since the rise of popular culture, and in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* it shines through every well-crafted page to such an extent that it is a small wonder to me that it's mythological theme has been so overlooked, either on purpose or by mistake, in the theatrical, cinematic and televisual adaptations of the story. A closer reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* will supply the open-minded with a variety of connections between the protagonist Tess and the natural world she so purely and lovingly traverses, that with a retrospective meditation on the character Tess stands out as so much more than a mere country lass. Instead, she stands as a personification of Nature itself, an earth goddess in human form.

It is this aspect of the novel that is the basis of this analytical essay, and in order to presents my study in a coherent and accessible way I will divide the findings of the research into two chapters. The first will look at Tess's relationship to natural world and the animal kingdom; inspecting the novel with the viewpoint that nature plays a vital role in the story. The second chapter will address the mythological aspect of Tess, in particular her similarity to a classic of Greek mythology, the story of Persephone.

I hope to come out of my study with a view on this classic example of a fallen woman that will present her in a new light. Hopefully, it will also inspire a new reading of the novel and although this essay is unlikely to have any effect on the book's popularity or esteem on the whole, it will perhaps simply show that the intrinsic marriage between mythology and literature is, or was at least up to the time of the birth of this book, still a prevalent and palpable force.

Chapter One: Tess and Nature

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a pastoral novel, and it is only fitting that the natural world is represented as more than a background or set, since the pastoral genre demands a romantic view of nature. My point, which this chapter will essay to prove, is that Tess's kinship with the natural world is more than just a clichéd consequence that follows with the grammar of the genre; that it is in fact symbolically significant in appreciating the many nuances and depths of Thomas Hardy's story.

I therefore intend to show how the symbolic appearances of animals foreshadow major events in Tess's life, how the surroundings come alive and personify her moods and experiences and where she stands in relation to the nature she so tenderly inhabits. But before I go into the details of it, I will first have to explain a couple of literary terms that relate to the theme of the novel that is the basis of this text.

'Pathetic fallacy' was originally used in reference to art, but during the Romantic era it was also applied to literature and poetry. Examples of it can be found as far back as in the works of Plato and Shakespeare. The 'pathetic fallacy' is the tendency to ascribe inanimate objects that occur in nature with 'human capabilities, sensations and emotions.' In literature, the 'pathetic fallacy' aims to help us understand the world. By endowing nature, otherwise indifferent and inexplicable, with human traits, poets and artists could create unforgettable images and scenes. Furthermore, it provided an author with an interesting way of describing the characters' state of mind and moods by having them mirrored in nature. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy makes as much use of the 'pathetic fallacy' as could be expected from a naturalist writer of his time; regardless of season or time of year, Tess's surroundings often correspond to her mood. But Hardy takes the 'pathetic fallacy' further than that, by making the connection between Tess and the natural world seem less accidental, less chimerical, and

more interactive. As the upcoming examples will show, the context of the character and the animal kingdom is central to understanding Tess and appreciating her as stronger than the mere victim she would appear to be without that bond. What misfortune and pain befalls Tess equally affects the countryside, the farmyard animals and the forest creatures, thereby suggesting more than a slightly romanticized view of female purity as it pertains to motherhood and creation of life. Hardy almost reverses the 'pathetic fallacy' by making Tess a personification of nature as opposed to nature personifying *her*, in accordance with the rape and abuse of the sensitive, feminine natural world by the over-powering and unmistakably male industrial society, which was on the onslaught at the time.

The full subtitle to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is: *A Pure Woman: Faithfully Presented*. The last part raises the point about 'naturalism,' an artistic and literary movement that was particularly active between the 1880's and the 1930's. Naturalist writers sought to imbue their work with a touch of realism in response to conservative romantic ideals. Prior to Thomas Hardy, in France, Émile Zola had shocked and upset readers by giving a vivid and true-to-life description of a corpse, thereby unveiling death of all sugar-coated coverings that old-fashioned cultural ideals demanded. Hardy upset his public with an uncompromising portrayal of Tess, a fallen woman, delivered in a realistic blow that lacked the fundamental cushions an Anglican society was used to. Ironically, the book's naturalist style functions side-by-side with the symbolical and allegorical elements that were popular components of Romantic literature, such as the 'pathetic fallacy.' This is perhaps Hardy's acknowledgement that there is no real opposition between the two concepts, like the idea of the duality of man purports that we all have good and bad sides to us. According to David Lodge, "many Victorian writers, struggling to reconcile the view of Nature inherited from the Romantics with the discoveries of Darwinian biology, exhibit the same conflict, but it is particularly noticeable in Hardy." When one comes to the part in the text where Tess is raped by Alec d'Urberville, the

deliberately ambiguous way in which Hardy describes it gives the term 'naturalism' a skewed meaning when applied to the story.

The scene is dark and foggy when d'Urberville has his way with her. Under pretence of giving her a lift back to the Trantridge poultry-farm (where she now resides), he prolongs the cart-ride to be with her and gets them both lost. He leaves her with the horse and goes off to reconnoitre their whereabouts; a scene which is heavily laden with atmospheric images:

Having buttoned the overcoat round her shoulders he plunged into the webs of vapour which by this time formed veils between the trees. She could hear the rustling of the branches as he ascended the adjoining slope, till his movements were no louder than the hopping of a bird, and finally died away. With the setting of the moon the pale light lessened, and Tess became invisible as she fell into reverie upon the leaves where he had left her. (56)

And a little further on, the natural images are even stronger:

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, some might say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the Providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked. (57)

The scene ends here, with an undisguised allusion to rape that could also be read (or misread, in my opinion) as seduction. In fact, as Kristin Brady points out, "from the time of the book's publication, the question of whether Tess was raped or seduced has divided critics, and the debate has still not been resolved with perfect clarity." The emphasis throughout the chapter is on the fog, the silence and dreamy quality of a forest in darkness, which instantly

puts Tess into a kind of “reverie,” as she sits on “dead leaves” waiting for Alec, keeping an eye on the horse. This is not the first time a horse has played an indirect part in her life.

It is, in fact, the death of a horse that leads Tess into her troublesome and tragically destined journey. The horse is the only one of its kind in the Durbeyfield family’s house and as such a potent sign of the family’s vulnerability and social status. In pre-industrial society, horses were status symbols, as were gardens, servants and houses. The strong bond between the family and the horse is signified by the fact that they still keep him, despite his old age and rickety state, and that they call him Prince, a noble and loving name. Tess’s reaction to the accident which kills Prince emphasizes her attachment to him even further. She is on her way in the middle of the night to the market, to sell a crop of hives; the family are beekeepers. Already at this early stage in the book, the vital position of animal life in the story is making itself felt. The sentences that introduce the horse instantly transform it from a dumb animal to a sensible, sensitive minor character:

The poor creature looked wonderingly round at the night, at the lantern, at their two figures, as if he could not believe that at that hour, when every living thing was intended to be in shelter and at rest, he was called upon to go out and labour. (20)

Maybe it is no wonder that Tess reacts with overwhelming guilt and self-loathing when Prince is struck down by oncoming traffic, as the old horse is the family’s only means of transportation and a lifelong friend whom she has real affection for. Like in the previous example of the ‘rape scene,’ Tess seems to lose consciousness quite naturally under the influence of the surrounding elements and the night’s atmosphere. The “mute procession past her shoulders of trees and hedges,” (21) along with the “occasional heave of the wind” (22) taking on the impression of a sad and soulful sigh, seem to lull her into a deep reverie from which she later wakes, unaware that she has been asleep at the reins. She awakes to find her

horse groaning in agony as it has been struck by a speeding cart, and her instinctive reaction is to run up to the horse and stop the blood-spouting hole in its chest with her hands, “with the only result that she became splashed from face to skirt with crimson drops” (22). Description of the horse’s blood and its dead body are emotionally charged as they recur in the chapter, with a vocabulary normally reserved for human remains. As Prince’s death dawns upon her, the atmosphere again imitates her feelings; it turns pale when she does, whereas the birds twitter while she stands there still and silent. In actuality, it is nothing more than dawn, but the whole gravity of the scene is told so intensely and poetically, one might think Hardy shares the Durbeyfields’ deep respect for Prince.

Horses can symbolize a lot of things; loyalty and friendship, strength and power, love and devotion. But they are also mythical and magical creatures, such as the unicorn or the winged Pegasus, and have always been indispensable to old-fashioned adventures of all kind. There is also a dark side to the mythology of horses; take for instance the four horsemen of the apocalypse, who were believed to herald the world’s end on horseback; in Celtic myths, nightmares were said to come to us from a visiting Horse goddess, thus the ‘mare’ part of the word; in Greek mythology, Centaurs were men with horse bodies from the waist down, who came to represent lechery and bestial depravity in Anglican society. The dark side of equestrian symbolism adheres more to the dangerously fast demonic cart-ride Alec later takes Tess on, and not to the benevolent Prince. Furthermore, horses are one of few domesticated animals that are referred to with subjective pronouns according to their sexes (as in “he” or “she” instead of “it”), which shows how easily they are humanized.

The final sign of familial love is the funeral the Durbeyfields hold for Prince, instead of selling its carcase to the “knacker and tanner” (someone who bought horses that could no longer work and turned them into dog food) for a couple of shillings. “He’s served me well in his lifetime,” says Tess’s father, “and I won’t part from him now” (23). The funeral is a

proper one, held in their own garden, and the children shed genuine tears; all except Tess, whose self-reproach for the untimely removal of the family's only "bread-winner" is unsurpassed. "Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself," Hardy explains, and ends the unaffectedly tragic chapter with the sentence:

Her face was dry and pale as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess. (24)

Prince's death is the first step on her dramatic descent into the figurative underworld that is her doomed destiny. She is compelled to seek out the d'Urbervilles that are her name-sakes, in the guise of a glorified beggar, hoping that the more well-off side of the family tree will be charitable in respects of acquiring a new horse. She is almost immediately employed by Mrs. d'Urberville to look after her fowl-farm. Tess fears at first that she is not up to the job: "But I don't know that I am apt at tending fowls," she says, to which her mother replies: "Then I don't know who is apt" (32). Her mother's reference here to Tess's natural skill with and affinity for animals of every kind is later verified when she proves to be a good caretaker and a quick learner. When Mrs. d'Urberville asks Tess to whistle to her precious bullfinches so as to encourage the birds to be chirpier, she quickly picks up the craft of imitating bird sounds, an otherwise difficult art that she acquires as smoothly as she teaches herself how to be a "supervisor, purveyor, nurse, surgeon, and friend" (42) to hens and roosters, despite never having tended birds before. At this point, forty or fifty pages into the story, we can confidently make the assumption that animals (in particular birds) will continue to make symbolical appearances that sometimes coincide with Tess's developing career as a rural worker and troublesome maturity from maidenhood into womanhood.

Birds also have symbolical meanings, one of which is innocence. This meaning is pertinent to the first part of the book, the eleven chapters of which all fall under the heading "Maiden." As a maiden, she takes care of the birds, the symbols of innocence. But after she is

used by her name-sake cousin Alec to satisfy his lust, that innocence is lost, or rather, taken away from her. As such she must leave her employment, for she is “Maiden No More” (as the subsequent phase of the book is called). Although she in fact leaves Trantridge to get away from Alec d’Urberville, it is tacitly understood that if she had had any other reason for leaving it would have been that she was metaphorically speaking no longer suitable to hold the position of caretaker of innocent creatures. As she traipses back home, emotionally burdened by her experiences, there is for the first time a touch of cynicism in Tess:

It was always beautiful from here; it was terribly beautiful to Tess to-day, for since her eyes last fell upon it she had learnt that the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing, and her views of life had been totally changed for her by the lesson. (58)

The idea of snake here plays with the perception of snakes as cunning seducers with malicious intent, as it was when Eve became acquainted with one in Paradise. Once again, Tess’s whole outlook on the world is expressed in terms of woodland life. The ‘sweet birds’ here, innocence, stalked and spied upon by the prurient and the pernicious, the ‘serpent.’

Bird song is another reoccurring detail that is full of different meaning; the sweet singing being an expression of sadness and of joy. On the dawn of Tess’s departure for Trantridge and her new employment, a single bird sings out in a “prophetic” voice; again testifying nothing more than the arrival of dawn, but to Tess the bird becomes a signaller of her future, as per her tendency to read so much meaning into small things. The pregnant meaning of a morning bird, the doom-laden portent of being pricked by a rose-thorn, spending hours upon her knees as a child looking for “vegetable and mineral treasures”; Tess’s devout relationship with nature shows how seriously she regards it, as though every blade of grass, every acorn and every single little ant were as vital a part of her being as her own limbs.

When Tess and Angel Clare leave Talbothay's dairy farm to get married, they are interrupted in saying farewell to the owners by "the crowing of a cock" (169). An ominous thing when heard in the afternoon, as Mrs. Crick, the dairy farmer's wife, observes: "An afternoon crow?" A bystander observes, "That's bad" (169), and by the second and third cockcrow, Tess grows uneasy and demands they leave without further delay. Michael Millgate points out that there was a paper written in Hardy's time about superstitions among people in Dorsetshire, in which could be found the belief that the sound of a cock crowing in the afternoon heralded impending sickness or death. As indeed is the case here, for Tess and Angel's marriage is plagued from the very moment of its conception.

After Tess's ill-fated period as mother, she leaves her home again, some two or three years after her escape from Trantridge, and ends up working as a dairymaid. It is not a long way to go for Tess from being a mother herself to milking cows, a similarity that even the most disinterested analytical reader could not possibly miss. Cows are potent maternal totems, and often stand in close relation to creation myths in various cultures. As very clear personifications of all things relative to Mother Earth, cows stand for nurture, fertility, nourishment. Their influence on human culture can be seen in as widely disparate areas as Hinduism, where cows are revered as the holiest of all earthly creatures, and Scandinavian mythology, in which the primeval cow Audumla gave nourishment to the giant Ymir, thus creating the world; to the common English euphemism 'holy cow' and the expression 'sacred cow,' used in reference to a person or institution that is beyond any form of criticism. Before long, Tess finds herself in "the Valley of Great Dairies," where she sees a "myriad of cows" that "outnumbered any she had ever seen before" (80). Coming to that from having buried a baby with no more life than a few months in it, is a turn of events as symbolical as the next.

For it is in her new profession as dairymaid that she meets that other destiny of hers; Angel Clare, the clergyman's son, who has taken to becoming a farmer's apprentice. She only

hears his voice at first, as he is obscured by the cow he is working at: “Tess’s attention was thus attracted to the dairyman’s interlocutor, of whom she could see but the merest patch owing to his burying his head so persistently in the flank of the milcher” (87).

As animals have hitherto been heralds of twists and turns in Tess’s path of life, the forecast is somewhat ambiguous in this instance. There is none of the nurturing and comfortable safety at hand which the abundance of cows could be perceived to prophesy. If Tess’s self-reproach for the death of the family horse led her indirectly to a manifestation of her imagined punishment at the hands of Alec d’Urberville, by that token the influence of these motherly creatures should lead her to a fruitful relationship with Angel Clare. But we soon find out that there is no happy family life around the corner, only a genuinely loving relationship burdened by obstacles from the very beginning. The cows in the scene are almost powers of love, as Tess under their influence seems to fall for Angel Clare the moment she lays her eyes on him as though the cows were agents of Cupid. It is also through the cows that Tess and Angel strike up their first conversation, as he has secretly paid attention to her method of working and arranged the cows in suitable order to that method, an act of which she takes immediate notice. In the practices of milking and taking long strolls in the garden, Tess and Angel develop an intimate but platonic relationship. The very landscape in some of these scenes of covert love takes on the roles of both external, natural influence (as the cows) and internal personification (as per the “pathetic fallacy”):

Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the Var Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate. The ready bosoms existing there were impregnated by their surroundings. (116)

Interestingly, the cows through Hardy’s pen assume the same intelligent and sensitive persona as the horse Prince did previously: “But certain cows will show a fondness for a particular

pair of hands, sometimes carrying this predilection so far as to refuse to stand at all except to their favourite, the pail of a stranger being unceremoniously kicked over” (95).

Tess’s earthly divinity is not only demonstrated through her interactions with animals and the close relationship between her form and the surrounding provinciality, but Hardy also paints an image of her that makes her seem born not of people, but of the land. Her pale skin is often compared to the pale dawn; at one point her hair is described as “earth-coloured”; Alec calls her lips “hollyberry lips.” After her first meeting with Alec d’Urberville, she finds herself stuffed with roses, resembling a rose-garden come to life: “roses at her breast; roses in her hat; roses [...] in her basket to the brim” (31). The symbolism of Tess as a representation of nature is at times extended to include all her gender, as in this extract found during her temporary employment as field worker:

But those of the other sex were the most interesting of this company of binders, by reason of the charm which is acquired by woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature, and is not merely an object set down therein as at ordinary times. A field-man is a personality afield; a field woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it. (68)

The scene that stands out more than any in its symbolical meaning comes towards the end of the novel’s fifth phase. Yet again it involves birds, the most frequently recurring of all creatures great and small. At a very low point in Tess’s young life, she wanders the countryside looking for work, with “something of the wild animal in the unreflecting instinct with which she rambled on” (216). She is compelled to sleep in the bushes, where she finds a spot of dry leaves under the shelter of some holly bushes. She makes “a sort of nest” (217) out of the dead leaves and curls up in it, reiterating the image of her as a wild animal. Nature seems very tender to her in this scene, presenting her with a comfortable place to lie down in.

As she falls asleep, she hears strange sounds among the leaves, which she at first ascribes to the wind. But in the morning, she crawls out from under the bushes to find a group of dead and dying pheasants on the ground. She reflects on the brutality of the pheasant-hunting shooting party, whom she remembers perceiving as “bloodthirsty,” “rough” and “brutal” when she glimpsed them as a child, as if she saw them with a pheasant’s eyes. She puts the wounded birds out of their misery, “with the impulse of a soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself” (219), creating a starkly symbolical image. One gets the notion that it’s not the birds she tenderly kills, but herself. The heavily metaphorical sentiment of the circumstance makes her euthanizing act incontrovertibly blameless.

The pheasants play the part of her soul, her alter-ego. Pheasants in 19th century England were raised for the sole purpose of being used as game for the ruling class, an interesting parallel to Tess (and farm girls in general), who has been similarly used by Alec d’Urberville, a typical representation of the self-centredness and greed of spoiled rich people. Moreover, the first birds she tended in the poultry-farm were as innocent as she was then, and these birds are as wounded and close to death as she is, although she does not know it yet.

Apart from being symbols of innocence and peace, birds can be emblematic of the connection between the human and the divine. Different birds symbolize different things, but birds in general are often associated with the soul; in Western society, a dove on a tombstone or in an obituary represents the departed soul, whereas it has also been known to symbolize a saved soul, which probably derives from Genesis 8:8-12, wherein Noah sent forth a dove from his ark to see if it was time to return to dry land after the Flood. In Tess’s case, the birds and she become intertwined, each in their respective state of broken body and broken mind. She gives the birds the peace and mercy she feels unable to bestow upon herself. Nowhere in the novel does the countryside in which she lives reflect and resemble her state of mind and the stage of her life more movingly and more poignantly.

Chapter Two: Tess and Mythology

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is Thomas Hardy's most well-known novel, and to this day still attracts analytical attention. Literary scholars and critics have found many different subjects of interest, mainly that of destiny in contrast to free will and the novel's condemning exposé of Victorian double standards. Modern analysts can approach it from a feministic perspective, as Irvin Howe in his book *Thomas Hardy* and Ellen Moers does in her essay, "Tess as a Stereotype," wherein she makes the following observation: "Earth goddess, modern woman, doomed bride of balladry, prostitute, Victorian daughter, unwed mother, murderess, and princess in disguise: Hardy's Tess is surely the all-purpose heroine." The morality of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was both praised and deplored by Hardy's contemporary critics. The book inspired both heartfelt admiration and severe antipathy for its style and subject matter; Robert Louis Stevenson, for one, expressed outrage over Hardy's "forced" and "ungracious" style, calling the book, "one of the worst, weakest, least sane books I have yet read." But what fascinated the nineteenth century critics most was the absence of a proper Christian integrity; *The Spectator*, for instance, referred to the novel's "pantheistic philosophy." These analyses are mere reflections of general concerns of the day, such as society's and literature's relationship to religion. Few essayists at the time considered the theme that is the subject of this chapter, namely mythology; for a discussion on the story and its relationship to Greek mythology would connect to the first chapter of this paper, in which I showed how connotative Tess is of Mother Earth.

J.T. Laird is one literary historian who has addressed the mythological symbolism in his book *The Shaping of Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, wherein he draws attention to the mythical elements that recur throughout the story. According to Laird, the previously cited rape scene

carries with it, as he puts it, “overtones of mystical sacrificial rites deriving from classical and Druidical sources,” while the images of roosting birds and hopping rabbits are suggestive, according to him, of “the helpless vulnerability of the victim and the relentless drive of Nature to reproduce the species” (Laird, 54). Laird also makes an interesting point when he refers to how Angel responds to Tess in the first stages of their acquaintance, when Angel cannot see the real Tess, a mere mortal woman, but a goddess. In his point of view she is like a goddess of chastity (the virgin Artemis), or a goddess of fertility like Demeter, a frequently recurring mythical allusion in the novel:

It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names, half-teasingly – which she did not like because she did not understand them.

(103)

Greek mythology underwent a kind of revival in the nineteenth century, when Christian mythology had hitherto been dominant, primarily because, as Margot K. Louis explains, of “a shift in sensibility that made the pain of life seem incompatible with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent God” (Louis, 23). The general pessimism of modernity made room for a more complex mythology that incorporated primitive rituals, flawed gods and, perhaps most significantly, female deities. But there is one legend in Greek mythology with which Tess bears a more than passing resemblance; that of Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld. Having up till now compared Tess with Mother Earth, or Demeter, the goddess of fertility who is intrinsically linked with every living thing in nature, I will now show the connection that Tess has to Persephone, who is also Demeter’s daughter and a goddess herself (in the same way that Jesus is God’s son and simultaneously God incarnate).

In its basic concept, the myth of Persephone is an ancient method of explaining the natural changing of seasons. Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, the earth goddess, and when she was abducted by Hades, Demeter was so stricken with grief that she caused a terrible drought in an attempt to coerce her brother Zeus to save her daughter from Hades, which he did. However, Persephone was tricked into consuming food in the land of the dead, which bound her to it forever, so she had to spend half or a quarter of the year with Hades, during which time Demeter did not cultivate the land. In Homer's version the myth is, according to Louis, "a tale primarily of the relationship between the great goddesses, mother and daughter, and secondarily of the tension between female and male: the mother struggles with the father and uncle to determine the daughter's fate; the daughter escapes her rapist-consort for a time, but not altogether" (Louis, 25). But, unlike Demeter, it is Tess's mother who has pushed Tess into abuse at the hands of Alec d'Urberville, although unintentionally, through her scheming over Tess's marital prospects:

Well, Tess ought to go to this other member of our family. She'd be sure to win the lady – Tess would. And likely enough 'twould lead to some noble gentleman marrying her. In short, I know it. (17)

Persephone is the archetypal fallen woman, the virgin who loses her pure quality under the cruel dominance of men, in this case Hades, who is also her uncle. Tess's connection with Persephone is hinted at here, for her Hades, Alec d'Urberville, is her cousin. Although the kinship is in name only, and although Alec's family has acquired the name d'Urberville, the relationship is nevertheless an imitation of shared ancestry. During their first encounter, Alec conjures Tess to accept his offering of a strawberry, similar to Hades tricking Persephone into eating of his pomegranates. Strawberries are often symbolical of fertility and sensuality, but also of goodness and purity (particularly in Christian mythology), which makes the fact that Alec gives her strawberries rather ironic. The way in which Alec feeds her the strawberry

gives the scene subtle yet explicitly sexual overtones, particularly in respects to the close proximity of his fingers to her mouth and the way in which she parts her lips to accept it: “[...] he held it by the stem to her mouth [...] and in a slight distress, she parted her lips and took it in” (29).

By taking the fruit in such an intimate way, she inadvertently invites her subsequent rape by accepting Alec’s advances, however unwillingly. When Persephone consumed the pomegranate seeds offered her, Hades managed to put her under his power and she was henceforth prevented from permanently escaping the Underworld, similar to Tess’s inability to completely escape her relationship with Alec, even though she comes very near when she agrees to become Angel Clare’s wife. In the last part of the book, she finds herself forced to accept Alec d’Urberville’s offer to come and live with him.

The previously mentioned image of Tess garnered with roses after her first acquaintance with Alec (see page 13) mirrors Ovid’s retelling of the Persephone myth, in which she is out gathering flowers when Hades suddenly appears and steals her away. The second time she meets Alec, he picks her up in his cart and drives to Trantridge with reckless speed in a manner that, as Louis observes, “parallels Hades’ seizing of the unwilling Persephone and bearing her away in his chariot to the underworld” (88).

In our introduction to Tess, she is taking part in a May-Day dance performed in honour of the agricultural goddess Ceres, the Roman counterpart to Persephone’s mother Demeter. In this way, Hardy frames the novel’s mythological character, by first introducing his heroine in a pagan ritual and finishing the story with her asleep in the middle of another ritualistic and mystic symbol, Stonehenge. The reverential and naturalistic portrayal of Tess in the light of her likeness to Persephone and Demeter conveys a modernist revision of an archetypal myth. In Ovid’s interpretation of the myth, Ceres (Demeter) is less powerful than the Greek original; as Louis puts it: “Ceres herself is made to beg Jove for help rather than compel him

as in the [Homeric] Hymn; she is a figure of anguish rather than of potent rage.” Furthermore, Hardy subverts the conservative view of fertility, in celebrating the moral strength of Tess even in the light of losing her virginity, her purity, thereby evoking the rural deity of Persephone, who ultimately symbolizes death and rebirth, rather than simply classifying her a fallen woman.

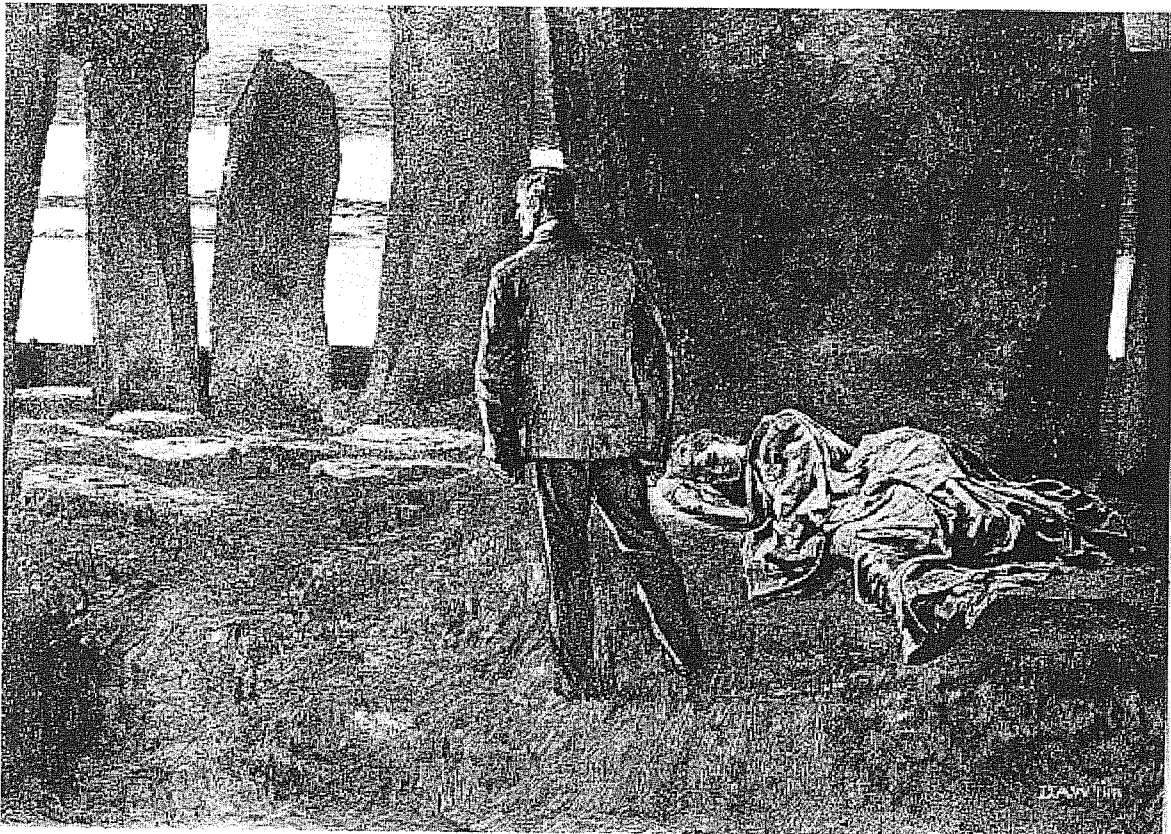
In lieu of a proper mother divinity, like Demeter, Tess assumes that role herself. With her baby about to die, she suddenly reveals a maturity and independency and christens it herself. With courage and determination she performs the act denied her illegitimate child, in a final attempt to save its soul, appearing to her gathered siblings, not as a tragic figure but as a proper matriarch; even more than that:

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. (75)

Herein, the two aspects of Tess are connected, as she conclusively stands as a revision or modernization of the myth; simultaneously an earth goddess and a daughter of nature. Louis here points out that she is a “goddess bereft of power” (90), but I disagree on that point. True, she is unable to save her child from death and from a common Christian salvation, but as she manages a burial, appropriating the Christian tradition to suit her ends, without the help of the local parish, I find her coming through the experience with an awakened sense of worth and proper self-knowledge. The experience shapes her and gives her divine simile substance, a palpable force that the other participants in her life lack; Angel Clare, for instance, although striving for a supreme and noble existence, shows little angelic quality in comparison with Tess. She even has the nerve to defy the proper Christian approach in the face of the vicar, who refuses to give her child a proper burial. “Then I don’t like you!” she says, “and I’ll

never come to your church no more!” (76). This behaviour is proof of more earnest and moral capacity than even Angel Clare would have evinced, who defied the Christian tradition in a more awkward manner by seeking to become a farmer instead, and shows that Tess exists beyond and above sacrilege as a pure divinity in herself.

Just like Persephone is bound to return to the Underworld for a couple of months a year – the exact amount varies depending upon which of the various sources of the myth one reads – Tess too is bound to return to her Underworld, i.e. Alec d’Urberville. In the novel’s final act, when she has again descended to the Underworld, she finally frees herself from her bond to Alec by killing him, a release that Persephone was never permitted, whose bond was everlasting. In her first (and final) act as a free woman, Tess lies down on a slab in Stonehenge, suspiciously similar to a ritual altar; and there the circle of pagan rites that began with the Cerelian May-Day dance is complete.



Conclusion

With this essay, I set out to show the heroine of Thomas Hardy's famous Victorian novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in a different light. Tess is one of nineteenth century literature's most well-known fallen women, in that she loses the respectability of her time when she has a child outside wedlock. I have essayed to show that Hardy used animal symbolism in the novel in a purposeful and ambiguous way to create a relationship between the rural world and his heroine Tess. I also aspired to analyse the subtle yet vivid similarity between the protagonist Tess and the young heroine of Greek mythology, Persephone. The animal symbolism in the story seen from the perspective presented in view of Hardy's interest in mythology makes evident a direct likeness between Tess and Demeter, or Ceres in Roman mythology, the ruler and protector of the natural world.

In the first chapter I endeavoured to show in more detail the many ways that Tess Durbeyfield becomes an embodiment and a divinity of nature, through her reverence for and constant interaction with entities of the natural world and in the way animals seemed to forecast imminent changes in her life. Furthermore, the theory is supported by the ways in which the intrinsic relationship between her soul and the earth are presented, ways that are similar to the 'pathetic fallacy' that was a popular storytelling technique at the time. I believe that the many depths and layers of the character of Tess is why her story is one of the true classics of English literature, many aspects of her illuminating her own setting, acting as a precursor to the modern age and even harking back to pre-Christian beliefs through her semblance to paganism that brings to mind pantheistic divinity, animism and sacrificial rituals.

In the second chapter I claimed that, apart from baring a striking resemblance to a goddess of fertility and protector of nature, Tess is also reminiscent to the daughter of one such goddess, Persephone, through her tragic experiences at the hands of domineering patriarchy. As previous, this is yet another aspect of mythological reinvention from Thomas Hardy, whose love for Tess is the engine of the story and the ultimate reason why one closes the book not feeling disappointed or heartbroken at the fact that she is turned murderess and faces incarceration, but morally uplifted. One is left with a feeling of poignant satisfaction because Tess survives the cruellest of experiences and is spiritually strengthened by them. In the end, she proves to us that she is deserving of the comparison to a goddess. We read of a woman who has gone through hell but ultimately achieves freedom of mind and body, and not through any means other than self-reliance and honest love.

The essay could have included a third chapter, devoted to the role that religion plays in this challenging and constantly self-defining story. Therein, the study would focus on the other protagonist of the story, who has inspired equal amount of fascination from readers since its publication: Angel Clare. Because, if it is through Tess that Hardy expresses outrage at the double standards and mores of his time when it comes to women and sexuality, I believe Hardy uses Angel Clare, a cleric's lapsed son, to voice his opinions on stagnant Christian, in particular Anglican, conservatism. This is an aspect of the critical and sceptical quality of the novel that Tess also embodies, whose defiance of patriarchy also incorporates a more candid revolt against institutionalized religion than Angel Clare's more introverted and docile rebellion. But because of the restrictions of this essay's scope, these theories will have to be the subjects of a continuation on this or an altogether different study.

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