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ECOFEMINISM AND HARDY: A CLOSE READING OF TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

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Abstract:

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary," Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society." It is one of the forms of feminism which has emanated through the amalgamation of feminism and environmentalism. The most important approach with in ecocriticism and ecological activism is that of the ecofeminists. Although commonly identified with the radical political movements of the 1970s and 1980s, ecofeminism (environmental feminism) has a much longer history, perhaps even extending back to prehistoric goddess worship. Ecofeminist discourse generally argues that the exploitation of nature and that of women are intimately linked, with some ecofeminists claiming "a parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other" (Salleh 24). Hardy's major tragic novels all reveal an extraordinary level of accord between the subject matter and prevailing attitudes of his fiction and many of ecofeminist theory's most regularly avowed tenets. Ecofeminism relates the oppression of women to the destruction of nature by identifying patriarchal society as the root of both problems and considering women (and all other humans) as an integral part of the natural world from which mankind so frequently seeks to differentiate itself. Women and nature are often injured concurrently by patriarchal dominance in Hardy's fiction, accurately depicting the real experiences of virtually all humans in their dealings with patriarchy. These shared, negative incidents are so common in Hardy's fiction that women and nature become essentially indivisible in terms of the unjust events they experience and the damage they both sustain. A sort of unavoidable symbiosis is formed between the natural world and its female inhabitants in Hardy's fiction. This paper analyses on the whole Hardy as an ecofeminist author and also shows the interrelation of Tess with the environment as well as with nature.

Key Words: Environment, Nature, Ecofeminism, Fiction & Mankind

Introduction:

In the introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, editors Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy, both well-known critics addressing the application of ecofeminist theory to literature, define ecofeminism by its goals and practices:

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "male-development" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. They are waged for environmental balance, hierarchical and multifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous cultures, and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability. (2)

An ecofeminist reading of Hardy's major works of tragic fiction will certainly reveal Hardy's concern regarding the division between rural and urban lifestyles, the unfair duplicity of Victorian society's sexual norms and the sheer devastation that stems from patriarchal society's subjective rules of conduct. Notably, nearly all of the human suffering and tragedy Hardy's fiction depicts are the direct results of patriarchal societies antiquated, biased, illogical, or condemnatory social norms. These injurious social practices represent aspects of life Hardy himself experienced and found to be constraining to both human lives and the natural world as a whole. In addition to concrete, factual insights in England's rural traditions and examples of patriarchy's ability to damage humans and nature, Hardy's distinctive narrative style grants the reader access to specific characters and their experiences spanning far beyond the character insight proffered by most of his contemporaries. Hardy's fiction consistently features the layering of themes, piercingly relatable characterizations, and nature's overtly animate presence; these attributes of his fiction work together to form levels of realism to which few novelists can even aspire. For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy does much more than rescue many aspects of England's rural culture from obliteration by time and social change. He also portrays one young woman's negative experiences within this system, a move that reveals much of the gender inequality present in English culture at her time. Tess's character lives the life of an individual who is doomed both by patriarchal society's inflexibility and her own highly individualized experiences and actions in many ways. However, Tess's character may also provide great insight into the much broader plight of women in general, especially living in rural areas at the time. The moral censure Tess experiences when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child out of wedlock would have been very common for any woman in her situation during this time in England, but her experiences are amplified slightly, as if by the use of this narrative technique to construct tragic fiction Hardy wished to demonstrate the worst possible effects Victorian society's gender discrimination in moral standards and the treatment of individuals might have. Regardless of how one reads Tess's culpability in her own demise, the fact remains that Tess, along with essentially all her female contemporaries living in England, experienced some form of oppression at the hands of a male-dominated social hierarchy. This theme remains visible throughout Hardy's fiction as one of the author's main focal points.

Specific examples of Hardy's fiction that accord with ecofeminist critical perspectives abound in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) as the main female character, Tess Durbeyfield, is repeatedly victimized by various men in her life. In the culmination of the novel, the downtrodden Tess eventually loses her life as a direct result of the violent actions she takes to free herself from the oppression she suffers from patriarchal dominance in the culture of the Victorian era. Tess's death stands out to

the ecofeminist reader because the tragic event illustrates both the destruction of nature and the suppression of one young woman's life and freedom to a critical point at which she must cause destruction and subject herself to nearly certain death in order to escape.

An ecofeminist perspective is also likely to recognize the way in which Hardy's description of the natural world so often reflects the human tragedies found in his work, and Tess's story provides an excellent example of this model. When Tess is raped and becomes pregnant as a young woman, a situation for which she is condemned by patriarchal society's inflexible values while her rapist goes on with his life in the same state as it was before he raped her, nature itself reflects the darkness and confusion of this moment in her life. For instance, as Tess suffers through the social exclusion and resulting sense of shame that accompany her pregnancy, she takes frequent walks after dark. During these walks, Tess often feels that nature itself is judging and reprimanding her: "Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence" (Hardy, *Tess* 103). Hardy's description of Tess's thoughts and the nature that surrounds her, while seeming to be entirely separate from her, actually cements the author's tendency to link women to nature because his next statement indicates clearly that Tess is not truly an entity divided from nature in any way: "But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law know to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (Hardy, *Tess* 103). Hardy clarifies that Tess has merely broken a rule invented by humans, one that does not apply to the natural world in any real way, and his assertion of unity between mankind and nature implies that patriarchal society's moral code, not Tess or nature itself, is wrong and damaging.

Hardy's descriptions of overworked animals and other such features of the natural world permanently altered from its original form for the sake of human convenience also support an ecofeminist reading. Each of these depictions is a clear example of nature being destroyed by patriarchal society, and when a domesticated animal dies or natural processes fail due to environmental alterations made for human benefit, the destruction takes on a particularly literal form. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* contains several powerful examples of such casualties of patriarchal society's ongoing attempts to improve the situation of humans through the manipulation of the natural world, but one of the most powerful is the death of the Durbeyfield family's horse. Prince, an overworked beast of burden, is killed in an accident with a speeding mail cart while Tess and her brother, both mere children, drowsily attempt to assure their family's financial survival by driving bee hives to market before dawn (Hardy, *Tess* 37-41). Prince's is a life that ecofeminist theory would consider a clear case of nature being ravaged and destroyed by patriarchy. Additionally, the fact that Tess is forced to perform the roles of driver and instigator in the horse's death creates in her an unwilling accomplice, and her actions are inherently destructive to nature because they commodify the beehives and bees and alter the insects' existence in a negative manner to satisfy mankind's selfish purposes. Tess's tragically coerced transgressions occur due to both her father's irresponsible drunkenness the previous evening and the generally oppressed states of nature and women in patriarchal society. Tess is bound by the patriarchal conventions of duty and obedience to her father, so she is also oppressed into assisting in the destruction of nature through her involuntary contribution to the horse's demise.

Patriarchal oppression forces Tess to carry out the destruction of nature when she transports the beehives and takes part in the accident that kills Prince, and her situation in fact accords perfectly with Greta Gaard's assertion that men are encouraged by society to focus on their rights, while women are tied to responsibilities. Universal privileges including the freedom to exist independently (or the freedom from misuse and/or destruction for many non-living, natural parts of reality) and the right to existential recognition from the rest of the world ecofeminism asserts all people and every portion of nature should receive are not afforded to Tess (as a woman), to her brother (as a child), and to Prince (as an animal). These rights are unjustly withheld from Tess, her younger sibling, and the horse they depend upon as greatly as Tess's father's identical rights are allowed to take precedence solely because he is a male member of an oppressively patriarchal society. This simultaneous suppression of the inherent rights and respect due two non-dominant citizens and the concurrent destruction of a portion of the natural world provide justification for ecofeminist theory's linking of the women's negative treatment to the destruction and misuse of nature.

Hardy's narration of Prince's death is also notable as the author provides his reader many bloody details regarding the deplorable event while maintaining a tone of exceptional respect for Prince; however, his words also accentuate the horse's inability to defend himself against misuse and eventual slaughter at the hands of patriarchal society, and the tragic fall of a natural creature from the assumed natural autonomy of the undomesticated horse to servitude and eventual sacrifice at the altar of mankind's self-worship, is a requisite part of patriarchal society's oppression. Hardy's sense of loss and the tragic pain Tess feels at her own helplessness and the loss of a tool vital to her family's survival stand out in the precise, evocative words Hardy chooses to describe the horse's gory death: "The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword, and from the wound his life's blood was spouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss into the road….Prince lay alongside still and stark, his eyes half open, the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him" (Hardy, *Tess* 40).

Hardy's use of sound in his description of Prince's hemorrhagic demise, along with the sympathetic way in which the author describes Prince's eyes and his wound, create an unavoidably grotesque, heart-wrenching mental image for the reader. Hardy's efforts to make this event as realistic as possible for his reader reveal the writer's intention to make his readers remember Prince's death with sadness and horror, a conclusion most ecofeminist critics would likely endorse, or at least decline to protest. Hardy's well-documented love of animals has been noted by many, and this aspect of Hardy's character appeals to many ecocritics and ecofeminist critics alike: "Hardy's love of, concern for and affinity with animals permeate his fiction…. [F]arm animals, in particular, abound in his novels. They are invariably treated sympathetically and frequently anthropomorphically" (Page, *Oxford* 8).

Hardy continues to highlight the unnecessary brutality of Prince's death as he describes the horse's removal plainly enough, yet he uses powerful imagery to ensure his readers' emotions will be stirred by this travesty: "All that was left of Prince

was now hoisted into the wagon he had formerly hauled, and with his hoofs in the air, and his shoes shining in the setting sunlight he retraced the eight or nine miles to Marlott" (Hardy, *Tess* 41). The removal of Prince's lifeless body is unceremonious at best, and many readers may be shocked by the callousness represented by such treatment of a dead animal as the horse is simply carted away like a heap of trash rather than a living being recently deceased. An ecofeminist perspective might cite this demonstration of disrespect for a non-human life as a symptom of mankind's lack of respect for nature, an attitude which allows humans to destroy much of the natural world with virtually no remorse. Such an attitude is explicit in several other portions of the novel narrating nature's destruction.

Hardy writes evocatively of the carnage left behind by male hunters, and Tess encounters their tormented prey, a relatively large number of mortally wounded pheasants that the compassionate young woman begins euthanizing one by one to end their inhumane suffering (Hardy, *Tess* 315). Hunting would have been widely condoned by society during the Victorian era, and despite the obvious destruction of nature and the brutality represented by the act of killing animals for food or sport, patriarchal society continued to advocate hunting as a noble pastime for men, especially those from the upper socioeconomic classes. Disparity is manifest in the differences between Tess's point of view and place in society as a working class female and the social positions of the men who have so brutally wounded the birds and left them to die of blood loss or another equally cruel consequence of the gunfire's catastrophic effects. The insight the narrator offers into Tess's experiences with hunters reveals a great sense of alienation; the hunters are so different from Tess that she barely recognizes them as human, viewing them as foreign and dangerous. Such a cooperative, comprehensive interpretation of reality and the acceptable parameters for humans' relationships with the natural world are frequently advocated by ecofeminist theorists, especially in regard to self vs. other issues. Hardy himself likely looked at the world from much the same perspective as that shared by his narrator and Tess, seeing all living beings interconnected to the larger natural world but with a delicate balance requiring propriety of action on the part of humans if nature is not to be damaged severely or destroyed. Unfortunately for Tess's character, the world she inhabits is far from this ideal, and in addition to her personal miseries suffered due to patriarchal oppression, she must repeatedly witness the misuse and destruction of the very parts of nature she thinks of as composing a massive family to which she belongs. Hardy lived in a world very similar to that of Tess, and he also struggled with the damage done to women and nature by patriarchy. He appears to have especially despised the destruction of nature for human entertainment rather than actual human needs. Hardy spoke out against those sports and pastimes resulting in injury or ruin for any part of the natural environment asserting that such activities were purely unnecessary, barbaric, and destructive: "His press correspondence included opposition to circuses and, above all, hunting, (both in Britain and of big game), an activity he regarded as being in a class of its own" (Page, *Oxfor*d 9). Hardy's own aversion to the butchery of hunting is reflected in Tess's character, and her fear of the men who hunt forms a discernible link between social phenomenon hazardous to nature and those that may also result in harm for women.

Precisely the same unremorseful sense of entitlement that enables patriarchal society's destruction of nature is almost always present in the minds of those who contribute to the subjugation of women, and Angel Clare provides a startling example of patriarchy's basis in such a mindset. Tess is obviously injured by Alec when he rapes her and simultaneously by her father because he is the man responsible for much of her family's crisis situation, a disastrous series of events that force Tess to her tormented existence and eventual tragic end. However, Tess actually receives the severest blows of patriarchal oppression from Angel Clare, a man readers might not readily identify as the novel's villain or most oppressive, injurious character.

However, most readers can agree with the statement that Hardy is quite critical and unsupportive of marriage, a theme that runs throughout the author's Wessex novels. The critique of marriage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is so scathing as to earn the novel recognition as "Hardy's most damning indictment of feminine sexual subjection" (Thomas 113). Tess's marriage to Angel and his intolerant, hypocritical treatment of his wife eventually lead to her death, and in this way, Angel is more villainous than Alec. Alec is openly oppressive, but Angel covers his patriarchal dominance of Tess with hypocrisy, religious ideologies, misleading behavior, and promises of a love he simply cannot provide her. Several readings of this novel actually place the greatest blame for Tess's death on Angel Clare and consider him the person most culpable in Tess's failure to move beyond the tragedies she had suffered in the form of victimization through rape, unfair social treatment, and the loss of her child: "In fact she does recover when she goes to Talbothays, but this recovery cannot be permanent, because there she meets Angel Clare, who becomes her second betrayer—the one man on earth who had loved her purely, and who had believed in her as pure" (M. Williams 93).

Conclusion:

Tagging Hardy as a proper ecofeminist, theorist or author, either conscious or unconscious in his beliefs, potentially risks overstepping the factual support available biographically and from varying analyses of those aspects of Hardy's character evident in his tragic fiction. However, an ecofeminist reading of these novels and a survey of Hardy's biographical experiences with female oppression and loss of rural culture to urbanization provides greater insight into the personal and social conflicts that led Hardy to create such realistic, heart-wrenchingly tragic novels, enacted by characters one virtually cannot avoid thinking of as more than fictional beings, but actual people who collectively refuse to conform to their era's overly constraining social norms. Despite the temporal distance separating Hardy's fiction from today's critic, an ecofeminist reading of his work is relevant both from a revisionist standpoint and for possible historical insight one may gain if considering Hardy's writing an early instance of the plight of women and nature intersecting. Hardy's startlingly open discussion of such issues as the vitality of un-spoiled nature and the sovereign rights of women to control their own lives caused some of Hardy's contemporaries to condemn his writing, even labeling it pornographic, and dismiss his work as needlessly graphic or inflammatory. However, an ecofeminist reading clearly reveals in Hardy's tragic fiction both instances of useful social criticism and commendable representations of the beauty and intrinsic value of the natural world and its inhabitants as they struggle against a male-dominated social structure in the hopes of eventually overcoming patriarchal dominance and its destructive material outcomes.

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