

## **The Relentless March of Progress and the Uprooted Rural Populations: An Analysis of Social Disintegration in Tess of the d'Urbervilles**

**Dr Sunneet Kaur**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University  
Amritsar

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### **Abstract:**

Victorian England witnessed a dynamic period of social and cultural upheaval. Driven by mechanization, the agricultural economy faltered, prompting a mass exodus of villagers towards these burgeoning industrial centres. This societal and economic metamorphosis was accompanied by a shift in ideological paradigms. The unyielding pressures of industrialization, coupled with discriminatory landownership practices, effectively pushed the agrarian communities out of their traditional settings, marking a dramatic shift in the social fabric of Victorian England. Literature of the period dealt a significant blow to established religious and idealistic interpretations of the universe, profoundly impacting artists, particularly sensitive to the prevailing atmosphere of environment. The present paper delves into the portrayal of rural instability under modern pressures in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, focusing on the inability of traditional structures to withstand the forces of the new. It analyses how the novel transcends mere recognition of increasing concern with rural issues or the inevitability of vanishing lifestyles. It offers a critical examination of Hardy's depiction of a world succumbing to the twin spectres of industrialization and urbanization. Beyond the broader societal shifts, the paper also investigates the personal tribulations faced by Tess Durbeyfield and her family as they endure the hardships of 'diasporic movement' precipitated by industrial forces. The paper establishes that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* serves not only as a poignant personal tragedy but also as a vital social document chronicling the disintegration of the English peasantry and the subsequent demise of traditional rural life. The narrative is imbued with a profound nostalgia for the pre-industrial past, lamenting the disruptive forces of urbanization and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization.

**Keywords:** Machines, Technology, Agrarian society, Victorian England, Diasporic movement, Man and machine

### **Introduction and Aim:**

Victorian England witnessed a dynamic period of social and cultural upheaval. The traditional agrarian way of life faced rapid dissolution as the nation embraced industrialization. Grimy railways replaced stagecoaches and quaint inns, while sprawling industrial towns mushroomed, supplanting the rural landscape. Driven by mechanization, the agricultural economy faltered, prompting a mass exodus of villagers towards these burgeoning industrial centres. This societal and economic metamorphosis was accompanied by a shift in ideological paradigms. Immersed in an era of fervent scientific and philosophical progress, individuals inevitably absorbed the zeitgeist. Darwinian evolution challenged the long-held tenets of the Bible, eroding faith in Christianity and prompting scepticism about its philosophical underpinnings and historical veracity. Literature of the period dealt a significant blow to established religious and idealistic interpretations of the universe, profoundly impacting artists, particularly sensitive to the prevailing atmosphere of environment. Generations-old superstitions and practices dwindled rapidly during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with England's deep immersion in the transformative Industrial Revolution and the stirring yet unsettling Chartist reform movement.

The relentless march of progress uprooted rural populations, severing them from their traditional way of life and propelling them towards burgeoning urban centres. This mass exodus, exemplified by the increased frequency of seasonal migrations, resulted in a profound disconnect from ingrained customs and practices. For instance, farms that once saw minimal tenant turnover now experienced yearly shifts in occupancy, highlighting the transformative nature of the era. Additionally, agricultural labourers, already burdened by societal oppression and the vagaries of nature, found themselves further marginalized in this evolving landscape. These communities, once vibrant hubs not only for agricultural activity but also for skilled craftspeople and other trades, faced a steady decline. Blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, and shopkeepers, who constituted a vital and informed segment of village life, witnessed a dwindling presence. This demographic shift was further exacerbated by the discriminatory practices of landowners. Life-holders, who had invested in building their own cottages, faced eviction upon the expiration of their leases. While they were willing to remain as tenants, landowners, prioritizing their own needs, opted to demolish these cottages, reducing the housing available to non-farm labourers. Consequently, these families, forming the backbone of village life, were forced to seek refuge in overcrowded urban areas. This phenomenon, often

cited as ‘the tendency of the rural population towards the larger towns,’ can be more accurately viewed as a forced migration, akin to water defying gravity. The unyielding pressures of industrialization, coupled with discriminatory landownership practices, effectively pushed these communities out of their traditional settings, marking a dramatic shift in the social fabric of Victorian England.

The present paper delves into the portrayal of rural instability under modern pressures in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, focusing on the inability of traditional structures to withstand the forces of the new. It analyses how the novel transcends mere recognition of increasing concern with rural issues or the inevitability of vanishing lifestyles. It offers a critical examination of Hardy’s depiction of a world succumbing to the twin spectres of industrialization and urbanization. Beyond the broader societal shifts, the paper also investigates the personal tribulations faced by Tess Durbeyfield and her family as they endure the hardships of ‘diasporic movement’ precipitated by industrial forces.

**Analysis:**

Thomas Hardy’s Wessex novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, serves not only as a poignant personal tragedy but also as a vital social document chronicling the disintegration of the English peasantry and the subsequent demise of traditional rural life. The narrative is imbued with a profound nostalgia for the pre-industrial past, lamenting the disruptive forces of urbanization and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. While Tess’ individual suffering stands as a focal point, Hardy’s masterful depiction of these larger societal shifts demands our attention, urging us to contemplate the broader consequences of modernization on both individual lives and established socio-economic structures. Regarding *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* Mrs. Hardy records:

Hardy explored in greater detail than ever before the scenes of the story, and was powerfully impressed by the massing evidence of the decay in agricultural life. Here is the impulse behind the Legend. It dramatizes the defeat of Tess the country girl and the representative of the ancient country Line, and her ruin by the spiritual invaders of economic Life (Mrs Hardy 159).

Steeped in history and in a sense of place, Hardy presents Tess as the product of particular South-West England of 1890’s. In this case Cecil notes, “Tess was written when the Industrial Revolution was in the process of destroying the old agricultural England, the population was shifting and the small communities of the past were breaking down bit by bit” (20-21).

Agricultural machinery was turning work-folk into labourers; scarcity of work was forcing annual migrations. The novel is not merely the tragedy of a heroic girl. It is the tragedy of a proud community baffled and defeated by the process beyond its understanding and control. Arnold Kettle notes that Hardy's novel goes beyond the fate of pure woman. He finds it to be more than that. He says, "In fact it is the destruction of the English peasantry. More than any other nineteenth century novel it has the quality of a social document" (45).

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* embodies a complex emotional tapestry: anger at the dismantling of the traditional rural order, puzzlement over its causes, and regret for its loss. Hardy avoids facile attribution of blame, instead implicating a multiplicity of actors and forces. These include the callous selfishness of the landlord, the societal hypocrisy surrounding female sexuality, the moral decay within certain established families, the disruptive influence of technological advancements, and the apparent indifference of the cosmos to individual struggles and aspirations. The author describes that "The class to which Tess' father and mother belonged and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster together with non-descript workers other than farm labourers" is a better informed class (Hardy 396). This stratum of society demonstrably bore the brunt of the erosion of village markets and the industrial transformation of nearby towns. Members of this circumscribed rural artisan class were highly susceptible to dispossession of both domicile and livelihood, often being forced to assume the shroud of unspecialized labourers.

The Durbeyfields, characterized by their small-scale farming practices, primarily relied on their sole asset, the horse Prince, for their livelihood. Prince's untimely demise serves as a pivotal catalyst for the family's descent into hardship and eventual ruin. This economic downfall mirrors the broader decline of the English peasantry during the period. Further exacerbating their struggle, the death of Tess' father, their eviction from their home in Marlott, and persistent financial stringency further amplify their vulnerability. Notably, Tess' tragic fate becomes intricately intertwined with the family's economic instability. Consumed by guilt over Prince's death, she feels morally obligated to accede to her parents' plan of seeking employment at Trantridge with the d'Urbervilles. Her decision to claim kinship, far from being driven by personal desires, stems solely from a profound sense of familial responsibility. This self-sacrifice demonstrates her willingness to subjugate her individual needs to the fundamental well-being of her family. One may agree with what Kettle says, "Tess prepared to become since

change she must a worker, is handed over by her mother to the life and mercies of the ruling class” (Kettle 42).

Driven by familial obligation, Tess sacrifices her aspirations of becoming a teacher and accepts menial labour on Alec’s “little fancy farm.” This idyllic pursuit serves as a mere hobby for the wealthy d’Urbervilles, who have recently ascended to the landed gentry. The poultry coop itself occupies a symbolic space – a former cottage belonging to a dispossessed copyholder. Land ownership held prestige, coveted by rising urban capitalists like the d’Urbervilles. However, Mrs. d’Urbervilles’ callous conversion of the cottage into a mere fowl house upon inheriting the property exposes the commodification of land and the erosion of traditional rural life under the pressure of economic advancement. The following passage refers to the squeezing out of the intermediate class:

The rooms where dozens of infants had waited at their nursing now resounded with the tapping of the nascent chicks. Distracted hens in coops occupied spots where formerly stood chairs supporting sedate agriculturists. The chimney cover and once blazing heath was filled with inverted bee-hives in which the hens laid their eggs while out of doors the plots that each succeeding householder had carefully shaped with spades were torn by cocks in wildest fashions (Hardy 82).

Hardy masterfully employs Tess’ narrative as a microcosm of broader historical forces. Her declining fortunes and eventual tragedy epitomize the plight of the vanishing English peasantry under the rising tide of capitalism. Alec, a mere pretender to the d’Urberville name, embodies the opportunistic nouveau riche usurping the established landed gentry. The Durbeyfields’ misplaced sense of newfound nobility, fuelled by Joan’s romanticized view of history, ironically throws Tess into the very heart of a predatory ruling class. She mentions “We have been found to be the greatest gentle folk in the whole of country - reaching all back, Long before Oliver Grumbles time to the days of Pagan Turks- with monuments and vaults, and crest and Scutcheon and Lord knows what all” (Hardy 42). Joan’s naive understanding of historical progress, characterized by an idealized lens on both past and present, unwittingly orchestrates Tess’ exploitation, highlighting the tragic interplay between personal circumstances and larger societal shifts.

Hardy utilizes Tess’ narrative to illuminate the stark contrasts between a fading past and a burgeoning modernity. The Durbeyfields serve as poignant symbol of this historical shift, embodying both what was and what is no more. This theme is further reinforced by juxtaposing

Tess and her mother, Joan: “Between the mother with her fast perishing Lumber of superstitions, folklore dialect and orally transmitted ballads and the daughter with her trained national school teaching and standard knowledge . . . When they were together the Jacobean and Victorian ages were juxtaposed” (42). The mother represents the vestiges of a bygone era and Tess, on the other hand embodies the modern, educated individual. Tess’ superior education, acquired under a London-trained mistress, allows her to speak two languages and transcend the provincial dialect and limited knowledge of her mother. Notably, her modern schooling acts as a liberating force, emancipating her from the superstitions that still hold sway over Mrs. Durbeyfield.

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* presents contrasting events to highlight the erosion of rural traditions. David Cecil points out: “Every year Hardy noticed that old habits were discontinued; that stories and songs were being forgotten; that families establish for years in a place were leaving it” (22). The ‘May Dances’ of the past, a joyful celebration embedded in nature’s rhythms, stand in stark contrast to the present-day ‘Club walking,’ a pale imitation lacking the inherent vibrancy and communal spirit. Tess’ participation in the ‘May Dance’ exemplifies an organic community deeply connected to their heritage, while the ‘Club walking’ showcases the intrusion of the sophisticated urban world, personified by Angel, who ironically becomes an agent of Tess’ destruction. This juxtaposition symbolizes the encroachment of modernity upon rural customs and the consequent loss of identity, laughter, and vitality. Notably, the labourers are depicted as not only bereft of their past traditions but also deprived of basic comforts, emphasizing the broader societal anxieties surrounding modernization and its impact on rural communities.

Tess’ tragedy truly unfolds following her traumatic encounter with Alec. The incident brands her as a ‘fallen woman, a consequence not only of her own misfortune but also of the Durbeyfields’ declining social standing. This raises a crucial question: why does Tess bear the brunt of this suffering? The answer lies in her profound sensitivity and unwavering devotion to her family. Tess’ unwavering concern for her siblings’ well-being becomes her Achilles’ heel, exploited by Alec to manipulate her into a state of indebtedness and ultimately, seduce her. This act of betrayal leads to her social ostracization and reduction to a mere field labourer upon returning to Marlott. Hardy describes the mechanical reaper which “left the fallen corn behind it in little heaps, each heap being of the quantity for a sheaf and upon these the active binders in the rear laid their hands” (Hardy 196). Tess’ act of binding sheaves proceeds with a

clockwork-like monotony, highlighting the dehumanizing impact of the reaping machine on rural labour. Workers, primarily women due to their perceived expendability, are reduced to automatons in this mechanized process. Tess, like her fellow labourers, becomes a passive cog in this relentless system, robbed of autonomy and individuality. Merryn Williams maintains, “She (Tess) is doubly vulnerable because she belongs to the working class and because she is a girl. She is liable to be reduced not only to the status of unskilled labourer, but also to mere sexual object in a society which has no means of resisting” (90).

Following Brown and Kettle’s analysis of the ‘destruction of English peasantry,’ Tess’ individual suffering under the ‘monstrous wheat engine’ expands to encompass the broader demise of the Durbeyfields. This decline, initiated by John’s death and culminating in their eviction from Marlott, coincides with the symbolic degradation of Old Lady Day. Once a revered seasonal festival imbued with religious significance, it becomes merely a cold marker for wage agreements, signifying the dehumanizing influence of modernization and mechanization. According to F. B. Pinion the threshing machine: “has infernal or plutonic associations. It ends in slaughter. It’s central figure is Tess, once victim always a victim. The machine is presented as an automation which works regardless of suffering” (489). This theme is further amplified as Tess becomes a cog in the machinery at Flintcomb Ash, embodying the broader struggles of her class trapped in an uncontrollable economic process. Here, the ‘tags of modern thought’ – mechanization, impersonality, alienation, and the cash nexus – manifest in brutal reality. The harsh working conditions, characterized by long hours, minimal wages, and clear proletarianization (evident in the impersonal contract binding Tess and her friends to the machine), underscore the inevitability of tragedy. While Talbothays offered a romanticized vision of rural labour through its focus on dairy work, its limited seasonality and instability necessitated Tess’ migration to harsher environments like Flintcomb Ash. Here, she endures gruelling manual labour for meagre wages, highlighting the stark realities faced by rural labourers in the face of modernization.

The threshing machine at Flintcomb Ash represents the burgeoning conflict between the agrarian past and the encroaching industrialized world, its mechanical voracity embodying the dehumanizing relationships characteristic of capitalist farms. As enclosures and industrialization reshape the landscape of rural England, traditional farm work succumbs to monotonous, mechanized drudgery, blurring the lines between man and machine. Dispossessed of their land and livelihoods, labourers like those at Flintcomb Ash are forcibly proletarianized,

swelling the tide of migration from rural communities to urban centres. Nothing could be more brutally factual than the description of a swede-field at Flintcomb Ash which conveys more economically and transparently Hardy's vision of human abandonment in "the disserving earth" (Vanghent 52). This transformation manifests in the conversion of arable land to pasture and the ruthless eviction of agricultural workers through village destruction. Women, already marginalized, become further exploited in this system, their labour viewed as a mere commodity. The ceaselessness of the work is described thus: "as the drum never stopped the man who fed it could not stop and she who had to supply the man with untied sheaves, could not stop! either unless Mariam changed placed with her, which she sometimes did for half an hour in spite of Gorby's objection that she was too slow handed for a feeder" (Hardy 368). Tess' gruelling task amidst the threshing machine, overseen by the itinerant engineer with his ever-moving engine, exemplifies the precarious position of this class. This engineer, devoid of personal identity and described as a menacing force, embodies the world of ruthless, profit-driven industrialism intruding into the traditional agricultural sphere. Unlike the other women who can briefly escape the relentless toil for refreshment, Tess finds no respite. "The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by the Livestock - and it was the business of the two women (Mariam and Tess) to group up the lower, or earthly, half of the root with the hooked fork that it might be eaten also" (234). Her work, crawling in the fields to pull turnips, becomes emblematic of the monotonous drudgery and alienation faced by those caught in the gears of modernization.

Driven by profit maximization and labour efficiency, farmers prioritize machine output over worker well-being. This pursuit reduces Tess to a mere cog in the system, highlighting the dehumanizing impact of technology when viewed solely through the lens of human control and profit. Instead of alleviating workload, the machine intensifies it, transforming labourers into 'slaves' bound to its relentless pace. The dust, noise, and exertion demanded by the 'tyrant' machine further contribute to Tess' physical and psychological suffering. This dominance symbolizes the triumph of mechanization over the organic vitality inherent in life close to nature. Furthermore, Hardy portrays the annual migration of rural workers as a testament to the 'sad fate' of peasant families caught in the throes of industrialization. This moving and disturbing account serves as a microcosm of the broader proletarianization of the rural population. Hardy viewed these migrations as disruptive to traditional 'local life,' causing significant social and cultural dissolution. Many families were forced from their villages

towards urban centres, driven by the 'greedy self-interests' of landowners who prioritized profit over community. This depopulation not only disrupts existing social structures but also exposes the inherent tensions between rural traditions and the forces of modernization. Passage on agricultural theme runs thus:

However, all the mutations were so increasingly discernible in village Life did not originate entirely in the agricultural unrest. A depopulation was going on. The village had formerly contained side by side with the agricultural labourers interesting and better informed class ranking distinctly above the farmer - the class to which Tess's father belonged and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster together with the non-descript workers other than farm t Labourers, a set of people who owned a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life holders Like Tess' father or copyholders (Hardy 396).

Driven once more from their home by financial hardship, the Durbeyfields find themselves at the mercy of the elements, mirroring Tess' own inability to secure material salvation. This desperation propels her towards Alec for the second time, highlighting the dehumanizing forces of economic determinism within the 'new order' defined solely by monetary value. Angel's arrival disrupts the rural scene, his upper-class urbanity presenting a stark contrast to the village's fertility rites. He and his brothers appear as harbingers of Victorian society, hovering around Tess with a fundamental misunderstanding of her character and worth. Angel's indifference becomes emblematic of the dogmatic and hypocritical social codes he professes, ultimately victimizing Tess with his priggishness and snobbery. His self-righteous idealism underscores distressing social nature of her tragedy. Indeed, Hardy masterfully utilizes Tess not only as an indictment of societal obscurantism but also as a poignant exploration of the individual's vulnerability and isolation in a harsh and indifferent world.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the monotonous drudgery of life underscores the dehumanizing impact of industrialization on rural life, a central theme in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The threshing machine, aptly described as a 'red tyrant,' embodies the exploitative forces encroaching upon traditional agricultural practices. It demands relentless toil from its human 'servants,' exposing the vast chasm between the exploitative landowners and the marginalized labourers. Despite this oppressive system, Hardy portrays the labourers' resilience, highlighting

their unwavering will to endure and persist in their struggle for economic survival. Notably, the machine paradoxically amplifies rather than diminishes human labour, further illuminating the harsh realities faced by rural communities in the face of modernization. Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* unfolds against a backdrop of profound societal shifts and cultural dislocation. The Durbeyfield family's precarious existence throughout the narrative reflects not only their internal dysfunction (John's drinking and Joan's perceived shortcomings) but also the broader forces of modernization eroding their way of life. The decline of haggling due to new transportation (railways) and distribution methods, alongside the depopulation of the countryside and mass migration to cities, represent larger social tendencies beyond their control. This context intensifies their tragedy when, upon John's death, the family faces eviction from their cottage due to an expiring lease. The landowner, eager to accommodate regular labourers (unlike life-hold tenants like the Durbeyfields), prioritizes their needs, leaving the family homeless. Further hardship ensues when the Kingsbere house owner, through 'mischance,' reneges on their promise to provide a new cottage to Tess' mother: "Thus the Durbeyfields once the D'Urbervilles, saw descending upon them the destiny which, no doubt, when they were among the Olympians of the country, they had caused to descend many a time, and severely enough upon the heads of such Landless-ness as they themselves were now. So do flux and reflux – the rhythm of change – alternate and persists in everything under the sky" (Hardy 395).

One can say that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* certainly depicts the decline of the English peasantry and is essentially a social and industrial tragedy. Douglas Brown rightly points out: "Hardy sets the culminating family tragedy against the ominous back- ground of the Lady Day Migration of so many village folk. The erasure of Local Life by these contemporary migrations, Hardy perceived was a grave social and spiritual loss. It is no accident of art that the story of Tess should end amid scenes of uprooting" (97-98). To fully appreciate *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a crucial balancing act is required. While Hardy meticulously depicts the rural population's changing landscape, their struggles against evolving circumstances, his central focus remains on Tess as an individual. Embodying both the collective spirit of her class and a distinct personality, she emerges as a tragic figure. Her suffering resonates deeply because it unfolds against a backdrop of societal destruction and disintegration. Interpreted through this lens, Tess can be understood not simply as a victim of personal betrayals, by her seducer and

husband, but also as a symbolic representation of the broader injustices faced by the English peasantry during a period of immense social and economic upheaval.

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