

The Deconstructed Angels in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Abstract: The nineteenth-century is an age when traditional social expectations for a truly pure and angelic woman pervade the Western world. In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), two main characters apparently bear unignorable relevance to the term "angel" or its connotation: Angel Clare, whose Christian name alone suggests the subtle artistic design of the author, and Tess, who is overtly defined by the author in the subtitle of the novel as "a pure woman". The controversial verdict on Tess lead readers to reflect upon the life experiences of the "angelically pure" Tess again in terms of *what she does* instead of what she is already assumed to be, thus revealing her loyalty, forbearance and nobility of her struggle against fate. Appearing both as an intruder into the Wessex country life and reforming destructionist of the dogma of the church, the other "angel", Angel Clare deconstructs what his father Reverend Mr. Clare of Emminster holds as absolute truth. His self-deconstruction along the way blurs the simple dichotomy of what is pure and moral, and furthermore, help him finally recognize the disadvantaged female. Prominently, these two "angels" are deconstructed against the incorrigible connotation and the Zeitgeist of their time, showing Thomas Hardy's possible awareness of the necessity of breaking the stereotypic angelical image as well as wielding the inestimable power of literature to propel changes.

Keywords: Angel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Deconstruction

1. An Introduction to "Angel"

The term angel is derived from the Greek word *angelos* [1], and its use in religious contexts arises from its being used as a direct translation of Hebrew *mal'akh* (meaning "messenger")—the term used in the scriptures for God's intermediaries. If closely examined, as the etymology demonstrates, the literal meaning of the word "angel" points more toward the *function* or *status* of such beings in a cosmic hierarchy rather than toward *connotations* of essence or nature, which have been prominent in popular piety, especially in Western religions [2]. However, back in the nineteenth-century, such recognition might be more or less counterintuitive, since it is still the age when traditional social expectations for a truly pure and angelic woman pervade the Western world.

Normally, the popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman is "the Angel in the House": she is expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The Angel is passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all—pure.

The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women [3]. The perfect image does not shatter until Virginia Woolf. The repressive ideal of women represented by the Angel in the House is still so potent that she declares, in 1931, "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" [4]. In the groundbreaking work of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar, by arguing that only the duplicitous female voice is truly female voice, comb out that the female textual strategy consists in "assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images women inherited from male literature, especially...the paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster" [5], which results in a reexamination of the "angels".

The works of Thomas Hardy have been explicitly and obsessively associated with matters of gender [6]. Born in a transitional period from the old Victorian to the Modern world, male as he is, Hardy is perhaps aware of the necessity of breaking this stereotypic angelical image as well as wielding the inestimable power of literature to propel changes.

Interestingly, even Patmore expresses an affection, though condescending and self-congratulatory, for the unvirtuous side of Hardy's heroines [7]. Anyhow, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, two figures apparently bear unignorable relevance to the term "angel" or its connotation: Angel Clare, whose Christian name alone suggests the subtle artistic design of Thomas Hardy, and Tess, who is overtly defined by the author in the subtitle of the novel as "a pure woman".

Hardy himself is quite aware of the controversiality particularly of his verdict on his female protagonist, with whom he demolishes "the doll of English fiction" [8]. In the Preface to the fifth and later editions of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he detects "a conscientious difference of opinion concerning...subjects fit for art and...an inability to associate the idea of the sub-title adjective with any but the artificial and derivative meaning which has resulted to it from the ordinances of civilization". He responds to those objectors that they ignore "the meaning of the word in Nature, together with all aesthetic claims upon it, not to mention the spiritual interpretation afforded by the finest side of their own Christianity" [9]. In saying so he seems to reexamine the established concept of purity. Furthermore, Hardy also takes this opportunity to elaborate on his motive and pursuit of art later in the preface at that particular transitional period. In response to those who dissent on grounds which are "intrinsically no more than an assertion that the novel embodied the view of life prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century, and not those of an earlier and simpler generation", he contends that "the novel is an impression, not an argument; and there the matter must rest; as one is reminded by a passage which occurs in the letters of Schiller to Goethe on judges of this class, 'They are those who seek only their own ideas in a representation, and prize that which should be as higher than what is'" [9]. The echo with Hardy's former assertion that "the novel was intended to be neither didactic nor aggressive, but in the scenic parts to be representative simply" [9] can be deemed as highly prospective. Meanwhile, at the end of the Preface to the fifth and later editions, Hardy further points out that "so densely is the world thronged that any shifting of positions, even the best warranted advance, galls somebody's kibe. Such shiftings often begin in sentiment, and such sentiment sometimes begins in a novel" [9]. Hitherto the text's attempt at furnishing a new outlook on the "angel" gradually grows lucid.

2. The "Pure" Angel

If we are to have an overview of our female protagonist, it takes cruelly few words to recapitulate Tess's early life experience: a country girl who gets premaritally pregnant and gives birth to an illegitimate child who dies prematurely—far from being the "pure and chaste" [9] woman refined enough and to the expectations of Angel's mother. Could she ever be defined as "pure" or an "Angel" in the house?

Etymologically, angels have their significance primarily in what they *do* rather than in what they *are* [2]. In other

words, whatever essence or inherent nature they possess is in terms of their relationship to their source. Because of the Western iconography of angels, however, they have been granted essential identities that often surpass their functional relationships to the sacred or holy and their performative relationships to the profane world. Therefore, popular piety, feeding on graphic and symbolic representations of angels, has to some extent posited semidivine or even divine status to angelic figures. It is such status that the text of the novel has endeavored to deconstruct. Deconstruction views texts as subversively undermining an apparent or surface meaning, and it denies any final explication or statement of meaning. It questions the presence of any objective structure or content in a text [10]. Instead of discovering one ultimate meaning for the text, deconstruction describes the text as always in a state of change, furnishing only provisional meanings. Thus, meaning can only point to an indefinite number of other meanings. With this in mind, we may reflect upon the life experiences of the "angelically pure" Tess again in terms of *what she does* instead of what she is already assumed to be.

It is easy to dismiss the fact that Tess is only sixteen years old at the beginning of the story. Her life exemplifies the clash between "the inherent will to enjoy and the circumstantial forces against enjoyment [9]". She is often compared to a "bird caught in a trap-net [9]"—the "trap" is set both by her parents and by Alec. She is sent out into the world at a very young age, innocent to the dangers which might await her. During the May-Day dance, she is not yet experiencing the awakening of love, as "being heart-whole as yet, she enjoyed treading a measure purely for its own sake...little divining when saw 'the soft torments, the bitter sweets, the pleasing pains, and the agreeable distresses' of those girls who had been wooed and won [9]". When Mrs. Durbeyfield suggests that some young feller with whom she danced the day before help to deliver the hives, Tess declares proudly, "O no—I wouldn't have it for the world! [9]" Her pride would never allow herself to accept any patronage of men for her physical beauty. On the way to deliver the hives, she seems to sense "the vanity of her father's pride", resisting subconsciously the "gentlemanly suitor laughing at her poverty and her shrouded knightly ancestry [9]", just as previously her pride does not allow her to "turn her head again" to learn any of her father's snobbery when his carriage comes round [9]. Her mother, with visions of a fancy marriage for her pretty daughter, gives little thought to the man her daughter will be associated with. Her father also thinks only of his own desire to restore the family name. This gives Alec the chance to take advantage of Tess's innocence and physical exhaustion to make her his victim.

Tess's silence concerning the nature of the fateful event is noteworthy, the consequence of which being that some readers may find it difficult to decide whether it is a rape or a "seduction". In definition, seduction is generally understood as an act or phenomenon aimed at misleading a person or a group of people. Since the term involves a fluid dynamics of power and guilt, which engages both the seducer, who acts

with an intention to mislead, and the seduced, who seemingly allows herself or himself to be led astray, it implies a certain degree of consent on the part of the seduced. The term seduction therefore tends to displace the guilt from the perpetrator to the victim. Feminist criticism holds that legal institutions have tended to reduce cases of rape to seduction narratives, which in turn redefined rape as constituted not by the violator's coercion but by the victim's non-consent [11]. Elissa Gurman points out that the story also reflects "a culture that eroticizes the less-than-conscious and passive female body, and both wrangle with the challenge of evaluating the consent that same body supposedly might have given before falling into complete unconsciousness" [12], since Tess is also supposedly soundly asleep. Fortunately, not all vestige of truth of non-consent is shunned from readers by Tess's silence in the text, let alone the pervasive circumstantial evidence of Tess's typical post-traumatic symptoms: her keeping reminding herself that Groby's cruelty is at least the "sort of attack being independent of sex" [9]; her delusion of sin that it is "the same attraction (as hers) which had been the prelude to her own tribulation" [9]. The community gossip about the event—"A little more than persuading had to do wi' the coming o't ... There were they that heard a sobbing one night last year in The Chase" [9]—remains the pitifully little defense of Tess as a "perfect victim". What also deserves readers' attention is the perpetrator's account. Alec says to Tess when they meet again four years later, "I saw you innocent, and I deceived you" [9]. He even expresses his respect for Tess, "Why I did not think small of you was on account of your being unsmirched in spite of all: you took yourself off from me so quickly and resolutely when you saw the situation; you did not remain at my pleasure; so that there was one petticoat in the world for whom I had no contempt; and you are she" [9]. His statement as the wrongdoer gives readers even more trustworthy proof of Tess's innocence in the tragedy.

Furthermore, although born of shiftless parents of very limited means, Tess herself also exhibits qualities worthy of a dignified human being. Tess has a strong moral sense as well as a keen awareness of justice. Tess's weakness lies in her feeling of responsibility for her family's welfare. She loves her younger brothers and sisters and feels she must provide for them. This noble aim leads to most of her difficulties. Alec senses her concern for them and uses his generous gifts as a means of dominating Tess. She is grateful for what he does for the children, but does not want to be indebted to him. She fights against him, but the overwhelming burden of the large family is finally too much for her to bear alone. She even feels guilty when she realizes that she might have wronged the allegedly rehabilitatee as she questions herself, "D'Urberville was not the first wicked man who had turned away from his wickedness to save his soul alive, and why should she deem it unnatural in him? [9]" Even Tess's rival in love Izz would argue in favor of her before Angel, "Because nobody could love 'ee more than Tess did!... She would have laid down her life for 'ee. I could do no more! [9]" It is her loyalty, forbearance and nobility of her struggle against fate that win the respect and sympathies of the readers.

3. The "Misnamed" Angel

Unlike his self-sacrificing father of charitable sentiments but rigid opinions, the other "angel", Angel Clare, is to deconstruct what his father holds as absolute truth. The "misnamed" [9] Angel (deemed by his father), is the youngest of the three sons of the Reverend Mr. Clare of Emminster, "an Evangelical of the Evangelicals, a conversionist [9]". Etymologically, the original sense of evangelist (with the root of "angel" in it) is "writer of a gospel". English used to have the word evangel "gospel". This came via Old French *evangile* and ecclesiastical Latin *evangelium* from Greek *euaggélion*, which in classical times means "reward for bringing good news (message of salvation through the atoning sacrifice of Christ)". Later on, it comes to mean simply "good news", and in early Christian texts written in Greek it denotes specifically any of the four books of the New Testament written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John [13]. It contains a missionary thrust because it is centered in the proclamation to the world of the good news of salvation. It also entails an appeal to conversion and decision on the basis of the free grace of God. In its historical meaning evangelical has come to refer to the kind of religion espoused by the Protestant Reformation. It is also associated with the spiritual movements of purification subsequent to the Reformation-Pietism and Puritanism. The revival movements within Protestantism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have also been appropriately termed evangelical [14]. Deconstruction actually opposes such logocentrism, the notion that written language contains a self-evident meaning that points to an unchanging meaning authenticated by the whole of Western tradition. Since there is no possibility of absolute truth, deconstructionists seek to undermine all pretensions to authority, or power system, in language [10]. In the novel, Angel Clare appears both as an intruder into the Wessex country life and reforming destructionist of the dogma of the church.

Those aspects of religion which deal with the supernatural are unacceptable to Angel. Although he shows great promise as a scholar, he does not go to the university because his father believes in education only as training for the ministry. No longer comfortable with his clerical family because his semi-emancipated thinking has alienated him from their single-minded approach to life, he joins the agricultural community to prepare for his future life as a farmer. When questioned about the unreligious book he booked, Angel declares to his father, "I love the Church as one loves a parent. I shall always have the warmest affection for her. There is no institution for whose history I have a deeper admiration; but I cannot honestly be ordained her minister, as my brothers are, while she refuses to liberate her mind from an untenable redemptive theolatri [9]". Here Angel is overtly attacking the Church's doctrine of redemption by comparing it to the game of thimblery—a swindler takes bets on which of three thimbles a pea has supposedly been placed under [9].

Meanwhile, complexity never ceases to tinge Angel's outlook on life. According to Terry Eagleton, ideologies like

to draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal, surface and depth. Deconstruction tries to show how much oppositions, in order to hold themselves, or need to banish to the text's margins certain niggling details which can be made to return and plague them [15]. Likewise, Angel's self-deconstruction along the way has blurred the simple dichotomy of what is pure and moral. Although intellectually liberated from orthodox Christianity, he is all the more dependent upon the Christian ethic and believes good morals are "the only safeguard for us poor human beings [9]". Angel's first falling in love with Tess is rather symbolic. He contemplates, "it was for herself that he loved Tess; her soul, her heart, her substance—not for her skill in the dairy, her aptness as his scholar, and certainly not for her simple, formal faith-professions. Her unsophisticated, open-air existence required no varnish of conventionality to make it palatable to him [9]". At the outset, idealizing Tess into an essence of virgin purity, he is struck dumb when he learns that she, too, has "sinned". Her confession strikes at the very foundation of his life. Another symbolic scene occurs when Tess makes her confession to Angel on their wedding-night, as Angel "paused, contemplating this definition; then suddenly broke into horrible laughter—as unnatural and ghastly as a laugh in hell [9]". It is not until he removes himself from the society in which he has been raised, and sees morality in its temporal and transitory aspects, that he is able to accept Tess's character as one who wills good, no matter what the deeds. At the end of Chapter 39, the narrator first proposes as commentary the criteria of judging a person, "No prophet had told him (Angel), and he was not prophet enough to tell himself, that essentially this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency [9]." Just as mentioned above—the simple connotation assumed by most fades from the "angel", deconstructionists are no longer prone to judgments by the sheer consequence but by what an individual actually does and would like to do: "The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay not among things done, but among things willed [9]". This echoes with Tess's aesthetic contemplation—"Beauty to her, as to all who have felt, lay not in the thing, but in what the thing symbolized [9]" and the "religion of loving-kindness and purity [9]" —dogma—she synthesizes with the learning from her beloved Angel. Additionally, Angel is also praiseworthy in that he finally recognizes the disadvantaged female through his self-deconstruction, realizing that "Tess was no insignificant creature to toy with and dismiss; but a woman living her precious life—a life which, to herself who endured or enjoyed it, possessed as great a dimension as the life of the mightiest to himself [9]". With such attention to the nonentity, authority is blurred, if not entirely removed, so that the subaltern might be freed from the "silence" and

speak with their own voice.

4. Conclusion

The two angels in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are thus deconstructed against the incorrigible connotation they hold and the Zeitgeist of their time. Penny Boumelha comments in the Introduction that "it is important that the novel is not set in the unspecific 'once upon a time' of fairy tale, but embeds its folk elements squarely in the context of the recognizable English society of the nineteenth century... The changing conditions... all take their place beside the mythological, biblical, and folk allusions to ensure that the novel bestows a challenging contemporaneity upon its tale of the maiden seduced and abandoned [9]". In a broader sense, the contemporaneity could perhaps also be interpreted as the state of being constantly new, especially in the current world. In this very day and age, there are still countless Tesses, male or female, gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender, literary or illiterate, experiencing at this very moment what might have confronted the nineteenth-century country girl—being imposed on others' wills. Hopefully, the deconstructive power within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which is written more than one hundred years ago, however subtle or limited, may at least offer certain new perspective or inspiration for our generation to brave the real conflicts and differences whose future history cannot be predicted.

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