

# Is Tess a Pure Woman?—On the Failure of the Adaptation of the Movie *Tess*

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Because of the great charm and social influence of the art of film, people regard the movie *Tess* is much more impressive than the original novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. However, the character and image of Tess in the film have a considerable distance of the Tess described by Thomas Hardy. That unyielding Tess in original, who boldly resists bias and the injustice of fate, is gone and replaces it with a pathetic and vain girl who is too good near to be weak. This undoubtedly weakened the image of the artistic value of Tess and it has nothing in common with Hardy's evaluation towards Tess—"a pure woman". Therefore, in a sense, the adaptation of *Tess* is a failure.

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*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is written by English realism novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) (1994) in 19th century and it is the masterpiece of his most famous novel *Wessex Series*. The subtitle of the work is "a pure woman", and that is the author's clear-cut attitude about the heroine Tess.

Since published, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is loved by many readers from all over the world for a long time and is shot for several times into movies and TV series. In 1979, Brill Productions in United States and Rennes Productions in France distributed the film *Tess* together and it was directed by the famous American director Roman Polanski. This adaptation was based on Thomas Hardy's classic one.

The heroine Tess was played by German actress Nastassia Kinski, the hero Clare was played by Peter Firth, and Alec Tess was played by Leigh Lawson. The film pleased critics and admires from all over the world after released and it won three Oscar Awards for best cinematography, best art direction, and best costume design combined with three nomination for best director, best picture, and best music. Additionally, the film also won the top honor of French film—the Caesar Award in 1980, best foreign language film and best new performance of Golden Globe Award in the U.S. in 1981 besides many other internationally renowned awards.

Because of the great charm and social influence of the art of film, people regard the movie *Tess* is much more impressive than the original novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. However, we are so disappointed to find that the character and image of Tess in the film have a considerable distance of the Tess described by Thomas Hardy. In one sense we could even say that the unyielding Tess in original, who boldly resists bias and the injustice of fate, is gone and replaces it with a pathetic and vain girl who is too good near to be weak. This undoubtedly weakened the image of the artistic value of Tess and it has nothing in common with Hardy's evaluation towards

Tess—"a pure woman". Therefore, to the author's point of view, the adaptation of *Tess* is a failure.

### **Tess in the Original Novel Is a Pure Woman**

For over one hundred years, the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has been frequently analyzed and valued by many scholars. Not only because the heroine Tess is a pure, beautiful, kind, and hard-working woman, but also she is tough and unbending and dare to fight against the prejudice and injustice of life. Hardy affirms in the subtitle that Tess is a "pure woman", which is a public challenge to the moral hypocrisy in Victorian Britain. Tess's purity lies in the following three aspects:

Firstly, as an ordinary country girl born in England, Tess loves nature, loves labor, and has maintained a hard-working and simple character. Tess's appearance is firstly described like that:

She was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others, possibly—but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment. (Hardy, 1994)

Tess is fond of throwing herself into the embrace of nature alone,

...it was then, when out in the woods, that she seemed least solitary. She knew how to hit to a hair's-breadth that moment of evening when the light and the darkness are so evenly balanced that the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty. (Hardy, 1994)

Tess also loves singing folk songs, "...gave the simplest music a power over her which could well-nigh drag her heart out of her bosom at times" (Hardy, 1994). Tess shows tender affection for little creatures, "...I never could bear to hurt a fly or worm, and the sight of a bird in a cage used often to make me cry" (Hardy, 1994).

Tess is living in a poor family with nine members. Her family relies on an old horse for some small business to sustain their living. Tess is the eldest daughter of the family. She began to help her mother with household affairs when she was young and she shouldered the responsibility of supporting her family when she was 17. She works hard without any complain.

Secondly, Tess did not make use of her marriage to live in luxury; instead she pursued her own happiness which based on self-esteem.

Due to poverty and in order to make a living, Tess was sent by his family to a nearby wealthy old lady Mrs. D'Urberville who was believed to be a distant relative of her family for help. When she went there, her purpose was only to solve her family troubles through hard work rather than to be a social climber. Once she found she was deceived, she made her firm decision to leave Alec D'Urberville and she said stubbornly, "...if I had ever sincerely loved you, if I loved you still, I should not so loathe and hate myself for my weakness as I do now! ...My eyes were dazed by you for a little, and that was all" (Hardy, 1994). Consequently, Tess has pure soul and noble morality.

Thirdly, Tess's perseverance and loyalty in love represents her pure nature. Tess fell in love with the clergyman's son Clare when they worked together. Tess was determined to marry him under his whirlwind courtship. On the wedding night, when Tess forgave her husband's previous love-affairs, she also confessed her past, whereas Clare abandoned her and went to Brazil alone.

After Clare had gone, in order to escape from importunities of lascivious and remain loyal to his husband, Tess cut her eyebrows deliberately and used handkerchief to cover half of her face to hide her beauty. Later for a highly-developed family conscience of responsibility and a spirit of self-sacrifice, Tess became Alec's mistress again to get the family's survival in return and this was against her will. In the meantime, Clare finally noticed that times were hard and that he treated Tess so harsh and extreme in the past. Therefore, holding his penitent mood, Clare came to Tess and wanted to be with her again. Tess, who was crushed by remorse and full of despair, was irritated by Alec's sarcasm and killed him with table knife. After spent five days happy time with Clare together, Tess was arrested and hanged. Tess was completely destroyed in the end although she was "sensitive as gossamer and blank as snow".

Hardy convinces fate subjectively, but objectively speaking, the realistic description of the novel reveals that the social reality is the decisive factor in causing the tragedy of Tess. In addition, Hardy believes that the purity moral is based on the purity of heart rather than the fault of the moment. The perfection of a person embodies in his or her understanding of life, love of life, and the loyalty of affection; only from such perfection can pure be produced. As a result, Tess is a pure woman.

Nevertheless, in Victorian era women's status was very low. Villain Alec could rely on religion to save his soul but Tess even had no chance to find a new life. The hypocritical moralists of British society regarded Tess as a typical demoralizing woman and as a warning example of sensuality. Tess was considered as "a figure of Guilt". Hardy's point of view was in sharp contrast to the social prejudice and he was attacking by a number of critics. Most critics could not accept Hardy's viewpoint so that though Hardy was well-known, for a long time he could not find a publisher willing to publish the novel.

### **Tess in the Movie Is a Pathetic and Vain Woman**

We cannot deny that the great success of the film *Tess* was partially relying on the natural and creative performance of Natasha Kinski. However, Tess in the film was too kind to be weak. We could not find Tess fought against the social prejudice and injustice of life; on the contrary, she seemed to resign herself to adversity and even showed a certain degree of vanity.

In the novel, Tess beat back Alec's entanglement in six different settings altogether and twice she had to use force to defend her dignity. The first time was on the thrashing field; when Alec pushed his luck to twin his arms around Tess's waist, she severely beat Alec in the face with her leather gloves and made his mouth bleeding. The second time was after her father's death; the night before the whole families were chased from the village, Alec offered to keep her family as a bait to persuade Tess into submission, but Tess pulled down the window on Alec's arms with strength. When Alec pressed on at every stage, Tess refused him resolutely again and again. No attention had been paid to such details in the film and there were no presentation and portrayal either.

In contrast, after Tess was ravished by Alec in the forest, she cohabited with him for four months. In the original novel, we can hardly find any information about this but in the film several shots were added. One was in the tent; Tess opened an elaborately decorated hatbox which sent by Alec. The other was that Tess and Alec went boating on the lake, the boat was paddled in the delicate water, and Tess was beautifully dressed.

In the original novel, Tess wrote three letters to her husband for help. In the first letter, although she did not mention the suffering she endured and confessed her unshaken confidence in love, the fear of the unpredictable

reality was implicated between lines. In the second letter, Tess cried earnestly, “Come to me, come to me, and save me from what threatens me”. After she snubbed D’Urberville she was exhausted and depressed; Tess blamed her husband in the last letter for his stony-heart in a desperate situation. However, her letters got no answer and Tess was involved in hopeless extremity. From refusal after refusal and begging after begging, readers precisely felt the impregnable virtue of Tess, and at the same time, experienced her hopelessness and despair. In the process Tess still remained unconquerable even when she faced the hardships of life and her characteristic of daring to fight became more and more clear. Nonetheless, in the film, the three letters were not shown and it seemed that Tess was content with her life of being a mistress of Alec.

When Clare came back from Brazil and tried to find his wife with feelings of repentance, Tess and Clare finally meet again in pain. Clare entreated forgiveness from Tess but she repeated again and again, “too late!” Clare walked away in great disappointment and Tess went back to the room upstairs. The audience of the film may feel that if not due to Alec’s repeated ridicule and sarcasm, Tess and Alec would probably continue to live together forever.

What’s more, in Hardy’s original novel, after Tess was caught by the police, she once said like that, “Angel—I am almost glad—yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted—it was too much—I have had enough; and now I shall not live for you to despise me”. This part is so desolate and grievous and is sensational enough to shock the readers. Unfortunately, this passage was deleted in the film which obviously weakened the characteristic of Tess.

### **The Adaptation of *Tess* Is a Failure**

In 1900, French film director Gorges Méliès (1861-1938) turned the folk legend “Cinderella” into film and this can be said as the start of the literary adaptation of a film. Its success is a great encouragement to Méliès and in 1902 he adapted famous writer Jules Verne’s science fiction *A Trip to the Moon* into the movie with the same title. Since then, film and literature have been closely tied; the two learn from each other and have profoundly affected each other.

Hungarian film critic Béla Balázs (1884-1949) pointed out that, the so-called adaptation means “[a film maker] may use the existing work of art merely as raw material, regard it from the specific angle of his own art form as if it were raw reality and pay no attention to the form once already given to the material” (1977). The reason why the film *Tess* is quite different from Hardy’s original novel is that film and literature are two different art forms and they have their own unique internal characteristics. Film belongs to visual culture, and “emphasized image, rather than emphasized words, is not due to conceptualize, but dramatic”. This determines film and popular culture have a natural and close relationship. Increasing the public’s acceptance is the most important considerations of film makers, especially commercial movies. But novel, in particular, pure literary novel, as a more self-made literary creation, has the indirectness of representing the image and the repeatability of reading experience. It has more imaginary space than the film art with more profound symbolic meanings. To some extent, we may even say that pure literary works embody the author’s personality and express the author’s personal thinking of fate and certain era. Therefore, it is inevitable that the adaption *Tess* and the original novel have differences. The adaptation is a re-creation activity. All the characters and plots in the original cannot be fully reserved. Some complicated material should be simplified and some plots should be re-arranged with details.

However, the common view from academia is that the success of a movie depends on whether it presents the intention and ideas of the original work. Especially the adaptation of classic novels, we must adhere to the principle whose bottom line is maintaining the original style and character's image. Unfortunately, according to the analysis above and precisely at this point, the film's adaptation of *Tess* is a failure.

Hardy once wrote such words in his explanatory note in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*,

I will just add that the story is sent out in all sincerity of purpose, as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things; and in respect of the book's opinions and sentiments, I would ask any too genteel reader. Who cannot endure to have said what everybody nowadays thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome's: If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed. (1994)

If *Tess* is a weak and submissive woman who involuntarily goes to destruction under the pressure of the surrounding, her tragedy will only arouse people's sympathy, but difficult to call for violent emotions in readers. Although lonely and helpless, *Tess* showed no frailness. She contested against her fate and fought with the devil. She openly expressed her dislike of Alec, rejected his endless entanglement, and finally killed him by her own hand. She refused to bow to the traditional forces, even afflicted by a series of knocks; she did not want to abandon her hope for new life. Of course, *Tess* cannot understand herself completely and neither can she clearly recognize her enemy. Her resistance, to a large extent, is self-defense by instinct. It is through such an unworthy person's tragedy which she does not mean to endanger society or others but cannot protect herself to expose the irrationality of society, condemned the social evil forces. It is difficult to draw such a conclusion through the film *Tess* after we watch it.

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