Fragility of the Victorian Concept of Ideal Woman: A Case Study of Tess of the D'Ubervilles

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Fragility of the Victorian Concept of Ideal Woman: A Case Study of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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Summary

The paper explains the position of an ideal and a fallen woman. Both positions were determined by men and their opinions. They were used to control women: one was used to make an example all women should follow, and the other one was used to show women what they would become if they did not follow the example. The ideal woman was an example of perfect womanhood – she is described as chaste and virtuous. This is a sort of woman young girls were encouraged to be like. This concept of a woman derived from the belief that women are inferior to men, and their only role should be that of a housewife. It was a very restraining position where women had no rights. The fallen woman was not a less restraining concept. This was the title women tried hard to avoid. A fallen woman was a woman whose reputation was somehow ruined. Although it was reserved for unchaste women, it was later used for any woman who did not fit into Victorian society. The paper explains how Thomas Hardy used both ideas in his novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* to ruin the concept of the ideal woman. He showed how delicate the position of the ideal woman was, and shocked the public with his depiction of the ideal and the fallen woman.

Key words: ideal woman, fallen woman, Thomas Hardy, Tess d'Urberville

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Introduction

This paper will explain the role of women in Victorian society, as well as the two contrasting ideas of a woman established in that time – the ideal and the fallen woman. The ideal woman is the concept created by men to control women. A woman is considered ideal if she is submissive, chaste and pious. She is an example for other women to follow. The fallen woman describes a complete opposite to the ideal woman – a woman who defies the rules of men and God. The state of a fallen woman usually refers to her immoral sexual behavior, but it was used for any woman that broke the rules of society. The stories of fallen women were used to warn young girls and keep them in line. Thomas Hardy incorporates both concepts into his novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and uses them to describe what would be considered a downfall by Victorian standards. Tess starts off as the ideal woman and ends up with a fate of a fallen woman. Her fate is not determined by her choices, but by the will of others around her. Analyzing Thomas Hardy's novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, this paper will prove how fragile the concept of the ideal woman really is, and how easily a woman can become "fallen" if she is judged according to such rigorous rules.

1. The Concept of the Ideal Woman

The position of a woman has always been fragile, not because of the supposed delicacy and fragility of the woman herself, but because of the social norms which accompanied the state of being a woman. In the Victorian period, women were perceived as controlled by their sexuality and reproductive organs, which prevented them from getting equal treatment. According to men, they were biologically inferior, and because of that, they had to be scrutinized and watched over (Wojtczak).

The supposed weakness of women resulted in men taking charge of them and every aspect of their lives. A set of social rules was established in order to keep women in line. Those rules were presented as guidelines for a girl to become an ideal Victorian woman. The term "ideal woman" might sound pleasant, but in reality it was confining. Women were stripped of their rights and became simply a property of a man, a tool for his success, satisfaction and abuse.

In the Victorian period, the ideal of true womanhood was a virtuous and chaste woman, whose only goal was to be a quiet and submissive wife. That "angel in the house", as Coventry Patmore calls her (1586), was supposed to listen to her husband, tend to the household and raise the children without a single complaint. Marriage and motherhood were considered the two most important aspects of a Victorian woman's life: "For a woman not to become a mother meant she was liable to be labeled inadequate, a failure or in some way abnormal. Motherhood was expected of a married woman and the childless single woman was a figure to be pitied" (Abrams).

However, even the domestic work and motherhood, the two spheres that were supposedly destined for women, were denied respect and dignity. Women did raise children, but their husbands were the ones making all the important decisions concerning them. Furthermore, taking care of the household was a job good enough for a woman, but for a man, that sort of work was seen as degrading. Women, however, were unable to do men's work because they were not considered intellectually fit for it. This system secured the position of women as second-class citizens, with no rights whatsoever.

Women were brought up with notions of purity, piety, modesty and submissiveness; such behavior was impressed on them from the earliest stages of their life (Wojtczak). The education they received ensured them a role of a good wife. While men studied everything – from literature and history to mathematics and philosophy, women studied dancing, drawing, music and, of course, everything that had something to do with housework.

After their education, men were free to pursue their careers, and women were free to stay at home: “Tom, Dick, and Harry, aforesaid, leave school and plunge into life; ‘the girls’ likewise finish their education, come home, and stay at home” (Mulock 1596). To study other fields was usually unnecessary and pointless, since it was very difficult to get a job as a woman. It was also frowned upon, as they were expected to stay at home and make it comfortable for their husbands, who were meant to provide for them. Boys were raised and taught to be the breadwinners, and girls were trained to be presentable in order to get a good husband.

Men were not the only ones to control women – the same rigid rules were set for girls by their own mothers, who were raised in the same environment. It was almost impossible to break away from that sort of a system because it was enforced not only by the oppressors, but by the oppressed, too. Women accepted this state and continued enforcing it.

The idea of a woman’s body as a man’s object was so strong that a young girl would be brought up thinking of her body as her husband’s body. She had to uphold the standard of purity, the same standard that was never applied to her future husband. A good wife was a virgin until her wedding night, and was forever faithful to her husband. Her husband, on the other hand, was allowed to have premarital sex, and his unfaithfulness was often overlooked. His body and sexuality never had to be scrutinized by the society, but since a woman was believed to be innately pure and asexual, existence of sexual desire was considered abnormal for her.

Marriage in the Victorian era was, unfortunately, rarely an institution in which both parties had equal respect and rights. Women never really belonged to themselves, nor did they have autonomy over their lives and bodies. Even though motherhood was considered sacred, mothers rarely had the real authority to make decisions concerning their children. The head of the family was the father, and before marriage women were considered property of their fathers (Wojtczak). After marriage, the ownership was transferred from their fathers to their husbands. They became properties of their husbands, along with everything else they owned. All of their profits, their inheritance, even their body, by law belonged to their husbands, who were free to do with it whatever they desired:

> Profits from any land wives owned at the time of the marriage or inherited during the marriage also became the property of husbands (….) Furthermore, men gained more than ownership of their wives’ earnings and property at marriage: the law made them owners of their wives’ bodies – and hence gave them the right to all that those bodies produced, including domestic labour, sex, and children. (Bradbury 137)

An unhappily married woman could do next to nothing about her situation. Since everything she owned belonged to her husband, he was free to do whatever he wanted with her possessions, her children and her body. Her position was almost that of a slave. Even in cases of abuse or adultery, it was impossible for her to divorce or leave her husband, and she had next to no support:

> Except in extremely rare cases, a woman could not obtain a divorce and, until 1891, if she ran away from an intolerable marriage the police could capture and return her, and her husband could imprison her. All this was sanctioned by church, law, custom, history, and approved of by society in general. (Wojtczak)

John Ruskin's essay, "Of Queens' Gardens," offers a valuable insight into Victorian ideology from a viewpoint of a Victorian man. Ruskin describes the man as active, innovative and progressive: "He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary" (1587). Since the man is so active, it is thus considered normal for him to encounter failure, offence or error (1588). The woman, however, is nothing like that. Ruskin's outlook on the role of a woman in the society expresses common Victorian prejudice and misconception of women as helpless, meek and flawless beings. According to Ruskin, a woman is "protected from all danger and temptation" (1587), and as such, she "must be incapable of error" (1588). For that reason, a woman's failure is considered far worse than any of her husband's mistakes and flaws.

It is fairly obvious that Victorian society was hypocritical and broken. Although the position of a woman as a domestic goddess was praised, in reality, even that little sphere, which was generously given to women by strong and proud men, was disrespected. Women had no autonomy over their lives, but were still expected to take it all with a smile. Not only were they expected to be flawless, but if their husbands strayed, women were the ones to save them from themselves. In a way, even their husband's faults would be attributed to them. They were responsible for the happiness and comfort of their husbands, but their efforts were often taken for granted – after all, taking care of their men was their sole purpose in life. There was never really any reward for women who were successful, but plenty of punishment for those who failed.

A system so strict was also very fragile, and women who were unable to live up to such high expectations would be considered less worthy and were to be pitied. Any woman who desired something more than being a wife and a mother was often treated as an outcast, and considered strange, even immoral. Rejecting the rules of the time meant that the woman

was no longer governed by men. She no longer fulfilled her duties as an object belonging to men in her life. Women who refused to be controlled by the rules set by men were immediately labeled as sinful. They were usually treated very badly by the society, even by their own families. With a set of rigid rules like these, and considering the treatment of women who defied them, it is not surprising that after a while, a new term arose to describe the ones who have, according to society, failed – the infamous fallen women.

2. The Fallen Woman

Female sexuality was probably the biggest aspect of a woman's life men desired to control in the Victorian era. Unless under the strict supervision of a man, a woman's body was perceived as something indecent. Although the term "fallen woman" was initially used to describe women who lost their innocence by way of socially unauthorized sexual activity, such as premarital sex, extramarital sex or prostitution, it was also applied to lower class women, women who were raped or women who had an ill reputation. In some cases, women were considered fallen simply for being educated or eccentric (Wikipedia). A woman who did not fit into the society's mold of ideal woman was a threat to it. Her wrongdoings, whether real or simply insinuated, threatened to corrupt the society. For women of the Victorian era, there was no in-between – they were "either pure or ruined" (Barnhill 3).

Most of these women became "ruined" as a result of poverty. In order to survive, many women resorted to prostitution, as a prostitute herself testifies in her letter to the editor of the Times: "There poor women toiling on starvation wages, while penury, misery, and famine clutch them by the throat and say, 'Render up your body or die'" ("The Great Social Evil" 1595). Women of lower classes were not an isolated case – even those who were brought up in better families, with more education, had to struggle if they wanted to become financially independent. Their families were rarely helpful, and education did little to improve their chances of getting a decent job – there were very few jobs available for women, and all of them were low-paid.

The number of women working as prostitutes was so high that the moralists of the time called prostitution "The Great Social Evil." However, the problem of fallen women was not as black-and-white as it seemed to the self-righteous people of the Victorian period. They saw the root of the problem in the sexual misconduct of women, but in reality, society itself was the source of the problem.

The sort of hierarchy that existed in the Victorian era enabled the exploitation of workers, especially children and women. The unfortunate worked, struggling to feed themselves and their families, while their masters collected all the profits. At the same time, upper classes felt that their Christian values permitted them judging those who were less fortunate, but those same Christian values never seemed to inspire them to help or empathize.

The same hierarchy that allowed exploitation of workers made it possible for men to take advantage of young girls with no consequences, while the unfortunate girls were labeled as fallen women. Girls like these were forever criticized, but never offered help. The double

standards of Victorian society are most prominent in the case of female sexuality and prostitution. Men involved with prostitutes never received any criticism for their actions – they were able to go to their families, while prostitutes were often shunned by theirs.

No one ever bothered to find out how all these women came to be prostitutes, if it was their choice or someone forced them into it. Even if they found out why those poor women were forced to become prostitutes, did any one of them really deserve to be blamed? No one should put blame on the girl who was forced into prostitution by someone who promised her a better life, but should the one who freely chose the path of prostitution be blamed? Why should she be blamed, especially by people who never respected her in the first place? Another Unfortunate asks that question in her letter, and holds the moralists responsible: "Why stand on your eminence shouting that we should be ashamed of ourselves? Why stand you there mouthing with sleek face about morality? What is morality? Will you make us responsible for what we never knew?" ("The Great Social Evil" 1595).

The blame was not on women, it was on the broken morality of the society. Appearance of prostitution in the Victorian era was hardly a sexual rebellion of women; it was only the continuation of male domination over women as sexual objects. Most of these women were still dependent of men, since the whole business of prostitution revolved around them.

Still, there were women who refused to be mistreated because of their profession. Men feared women like the anonymous prostitute who wrote "The Great Social Evil." She was one of the women who were not ashamed of their profession; she used her sexuality and defied strict moral rules of the Victorian era. While doing so, she felt no shame. In a way, even while catering to the needs of men, she retained her independence. Refusing to be the subject of hatred and an outcast to society, she demanded respect:

> I earn my money and pay my way, and try to do good with it, according to my ideas of good. … My milliners, my silk-mercers, my boot maker know, all of them, who I am and how I live, and they solicit my patronage as earnestly and cringingly as if I were Madam, the lady of the right rev. patron of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. ("The Great Social Evil" 1594)

Women like these, who refused to stay silent while others insulted them, were, of course, regarded as dangerous and deviant. It was believed that their sins would bring chaos into the "decent" society. In order to prevent that, the issue of the fallen women was frequently addressed in literary works of Victorian authors. All of the women who flawed, willfully or not, were harshly punished for it. Literature was used as a medium of control to

keep young women in their right place. It served as a sort of warning for young women, and the literary works involving fallen women always punished them. Most of the fallen women, if not all, ended tragically, either in prison or in a grave. The fate of a woman who strayed from the Victorian perception of true womanhood was always tragic. Even those towards whom authors had a sympathetic attitude, such as Tess d'Urberville, suffered and died in the end.

3. Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy was a famous English poet and a novelist. He was born in 1840 near Dorchester, in a small village named Upper Bockhampton. He died at Max Gate, his home in Dorchester. After his death, his heart was removed and buried at Stinsford with his wife Emma, and his ashes were placed in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey (Wikipedia).

He attended local schools, until an architect took him for his apprentice. In 1861 he moved to London to practice architecture. He also took up writing, and, interested in both poetry and fiction, he explored both. Soon, he decided to focus on fiction, and after his first novel was rejected, he wrote *Desperate Remedies* and *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Norton Anthology 1851).

Since his writing career was becoming successful, he gave up architecture and concentrated solely on writing. His efforts produced the novels *Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* (Wikipedia). *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* were not well received. The first reason was the author's sympathy for the fallen woman, and latter was the fact that it featured a couple living together while still unmarried. After publishing the two works, Hardy returned to writing poetry (Norton Anthology 1851).

Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented was published in 1891. Its subtitle, *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*, showed Hardy's intention of treating Tess as a pure woman, who was completely innocent. The fact did not sit well with the public. Tess did suffer, and she did die in the end, but throughout the novel she is repeatedly regarded as a perfect example of an ideal woman. It could be said that her punishment was the death of her newborn, but after its death, Tess is determined to start a new life. No one tries to stop her, and the only person who thinks of her as a sinner is Tess herself. She is not really punished by the society or the people around her; most of her punishment comes from herself. It surely was not the type of punishment Victorian society would inflict upon a fallen woman. Hardy's kind attitude towards Tess showed his criticism of Victorian society, and, as such, was not well received. He tried to expose the double standards present amongst the people. Tess' story begins with her as a pure woman, and even after her "downfall" she is described as such. Hardy treats her as a victim, not as a criminal. By presenting Tess as a pure, almost ideal woman, he challenged people to question those double standards and the society where a man like Angel Clare was allowed to atone for his sins, but a woman like Tess was not, even though her sins were forced onto her.

4. The Fall of Tess d'Urberville

The first time Tess is introduced she is described as an innocent young girl spending time with her friends. The only thing that troubles her is her drunken father. Other than that, she is an ordinary girl with ordinary problems. Her appearance draws attention to her – although she is not handsomer than others, her mouth and her large eyes add something graceful to her otherwise ordinary features (Hardy 10).

Although she is a child, she inherited her mother's good looks. The combination of innocence and maturity makes her stand out among the other girls. She is still very young, which is visible in her behavior, but her appearance makes her seem "more of a woman than she really is" (Hardy 35). Her attractive appearance makes her no less innocent and pure, as Hardy describes her as "a vessel of emotion untinctured by experience" (10). The premature womanhood in her features does not taint her purity, and she is still an inexperienced young girl.

Tess' trouble does not derive from her own behavior – her trouble comes along with the good looks she was born with. Throughout the novel, Hardy implies several times that her appearance will end up being her disadvantage. When a few drunken men in the inn talk about Tess' beauty, one of them says how her mother, Joan, should watch over her so she does not get "green malt in floor" – a local expression for getting pregnant (Hardy 21). That is the first implication of Tess' upcoming trouble. The other, even more obvious, is in regard to her relationship with Alec d'Urberville:

> Tess Durbeyfield did not divine, as she innocently looked down at the roses in her bosom, that there behind the blue narcotic haze was potentially the 'tragic mischief' of her drama – one who stood fair to be the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life. (Hardy 34)

Alec d'Urberville is a dominant and slightly aggressive man Tess meets when she visits the d'Urberville mansion for the first time. As soon as he sees her, he is captivated by her beauty. The first name he calls her is "my Beauty", and he continues to give her nicknames relating to her appearance, only later asking her for her real name (Hardy 32). Tess' inexperience makes her vulnerable, and Alec, being a typical predatory type, notices that weakness. Unfortunately for her, that makes her even more fascinating in Alec's eyes.

Alec continues to pursue her, despite her desire to be left alone. Her reluctance makes him more decisive and, at times, frustrated – that is when his true temper manifests itself. One of those enlightening occasions is the ride from Marlott to Trantridge. Here is where Alec's real temper shows, as he takes advantage of his position to elicit a kiss from Tess. First, he

frightens her by riding his horse too fast, and then he tries to extort a kiss from her. She calls him her kinsman, trying to appeal to his honor, but nothing, even her tears, can change his mind (Hardy 46). It becomes very clear that Alec is the kind of person who will disregard Tess' feelings and wishes if they contradict his desires. This event in a way shapes their relationship, and predicts the unfortunate events that will soon unfold.

Throughout the first phase, *The Maiden*, Tess' behavior is always acceptable; she is polite towards Alec, but distant and reserved. Nothing in her behavior can be taken as a sign of impropriety, as she continuously, but politely, rejects Alec. Unfortunately, her young nature cannot imagine what kind of danger really lies in Alec's gestures. Still too young and inexperienced to see it, she accepts a ride back home with him, and he rapes her. It is never explicitly written in the book that Alec rapes Tess, but from his lustful behavior, her continuous rejection, and their later dialogue, it can be concluded that their sexual intercourse was not wanted by both parties.

After her misfortune, Tess is still treated with dignity. She gives birth, but no one in her surroundings blames her for being an unmarried young mother; they even pity her: "Well, a little more, a little less, 'twas a thousand pities that it should have happened to she, of all others. But 'tis always the comeliest!" (Hardy 80). When her child dies, she decides to make a fresh start and moves to a dairy farm. There, no one knows of her past and she is able to start a new life. Even after everything, she is allowed to experience joy and love.

Everything about Tess - her behavior, her character, her surroundings – negates the theory that a fallen woman is morally ruined. Tess still possesses all the qualities of an ideal woman – she is modest, chaste and faithful. She is still "a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form" (Hardy 115). She is not a ruined woman the society expects her to be. Such a depiction of Tess did not sit well with the public. By showing her path from the ideal to the fallen woman, Hardy challenged the prejudices of his time. Tess was a pure woman indeed, and her actions were anything but that of an immoral woman. The actions and wishes of others play a bigger part in her misfortunes than the actions and wishes of Tess herself.

It is in her relationship with Angel that Tess' position as the ideal woman is most prominently depicted, and it is that same relationship that proves how delicate the position of the ideal woman really is. To Angel, Tess is perfect, whether it is at dawn when she looks "as if she were merely a soul at large", or during the day when she becomes a "dazzlingly fair dairymaid only" (Hardy 115, 116). More than that, she is a perfect companion to him: "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" (Hardy 144).

Tess is so madly in love with Angel; she not only loves, but also worships him. The extent of her affection for him is so great that her behavior is shaped completely by him. Everything she does has a hint of Angel Clare's influence in it: "His influence over her had been so marked that she had caught his manners and habits, his speech and phrases, his likings and his aversions" (Hardy 179). Basically, she becomes his ideal woman by molding herself into someone she thinks he would love even more. In a way, that seems to be the foundation of their relationship; he sees her as a perfect entity, a vision of something divine, and she, knowing what is expected, molds herself into the picture he imagined.

Angel's attitude towards Tess after her confession yet again confirms the existence of double standards in Victorian society when it comes to men and women. Tess is encouraged to confess her past troubles relating to Alec d'Urberville after Angel admits to his short affair with a woman. After Tess so eagerly forgives him, he denies her his forgiveness, even though Tess cannot be blamed for what happened to her. Nevertheless, he refuses to forgive her and conveniently decides that his wrongdoing is nothing like hers, therefore, he is completely in the right to judge her. When it comes to her case, "forgiveness does not apply to it" (Hardy 200).

What destroyed the relationship between Angel and Tess was not her past, but the perception of true womanhood which was imposed on Angel by the society. Although he considers himself more liberal and open minded than the rest, he ends up caving in under the pressure of societal norms of the time. He is not, after all, so "considerably indifferent to social norms and observances" (Hardy 103). How easily does he go back on his word and denies Tess his protection and love. Just a few hours before their confessions, he thinks: "Do I realize solemnly enough how utterly and irretrievably this little womanly thing is the creature of my good or bad faith and fortune? I think not. … And shall I ever neglect her, or hurt her, or even forget to consider her? God forbid such a crime!" (Hardy 191). Despite those thoughts, he does not hesitate a second to condemn her, neglect her, and hurt her.

Angel's behavior is the crucial evidence of how easily the very concept of the ideal woman can be brought down. Tess is not condemned by Angel just because of her past; what troubles him more is that she ruined the picture he had of her. The picture of pure womanhood he saw in her is destroyed: "He looked upon her as a species of impostor; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one" (Hardy 201). He claims that after this confession she is another

person, even though nothing changes in her attitude. However, she is no longer a divine being he imagined; she no longer fits his mold of feminine perfection.

When Angel finds out about her past and leaves her, his actions are not praised, but presented as wrong. He is not sympathized with; in fact, he is shown as a narrow-minded person: “With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings” (Hardy 232). Tess is the one sympathized with; she is the one who is wronged. Angel and Alec are merely products of their time, and she is the victim of the time.

The conversation between Tess and Angel at the night of their wedding is a sort of a turning point. This is where Tess starts her journey towards being a “real” fallen woman. Up to this point, Tess did think of herself as unworthy of Angel’s affection, but his attitude towards her, along with encouragement of her friends, Izz, Marian and Retty, changes her opinion. She starts believing that she is allowed to have a happy life and a happy marriage, and is determined to be the best wife she can be. However, when the person whose opinion she cherishes the most rejects her, she gives up all hope of happiness. Angel’s attitude reinforces her belief that she is unworthy of forgiveness, and that she is, indeed, fallen.

A series of events lead up to Tess’ downfall, most notable of which is her encounter with Alec d’Urberville. This is possibly the most important event towards the end of the novel. Their encounter brings back old memories and puts Tess back in the position she was in when they first met. Her thoughts on her beauty are revived, and she feels guilty for her good looks again: “And there was revived in her the wretched sentiment which had often come to her before, that in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature has endowed her she was somehow doing wrong” (Hardy 271).

At first Alec is a changed man, seemingly regretting his actions. Still, in a typical act of victim blaming, he asks of Tess not to tempt him, as if she did anything of the sort: “to lessen my fear, put your hand upon that stone hand, and swear that you will never tempt me – by your charms or ways” (Hardy 273). By doing so, he implies that the fault has always been in her, and not him. She is appalled by his request and the implication of it, but grants him his wish. His constant pursuing, coupled with Angel’s absence and the devastating effect of the death of her father, play a crucial part in shaping Tess into a fallen woman.

Tess’ downfall is guaranteed the moment Alec d’Urberville sets his eyes on her for the first time; its pace is slow, but steady, until every aspect of Tess’ life changes for the worse. The last part of the novel shows her struggling with Angel’s abandonment, and later, poverty.

Her change of heart is not clearly pinpointed, but, as is the case with her rape, the circumstances of it are implied. When her father dies, Tess and the rest of her family are thrown out of the house, and Alec gets another chance to use his superior position to manipulate Tess. Concerned for the well-being of her siblings, Tess agrees to live with Alec as his mistress.

It must be noted that, even at this point, Tess' actions are never presented as those of an immoral woman. Her arrangement with Alec is an act of desperation, and it is shown as such. Tess remains faithful to Angel, until it is no longer an option – she has to do something to provide her family with food and shelter, and she makes a great sacrifice by agreeing to live with Alec. From the point of view of Victorian society, her actions should be condemned, but the characters around Tess do not share that opinion.

When it comes to Tess' actions, most of the characters prove to be more generous and forgiving than Angel. Tess' mother is supportive of her from the beginning. She is disappointed with the events in Tess' life, but she still helps her: she helps Tess when she has a baby, gives her advice when she is about to marry Angel, and does not disown her when she starts living with Alec. She is the one who tells Tess that what happened to her was not her fault. Izz and Marian, who were both in love with Angel, do not harbor any bad feelings towards Tess when Angel chooses to marry her. They do not turn against her even when she is no longer in Angel's good graces. Instead, they decide to help her and write a letter to Angel. Even Angel's parents, religious and decent people, have a more forgiving outlook on Tess' past than Angel does. Their position on the matter is rather different than Angel's; instead of judging Tess according to her deeds, they judge her by her will (Hardy 325).

The issue of will is extremely important when it comes to the question of the fallen and the ideal woman. The story of Tess shows how easily the ideal woman becomes a fallen woman in the eyes of society if her will is not taken into consideration. The events of Tess' life are not determined by her will, but by the will of people surrounding her. Her deeds therefore cannot be judged so harshly, because her choices were limited, and her fate dependent on others. Towards the end of the novel, Angel comes to the same conclusion: "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" (Hardy 298).

Angel's change of heart is very significant, because he goes from being a person whose morality is determined by the society to becoming someone who dismisses social norms of the time, if those norms contradict his common sense. Unfortunately, it comes too late, as Tess is already set for ruin. She is living with Alec, and refuses to go back to Angel,

convinced there is no coming back from the things she has done. She would have stayed with Alec, had he not insulted Angel. In a sudden act of fury, she kills him. The last days she spends are her happiest; she spends them with Angel, until she is caught and executed.

Tess suffers a typical end meant for a fallen woman. Such an end would have been accepted by the Victorian audience, if not for Hardy's compassionate depiction of Tess. Even towards the end, when the image of Tess as the ideal woman is broken, and she falls into a category of a fallen woman, Tess is not described as wicked or evil. In fact, the events of her life are depicted in a way that it is hard not to feel sorry for her. Her death is not presented as a punishment she deserved for killing Alec, but as a sad ending to her story, which was not directed by her, but by "the President of the Immortals" (Hardy 350).

Tess' life leads her from the state of an ideal woman to the state of a fallen woman. It is difficult to ignore the role the people around her play in her downfall. One of the reasons people of Hardy's time rejected the novel must have been the way he depicted the society. It was not a false portrayal. On the contrary, the novel was too accurate in its depiction of double standards, and the ease with which an innocent girl can become "a wicked woman." By doing so, it showed how quickly the society makes a scapegoat out of those who have no power to fend for themselves.

Conclusion

The Victorian period was not a particularly blissful period for women; they had to follow a strict set of rules to be accepted and maybe, if they were lucky, even respected. The world around them was set up to control every aspect of their life. Thomas Hardy uses the two ideas meant to teach women submission and scare them into obedience, but instead of using them for their original purpose, he uses them to teach the society a lesson. Tess possessed the qualities of an ideal woman, but a chain of events leads to her death as the fallen woman. By giving Tess such a tragic destiny, Hardy shows that even the purest woman is not safe in a world where only men's opinions and desires are taken into consideration. Tess was the image of perfection – modest, virtuous and obedient. All of those virtues could not help her in the end – she was mistreated by the men who were supposed to protect her. The behavior of Alec and Angel determined Tess' life and death, and it was their behavior that made her into a fallen woman. Her downfall proves how easily the illusion of perfect womanhood can be shattered, especially in a world where women were immediately treated as suspects.

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