

The Comparative Interpretation of Tess's and Hester's Tragedy

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Abstract: Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Tess Durbeyfield in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are two excellent feminist representatives in the treasure-house of British and American literature. Although the two female leading characters were in different times and countries, they share a lot in common in the causes of destiny tragedy. Both Hester and Tess were born in poor families and suffered the oppression of religion and male-oriented society. Both of them were victims of two men. However, they finally went to different endings of salvation and destruction for different resistance attitudes and personalities. Tess was hesitant in resisting tradition and adopted a radical way of confrontation while Hester insisted on countering the tradition and adopted a sustained way. Hester was tough, self-reliance and sustained while Tess was weak, dependence and radical. Through comparative studying the similarities and differences between Hester and Tess, we can reflect the same trouble of female survival under male power and gain some enlightenment on the current male-female relationships.

1. Introduction

The Scarlet Letter is written by the famous American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. The novel tells a tragic love story set in colonial New England. Roger Chillingworth married Hester Prynne without love, and Hester fell in love with minister Arthur Dimmesdale and gave birth to their daughter Pearl. Consequently, Hester was publicly punished to wear the red "A" for life as a symbol of adultery. However, Hester boldly pursued her happiness and fought doggedly against the cruel Puritan rule. And finally, she was accepted by the people.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles is written by the British writer Thomas Hardy. The novel describes the tragic fate of Tess at the end of the 19th century when capitalism invades the countryside. Tess was born into a poor family. Her parents asked her to claim a family connection with a rich old woman, leading her to be seduced by the family's eldest son, Alec d'Urberville. Later, she fell in love with and became engaged to Angel Clare. On their wedding night, she confessed her past misfortune to her husband, but did not win his forgiveness back. They separated, and her husband went away to Brazil. A few years later, Tess met Alec again. When Angel repented and came back to find Tess, it was too late. Tess murdered Alec and then was arrested and hanged.

The two heroines, Hester and Tess, have undertaken amazing similar life experiences. Their life experiences are recreations of the mythological archetype of "Adam-Eve" for they have

experienced the same process of paradise, crime, suffering, confession and being saved^[1]. Hester and Tess are symbols of Eve. They were a collection of a series of fine qualities, such as beauty, kindness, diligence, tenacity and bravery. Hester could have lived a free life in the new world of “heaven on Earth”, but since Hester’s husband was not known alive or dead for a long time, she could not bear loneliness and ate the “forbidden fruit”. As a result, Hester was sentenced to put on the symbol of adultery in front of the chest, being driven out of “heaven” like Eve. Tess was seduced to eat the forbidden fruit “strawberry” by viper Alec, then she was destroyed. Besides, it is no accident that Angel and Arthur all begin with “A” like Adam.

Given the striking similarities between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, some scholars make a comparison of different themes, including moral concepts, fertility concepts, tragic love and feminist ideas. Dong Wugang compares *The Scarlet Letter* with *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* in terms of moral concepts, discussing women’s marriage and women’s social status.^[2] Wang Chunxia discusses the details in texts about having children out of marriage to explore the possible fertility concepts of Hardy and Hawthorne.^[3] Liu Jiang analyzes the tragic love theme with the help of parallel study to explore the common reasons of the love tragedy in the above works.^[4] Ma Xinyu found through comparison that the two novels have many similarities in expressing the tragic fate of women. Hardy and Hawthorne expressed their concerns about the social status and destiny of women as well as share similar feminist ideas.^[5]

Some scholars also make a comparison of the writing techniques and major characters. Zeng Yanbo summarized the similar beauty of the symbolic writing techniques in the two novels through comparative analysis of the three main symbolic characters.^[6] Shen Qinmei started from the similar tragedy of the two heroines, and discussed their different personalities. Hester was tough, daring to admit her mistakes and fight against outdated traditions, while Tess was weak, facing society and tradition in silence. Gao Hong, Miao Shiyan has studied the similarities and differences between the two heroines Tess and Hester, finding out the external and internal causes of their tragic fate. The social and cultural context in which they lived and their economic conditions are the same indirect causes of their tragedy. Meanwhile, parents and lovers are the same direct causes of their tragedy. However, the two heroines ultimately go to different endings of salvation and destruction.

The above studies have conducted a comprehensive and detailed study on both Tess and Hester. But most of them were trying to find the similarity through the difference. And the aspect of difference still need to be supplemented. This thesis intends to use the comparative method to interpret Hester and Tess in the two novels from the similarity and the difference. Trying to reveal the common female dilemma faced by Hester and Tess in different times and different countries, and find out the reasons of their different endings. Trying to put forward new insights for male-female relationships.

2. Similarities of the Tragic Destiny

Although Hester and Tess were in different times and countries, they share a lot in common in the causes of destiny tragedy in terms of economic conditions, hypocritical lover, religion and unfair law.

2.1. Economic conditions

Poverty is the primary cause of their unfortunate fate. Hester and Tess were very similar in family background. Hester was born in an old England noble family which was decaying seriously. The pressure of survival caused by the decline of her family business limited Hester’s choice of love and marriage life, and even forced her to marry someone she didn’t like. Meanwhile, Tess’s ancestors were from a prominent ancient warrior family d’Urbervilles family. However, by the time

of her father's generation, it had descended into an ordinary peasant family struggling to make a living. Her current situation of survival and family responsibility forced her to work in the d'Urberville as expected by her parents, then her tragic fate began. It was also her poor family push her to be with Alec for the second time. As women, they can only bear the unfortunate birth and make compromises on their life choices. The background of low economic status has become the booster of their suffering.

For much of human history in patriarchal society, girls were considered property. Or, at best, subordinate people, required to obey their fathers until the day they had to start obeying their husbands. Both Hester and Tess in the two works had suffered such kind of inequality as well as oppression. The unfortunate marriage between Hester and Roger was the result of oppression. Because of her parents' request, Hester married a rich old man who she did not like, which was undoubtedly a damage to her happiness. Similarly, Tess was under the shackles of her parents. After the old horse, the family's only source of income, died, she could only obey her parents' request to enter the d'Urberville and try to win the heart of the family's eldest son. Her parents' view fully reflected the underlying law that unmarried women existed as passive objects exchanged from father to husband at that time.

2.2. Hypocritical lover

The two men they meet are strikingly similar. Both Hester and Tess have experienced love-hate relationships with two men in their lives. Hester met Roger Chillingworth and Arthur Dimmesdale, while Tess met Alec d'Urbervilles and Angel Clare.

Both of the first men, Roger and Alec, serve as the devils in Hester and Tess's life. Roger deceived Hester by marrying her and took revenge after discovering her betrayal. Alec found an opportunity to seduce her and forcibly occupied her again when her husband departed.

Then the second two men, Arthur and Angel, all serve as our heroines' beloved ones. Although their love is true, Arthur and Angel are all constrained by tradition or very weak in encountering difficulties, which profoundly result in the tragedy. After hearing Tess's confession on the wedding night, Arthur just went away indifferently, leaving the heroine alone struggle in despair. Angel just hid behind the heroine, letting the lover alone to be labeled as adulteress, to bear the blame, but refused to stand up to bear his own fault. The two men, as leading roles of the patriarchal society, are the direct factors that push two heroines to their tragic fate^[7].

2.3. Religion

The Scarlet Letter was set in New England more than 200 years ago, where moral and ethical shackles of puritanism were deep at that time. Puritans cruelly suppress people for the sake of realizing the religious dreams that they had failed to achieve in old England to create their garden of Eden. Consequently, they built up numerous prisons and laid out cruel laws to regulate people's thoughts and actions. Such kind of cruel Puritan moralism and laws constantly threaten Hester's pursuit of love and disrupt her spirit.

Likewise, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was set in Victorian Britain under the rule of Christianity. Unfortunately, Christian morality was fully deceptive as to women's chastity. "The Christian Church calls a woman's pregnancy a sin of prostitution. A woman who has given birth is considered impure..." Under such misleading belief, rapist Alec didn't suffer any punishment. On the contrary, innocent Tess is regarded as impure and immoral. What's worse, Angel also followed the old tradition and brutally abandoned Tess after knowing Tess's bitter experience, regardless of his own dishonor past.

The two works are anti-religion. Puritanism emphasized frugality and abstinence, limiting all

indulgence, pleasure, and consumption. A series of cruel regulations and decrees were enacted. In such a social atmosphere, people's instincts and desires are forcibly suppressed. *The Scarlet Letter* was trying to disclose Puritanism from the cruel side. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* severely criticizes and satirizes the rigid Christian teachings and the destruction of humanity, especially the religious rules and regulations on the persecution of women on the issue of chastity.

2.4. Unfair Law

In the early colonial period of America, the religious craze led to savagery and cruelty. The church enacted anti-human laws. Hester's marriage was originally unfortunate, and there was no news of her husband for several years. Given these premises, the love of this helpless young woman with Dimmesdale seemed reasonable. However, the law showed no mercy to a widow like her, and did not care for the baby and even let her give birth to baby in prison. The law during that period is really anti-human and cruel.

In Victorian England, law, as an instrument of ruling class, preserved the absolute power of upper-class men and deprived women's right to inherit and abortion. Tess's sex with Alec was not voluntary but forced. Alec's behavior was a serious crime. But the 19th century's legal system upheld Alec's absolute power and turned a blind eye to it. Tess was also forced by the inhuman abortion law to give birth to the rapist's child for abortion was banned and punishable like murder at that time. After Tess fell into the financial crisis, the death of Tess's father made things worse. Because according to the marriage law at that time, women are only appendages of their husband upon marriage, and cannot equally enjoy any property rights and inheritance rights.^[8]

3. Different Endings and Reasons

Hester and Tess were born in different countries and different times. Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Thomas Hardy's thoughts of writing were also different. But these are not the vital reasons that lead the two heroines to different endings.

Above external factors such as economic, religious and legal social factors, family factors and love affairs limit the freedom of Hester and Tess, and the two heroines face similar limitations. They all suffered severe social and economic disadvantages. However, they own two different kinds of endings. Hester was forgiven and admitted anew by society while Tess was hanged to death as she had killed Alec. Under the same external disadvantage, their endings are up to their different personalities and different attitudes towards tradition.

3.1. Tess's hesitance in resisting tradition VS Hester's insistence in countering tradition

Both of them have been bravely resisting unfairness, but one is hesitance between tradition and modern while the other is insistence on countering the tradition.

Tess, unlike traditional women, did not submit to the cruelty of fate or the strong will of males. Contrary to the traditional females' obedience to their parents, she resolutely rejected her parents' words. When Tess's vain mother intended to send Tess to claim a family connection with a rich old woman, young Tess replied, "I shouldn't care to do that"^[9]. When Tess was raped by Alec, her mother kept persuading her to marry Alec. But she defied her parents again by refusing to marry. For marriage, she did not eager marriage like other women to marry a rich gentleman, and refused to marry when she lost her virginity to Alec. Moreover, she was brave enough to baptize her baby by herself and open-minded enough to go out with her illegitimate child. At last, she challenged tradition at the cost of becoming a murderer, taking her resistance to the extreme.

She has been bravely resisting tradition, but she was also restrained by traditional thought.

Above all, Tess eventually compromised with her parents to “claim kin” out of guilt. Secondly, Tess suffered the insult from Alec. It was not her fault. But she still felt frightened and uncomfortable about her sin. The traditional view of chastity has a very deep mark on her heart. Thirdly, she gave up all her dignity and lost her spiritual independence when Angel abandoned her. She was like a slave in front of Angel begging for forgiveness. Fourth, she often acted as a passive victim. She passively accepted her family’s request to rely on her beauty to marry; passively possessed by Alec; passively accepted the cohabitation with Alec; passively accepted the pursuit of Angel. Although she occasionally acted as an active part, passivity is dominant. Even after the peak of her self-consciousness, killing the representative of the patriarchy—Alec, Tess still chose to give Angel her younger sister just like a thing without asking her will.

Tess was actually battling with two societies: if the tradition can overcome the modern, then she can follow the tradition to survive; If the modern can overcome the tradition, then she can find a new way out to survive. But for Tess, her conflict with tradition is irreconcilable because her modern thought and traditional thought are evenly matched. Her spirit against tradition was incomplete sometimes she will submit to fate, and sometimes she will attach all her hopes and happiness to others. She was doomed to trap between modern and tradition, unable to find a way out. The only solution is to die. She was finally delivered to the gallows and ended her young life.

Comparatively speaking, Hester’s self-consciousness was wakened earlier for she had gained better education, and her modern thought has exceeded the power of tradition.

She has maintained her self-dependence, not blindly obeying anyone, but only to the voice of her heart. Under the same circumstances, Hester could remain acting as an active part.”^[10] She knew exactly whom she loved and tried everything she could to get her love. It was her choice to be with Arthur; it was her choice not to reveal Pearl’s real father in front of the church; it was her choice to disclose Roger’s hypocrisy; it was her insistence on the guardianship over Pearl.

The modern has overcome the tradition for Hester, so she can find a new way out to survive. Hester knew that personal resistance against society was useless. So she obediently wore the red letter “A”. But unlike Tess’s desperate resistance, she never gave up her determination to resist. So at the end of the story, Hester, with a sustained confrontation and a firm insistence on countering the tradition, finally gained people’s affirmation and passed her old time in peace.

3.2. Different personalities

3.2.1. Tough VS Weak

Hester was tough while Tess was weak. The first time Tess was seduced by Alec because of her innocence. But the second time, she had already known what Alec was. Though her poor family played a vital role, it was her weak character that caused her to give up struggling. The subconscious hope for a comfortable life drives her to be seduced by Alec for the second time. But Hester never thought Dimmesdale would share pains with her and she bears all the pains alone. The fact proved her endeavors and the letter “A” changed the meaning of “ability” in people’s eyes. Her virtue finally won people’s respect.

3.2.2. Self-reliance VS Dependence

When facing the unjust, Hester’s virtuous self-reliance finally made up for her sin. Tess’s kindness and dependence lead to the reverse side. Arthur’s love supported Hester to live independently in the Puritan settlement for seven years, relying on needlework to maintain her life. However, Tess’s kindness caused tragedy. For the sake of her family, she had no choice but to seek help from relatives. Alec also took advantage of this weakness many times.

3.2.3. Radical VS Sustained

One chooses to confront radically while the other chooses to confront sustainability. Naive Tess had high self-esteem. Therefore, she would be more impulsive and extreme in behavior, preferring to exchange the tragedy of physical destruction for the outcome of spiritual victory. Hester is smarter than Tess, able to know how little power an individual has. So she chose to endure in silence and stop fighting directly against the secular world.

4. Conclusions

Through comparative studying the similarities and differences between Hester and Tess in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we will have a better appreciation of the advanced humanistic consciousness of Hawthorne and Hardy. Both of them turned their eyes on the ordinary working women and reconstructed the operations of patriarchy for the time, reflecting the same trouble of female survival under male power. In economics, women existed as “others”, with low economic status and no stable source of livelihood. In law, law preserves the absolute power of upper-class men. In society, the exaggeration of female chastity and arranged marriages were also the patriarchal tradition that oppressed women. Both of them reveal the hypocrisy of religion.

While their external factors like economic, religious and legal social factors, family factors and love affairs are the same, it is their internal factors like personalities and attitudes towards tradition that lead them to walk on different paths of sustained and radical, and finally go to different endings of salvation and destruction. Tess and Hester's noble personalities and actions have inspired more women to fight for their pure love and their rights. Their different endings also left some enlightenment for the current male-female relationships. Above all, women need to be independent not only in economics but also in mind. Because one of the direct reasons for their tragedy is poverty. So if they can achieve economic independence, they can also get rid of the tragedy from the root. And Tess's failure of resistance is also because she held all her hopes and happiness to Angel. She was like a slave in front of Angel and gave up all her dignity. However, Hester could bear all her pains alone and remain dignified. She did not rely on men and created her own meaning, and then won redemption back. Their different personalities of dependence and self-reliance are the main reason for their different endings. Secondly, at no time should we give up the struggle, but we should pay attention to the means of struggle and not be tough and foolish. Facing the inequality, Tess's attitudes against tradition were hesitant while Hester's attitudes were firm. Tess's countermeasures were too radical for the secular world to understand while Hester's countermeasures were more appropriate. And the ending that Tess died young while Hester won people's respect turns out the best way against unfairness is to take an appropriate approach, and then stick to it.

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