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## LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Tess's freedom in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

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**Abstract:** *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is traditionally read as a reflection of Thomas Hardy's deterministic view of the world, and freedom seems to be a mere fantasy for Tess. However, in view of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical concepts on freedom, Tess is free despite the inevitability of the processes of biological nature and of circumstances in life, and the whole novel delineates how Tess, conscious of her position in life, strives against the natural flow of things through constant choices. This essay, employing Sartre's relevant theory, attempts to offer an adequate account of Tess's freedom which is manifested in consciousness of nothingness, alienation, dread, free choice and death to open up a new channel to interpret *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and to draw readers' attention to the optimistic and the inspiring in Hardy's novels.

**Subjects:** Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning; Literature

**Keywords:** consciousness; alienation; dread; free choice; death

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, one of Thomas Hardy's major novels of character and environment, never fails to fascinate its readers. Traditionally labelled as a naturalistic novel, it has been thoroughly studied from different approaches including social, psychological, hereditary and Marxist, all of which proceed from the so-called pessimistic and deterministic philosophy of Hardy. Peter Widdowson states that Hardy's deeply alienated consciousness has led him to believe that people do not control their own destinies; what controls them is "a class system which reproduces the dynamics of social and

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Thomas Hardy is a major transitional figure between realism and modernism in English literature. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, one of his major novels of character and environment, is traditionally read as a reflection of Thomas Hardy's pessimistic and deterministic view of the world. However, its role as a force in modern literature is primarily ignored. This paper, employing Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical concepts on freedom, attempts to show that Tess is free despite the inevitability of the processes of biological nature and of circumstances in life and that the whole novel delineates how Tess, conscious of her position in life, strives against the natural flow of things through constant choices. This purpose of this paper is to open up a new channel to interpret *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and to draw readers' attention to the optimistic and the inspiring in Hardy's novels.

economic power in an absurd, arbitrary and divisive way” (1989, pp. 213–214). Arnold Kettle in his study of *Tess* says that a “pessimistic and deterministic view of the world in which man is at the mercy of an unyielding outside Fate is the conscious philosophy behind the novel ... and there is no doubt that this conscious philosophy affects the book, in general, for the worse” (as cited in Guru, 1998, p. 34). Apart from such direct critical treatment of determinism which is believed to be the main tone of the novel, more recent feminist readings of *Tess* also follow this fatalistic approach to life, albeit in a different way. Penny Boumelha interprets the novel as particularly the woman’s tragedy, attributing Tess’s tragic fate to her “nature as a woman” (1982, pp. 123–124). Geoffrey Harvey considers Tess as “a victim of an ambivalent attitude towards woman that is traceable both to Hardy and to the culture in which he lived” (2003, p. 169). Tola Odubajo defines Tess as “a naïve woman whose pitiful existence was defined by the patriarchal dictates which dominated the Victorian consciousness” (2017, p. 9229). It seems that the sources of the novel have already been exhausted, but previous criticism created new problems as it solved old ones. For example, there is a sharp discrepancy between Hardy and the critics on his outlook. Critics, either ascribing Tess’s fate to Hardy’s philosophy or to patriarchal society, have primarily denied free choice, action or even hope in the portrait of Tess. However, Hardy himself often violently and explicitly repudiates the imputation of determinism and pessimism in his thought, and he denies any consistent philosophy in his art, although he fails to account for his innumerable references to Time, Chance, Fate and the Immanent Will in his poems and novels alike. Hardy died in 1928, just after other literary and philosophic seeds of the 1960 s and 1970 s began to sprout. Then, what did Hardy say that interests more readers today than ever before? As early as 1990, John Alcorn pointed out that “Hardy may be a proto-existentialist” (1990, p. 1), but he did not show any evidence. Delightfully, I found such problems could be accounted for from the perspective of existentialism, for a thread of existentialism, which was closely related to naturalism, is woven throughout *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and it seems that Hardy leaned toward existentialism long before the word “existentialism” was coined. In the light of freedom advanced by Jean-Paul Sartre, the most notable representative of existentialism, Tess is free despite the inevitability of the processes of biological nature and of circumstances in life, and the whole novel delineates how Tess, conscious of her position in life, strives against the natural flow of things through constant choices. This essay, employing Sartre’s relevant theory, attempts to offer an adequate account of Tess’s freedom which is manifested in consciousness of nothingness, alienation, dread, free choices and death to open up a new channel to interpret *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and to draw readers’ attention to the optimistic and the inspiring in Hardy’s novels.

Naturalism, an aesthetic movement in the late nineteenth century, was inspired by the Darwinian view of nature. It depicts a kind of literature which endeavours to explore the position of human beings in the universe by using scientific theories of objectivity. Naturalists posit a world dominated by natural, social or psychological forces beyond human or rational control, and they study human beings completely governed by their nerves and blood, without free will, and the ways in which the characters’ lives and actions are determined by forces of heredity, environment and natural laws. Produced in the period of naturalism, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* inevitably displays some features of naturalism typically characterized by determinism. For example, Tess derives her passionate feeling and flashing temper from her d’Urbervilles ancestry, and her pretty face and figure come from her peasant mother. Hardy’s reference to Fate reinforces readers’ impression that Tess does not control her own destiny. We are told that “she has hoped to be a teacher at the school, but the fate seems to decide otherwise” (Hardy, 1994, p. 50). However, though Hardy lays much emphasis on natural laws in the novel, his primary concern is his heroine as an individual instead of relentless law working through her, and his great triumph over his contemporary writers is that he does not deny a margin for choice and action. Tess is pitted against an unconscious life-process, but she is not a mere object or machine. She has her will, emotion, and a sense of values with which she tries to mould the unconscious nature. Tess displays a two-fold consciousness of her position in life: the one of her ability to make free choices and direct her actions and to influence other human beings and their courses of action; the other of what appears to be beyond her control, of the inevitability of the processes of nature, of biological nature and of circumstances in life. The consciousness of the existence of a super-power controlling her destiny from outside herself does not, in practice, stop her from doing what she chooses to do. It is the working of the

former consciousness that vests Tess with her vitality and her efforts in the struggle for fulfill her aspirations. In fact, as early as 1978, in *Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way*, Roy Morrell denies the various inflexions of the Hardy-as-determinist line of criticism and attempts to focus on the existential aspect in Hardy. According to Morrell, “Hardy is tireless in his exploration of choice and freedom” (1978, p. 14), and he believes that Hardy’s philosophy is apparent in seeing “point in exploring where the possibilities of freedom and happiness may lie” (1978, p. 17). Morrell achieves a kind of break-through in Hardy criticism and his interpretation of Hardy’s novels, free from the distraction of the so-called philosophy, is a very significant landmark in the process of evaluation of Hardy’s novels. His emphasis on choice available to characters in Hardy’s novels is a direct refutation of that pessimistic determinism which Hardy is supposed to enforce on us through his writings, and his pioneering effort has generated a wave of illuminating criticism of Hardy in the following decades. However, although some critics have found the good and the inspiring in Hardy’s novels after Morrell, the scales on the side of pessimism and determinism have been so heavily and persistently loaded that a present-day Hardy student is still apt to disregard the scales on the other side. Morrell’s work is not adequate. He fails to distinguish between naturalistic choices in the natural flow of things in human life and existential choices which are free from outside forces. Besides, it seems that he oversimplifies “freedom” by equating “the possibilities of freedom” with “the possibilities of happiness”, which diverges from Sartre’s ideas on existential freedom.

Though existentialism is often viewed as a radical rebellion against naturalistic philosophy, it is mostly a consistent development within it, so existentialism shares some similarities with naturalism. For example, both of them have focused on human situation that are negative, such as pain, frustration and death. However, different from naturalist writers who treat men as objects such as tables or chairs which are circumscribed by the same ensemble of determined qualities and phenomena, existentialist writers hold the belief that “existence precedes essence”, that is, man is a being who emerges on the scene first before he is defined by any set of designated qualities or concepts; thus, existence means free will. Though existentialists do not always agree with each other, their common interest in human freedom unites them together. They are concerned with the world regarded as the environment for man who is treated as an individual being different from objects for his capacity to freely choose among alternatives and to act accordingly in spite of natural or social constraints he encounters in certain situations. When illustrating his ideas on freedom, Jean-Paul Sartre points out that “subjectivity must be the starting point” (1957, p. 13) and “freedom precedes essence” (2009, p. 15) by which he means man creates his essence and makes himself what he is through a complex process of responsible choices and acting. Yet, Sartre’s freedom does not mean the possibilities of happiness and free choices are not necessarily related to benevolent environment. When Sartre asserts that “never were we freer than under the German occupation” (1992, p. 619), he is trying to say that never were we freer than when we were the most restricted. This seemingly contradictory statement reveals the real enchantment of Sartre’s freedom and explains why Sartre defines freedom as “the being of man—i.e., his nothingness of being” (1992, p. 569). Man’s “nothingness of being” comes from the existential absurdity which is the reality of man’s existence and serves as the condition for human freedom.

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* articulates an absurd world where Tess lives a futile life and is the sport of indifferent forces which constantly defeat her aspirations and make a mockery of her life. The absurdity of the universe lies in its oppression of her desires and its opposition to her will. Before we have got beyond thirty pages, we find this paragraph on the helplessness of human estate:

All these young souls are passengers in the Durbeyfield ship—entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household choose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither are these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them—six helpless creatures, who have never been

asked if they wish for life on any terms, much less if they wish for it on such hard conditions as are involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield. (Hardy, 1994, p. 28)

Tess is conscious of her pain in this absurd universe, for she knows that her life is meaningless and will eventually come to nothing. When she is still young, Tess begins to realize that the world where she lives is a blighted one. When Tess says that “My life looks as if it had been wasted for want of chances. ... I feel what a nothing I am. I’m like the poor Queen of Sheba who lived in the Bible. I feel there is no more spirit in me” (Hardy, 1994, p. 130), she is conscious of the absurdity of the world where she lives and of her “nothingness of being”. This absurdity of the universe and man’s despair resulting from it are often interpreted as the reflection of Hardy’s determinism and pessimism, but they are actually situations or restrictions which make Sartre’s freedom possible. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre points out that “human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human-reality is” (1992, p. 629). In the light of this statement, freedom depends on the confrontation with adversity and resistance for its full meaning as freedom, so Tess’s existence as nothingness serves to provide a situation where freedom becomes possible and meaningful, for “would it not be reasonable to say: if no obstacle, then no freedom?” (Sartre, 1992, p. 622). For naturalists, suffering and absurdity are not only inevitable but also an indispensable part of human nature, constantly plunging man into despair. However, Sartre defines them as situations, as what man has encountered in his environment. To bravely commit oneself to life when its meaninglessness should invoke a suicidal despair is actually a mode of revolt and the beginning of freedom, just as Sartre suggests, “human life begins on the far side of despair” (1955, p. 123). This can account for why Tess can accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope, for on the far side of despair hope begins, and “some dreams, some affection, some hobby, at least some remote and distant hope which, though perhaps starving to nothing, still live on, as hopes will” (Hardy, 1994, p. 20). It is Tess’s consciousness of nothingness of being or nihilation, which is to Sartre equivalent to freedom in situation, that propels her into the act of engagement with situation. Only with the inevitability of a thrashed fate and without the acquiescence that is supposed to accompany it does resistance blossom and freedom show its full meaning.

According to John Alcorn, one of the themes of Hardy’s novels is “modern man’s loss of contact with the physical world” and “the sense of estrangement and abstraction” (1990, p. 3). This estrangement is identical with Sartre’s alienation which can be defined as self-estrangement. We can understand this existential alienation as the emptiness caused by dissatisfaction with mere achievement and the helplessness that results when the relation breakdown has brought forth a loneliness of soul. Tess certainly seems alienated from her environment and other people in it. Her overwhelming feelings of alienation or estrangement results from her longing for the integration she never acquires. Not wanting to be reduced to a struggling cipher born to suffering and misery, Tess attempts to depend on Angel Clare for her definition as a human being. It is through their relationship that she is linked in full consciousness to her environment. The relationship between them is of such an absolute nature that when it is ruined, she is thrust into the emptiness caused by the helplessness. The break-down of their relation has moulded her into a lonely, rootless exile from meaning. Hardy’s poetic treatment of Tess’s new relationship to her surroundings after Angel’s rejection reveals the divorce between man and his life which comprises the feeling of alienation. The divorce begins immediately after Tess’s confession:

The complexion even of external things seems to suffer transmutation as her announcement progressed. The fire in the grate looks impish—demonically funny, as if it does not care in the least about her strait. The fender grins idly, as if it too does not care. The light from the water-bottle is merely engaged in a chromatic problem. All material objects around announce their irresponsibility with terrible iteration. (Hardy, 1994, p. 225)

The physical universe that attained its meaning from human feelings now exists only as a clumsy, alien factor in the primary struggle to survive. Flintcomb-Ash brings sharply to the senses the nihilation of life and nothingness of being without delusions, without love, without an aspiration or any reason for living to man, trivialized and deserted on the surface of the earth in an indifferent universe that repeatedly checkmates the individual. The human consciousness that brought Tess affliction and banishment has also brought her knowledge of the leveling flintiness of her nihilistic existence as a human being. Constantly overwhelmed by the feeling of alienation from the world about her, Tess has emerged from innocence to consciousness of alienation which is reflected in her failure of recognition. She feels estranged even from her brothers and sisters: “She does not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering and awful, a divine personage with whom they have nothing in common” (Hardy, 1994, p. 100). Her awareness of her alienation is further reinforced in her discovery that all things sink into a sort of indifference to her, for whatever happens to her, “the trees are just as green as before; the birds sing and the sun shines as clearly now as ever. The familiar surroundings have not darkened because of her grief, nor sickened because of her pain” (Hardy, 1994, p. 96). Tess lives as a stranger and an alien, although it is no strange land that she is in. Gradually, “she is not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides Tess is only a frequently passing thought” (Hardy, 1994, p. 96). Because of this sense of estrangement from which she attains her full self, Tess distinguishes herself from the pure will-less subject that rests in fixed contemplation of the object presented to it. Her consciousness of alienation assists her to become and remain an individual. It is a perpetual possibility of disconnecting the self from the causal series, and thus, it is free. This human consciousness, which for Sartre denotes “openness towards being” or awareness of existence, functions as premises in Sartre’s account of freedom, just as David Detmer explains in his study of Sartre, “to be free is to reject all possible explanations of knowing, doing or being which refer to something prior and external to consciousness” (2005, p. 2). The spontaneous nature of human consciousness, though not the essence of freedom, is the pre-condition of choice. Tess’s consciousness of her alienation makes her freedom possible, for it is impossible for her to live unfree lives given that the essence of consciousness consists in its freedom, as Sartre firmly believes, “one must be conscious in order to choose, and one must choose in order to be conscious. Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing” (1992, p. 595). In other words, Tess’s consciousness of her position in life is the result of her free choice and conversely, it is an absolute starting point for thought without which it is totally impossible for Tess to choose and act.

Since consciousness and freedom depend on their relationship with the world and with each other to have complete and tangible meanings, consciousness of freedom will inevitably lead to anguish. Sartre defines anguish as “the consciousness of this freedom, the recognition that my future is my possibility, that it depends on me to bring it into existence and sustain it, that the only thing that separates me from it is my freedom” (2009, p. 16). Tess’s existential anguish results from her sense of alienation, the breakdown of her relations with the outside world which can protect her from the potentially destructive effects of coming face to face with her freedom. It is manifested through her anxiety and dread in which her consciousness is shivering over a deep ocean of agony. Tess always suffers from anxiety, for nobody can help her out of dread resulting from the torture of alienation. She often sees before her “a long and stony highway which she has to tread, without aid, and with little sympathy” (Hardy, 1994, p. 90). After she is seduced by Alec, she seems to see “numbers of tomorrow just all in a line, the first of them the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand further away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said, ‘I’m coming. Beware of me. Beware of me’” (Hardy, 1994, p. 83). Tess loves Angel passionately and faithfully in order to illuminate herself into obliviousness of her past misery and to hold back the dismal phantoms that will persist in their endeavors to touch her—doubt, fright, distress and anxiety which are “waiting like wolves just outside the circumscribing light” (Hardy, 1994, p. 195). However, behind her great love is “some monstrous fear, almost a desperation, as to some secret contingencies which are not disclosed” (Hardy, 1994, p. 310). Tess feels she is surrounded by dangers, and her dread is not fear in the face of any specific danger but

the emotional understanding of possibility of choice and action. Dread holds her in suspense and results in the uncertainty of her future. It is not a sensible response to a situation but an unreflective way to understand the world as a situation which could be transcended by subjective effort, albeit unwittingly. She becomes an existential creature “who suffers from needless worries, from unreasonable doubts and from causeless fears” (Mcelroy, 1963, p. 1). Tess’s existential anxiety comes from “the realization that the agent is solely responsible for his acts”; it is “the dread of being free” (Rose, 2003, p. 3). This dread captures her nature as a human being who is condemned to be free. She seems to experience the world through the dominant emotion of anguish; her dread is the manifestation of her psychic state. The source of her dread is her freedom from natural or social forces beyond her mastery which always lurks out of sight but constantly comes to her consciousness. It is by her dread, which is caused by the total freedom involved in recognizing her spontaneity, that she becomes aware of her freedom. Aware of herself as a center of freedom, she will sharply differentiate herself from things. Above all, she is encouraged to think for herself and to understand herself not as a thing but as a free person. In her anxiety and dread lies the possibility for her to remain free to decide her own values and to live her life accordingly, so her dread is a form of being of freedom.

To Sartre, existence is identical with freedom, so to exist means to strive for freedom through free choices and passionate efforts (1992, p. 572). No man can live authentically unless he meets his obligation to make a choice and to exercise his free will. Although Sartre does not tell one what to choose, he does suggest there are right and wrong ways of choosing, namely “good faith” and “bad faith”. “Good faith” refers to authentic existence and “bad faith” refers to inauthentic existence. To be inauthentic is, for instance, to follow the herd unquestioningly. Bad faith, an affirmation of psychological determinism by which man tries to persuade himself that he has a fixed nature leading to his act, is intended to distract oneself from the anxious responsibility of the self’s own freedom. But the authentic man will refuse to be lost in the world of public functions without a struggle. Man should achieve authentic existence involving acceptance of responsibility for one’s own actions. Good faith, or genuine choice, means to come to one’s self and to be responsible for the whole of one’s personality. With good faith, man’s destiny is within himself, and action based on his free choice is the only way for man to live authentically.

Though often read as a victim of Hardy’s determinism, Tess is not a puppet in the hands of fate. Guru believes that Hardy’s man “does have a fair chance of mastering the environment, if he acts and becomes sufficiently adaptable to changing circumstance” (1998, p. 30). Weak and delicate in appearance, Tess is full of strength and courage. Instead of passively yielding to her fate, she constantly makes brave choices in opposition to cruel reality and unremitting effort to carry out her choices. Naturalists also present choices in various ways, but they have tacitly understood that determined characters cannot restrain themselves when everything required for an action is present, because they always choose to act as their strongest desires dictate, and their choices always seem predictable and outside their control. Then it is important to examine the nature of Tess’s choices. When her father is intoxicated by his illustrious family history, Tess chooses to preserve her dignity. She feels ashamed at her father’s flightiness, and she insists on having the simple peasant family name “Durbeyfield” as her surname. After she is seduced by Alec, she makes the moral choice of coming back to Marlott in spite of her pregnancy. She has a clear understanding of Alec’s nature, of her own nature and of her position in life. Any other country girl would willingly accept her fate and marry Alec, but Tess refuses to follow the herb. When Alec shamelessly tries to lure her with comfortable life, she bluntly declares: “I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not—I cannot. I should be your creature to go on doing that; and I won’t” (Hardy, 1994, p. 83). This can also be seen in the quiet, dignified tone of her reply to Alec, who, having stolen after her on her way back to Marlott, rebukes her for not loving him: “Perhaps of all things, a lie on this thing would do the most good to me now; but I have honour enough left, little as ‘tis, not to tell that lie. If I did love you I may have the best o’causes for letting you know it. But I don’t” (84). When her mother scolds her for not luring Alec into a proposal of marriage, she proudly proclaims: “Perhaps any woman would, except me” (Hardy, 1994, p. 87).

When Tess makes her choices, there is always an alternative, an alternative which will reduce her to a will-less animal that does not need to bear the responsibility for its existence and its action. However, she chooses differently. Her different and dangerous choices are not fatally determined by the organization of the individual or the momentary condition of her environment. They are not responses to experiences out of a similar constellation of yearnings and motives but the wills that enable her to refrain from desire or alter behaviour. They are what Sartre calls “good faith”, for she stands apart from her peers and chooses an individual and meaningful, although futile and painful, life. With the harvest on in Marlott, the spirit of life, of youth prevailing over her sense of mortification and shame through a long period of seclusion, she musters up the courage to face life and to look people bravely in the face even with her baby in her arms. The baptism and the burial of her infant “Sorrow” are symbolic of great moral strength and freedom of spirit that she can now display. Tess, thus, transforms from an innocent girl to a mature woman.

After she falls in love with Angel, Tess makes a new choice—loyal and devoted love. After Angel deserts her when he gets to know her past, she is still devoted to him wholeheartedly, “I would be content, ay glad, to live with you as your servant, if I may not as your wife; so that I could only be near you, and get glimpses of you, and think of you as mine” (Hardy, 1994, p. 326). At this stage, Tess is ready to pay anything for a true love, including her life. Her confession of her inglorious past to Angel despite her mother’s strong objection and her murder of Alec are both acts of moral choice, of assertion of herself in the face of forces of disintegration. They are also symbolic of the knowledge she has gained through experience of her true self and a resolution of the constant conflict within her. Rosemarie Morgan claims that “Tess has not earned but, rather, learned guilt and sorrow” (1988, p. 103). I would argue that “chosen” might be a more suitable word. Conscious of nihilism in her existence, Tess has chosen anguish and guilt for which she is responsible, so she is eventually able to define herself not by actions she happens to perform but by the very capacity for choosing certain actions over others. In her free choice she comes to possess her moral self that is greater than the sum of forces which go into making her. It is her action that endows her existence with meaning in its existential sense.

John Goode asserts that Hardy demonstrates in his novels “the thwarted need to be in touch and the insistent separation of the struggle for existence, the flaw in a universe in which desire and circumstances are at war” (1988, p. 43). Critics have dissociated Tess from freedom largely because of the frustration she has experienced in her struggle for existence despite her brave choices, but the failure of Tess’s choice and action is not an argument for or against freedom. It is merely the reality around her; it serves to reinforce the existential absurdity which has been previously discussed. Sartre’s concept of freedom is of absolute nature and it attains its full meaning only in situation or “circumstances”, regardless of its failure or success against coefficients of adversity it encounters. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explains that “the formula ‘to be free’ does not mean ‘to obtain what one has wished’ but rather ‘by oneself to determine oneself to wish’ in the broad sense of choosing. In other words, success is not important to freedom” (1992, p. 621). Sartre’s freedom has to do only and completely with the autonomy of choice. Tess choosing to challenge the restrictions of her environment in spite of repeated failures is expressing the freedom that she is. In fact, just because of the disparity between her intention and the reality she encounters does freedom show its full meaning. This is also the fundamental difference between naturalistic characters and existentialist characters. Plunged into a sea of brute facts, a naturalistic man will choose to live an empty and meaningless life, rushing on to the satisfaction of the unbridled instincts of a man who knows no other limit than powerlessness. However, an existentialist man will choose to withstand the forces in this futile world that compels him into action and announces his free will by not giving way, by standing firm in battle when constantly overcome by fear or refusing to submit to extortion though threatened by public exposure. Wishes like Tess’s, in their hankering for sublime satisfaction, cannot be fulfilled, but Tess is not hesitant to choose to break the hell where she lives a futile and painful life. When Hardy writes in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* that “the beauty or ugliness of a character lies not only in its achievement, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lies not among things done, but among things willed” (1994,

p. 329), it seems that he has Sartre's concept of freedom in his mind. His "aims", "impulses" and "things willed" are free choices made by Tess in opposition to her environment and reality which enable her existence to be meaningful. In this absurd world, the only way out is to revolt, to act independently of the world outside, which is a signifier of man's existence.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is deemed to be pessimistic and deterministic partly because of Tess's death at the end of the novel. For example, Felicia Bonaparte tries to convince us that the dying scenes of Tess "reminds us of the crucifixion not to make Tess a Christian sacrifice but to suggest that such a sacrifice makes her a victim of the wrong mores" (1999, p. 429). Death seems to be Tess's destiny which cannot be altered or a punishment for her struggle against her fate, but in fact, to Hardy, death is a friend instead of an enemy, for it can help man to deliverance from his suffering and can make man's spirit and virtue glow forever. This is indicated by Hardy's attitude towards his own death. When Hardy is dying, "there is an unbelievable dignity and ripeness: he is waiting so tranquilly for death, ... and yet he entertains so many illusions, and hopes for the world ... They used to call this man a pessimist while really he is full of fancy expectation" (Halliday, 1978, p. 225). Hardy also endows his heroine with his eagerness and readiness for death which echoes with Sartre's death consciousness that defines man's existence as being-towards-death. Death can help man to find out what is really significant in life, and man's existence towards death always unfolds a certain scene in history for whose becoming he is responsible. It is not until man has come to the end of his life that he can look back and examine his essence defined by what he has done according to his free choice. Sartre praises Camus for acknowledging positive qualities in death: "You unites the joy of life to the sense of death ... . You are of the opinion that all negation contains within it a flowering of yes, and you want to find consent in the heart of refusal" (as cited in Dembo, 1989, p. 70). Tess has realized the delight in death very early in her life. She has learnt from her experience that "in some circumstances there is one thing better than to lead a good life, and that is to be saved from leading any life whatever" (Hardy, 1994, p. 239). When her beloved husband Angel decides to leave her and walks in sleep with her in his arms, Tess hopes that they could fall together, and both be smashed to pieces, for if they die together, "they would go out of the world almost painlessly, and there would be no more reproach to her, or to him for marrying her. His last half-hour with her would have been a loving one" (Hardy, 1994, p. 244). This consciousness of death eventually prompts Tess to choose death actively, which is consistent with Sartre's idea that when man resolves to escape from the banality of his trivial existence, his consciousness of this nihilation will impel him to choose the only unreserved possibility that belongs to him: death. The understanding of death enables Tess to discern the common predestination by which all men are bound and it offers her the possibility of freely choosing the necessity that all men are subject to and of remaining faithful to her authentic self for which she is responsible. When Tess plunges the knife into Alec's chest, fully aware of the consequences, she is actually making the choice of death. She is conscious of the necessity of death, so she can face death calmly with pleasure and dignity. Her ambitions of a life of love and happiness in the being of Angel are also fulfilled by death. Consequently, when, at Stonehenge, she finds people gathered around her to take her to prison, she tells them quietly, almost gladly, "I am ready" (Hardy, 1994, p. 382). The end of her life's journey at Stonehenge is not, as some critics have suggested, symbolic of Tess being sacrificed on the altar of Hardy's fatalism or pessimism. On the contrary, it symbolizes Tess's being "at home" with what is "older than the centuries", "older than the d'Urbervilles", with history itself and with the flux of life itself, so she calmly declares to Angel: "It is as it should be. Angel—I am almost glad—yes, glad. This happiness could not have lasted—it is too much—I have had enough; and now I shall not live for you to despise me" (Hardy, 1994, pp. 381–382). Death, as the ultimate goal of human life, is not a natural state but a price that Tess has paid for her free choice, so it is an achievement, an act of free choice and a sign of her freedom.

Existential death functions as a spur and a promise instead of a threat to the survivors. Only the man who consummates his life dies triumphantly, surrounded by those who hope and promise, so man should choose to die happily, or man should at least choose to die struggling. Tess's murder of Alec, while it aligns Tess with automatic choice which directs the cosmic process towards death, restores to her life an order she has chosen existentially: to live and love with an intensity

enhanced by consciousness of the impending death sentence she has pronounced on herself. In a universe shaped by death, it is the only journey to end in fulfillment. Tess, aware of the power of death which allows no one to remain unsoiled, collaborates at times with the drive towards death. Then in the immensity of her emotions, in her capacity to endure the suffering, and in her assertions to shape her life and love as she would like them to be, Tess has realized her authentic self. Shanta Dutta believes that Tess is free from any exterior judgments imposed by forces outside because of Hardy's allegiance to "a living, breathing, sentient woman" (2010, p. 9). This "living, breathing, sentient woman" is the very existential creature who defines herself through an elaborate process of responsible choices among which death is the most life-affirming decision to maintain her autonomy and to assume the responsibilities for her authentic acts. Since death is an achievement resulting from free choices, there is a kind of static beauty in Hardy's delineation of death. At the close of Tess's life, Hardy presents a splendid picture:

The band of silver paleness along the east horizon makes even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bears that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stand up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped sun-stone beyond them, and the stone of sacrifice midway. (Hardy, 1994, p. 381)

Stonehenge and Wintonchester, with their symbols of an order based on death defined blackly against the empty sky, provide a fitting end to this maintenance of unique human identity against the existential void. Faced with death, Tess holds fast to her choices of truth and love. In freely choosing to give up her life, she immortalizes herself.

John Rabbetts believes that Hardy's attempts in his novels might be seen as "an early modernistic attempt to transcend the naturalistic mode of the novel" (1989, p. 153). Though Hardy is not an existentialist in the sense that Sartre is an existentialist, that is, an existentialist who illustrates his existentialist philosophy in his works, there are elements in Hardy's novels which look forward to twentieth-century novels written in the climate of existentialist thought popularized by Sartre and Camus. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can be viewed as Hardy's exploration of Sartre's existential freedom through consciousness, alienation, dread, free choice and death, long before existentialism earned its literary reputation. One cannot say with certainty whether Sartre, the most upright and compassionate champion of human individuality and freedom against rigid determinism, has been influenced by reading Hardy, but he is born conscious of Hardy's universe. Hardy's outlook is modern, and he never loses sight of the humanity which has been responsible for progress in western civilization so that he is valued today and will remain significant for the future. Hardy's own words in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can serve to account for his existential thoughts which are far advanced in his time: "What are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in -logy and -ism, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries" (1994, p. 129). Every philosophical or literary trend cannot be separated from history. It is the development of the past. Although Hardy lives in the age of naturalism, he moves gradually and unconsciously towards existentialism with a view to discard certain unreasonable aspects of naturalism.

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