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The Poetics of Sacrifice in Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

By the middle of the nineteenth century England had overcome an unsettling financial period between 1815 to 1842 and had begun an economic recovery. ‘The Bank of England, after the discouragements of the years down to 1842, was prepared to provide loans at a low rate of interest... Brickworks, mines, machine making, iron production, all boomed; the wages of heavy labourers rose; a general stimulus followed. Traders felt the same exhilaration, both in the West and East’ (Checkland, p. 36). The industrial and commercial classes that verily controlled economic conditions and dominated English society and culture were both aggressive and mercenary when it came to exploiting the lower orders. In terms of working conditions, the *Ten Hours Act* was not effected until 1833 and the act was not extended to women and children until the *Ten Hours Act for Women and Young Persons* (1847). ‘The Act, strengthened by further legislation in 1850 and 1853, provided a ten and a half hour day, from 6 am to 6 pm with one and a half hours for meals’ (Checkland, pp. 248–9), but there were rearguard reactions to these laws and in some cases even courts ruled against the law showing it to be ‘ambiguous’ (Checkland, p. 249). Even though those laws were designed to mitigate the working conditions for children and women, women did not have any inherent voting rights until 1884, were not extended the full right to vote until 1918 and a woman’s suffrage movement was not even founded until 1897 only six years after the publication of *Tess*.

With the growth in the industrial state came the growth of capital and competition. In that sense, perhaps to a greater extent than before, every group without a negotiable power base was exploited: hence women and children were most appealing and both were appropriated as commodities to be used in the quest for capital gain. This ‘economic slavery’, of course, could only result in
the perception that women were property. As such, one discovers that Tess (Greek, she who reaps) is a viable commercial ‘property’ not only in terms of her use-value, but in terms of her innocent beauty a combination which could only result in a novel predicated on the exploitation of innocence and, as we shall see, the implementation of sacrifice.

PHASE THE FIRST: THE MAIDEN

Tess, of course, is thick with ‘potential meaning’ (secular and sacred) and a poetics of the entire novel is not within the scope of this book; however, there are some very significant items which manifest in the first ‘phase’ of the novel which lay the poetic foundation for the entire novel. Key among those devices is that Hardy does not use the word ‘chapter’ in the novel (sections of the novel indicated by Roman numerals), but, rather, uses the word ‘phase’ and the notion of a phase rather than a chapter is a distinguishing feature of the novel. What one knows of a phase is that it can be a discernible part in a stage or process. Though the titles of the phases are not of Hardy’s doing, they focus on the Predominant feature of each phase. And so the clear implication of the title of ‘Phase the First, The Maiden’, yields to all things that imply maidenhood: namely, virginity, innocence, trustworthiness. If one can talk about stages or developments, one can also include in that process the notion of ‘discovery’, an action of uncovering, whose origins are closely related to those of ‘revelation’, the disclosure of something often by a divine or supernatural agency. It is not coincidental, then, that the entire novel hinges on one unique revelation: that is, the Durbeyfield family is related to the D’Urbervilles.

On the first page of ‘Phase the First: The Maiden’, we meet the parson as he encounters John Derbyfield on the road and calls him ‘Sir John’ to the bemusement of the latter. ‘The parson rode a step or two nearer. “It was only my whim,” he said; and, after a moment’s hesitation: “It was on account of a discovery I made some little time ago, whilst I was hunting up pedigrees for the new county history. I am Parson Tringham, the antiquary, of Stagfoot Lane. Do not you really know, Durbeyfield, that you are the lineal representative of the ancient and knightly family of the d’Urbervilles, who derive their descent from Sir Pagan d’Urberville, that renowned knight who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror,