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Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1890) reinforces the psychological oppression of Tess by the men in her life. The two men who “love” her believe themselves to be superior to her, causing her powerlessness in the face of social and emotional strife.

From the moment Tess meets Alec, she is both manipulated and tricked by him. Believing him to be a true D’Urbervilles and a distant relative with money, Tess feels indebted because he is willing to help her family financially by giving them money and her, a job. The reality is that he desires Tess sexually and, without regard to her feelings, takes advantage of her. He has little respect for her as a young woman and person and the blight that such a transgression will cause on her reputation, especially during 19th century Victorian England. At this time, a woman’s purity was crucial; young girls would not have been able to marry into a good family if she had become “impure.” Because Alec has no intention of marrying Tess, this treatment ruins her chances of a decent future. Not only is she dependent on him for money, but also for her own honor. The fact that he is so careless and self-serving forces her to return home in shame and deal with the aftermath on her own.

The situation complicates when she leaves home and attempts to begin again. Finding a new job as a milkmaid in a distant town, she meets an upstanding, yet unbending man, Angel, with whom she falls in love and dreams of marriage. She actually believes she has an opportunity to “clean the slate” of her past life if Angel will accept her past and still love her. She tries countless times to confess her past transgressions, but he never considers that her past could be

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condemning to his own masculinity. In ignorance, he tells her that they can share all their secrets on their wedding night. Unfortunately, their wedding night proves to be a disaster when he confesses his own sinful background, thus encouraging her to share hers. In his own mind, Angel has created Tess to be the Angel of the House, and her news destroys his pride. He is now unable to view Tess as the same woman he thought he married: “You were one person; now you are another” (262). As man of the house, he feels he has the right and moral obligation to reject her, which he does. Regardless of the fact that his actions before marriage are no different than her own, she takes total blame for the dissolution of their marriage. To make it easier for him, she resolves to return home.

Tess’ patriarchal world creates a double standard of moral values. On the one hand, the females are expected to stay pure until their wedding night but, on the other hand, the men are valued for their prowess. Both Alec and Angel have put Tess on a pedestal as the ideal woman, valued only for how she can make each of them feel about themselves. Despite the many attempts to stay pure for her absent husband, the novel depicts Tess as weak. She never finds happiness because she is condemned on both counts: Angel believes she has lied to him about her own virtue, and Alec insists that he deserves her. Both objectify her, someone who should be punished for a past that seems to be out of her control.

Unfortunately, it is not only the men who uphold the patriarchal ideology. Tess’ mother is the one who sends her daughter to “claim kin” at the D’Urbervilles household, believing that Tess’ beauty will win over the rich cousin. Her mother’s plan is that the family will somehow be the recipient of a large sum of money and that Tess’ beauty will achieve. Both women are socially programmed to believe that their own powerlessness is impossible to overcome without being a “bad girl” and totally dependent on masculine desire.