

# Gossip as an Instrument of Tragedy in Tess of the D'urbervilles

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## Abstract

Studies in Victorian literature have tended to regard gossip as a form of social talk without considering its significance as a social interaction that communicates information in fictional societies. This article takes a different approach and examines the novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as a case study. Using contemporary research on the sociology of gossip, rumours, legends and scandal, it attempts to understand the function and importance of these various forms of social judgement utilized by Thomas Hardy in his novel. This paper argues that the informal circuitries of information greatly influence the plot and Tess's decisions and eventually lead to her tragedy. Furthermore, this study of gossip in fiction adds to the existing literary criticism of novels in Victorian literature, and prompts that gossip's unacknowledged and varied role in literature should be assessed in future research.

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**Keywords:** Gossip, novel, social judgement, scandal, tragedy, Victorian literature, Thomas Hardy.

## Introduction

Recent studies on gossip have evaluated numerous aspects of social talk and its implications on the society where opinions are vocally expressed. Even though the theories are based on research from society and real conversations, applying them to my research and analysis allows a more comprehensive understanding of the elements and characteristics of gossip in the text that taken as my case study. Niko Besnier defines gossip as a verbal "information exchange" that is "negatively evaluative and morally laden" and concerns itself with the behaviour of "absent third parties, involving a bounded group of persons in a private setting" (2009, p. 8). In his research on the sociological aspects of gossip, Jörg Bergmann sets out to prove that gossip is a "social form of discreet indiscretions" (1993, p. 118). He shows that it both violates and abides by the "boundaries between the private and public" (1993, p. 118) because when a person "intentionally" communicates information to

particular friends instead of widely and “indiscriminately,” he acts “discreetly” (1993, p. 151). He names three essential characteristics for the “subject of gossip” as “absence, acquaintanceship, and privacy” (Bergmann, 1993, p.54). This means that gossip must be done in the absence of the subject of discussion, among a group of friends or acquaintances, and is usually conducted in a private setting.

Patricia Meyer Spacks (1985) sets out to determine other characteristics of gossip and she argues that gossip is usually criticized and disparaged because of its disclosure of secrets, and its violation of privacy. After communicating a curious piece of information to acquaintances or friends, what determines whether this information will be transmitted further or die out with disinterest is the listeners’ judgement of the incident and people involved. In other words, Spacks (1985) states that for gossip to be transmitted effectively to another person, it must be both believable and intriguing to the other person, shock-worthy, and a topic that can be analysed and commented on.

Gossip had particular power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in dealing with and monitoring a woman’s reputation. “Oral speech,” discussed by Laura Gowing in her study of early modern English societies, held great power for a person’s reputation both legally and socially at a time when only a few women “used the written word with any frequency” (1996, p. 111). Since the female characters in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* also habitually do not read or write, the female society in the novel, especially in Marlott, distinctively form a community similar to that of early modern England where they speculate and judge Tess based on hearsay.

Both Bernard Capp (2003) and Melanie Tebutt (1995) in their study of gossip discuss how female gossips and older women of a neighbourhood assume a position of power by controlling and observing the borders of proper behaviour in their unyielding conventional position of moral authority. This is evident in the novel where Tess experiences the collective and disapproving opinion of her society and neighbours, and suffers the consequences of her improper behaviour. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* was published in the late Victorian period (1891), but Hardy does not clearly determine a definite time period of when the novel is set. It can be deduced that it is after the invention of the telegram (1871) that is mentioned at the end of the novel. The time period is relevant in this study of gossip in the novel, because as J. F. C Harrison states, worry about “what the neighbours would think” while trying to maintain a higher “social standing” and “respectability” demanded an almost “neurotic cost” to the working class of the late Victorian period (1990, p.131).

Furthermore, it is necessary to define tragedy in order to demonstrate its connection to gossip in this novel. Tragedy, as defined by Peter Childs and

Roger Fowler (2006), “is a dramatization of an individual’s sense of life and society” as continuously threatened by the capricious whims of fate and people’s arbitrary viciousness (p.241). The individual’s life is endangered when an action “opens a gap in the fragile fabric of morality and civilization” (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p. 241). In other words, tragedy in the case of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* can be explained as the disproportionate suffering of a character due to a previous error in judgement. Tess’s fate is considered to be a tragedy since her illicit pregnancy destabilizes her position and reputation in her local society and later leads to the unfortunate event of her death.

### **Research Questions**

In this paper, I will proceed to demonstrate how several examples of gossip and other forms of traditional communication in the novel show the significance of gossip to the plot of the novel and the characters affected by social judgement. I will examine the following questions: how does gossip affect Tess’s relations with the society around her and determine her fate? What are the different types of informal talk evident in the novel? Furthermore, how do the mechanisms of gossip create a form of moral and class regulation in the society of the novel?

### **Literature Review**

Since the publication of the novel, critics have argued several reasons for Tess’s tragedy. Richard Nemesvari suggests that the destruction of Tess is a direct result of Alec and Angel’s “attempt to stabilize” their masculine identity, “and in doing so defeat the rival who embodies an alternative vision of self which they cannot accept” (2002, p. 88). Rosemary Jann (2000) in her discussion of the construction of class, states that Tess’s “endorsement of middle-class mores contributes” to her “victimization” (2000, p. 411). Jeanette Shumaker, in her article about Victorian confession novels, says that Tess’s “redirection of rage away from the unjust hierarchies of gender and class leads to tragedy” when her confession, though it “reinscribe[s] the gender and class hierarchies” does not enable her salvation as a ‘fallen woman’ (1994, p.445). However, I claim that very little of the narrative depends on Tess’ sexual transgression, or even on her role a victim of sexual assault or social injustice. In his article about rumour, its physiology and movement within social spaces in the novel, Daniel Williams contends that “rumor operates as a compelling and often covert force” (2013, p. 95). To expound on Williams perspective on rumour, I will take this idea further and argue that the narrative is propelled by the combination of various economies of information present in the text that impel Tess towards her tragedy.

## **Gossip as an Instrument of Tragedy**

In the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess is the centre of different mechanisms of rumour<sup>1</sup> and is affected by damaging information from three sources. I will use 'information' in this context similar to Alexander Welsh's definition of "knowledge that is tucked away – hidden, in fact – until it is brought forth" and its "value hinges upon its release, which may occur through deliberation or by chance" (1985, p.44). The first source of information that induces change is when Parson Tringham sees fit to inform her father, John Durbeyfield about their supposed ancestors, the d'Urbervilles. I will call this source of information a local legend or tradition, because it is a "non-historical or mythical story<sup>2</sup>" that is "handed down<sup>3</sup>" from generation to generation. The second source of information is hearsay, according to which individuals in the novel prejudge Tess without concrete evidence. And the last source of damage is the gossip that occurs after Tess's fall becomes undeniably clear, and forms a reputation that neither she nor those who encounter it can forget.

This paper argues that the tragic outcome is as much the result of the informal economies of knowledge as destiny or her own agency, and in what follows I will track the course of these different circuitries of knowledge as they impact on Tess, and explore their unpredictable relationship to the events of the novel. I will explore what happens at the boundaries of these regimes of knowledge, suggesting that their influence diminishes only to be supplemented by the narrative which keeps the power of information foreground in the reader's mind. Finally, I will show how at various points in the novel the unexpected conjunction of the economies of information pushes the narrative forward.

### **"Curious bit of lore": The legend of the Durbeyfield's family history**

The novel demonstrates the importance of a person's history as a source of gossip since, according to Max Gluckman, "members" of a community "can hit at one another through their ancestors," whereas their ignorance of such knowledge allows them to fall in a weak position. This desire and curiosity for knowledge urge the characters in the novel to learn about one another's history to maintain a position of power and belonging in a small community (1963, p. 309). In the first few pages in the novel, the Durbeyfield family history is introduced by Parson Tringham, and though his narrative is not solely concerned with Tess, she is the person most affected by the information. The clergyman informs John Durbeyfield of his ancestral

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1 The sociologist Jörg Bergmann explains that the "decisive difference between rumors and gossip is that rumors contain unauthorized messages that are always of universal interest and accordingly are disseminated diffusely (1993: 70).

2 From the etymology of 'legend' in the Online Etymology Dictionary

3 From the etymology of 'tradition' in the Online Etymology Dictionary

origins after claiming to have made “inquiries about his father and grandfather”<sup>4</sup> while “tracing the vicissitudes of the d’Urberville family” “till he had no doubt on the subject” (1993, p. 4). This parson, who appears to have upper-middle-class pursuits such as genealogy and local history, philanthropically decides to enlighten a known drunk like John Durbeyfield of his loftier origins, probably because he wishes to spread the knowledge he has gained through his research to the less fortunate. The reader becomes suspicious about this “useless piece of information” when the parson “rode on his way, with doubts as to his discretion in retailing this curious bit of lore” (1993, p. 4). To “retail”<sup>5</sup> in this context convokes all its etymological possibilities relevant to the economies of information: Parson Tringham refashions the information about the history of the d’Urbervilles he has researched, recounts the local legend he has heard, and then succeeds in metaphorically selling his doubtful information to a more than susceptible audience. John Durbeyfield’s pride in his newly-acquired family connection is based on little fact and the word of a single clergyman, but this does not prevent him from repeating this history to anyone who will hear him. The evidence of their connection to the d’Urbervilles is a mere rusty silver spoon that may or may not have the crest of the ancient family. Whether the spoon is inscribed with the crest or not, their possession of such a spoon does not necessarily mean it has belonged to the Durbeyfield family for generations, as it could have been bought or given as a present to earlier generations of the Durbeyfield family. Furthermore, Tess’s resemblance to the female d’Urberville’s portraits displayed in the d’Urberville ancestral home can be a mere coincidence, for anyone can vaguely resemble one or two portraits in a gallery.

The lack of evidence substantiating Parson Tringham’s claim does not discredit his actual research into the d’Urberville family tree, but merely his assumption, probably based on the similarity of the two names, that the D’Urberville family name has declined into the Durbeyfields. The text insinuates that the clergyman is believed because, as a virtuous member of the Church, he is a reliable source of information whose knowledge and behaviour should not be questioned but emulated. This narrative concocted by the clergyman about various individuals momentarily takes control of their lives, even if the narrative itself is without ill intentions. The clergyman’s narration of the legend of the d’Urbervilles does largely dominate the Durbeyfield’s lives and others’ opinion of them throughout the novel.

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4 All quotations from the novel are taken from Hardy, T. (1993). *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Wordsworth Classics Edition.

5 To retail (v): mid-14c: "to cut off, pare, clip, divide," from re- "back" + taillier "to cut, trim" Sense of "recount, tell over again" is first recorded 1590s" Taken from the Online Etymology Dictionary.

This legend of the ancient family appears to be common knowledge to the individuals Tess encounters in the novel, and each has different reactions about this family history and her possible relation to the illustrious d'Urbervilles. John Durbeyfield is hopelessly vain; Joan Durbeyfield urges Tess to work for her false yet rich relations; the village further disdains the family's failure to rise above their station; Angel is impressed, and Mr Crick is curious. The widespread knowledge of a local legend could be the result of generations of gossip repeated and altered after every repetition. According to Spacks, communal histories partake of the mythic and "the fluid permanence of oral tradition may possess" the power to "remak[e]...history in talk" (1985, p. 231). Mr Crick, the dairyman, repeats to Tess a story he has heard as a child about the Durbeyfields that is quite similar to what the clergyman has told John Durbeyfield of his family history. Immediately after meeting Tess, the dairyman recollects that an "aged woman of ninety" has informed him that the Durbeyfields originate from an "old ancient race" but the "new generations didn't know it" (1993, p. 94). Mr Crick's story can be considered part of the local legend since it is an unreliable account of a now non-existent ancient family, the d'Urbervilles, that is repeated to others, generation (the old lady, Mr Clare senior) after generation (Mr Crick as a lad, Angel Clare). "Old Mr Clare", a notably "sincere" (1993, p. 138) and righteous clergyman, also relates to his son the story of the ancient d'Urbervilles. His father narrates his encounter with a "young upstart squire named d'Urberville" living "in the neighbourhood of Trantridge" but that "the original d'Urbervilles decayed and disappeared sixty or eighty years ago" and that a new family "has taken the name" (1993, p. 145-146).

It is important to point out that there is no concrete evidence that Tess is descended from the ancient family, and all accounts of the story are based on uncertain speculation. Nevertheless, this belief or fascination in a dubious story about a "curiously worn out" family is shared by several individuals in the local area surrounding the ancestral home of the d'Urbervilles (Marlott, Trantridge Farm, Wellbridge), and since Tess does not stray too far from where she first hears the legend, it remains a familiar story to those around her. The essence of the legend that affects Tess in particular is that the ancient and lofty title "decayed" into a poorer family name, and it may be the Durbeyfields. The unreliability of the information narrated by the clergyman does not prevent the Durbeyfields from grasping at the relation to such a lofty title and wealth, and spreading rumours about non-existent upcoming nuptials.

### **Rumours and hearsay of "a transcendent conquest"**

The second type of information begins to circulate in the novel as soon as Joan and John Durbeyfield decide to publicly plan their way back to nobility and affluence by sending Tess to their rich 'relatives.' At this point, it is Tess's

parents who spread false information about their daughter, and damage her reputation by associating it with Alec d'Urbervilles, a known seducer from Trantridge. Tess, well-aware of her mother's propensity for gossip, warns her mother to "say nothing" of the "silly" idea of marriage "about parish" when Tess consents to work for the d'Urbervilles in Trantridge. However, "Mrs Durbeyfield did not promise. She was not quite sure that she did not feel proud enough, after the visitor's remarks, to say a good deal" (1993, p. 39). Joan Durbeyfield's excited talk about her daughter's "fine prospects" (1993, p. 21) to her acquaintances sets the foundation for the prejudice, speculation and then rumours about Tess and her gentleman.

Joan Durbeyfield has been talking "a good deal" (1993, p. 39) ever since Tess left to work for the d'Urbervilles months ago. What has been gossiped about in Tess's absence is not mentioned in the novel, but it is not difficult to fathom how Joan exaggeratingly constructs her own ideal future for Tess; how John repeatedly talks about the day his life changed when he first hears about the d'Urberville legend; and how the gossipmongers of Marlott speculate about Tess's fate, especially after hearing of Alec's scandalous reputation. When Tess finally returns to her native village and recounts to her mother what has happened to her, Mrs Durbeyfield, who is well acquainted with the "talk" (1993, p. 72) from Tantridge about Tess and Alec, is shocked to find that Tess has not managed to marry him. Joan Durbeyfield truly believed her own speculations about her daughter's future before anything actually occurred between Alec and Tess, and the alarming disappointment she feels is a result of her preconceived opinion colliding with the truth of Tess's story.

Her mother's disappointment in Tess's supposed failure is superseded with the society's reaction of her return. Hardy narrates that "the event of Tess Durbeyfield's return from the manor of her bogus kinsfolk was rumoured abroad, if rumour be not too large a word for a space of a square mile" (1993, p. 73). When something is rumoured to be true, it means that there are no facts established to verify the truth, merely hearsay. And in a small community, rumour is in fact "too large a word" for something so easily determined as Tess's return. In order to establish the span a rumour can reach, a line must be drawn from the first person who gossips about a certain piece of dubious information to the last person who hears and is interested in this information. All these people included along the line drawn, form the community concerned, either negatively or positively, in Tess's welfare. According to Hardy, this community is only "a space of a square mile," and rumour is definitely "too large" a word for the news of Tess's return: the news has not been repeated, communicated, or fabricated enough to gain the momentum of a rumour (1993, p. 73). The fact that the curious young women of Marlott decide to visit Tess "in their best starched and ironed" shows that they are

prepared to meet Tess based on the rumour of her “transcendent conquest” of a rich gentleman (1993, p. 73). This “transcendent conquest” is what they expect to hear: it is what her mother has been talking about for months, and it is this prejudice about Tess that gains her the respect of her fellow village women symbolized by their formal and clean attire worn in a visit to a woman they once considered an equal. That an unfamiliar “gentleman” with a “reputation as a reckless gallant and heart-breaker” is associated with Tess “lends” her “a far higher fascination than it would have exercised if unhazardous” (1993, p. 73). The element of danger and risk is fascinating to those who have led safe and conventional lives within the protection of the social and moral conventions; a protection Tess soon loses after her return to Marlott. Her intriguing relationship with Alec only “lends” her a brief moment of interest among the people of Marlott because the danger they suspect her to have been in turns out to be true, and the gossip transforms from mere amusement and curiosity to malicious rumours.

The gossip about Tess and Alec is at first harmless and a source of entertainment, but soon turns serious and spiteful when Tess’s predicament becomes generally known. “Malicious gossip,” according to James C. Scott, “is by no means a respecter of persons,” but it “is a respecter of the larger normative order within which it operates” (2007, p. 282). Tess’s illicit relations with Alec and her consequent pregnancy must be talked about to show the result of disregarding proper conduct, and what has to be done to prevent the corruption of other young women in the village. Her ‘fallen’ reputation can no longer be debated when the evidence of her pregnancy becomes known. A fallen woman, as Tess clearly is in the eyes of the parish, must be shunned, and her treatment by the village acts like the malicious sexual gossip found by historians in Early modern communities, where the women of a parish, are responsible of “policing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, for gossip might generate a collective pressure forcing offenders to move out or conform” (Capp, 2003, p. 59).

Tess begins to hear whispers about her condition on a Sunday morning a few weeks after her return to Marlott. She tries “to be as much out of observation as possible” in church and takes a “back seat” (1993, p. 74). However, the people in the church “whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more” (1993, p. 75). It is interesting to notice that the whispers start in church where the people can take a moral and religious high ground while looking down upon the ‘fallen’ woman. The ostracism of Tess is not due to a personal aversion to her as a person: it is shown as part of the community’s mechanism of social and financial self-regulation. During the Victorian period, there were constant changes and amendments to the laws governing illegitimacy in Britain, and the financial responsibility for raising a bastard

alternated between the putative father, the Parish the child was born into, and the responsibility of the single mother<sup>6</sup>. Which Poor Law Hardy thought of using in the context of his novel is unclear, but in either case an illegitimate child in a parish is a liability whether it strains the finances of the parish or merely disrupts the relative serenity of the village with scandal. Once the people of Marlott witness the evidence of her illicit relations and realize the consequences of Tess's situation on the community, her banishment from the village becomes absolutely necessary.

The depiction of the women of Marlott as the protectors of the village's reputation and economic status is doubly reinforced in the end of the novel when John Durbeyfield dies. The women's whispers and gossip are replaced by direct insults and confrontation as the Durbeyfields begin to be "looked upon with disfavour" since they are "cottagers who were not directly employed on the land" and so "had to seek" somewhere else to live (1993, p. 309). Tess's unfavourable past only increases the village's wish to be rid of the "household" when the Durbeyfield's "lease ended" in order to keep the village "pure" "in the interests of morality" (1993, p. 310). "Some people of scrupulous character and great influence" observe Tess visiting her child's grave and rebuke her mother for "'harbouring'" her scandalous daughter (1993, p. 310). These individuals of "scrupulous character and great influence" are most likely women, like the women of early modern England discussed by Laura Gowing (1996), who have a "particular standing in neighbourhood social relations" because of their ability to gossip, slander, and condemn others as "brokers of oral reputation (1996, p. 123). The women of Marlott confront Joan about Tess's residence in the village, and since her husband is dead, Joan is now susceptible to be browbeaten without any fear of the consequences. So as Harrison (1990) states of working class families in the late Victorian period, the Durbeyfield's economic downfall after the death of John Durbeyfield destroys what is left of their respectable "status," and they are successfully ostracised by those concerned with the village reputation (1990, p.131). The Durbeyfields' standing in community, previously disdained because of John Durbeyfield's drunk boasting of higher

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6 "Following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the 1845 Bastardy Act amended a degree of the harshness of the 1834 Poor Law towards "single" mothers and their illegitimate children. In a further attempt to address the continued financial drain unwed mothers were to a parish, the Act stated that fathers had to legally support offspring until aged thirteen (this was later changed to sixteen). Following the terms of the Poor Law Amendment Act, when mothers were unable to prove the identity of the father, they were obliged to support the child, and if they were unable to do so they could send the child to the workhouse. The 1872 Bastardy Laws Amendment Act altered this by providing that a "single" woman might apply for a maintenance order from the father in respect of her illegitimate child before it was born" (Hansen, 2006: 20).

connections, is now thoroughly scorned by the community due to Tess's fallen status and the family's abject poverty.

### **Never “nearly forgotten”: Tess's fallen reputation and tragedy**

To return to the third source of information about Tess, it must be noted that all who observe Tess with her illegitimate child are authoritative sources because of their ability to repeat her history and reputation to others not present. According to Jörg Bergmann's sociological study of gossip, “gossip producers who have a firsthand knowledge about the event that they reconstruct seem to have a systematic advantage” as they are able to support the “accuracy” of their gossip with their own “observations” (1993, p. 102). In their break from occupational and social obligations, her fellow workers' resentfully attempt to destroy Tess's appeal by talking about her justly-deserved misfortunes as a consequence that befalls women too beautiful for their own good. Alpha Love-Bhabuta portrays “the field-women” as “the local commentators and distributors of justice who protect the sanctity of the community and its inhabitants from Tess's shameful past (2010, p. 21). Furthermore, these witnesses of Tess feeding her illegitimate child are not satisfied by their knowledge of Tess's history. They are curious about the vague details of the story surrounding her affair with the rich gentleman, and so begin to repeat gossip that insinuates she was not a willing partner with Alec and was overheard “sobbing” “one night last year in The Chase” (1993, pp. 79-80). The consistent talk and speculation about her past leads to Tess's seclusion, while she hopes that the people of Marlott will move on to another scandal more interesting than her own:

her trouble, never generally known, was nearly forgotten in Marlott. But it became evident to her that she could never be really comfortable again in a place which had seen the collapse of her family's attempt to ‘claim kin’ – and, through her, even closer union – with the rich d'Urbervilles (1993, p. 87).

The most important word in this passage is “nearly”, she thinks her past is nearly forgotten, but it never really is. The community's memory of the past is unmistakable in the end of the novel when the village treats Joan and her family abominably as soon as her ‘fallen’ daughter returns home, and they are forced to leave the village because of Tess's never forgotten reputation. Tess must have known that the people of Marlott have not and will not overlook her “trouble”, and that is what truly makes her uncomfortable to stay in her village. It is not the information about her personal lot that causes her to move on, but the class-based gossip about attempted (and failed) social mobility, showing that the society around Tess regards overreaching a far worse and unforgivable crime than illegitimate pregnancy. In this case, even if her “trouble”, her ‘fall’, is completely forgotten in Marlott, she could still not bear to remain there because the village resents her family's empty boasts

about a connection to the aristocracy. After her child's death, Tess believes she could annihilate the past by escaping it. The novel's events following her escape from her village prove that it is merely a physical escape. What happens to her remains in her thoughts throughout the novel, burdens her with guilt and shame, and she is unable to hide from her past or the people who are familiar with it. It is the combination of two circuitries of information surrounding her, her fallen reputation and her unsuccessful attempt to realize the d'Urberville legend that form a collective pressure causing her to move out of Marlott, and into a new stage in the plot.

Tess is able to escape her 'fallen' reputation in Dairyman Crick's farm, and enter into a brief respite that, unfortunately, does not include her connection to the d'Urberville legend. This legend is repeated by Mr Crick the moment of their first meeting as a form of friendly gossip to welcome her to the farm. Nevertheless, this disregard of and disinterest in her scandalous past at the dairy does not keep her history far from the mind of the reader. Tess's own thoughts are constantly preoccupied with her past transgressions, and as her relationship with Angel Clare develops, her guilt about her history with Alec grows until she cannot think about anything else. Tess's obsession about her past mistakes and transgressions seems to be symptomatic of many Victorians who are described by Gertrude Himmelfarb as attempting to contain and control an "irregularity" "within conventional" morality (2007, p. 211). She is the only one preoccupied with the past while all the other dairymaids are more focused on the present, and on speculating where Angel's affections lie. And so when Tess's relationship with Angel is suspected by the dairy maids, gossip is a natural occurrence.

Retty Priddle, Izz Huett and Marian all hopelessly admire Mr Clare and Marian notices, after watching "him every day" that he will not marry any of them because "he likes Tess Durbeyfield best" (1993, p. 120). This is the kind of harmless gossip that Spacks (1985) tells us "exists only as a function of intimacy" and "takes place in private, at leisure, in a context of trust, usually among no more than two or three people" and is a "crucial means of self-expression" and "solidarity" (1985, p. 5). The dairymaids' gossip about what has occurred or what they have gathered during the day in the privacy of their bedchamber, and the fact that they are willing to share and trust Tess with their information renders her a part of their group. Tess is shocked to learn that "some lady" of Angel's "own rank" "looked out for him" and they dairymaids are convinced that "he is sure to marry her" even if he does not like the woman (1993, p. 130). The young women in fact "had heard so very little of this" but still "build up wretched dolorous dreams" of the lucky lady's "wedding preparations" (1993, p. 130). This kind of information based on little evidence leads to prejudice and faulty preconceptions about others. Tess, unfortunately, believes this dubious account and convinces herself that her relationship with

Angel is merely “temporary” and knows that “in the eyes of propriety” she is “far less worthy of him than the homelier ones whom he ignored” (1993, p. 130). These dairymaids continue to repeat gossip and spread rumors about Angel and Tess in their leisure time and their bitter resentment at being neglected by the man they care about only increases their envious yet harmless talk about the couple.

There is no scandal about Angel and Tess even after they frequently spend time together alone, since gossip about a person’s reputation does not seem to concern anyone at the farm. The scene where Tess is leaning on Angel in the secluded house is interrupted by “Mr Dairyman Crick, Mrs Crick, and two of the milk-maids” (1993, p.173). Tess immediately jumps “to her feet, while her face flushed and her eyes shone in the firelight” and cries defensively that she “wasn’t really sitting on his knee though might ha’ seemed as if [she] was almost!” but Mr Crick confesses that he saw nothing and frankly did not care where she was sitting (1993, p. 173). The reason no scandal emerges from Tess’s behaviour with Clare, is because the witnesses do not “care” enough about her actions to talk about it or listen to stories about her. In comparison, the insinuating talk that circulates after Tess’s work at the d’Urbervilles is fuelled by Alec’s reputation as a seducer while it is Angel’s strict morality and gentleman-like behaviour that helps keep Tess’s reputation safe from wagging tongues. Mr Crick’s dairy seems to be a space where one’s scandalous past cannot reach and is inhabited by individuals unconcerned with disturbing the tranquillity of dairy life with fresh scandal.

In the honeymoon period at the ancient d’Urberville manor in Wellbridge, Tess’s past affects her present more than anywhere else in the novel. This is not because of whispers or malicious gossip, but only because Angel learns her dreaded history. Tess’s past is criticized in Marlott, but does not evoke the anger and the singular repulsion to her character that Angel Clare exhibits once he learns her secret. His extreme reaction to her history is unprecedented in the novel, and could be explained by his religious upbringing, the moral exactitude of his character, his affection for Tess, and also his indignation at being deceived by her outward purity. His intense repulsion of her past destroy the honesty and camaraderie of their relationship and their intended happiness. In addition, Tess’s alleged descent from the d’Urbervilles adds to Angel’s outrage because of his renewed yet “putative” contempt for old families (Garson, 1991, p. 137). Here both her reputation as a ‘fallen’ woman and the legend of her ancestors gain new damaging strength when they combine to alienate Angel further from Tess. So again these two sources of information combined create new reactions from the characters and lead to further developments in the plot and a new destination for Tess and Angel’s relationship. Furthermore, this consequence of Angel’s newly gained knowledge contradicts Tess’s later statement about the trafficking of rumours.

After Angel and Tess separate, she does not return to Talbothays even if she knows a comfortable room will be available for her “out of sheer compassion” because it :

might bring reproach upon her idolised husband. She could not have borne their pity, and their whispered remarks to one another upon her strange situation; though she would have faced a knowledge of her circumstances by every individual there, so long as her story had remained isolated in the mind of each. It was the interchange of ideas about her that made her sensitiveness wince. Tess could not account for this distinction; she simply knew that she felt it (1993, p. 241).

Tess believes that the exchange of information about her past amongst people who think highly of her would make “her sensitiveness wince” (1993, p. 241). But really the only time the “knowledge of her circumstances” truly makes her personally suffer is when Angel keeps her history to himself and allows it to fester unspoken and firmly entrenched in his mind. According to Ian Gregor, Angel needs to love Tess as “a person with a past as well as a present” not only as an “image kept in being through the sheer intensity of his own immediate feelings” (1974, p. 194). His failure to do so, and as Michael Millgate states, his “rigidity and lack of charity” cause Tess “greater damage” than Alec, for while “Alec sacrifices Tess to his lust,” “Angel sacrifices her to his theory of womanly purity” and “social law” (1994, p. 276). However, the “interchange of ideas” (1994, p. 241) about her could indeed be hurtful because it involves speaking and repeating aloud a past she would like to keep hidden. As they share this information with one another, rumours about why he deserts her would grow to unforeseen proportions and she will be forced to escape the whispers and hurtful remarks once again. If the “story” remains “isolated in the mind of each” person, Tess will not have to endure hearing her despised history and scandal spoken about, and perhaps even gain a sympathetic ear to her troubles (1993, p.241).

The third space void of circulating damaging information is at the Flintcombe-Ash farm where her previously enjoyable milking days are replaced with rough labour in a “swede-field” with her fellow ex-dairymaid Marian (1993, p. 249). The only place she could find work is evidently one where Farmer Groby, the “Trantridge man” (1993, p. 182), is well aware of her past, but so indifferent to her feelings and needs that he does not bother her about it. His harshness and inconsiderateness cannot be compared to Mr Crick’s cordiality and generosity to Tess, yet fortunately for Tess; they both do not care enough about Tess’s history or behaviour to spread rumours about her. The reader becomes certain about Groby’s discretion when the dairymaids, known for their proclivity to repeat news to one another as a way to bide the monotone and brutal nature of their work, do not repeat any information about Tess’s past. In the Flintcombe-Ash farm, Tess discerns a

way to escape both her past with Alec and her fond memories of Angel through raw physical labour, where she becomes too exhausted to think about anything other than her harsh surroundings and poverty. Her mental reprieve from her 'fallen' history is all too short when she is again relentlessly pursued by Alec, forcing her to revisit all the unpleasantness of her former encounters with him. Consequently at Flintcomb Ash, she is, as Millgate describes it, "surrounded not only by cruelty and oppression, human and climatic, but by people who know different parts of her past and thus represent to her a conscious or unconscious threat" (1994, p. 268). Even if her past is not spoken of or constantly relived by Tess, Alec's nearness dwells forebodingly in Tess's mind.

The aforementioned locations were fortunate for the heroine because of the gaps in the circulation of information, but the last reprieve, Branhurst Court, differs as an isolated and uninhabited place suitably chosen for Tess's concealment after her murder of Alec. Angel and Tess are "thrown in a vague intoxicating atmosphere at the consciousness of being together at last, with no living soul between them" (1993, p.339). They are disconnected from responsibility, the past, and reality like "two children" (1993, p. 340) where they do not "think outside of now" for six days in "absolute seclusion, not a sight or sound of a human being disturbing their peacefulness" (1993, p. 342). The previous occasion where Angel and Tess are alone together does not exude the same tranquillity because Tess's unforgotten history was a malignant tumour draining Tess's strength and hope while swelling with Angel's vindictiveness under the cursed roof of the d'Urberville ancestral home. Tess and Angel are only able to fully accept each other in a place where they do not allow moral or social judgements, an empty mansion with no whispers or rumours, and so their relationship regains the dreamlike quality it possesses in the dairy farm. Reality interrupts their "profound slumber" in the form of the "old caretaker", who hurries to "consult with her neighbours on the odd discovery," resorting immediately to the gossip of her society to explain the curiously genteel "vagabonds" (1993, pp. 343-344). After Tess and Angel's ideal respite, the social consequences of gossip return in full-force as the highest form of social authority, the police, arrive to escort Tess to her final judgement.

With all the gossip, rumours, and legends circulating about her and her family, Tess rarely blames society for her misfortunes, but attacks Alec d'Urbervilles or bears the guilt herself. Her guilt can be clarified by Amanda Anderson's explanation of the impact of "fallenness" in Victorian culture. She highlights that by "blaming society for the rhetoric of fallenness", the "fallen woman" exhibits her "utter susceptibility to public opinion" and "internalizes" the "moral" censure to her own actions (1993, p. 58). Since Tess chooses to blame herself and Alec, she still possesses the modicum level of

imperviousness needed for her survival. Her misfortunes, however, are mostly the result of the social repercussions to her “fall”, not the “fall” itself:

Moreover, alone in a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. If she could have been but just created, to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as the parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasure therein. Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensations (1993, p.80).

The narrator suggests that Tess’s “despair” is caused by the “conventional aspects” of morality she has internalized from the social codes around her, and she would be less troubled if she only allowed her natural feelings to rule her life and pass judgements on her actions. Marjorie Garson claims that Hardy views Tess as “a natural creature and should not be condemned by society’s arbitrary law” (1991, p.145), but should be following the “true standard of value” and “the natural order of things” (Paris, 1969, p. 63). The society in the novel elevates one tragic incident of Tess’s life and makes it a representation of Tess’s moral character, for as Bergmann states, one of the elements of the gossip is to interpret the seditious behaviour or event as a “manifestation of a characteristic property that symbolizes the subject of gossip as a whole” (1993, p. 129). Bernard J. Paris highlights Hardy’s belief that there is too great an emphasis on sexuality in establishing “moral judgements” and even though Tess is affected by her “sexual experience”, “fundamentally...her self is the same” with numerous attributes to make her a moral and respected individual (1969, p. 61).

## **Conclusion**

All the information circulated in the novel: the legend of the d’Urbervilles, the rumours spread before Tess’s illicit relations with Alec, the reiteration of her scandal after the pregnancy, are means of control. The people who possess some kind of knowledge, true or conjectured, about Tess affect her in one way or another when they choose to talk about it, making it a form of control over her fate in the text. The same information heard by several people can lead to different reactions, and so it is not the knowledge itself that is damaging, rather it is how a person perceives this knowledge that leads to the consequences that propel the narrative forward. The same rumour can lead to unpredictably severe actions depending on the context, for Angel hears the rumour about Tess’s ancestry the first time in humour, but finds it upsetting when he considers it in context with her scandal. Tess grants the society around her the power to control her life by allowing gossip to affect her decisions and by internalizing hurtful social judgements that inhibit her own individual development. The characters in the text base their judgements on

evidence that is never conclusive: even Tess's pregnancy does not inform the observer what actually occurs in the Chase with Alec d'Urbervilles. These judgements of society, according to D. H. Lawrence, lead to Tess's tragedy, because she is never "at war with God, only with Society" and yet she is "cowed by the mere judgement of man upon [her], and all the while by [her] own soul [she] [is] right" (2002, p.30). Despite society's absolute condemnation of Tess's character, the reader is aware that her "soul" is not affected by malice and her actions were as a result of the circumstances that rumours and gossip propelled her towards. This is because the reader is free to make his own judgements and speculations about the uncertain gaps in Tess's story, while considering the consequences if information is spread incorrectly, something the characters in the novel rarely do.

In conclusion, my research has revealed an underpinning narrative of gossip in Hardy's novel, and shown how like in Victorian society, social judgement is almost inescapable when scandal occurs. The power of words and reputation were able to maintain a social order in the novel, where a Durbeyfield never in fact becomes anywhere closer to the elusive higher rank of the d'Urbervilles. For future research, the dialogues and conversations in the novel can be further examined to determine whether the techniques and the relational structure of gossip discussed by Bergmann are applicable in fictional societies. Though gossip has been researched in the fields of sociology, it is necessary for future literary academics and researchers to focus on this largely unexplored territory of characters' relationships and economies of information in novels and plays, for gossip is a publicly disdained worldwide practice that has existed and will continue to exist as long as there is privacy, curiosity, and social relationships.

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