

**Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (chapter 20) – 1891**

[*Tess, a country girl, has been working on a farm away from her parents'. There, she has encountered Angel Clare, the son of a prominent clergyman who has been working as a farmer to learn the tricks of the trade before setting up his own plantation.*]

Tess was the merest stray phenomenon to Angel Clare as yet—a rosy, warming apparition which had only just acquired the attribute of persistence in his consciousness. So he allowed his mind to be occupied with her, deeming his preoccupation to be no more than a philosopher's regard of an exceedingly novel, fresh, and interesting specimen of womankind.

They met continually; they could not help it. They met daily in that strange and solemn interval, the twilight of the morning, in the violet or pink dawn; for it was necessary to rise early, so very early, here. Milking was done betimes; and before the milking came the skimming, which began at a little past three. It usually fell to the lot of some one or other of them to wake the rest, the first being aroused by an alarm-clock; and, as Tess was the latest arrival, and they soon discovered that she could be depended upon not to sleep through the alarm as others did, this task was thrust most frequently upon her. No sooner had the hour of three struck and whizzed, than she left her room and ran to the dairyman's door; then up the ladder to Angel's, calling him in a loud whisper; then woke her fellow-milkmaids. By the time that Tess was dressed Clare was downstairs and out in the humid air. The remaining maids and the dairyman usually gave themselves another turn on the pillow, and did not appear till a quarter of an hour later.

The gray half-tones of daybreak are not the gray half-tones of the day's close, though the degree of their shade may be the same. In the twilight of the morning, light seems active, darkness passive; in the twilight of evening it is the darkness which is active and crescent, and the light which is the drowsy reverse.

Being so often—possibly not always by chance—the first two persons to get up at the dairy-house, they seemed to themselves the first persons up of all the world. In these early days of her residence here Tess did not skim, but went out of doors at once after rising, where he was generally awaiting her. The spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead impressed them with a feeling of isolation, as if they were Adam and Eve. At this dim inceptive stage of the day Tess seemed to Clare to exhibit a dignified largeness both of disposition and physique, an almost regnant power, possibly because he knew that at that preternatural time hardly any woman so well-endowed in person as she was likely to be walking in the open air within the boundaries of his horizon; very few in all England. Fair women are usually asleep at mid-summer dawns. She was close at hand, and the rest were nowhere.

The mixed, singular, luminous gloom in which they walked along together to the spot where the cows lay often made him think of the Resurrection hour. He little thought that the Magdalen might be at his side. Whilst all the landscape was in neutral shade his companion's face, which was the focus of his eyes, rising above the mist stratum, seemed to have a sort of phosphorescence upon it. She looked ghostly, as if

40 she were merely a soul at large. In reality her face, without appearing to do so, had caught the cold gleam of day from the north-east; his own face, though he did not think of it, wore the same aspect to her.

It was then, as has been said, that she impressed him most deeply. She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them.

“Call me Tess,” she would say askance; and he did.

Then it would grow lighter, and her features would become simply feminine; they had changed from those of a divinity who could confer bliss to those of a being who craved it.

At these non-human hours they could get quite close to the waterfowl. Herons came, with a great bold noise as of opening doors and shutters, out of the boughs of a plantation which they frequented at the side of the mead; or, if already on the spot, hardly maintained their standing in the water as the pair walked by, watching them by moving their heads round in a slow, horizontal, passionless wheel, like the turn of puppets by clockwork.

They could then see the faint summer fogs in layers, woolly, level, and apparently no thicker than counterpanes, spread about the meadows in detached remnants of small extent. On the gray moisture of the grass were marks where the cows had lain through the night—dark-green islands of dry herbage the size of their carcasses, in the general sea of dew. From each island proceeded a serpentine trail, by which the cow had rambled away to feed after getting up, at the end of which trail they found her; the snoring puff from her nostrils, when she recognized them, making an intenser little fog of her own amid the prevailing one. Then they drove the animals back to the barton<sup>1</sup>, or sat down to milk them on the spot, as the case might require.

Or perhaps the summer fog was more general, and the meadows lay like a white sea, out of which the scattered trees rose like dangerous rocks. Birds would soar through it into the upper radiance, and hang on the wing sunning themselves, or alight on the wet rails subdividing the mead, which now shone like glass rods. Minute diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess’s eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and commonplace these dried off her; moreover, Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only, who had to hold her own against the other women of the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> A barton : a farmyard

## introduction

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the encounter between the two star-crossed lovers seems to isolate the characters, who are somewhat secluded from the rest of the revelers while sharing their first intimate exchange. That might suggest that intimacy is necessary for love to emerge, or that love entails a form of self-exclusion from the rest of society.

In a similar fashion, in the twentieth chapter of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy sets the stage for the nascent love between Tess and Angel by depicting farm scenes where the pair remain physically distant from the other workers. Their seclusion is further reinforced by a sense of otherworldliness stemming from the description of the landscape at the wee hours of the day. The passage thus mostly relies on internal focalization to relate Angel's evolving perception of Tess as the day rises. Yet, the character's limited visibility at the break of dawn also hints at a partial – if not flawed – vision, which is notably suggested by shifts in focalization. While the stage seems to be set for the emergence of a love story, it also contains elements indicating a lack of judgment, which will cause the eventual downfall of the lovers. I shall therefore demonstrate that the shifting perception of the Tess as light changes poetically depicts love as a blinding force which negates the reality of the loved one. After having shown that the passage acts as a lyrical pause in time and a break from the daily toil of farm life, I shall argue that this respite enables a focus on the characters' limited sight, paving the way for both contemplation and interpretation in a shifting light. That imperfect vision may actually pinpoint the lover's inability to decipher the reality of the world surrounding him.

### I. a lyrical pause in time and a break from the daily toil of farm life

1. a pause in time: adv “often”, “**continually**”, “**daily**” – reinforced by use of present tense
2. Limited action: “milking **was done...**” (passive; concept rather than people doing it) “and before milking **came** the skimming” (as if by itself) + sleeping (“another turn of the pillow”); “they drove the animals **back** to the barton, **or sat down** to milk them” (action as return to stability or stasis) – from time of the **clock** to time of **daylight** → from art to nature
3. Highlighting a duet: “**they met** continually... **they met** daily” (+ rest of sentence) → repetition as duality; not daily life of farm but the duo is emphasized // “they seemed **to themselves**” (= self-centered gaze, inward look); “feeling of isolation” // “Adam and Eve”

### II. a focus on the characters' limited sight paving the way for both contemplation and interpretation in a shifting light

1. lexical field of sight: “apparition, phenomenon” + birds “watching them”; the cow “recognized” them; focus on Tess's “eyelashes”
2. impaired sight: twilight, mist, moisture on eyelashes; global indeterminacy, in-betweenness: “violet **or** pink”; “**half**-compounded, aqueous light” // “gray **half**-tones”
3. From contemplation to interpretation: “**specimen**” → observation + analysis (“to angel Clare”) + “beauty”, “**dazingly** fair”, “well-endowed”

### III. Blind(ing) love: the lover's inability to decipher the reality of the world surrounding him

1. shifting identity of nature (birds as artificial, trees as rocks, cows as absent carcasses),

Tess' shifting identity: names → Eve / Demeter / Tess: up and down movement, down to earth

2. a tension between concreteness and abstraction: "**ghostly**", "a **soul** at large" "ethereal", goddess, "essence of  $\emptyset$  woman" (44) ≠ "impressed", "impression", "call me Tess" (direct speech → voice heard more directly, more concrete), "**hold** herself against the other **women**"
3. ≠ qualified by narrator's direct interventions ("in reality" | 40) and shifts in focalization (from Angel to external → distance from his interpretation)

### Conclusion

The scene works as a poetic pause where sight is paramount. The focus on a time of day when the two characters are alone highlights Angel's perception of Tess as the light changes, showcasing a form of admiration. That enables the narrator to describe a peaceful scenery of the countryside at dawn. Yet, the changing light induces changes in how Angel perceives Tess, suggesting how fickle love may be. The process consisting in making Tess more and more concrete also seems to run contrary to the typical idealization of the loved one: by resisting nicknames likening her to divinities and by becoming a woman among many others after having been perceived as a reborn Eve, Tess loses her status as an extraordinary being as the day rises. That change may be suggestive of how rapidly Angel will turn away from Tess once he's learnt about her past.