



The Role of Religion in British Literature: Conflict and Faith in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Murder in the Cathedral*

Dr. Smita K

Assistant Professor of English

Government P.G.College, Sector -1, Panchkula

Abstract

This paper explores the complex role of religion in British literature through a comparative study of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), two works that foreground the tension between conflict and faith. Hardy presents religion as a rigid and oppressive institution, exposing its complicity in Tess's tragic downfall and highlighting Victorian society's moral hypocrisy and double standards. In contrast, Eliot dramatizes the martyrdom of Thomas Becket to emphasize the redemptive strength of faith, portraying religion as a source of spiritual authority and transcendence in the face of political power and human fear. Together, these texts reveal the dual function of religion in literature: as both a mechanism of constraint and judgment, and as a pathway to inner conviction and ultimate liberation. The study underscores how British writers have used religion to interrogate moral, social, and existential dilemmas.

Keywords: Religion, Conflict, Faith, Oppression, Transcendence.

Introduction

Religion has always occupied a central place in British literature, serving both as a source of moral guidance and as a site of deep conflict, where individual desires and social institutions come into tension with questions of faith, morality, and divine justice. In the late nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) reflects the crisis of belief that characterized the Victorian era, when traditional Christian faith was increasingly challenged by scientific rationalism, social change, and shifting moral codes. Hardy presents religion not as a comforting refuge but as a rigid, often oppressive force that contributes to the tragic downfall of Tess, a character whose innocence and suffering stand in stark contrast to the hypocrisy and moral rigidity of those who judge her. Religion in this novel becomes a lens through which Hardy critiques Victorian society's double standards, exposing how faith can be used to reinforce social inequality and punish the powerless. In contrast, T. S. Eliot's modernist verse drama *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) revisits the medieval

conflict between church and state through the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket, dramatizing religion not as an oppressive structure but as a source of inner strength, spiritual conviction, and transcendence. Written during a time of political unrest and moral uncertainty between the World Wars, Eliot's play emphasizes faith as a higher calling that demands sacrifice, portraying Becket's death as an act of Christian obedience and ultimate triumph. Together, these two works illustrate how religion in British literature operates both as a destabilizing force that intensifies human suffering and as a sustaining faith that affirms spiritual authority and divine order. While Hardy exposes the tragic consequences of religious dogmatism and social judgment, Eliot emphasizes the redemptive and transformative power of faith in the face of political and personal conflict. Examined side by side, the novels highlight the dual role of religion in literature: as a system that can constrain and condemn the individual, yet also as a means of affirming purpose, resistance, and ultimate transcendence.

Need of the Study

The study of religion in British literature is essential for understanding how faith and conflict have shaped both individual destinies and societal structures across different historical contexts. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reflects the Victorian crisis of belief, where rigid morality and institutional religion often reinforced social injustice, while T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* embodies a modernist revival of spiritual authority, presenting faith as a force of resilience and redemption. Examining these texts together highlights the dual role of religion—as an oppressive mechanism that deepens human suffering and as a transformative power that provides meaning and transcendence. This comparative exploration is necessary because it reveals how literature mirrors the evolving relationship between society and religion, offering insights into questions of morality, justice, and spiritual strength. Thus, the study contributes to a deeper appreciation of British literary traditions and their engagement with universal human dilemmas.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is defined by its focus on the thematic and structural role of religion in two distinct yet complementary works of British literature: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. While Hardy situates religion within the Victorian crisis of faith, exposing its role in perpetuating moral hypocrisy and social oppression, Eliot employs religion as a dramatic force that embodies spiritual conviction and divine authority. By examining these texts side by side, the study explores how religion functions both as a source of individual conflict and as a medium for transcendent faith. The analysis considers historical, social, and literary contexts to demonstrate how religion evolves from a burden in Hardy's naturalistic narrative to a redemptive principle in Eliot's theological drama. Thus, the scope encompasses comparative literary

analysis, thematic interpretation, and critical engagement with religion as a cultural and philosophical construct.

Importance of Religion in British Literature

Religion has played a vital role in shaping British literature, functioning both as a guiding framework of moral values and as a powerful source of conflict, doubt, and transformation. From the medieval morality plays and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the works of Milton, Bunyan, Hardy, and Eliot, religion has remained central to the exploration of human existence, morality, and the search for meaning. British writers have consistently used religion to reflect the prevailing concerns of their times: in the medieval and Renaissance periods, it provided a spiritual and social foundation; in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, it became a subject of questioning and reinterpretation; and in the Victorian era, religious faith came into crisis under the influence of science, industrialization, and new philosophical ideas. Literature thus became a stage where issues of sin, redemption, divine justice, and spiritual conflict were dramatized, allowing readers to engage with the tension between institutional authority and individual conscience. Religion in British literature not only illuminates the cultural and historical backdrop of different eras but also highlights the universal struggles of faith, morality, and human destiny. It remains significant because it shapes character development, influences themes of conflict and resolution, and serves as a mirror to society's evolving relationship with belief and doubt. Ultimately, religion's importance lies in its capacity to enrich literature with profound philosophical and ethical questions that continue to resonate with readers across generations.

Religion as a Source of Moral Conflict, Social Order, and Individual Struggle

Religion in British literature frequently emerges as a multifaceted force that both shapes and destabilizes human experience, serving simultaneously as a source of moral conflict, a framework of social order, and a catalyst for individual struggle. As a system of belief, it provides moral codes that dictate right and wrong, yet these codes often clash with human desires, exposing characters to dilemmas between personal will and divine law. This is particularly evident in works like Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, where rigid religious morality intensifies Tess's suffering, and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, where Becket's spiritual duty conflicts with earthly authority. Beyond the individual, religion also reinforces social order, maintaining hierarchies and legitimizing power structures, from the patriarchal norms of Victorian society to the medieval tension between church and state. However, this very order can suppress individuality, turning faith into a tool of judgment rather than liberation. On a personal level, religion often becomes a space of inner struggle, where characters wrestle with doubt, guilt, and the search for meaning. For some, this struggle ends in disillusionment, while for others, it leads to spiritual strength and transcendence. By highlighting

these tensions, British literature illustrates the dual nature of religion—as both a guiding force that shapes collective identity and a burden that complicates personal freedom and moral choice. This complexity underscores the enduring significance of religion as a theme that not only reflects cultural values but also probes the deepest anxieties of human existence.

Historical and Religious Context

Understanding the historical and religious context of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Murder in the Cathedral* is crucial for interpreting their treatment of faith, conflict, and moral struggle, as both works arise from distinct yet significant moments in the history of British thought. In the late Victorian period, when Thomas Hardy wrote *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), England was experiencing a profound crisis of belief, spurred largely by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and its evolutionary theories, which directly challenged the Biblical creation narrative and undermined the authority of traditional Christian dogma. This scientific revolution, combined with growing industrialization and social change, led to widespread religious doubt and questioning of divine justice. Hardy himself, deeply skeptical of organized religion, infused his novel with critiques of moral hypocrisy, presenting Tess as a victim of fate and social-religious codes that place impossible burdens upon her. The rigidity of Victorian morality, justified by religious norms, exposes the conflict between individual suffering and institutional judgment, revealing religion as more destructive than redemptive in Tess's world. In contrast, T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) returns to the medieval period, dramatizing the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170 during his conflict with King Henry II, a defining episode of the struggle between church and state. Rooted in Catholic tradition, Becket's refusal to submit to royal authority and his embrace of martyrdom symbolize the ultimate victory of spiritual conviction over temporal power. Eliot, writing in the twentieth century, used the historical figure of Becket to address contemporary anxieties about authority, faith, and the role of religion in a fragmented, modern world scarred by war and uncertainty. While Hardy's Victorian context reflects skepticism and the erosion of religious certainty, Eliot's medieval setting emphasizes faith as a force of resilience and transcendence, affirming the enduring power of Christian martyrdom. Together, these works also illustrate broader shifts in faith, showing how religion functions as both institutional authority and personal spirituality. Hardy critiques the institutional church as an oppressive structure that enforces social injustice, while Eliot portrays faith as an inner calling that surpasses worldly power and fear. Thus, both texts reveal the tension between the external pressures of institutional religion and the internal struggles of individual belief, highlighting how literature across centuries engages with the evolving relationship between doubt, conviction, and divine purpose in British society.

Religion and Conflict in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

1. Clash of Tradition and Modernity

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is deeply embedded within the social, religious, and cultural contradictions of Victorian England, and nowhere is this more evident than in the conflict between tradition and modernity. Tess's life, marked by rural innocence and her deep connection to nature, stands in sharp contrast to the rigid moral codes imposed by a society heavily influenced by religious orthodoxy. Hardy portrays Tess as a symbol of natural purity, whose instincts and humanity are uncorrupted by the dogmatic structures around her. Yet, despite her inherent goodness, she becomes entrapped within moral frameworks that condemn rather than protect her. The clash between her innocence and the artificial constraints of societal morality reveals Hardy's critique of a religion that fails to adapt to the evolving realities of human life. This failure is further emphasized by the Church's silence in the face of Tess's suffering. When Tess is seduced and abandoned, the institutions of faith that claim to uphold morality do nothing to shield or redeem her. Instead, the silence of religion in the novel functions as complicity, showing that organized faith has little space for compassion or justice in the lives of those most vulnerable. Through Tess, Hardy highlights how the Church, once a source of guidance and support, becomes irrelevant and even destructive in an age where traditional beliefs are increasingly questioned by scientific progress and shifting moral sensibilities.

2. Moral Hypocrisy and Social Judgement

The role of religion in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is also sharply revealed through Hardy's exposure of moral hypocrisy and the ways in which religious values are manipulated to reinforce social judgment. Angel Clare, Tess's beloved, epitomizes this selective religiosity. Though Angel distances himself from the rigid orthodoxy of his clergyman father, he nonetheless clings to inherited notions of purity and female virtue. His rejection of Tess after her confession of past sexual experience exemplifies the very hypocrisy Hardy seeks to expose: Angel, who himself has transgressed, cannot extend the same forgiveness or understanding to Tess, whose so-called "sin" was not even born of her own will. This inconsistency underscores how religious morality is often applied selectively, privileging male freedom while oppressing women under the guise of virtue. The broader Victorian society mirrors Angel's stance, enshrining double standards around purity and sin that allow men to err while condemning women to lifelong stigma. Hardy's critique is biting: religion, instead of embodying mercy or redemption, becomes a weapon of judgment that polices women's bodies and denies them humanity. This hypocrisy is not merely individual but institutional, as sermons, moral codes, and social norms converge to uphold an unjust system where Tess is punished not for her lack of morality but for her inability to conform to oppressive standards. The

irony lies in the fact that Tess, though condemned as impure, remains the most morally authentic character in the narrative, her compassion and resilience outshining the shallow faith of those who claim moral superiority.

3. Spiritual Conflict

At its deepest level, the role of religion in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* manifests through Tess's internal spiritual conflict, where fate, divine justice, and personal suffering collide in tragic intensity. Hardy frames Tess's life as one governed by an inexorable destiny, often described with biblical or quasi-religious overtones, suggesting that she is trapped in a world where divine justice is either absent or indifferent. Tess wrestles with the meaning of her suffering, at times questioning the fairness of a God who allows innocence to be punished while hypocrisy thrives unchecked. Her struggle reflects the broader Victorian crisis of faith, where many grappled with reconciling religious belief with the harsh realities of life and the growing influence of scientific rationalism. Religion, instead of offering solace or hope, becomes for Tess an oppressive force, a reminder of her condemnation by societal and moral codes that masquerade as divine law. Rather than redemption, she encounters silence; rather than grace, she meets judgment. Her execution at the novel's end stands as the final indictment of a system that claims to uphold divine justice but, in practice, perpetuates cruelty and despair. Yet Hardy also imbues Tess with a spiritual dignity that transcends institutional religion. Her resilience, her compassion for others, and her enduring humanity suggest a form of natural morality that exists outside the Church's authority, rooted instead in empathy and authentic human connection. In this sense, Tess becomes a martyr not of faith but of a faithless system, a figure whose spiritual conflict reveals the inadequacy of traditional religion to answer the deepest questions of human existence.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, religion emerges not as a source of redemption but as a force of conflict that exacerbates suffering, upholds hypocrisy, and silences compassion. Through the clash of tradition and modernity, the exposure of moral double standards, and Tess's own spiritual conflict, Hardy critiques the oppressive role of religion in Victorian society, showing how it fails those who need it most. For Hardy, the tragedy of Tess is not only the tragedy of a woman condemned by circumstance but also the tragedy of a society where religion, instead of nurturing human dignity, becomes complicit in its destruction.

Religion and Faith in *Murder in the Cathedral*

1. Faith as Strength

T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) presents religion not as an oppressive institution, as in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but as a profound source of strength and transcendence, embodied in the figure of Archbishop Thomas Becket. At the heart of the drama lies Becket's

unwavering acceptance of martyrdom, which he regards not as a tragic loss but as a fulfillment of divine purpose. His spiritual conviction enables him to resist both the temptations of personal pride and the threats of King Henry II's power, demonstrating the superiority of spiritual authority over temporal rule. Eliot emphasizes that true faith requires surrender of the self, as Becket learns to renounce his desire for personal glory in order to embrace God's will. The conflict between spiritual and temporal power, therefore, is not merely political but deeply theological: the play dramatizes the confrontation between worldly authority, which seeks control and submission, and divine authority, which demands obedience to higher principles. Becket's steadfastness illustrates how faith empowers the individual to confront tyranny, transforming vulnerability into resilience and inevitable death into spiritual victory.

2. The Role of the Chorus

Central to Eliot's religious vision in the play is the Chorus, composed of the women of Canterbury, who represent the collective human response to conflict, fear, and divine intervention. Their voices embody ordinary humanity, expressing dread of violence and reluctance to embrace the consequences of Becket's defiance, yet their perspective evolves as the drama unfolds. Initially fearful and resigned, the Chorus reflects the instinctive human tendency to cling to safety and avoid sacrifice, thereby capturing the universal struggle between worldly comfort and spiritual responsibility. Their language, infused with biblical echoes and liturgical rhythms, transforms the play into a ritualistic experience, reminding the audience of the sacred dimension of historical events. The Chorus functions both as commentator and participant, moving from lamentation to acceptance, thereby dramatizing the process through which human fear is reconciled with divine will. By employing poetic cadences that resemble the structure of church liturgy, Eliot blurs the boundary between drama and religious ritual, inviting the audience to witness Becket's martyrdom not only as a political act but as a sacred, communal event.

3. Martyrdom and Redemption

The culmination of *Murder in the Cathedral* lies in Becket's martyrdom, which Eliot frames as both sacrifice and triumph of faith. Far from being portrayed as a meaningless act of violence, Becket's death is imbued with profound spiritual significance, symbolizing the victory of Christian obedience over worldly corruption. Becket embraces his fate with serenity, recognizing that martyrdom is not about personal glorification but about affirming God's authority. In doing so, Eliot presents martyrdom as an ultimate form of religious witness, where death itself becomes redemptive not only for the martyr but also for the community that bears witness to it. The aftermath of the murder transforms the narrative from tragedy into affirmation, as the Chorus and the priests acknowledge that Becket's sacrifice has sanctified Canterbury and reaffirmed the supremacy of divine will. In

this way, Eliot uses the play as a meditation on Christian obedience, exploring the paradox that true freedom is found not in resisting God but in yielding wholly to divine purpose. The martyrdom thus transcends historical specificity, speaking to timeless questions of faith, loyalty, and spiritual integrity.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot portrays religion as a dynamic and transformative force that elevates human existence beyond fear and mortality. Through Becket's acceptance of martyrdom, the conflict between spiritual and temporal authority, the ritualistic function of the Chorus, and the redemptive power of sacrifice, the play illustrates faith as strength and transcendence. Religion here is not a burden but a liberation, enabling both individual and community to find meaning in suffering and to affirm divine order amidst worldly chaos. By fusing historical narrative with liturgical language, Eliot presents a vision of religion as both lived experience and spiritual truth, affirming its enduring capacity to guide humanity through conflict toward redemption.

Conclusion

The exploration of religion in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* reveals the dual and often paradoxical role of faith in British literature, functioning both as a site of conflict and as a source of strength. Hardy presents religion as a destructive force intertwined with social hypocrisy and rigid morality, where Tess becomes the victim of an unforgiving system that confuses human judgment with divine justice. Religion here operates as an oppressive burden, exacerbating suffering rather than offering redemption, and thus reflects the Victorian crisis of belief shaped by scientific doubt and moral disillusionment. In sharp contrast, Eliot dramatizes religion as the embodiment of faith and transcendence, with Becket's martyrdom serving as a triumphant assertion of spiritual authority over temporal power. His acceptance of death transforms suffering into sanctity, illustrating religion as a liberating force that provides meaning, purpose, and ultimate redemption. Taken together, these two works underscore the enduring influence of religious themes in British literature, not merely as historical or cultural backdrops but as central to the exploration of universal human dilemmas. The persistent tension between individual suffering and divine purpose remains at the heart of both narratives: Tess's tragedy arises from the silence of a religion that fails to protect the innocent, while Becket's triumph lies in surrendering to a divine will that elevates his sacrifice into eternal significance. Thus, British literature continues to reveal religion as both a force that constrains and one that redeems, reflecting the complexity of human existence where doubt and faith, despair and transcendence, coexist in perpetual dialogue.

References

1. Franklin, R. (2021). Thomas Hardy and Religion: Theological Themes in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure.
2. Asquith, M. (2009). Putting faith in Tess: religion in Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Mark Asquith explores the religious scepticism which permeates one of Hardy's most popular novels. *The English Review*, 19(3), 21-24.
3. Sivandipour, F., & Talif, R. (2014). Investigating Thomas Hardy's Reaction to Victorian Religious Forces through Reading Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. *Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 785.
4. Allison, I. M. (2002). *Nineteenth century clergymen and issues of faith, doubt and death: A literary review*. University of Glasgow (United Kingdom).
5. Wu, Y. F. (2011). 'Ignoring That There Was a Corpse': The Foiled Gothic in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. *Gothic Crossings: Medieval to Postmodern*, 173-223.
6. Beyad, M. S., Kaboli, T., & Spurlin, W. (2016). Shifting Nineteenth Century Views on Religion and Their Influence on Thomas Hardy. *International Journal of Advanced Biotechnology and Research*, 7(4), 1880-1892.
7. Rowan-Brooks, N. (2018). Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Study Guide. *The Thomas Hardy Yearbook*, (46), 1-88.
8. Grimes, C. (2013). *Tess of the D'Urbervilles (MAXNotes Literature Guides)*. Research & Education Assoc..
9. Singleton, J. D. (2010). *The suspension of (dis) belief: Novel and Bible in Victorian society*. Syracuse University.

10. CENSORSHIP, B. N. O. (2017). CHAPTER FIVE BRITISH NOVELISTS ON CENSORSHIP: A HISTORICAL APPROACH ALBERTO LÁZARO. *Travelling around Cultures: Collected Essays on Literature and Art*, 70.
11. Hendry, M. (2019). *Agency, loneliness, and the female protagonist in the Victorian novel*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
12. Radford, A. (2017). *Thomas Hardy and the survivals of time*. Routledge.
13. Ali, M. Y. M. (2013). *Thomas Hardy: a positivist-Christian?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Wollongong).
14. Niemeyer, P. J. (2015). *Seeing Hardy: film and television adaptations of the fiction of Thomas Hardy*. McFarland.
15. Galbreath, K. C. (2003). *Romantic Characters in Modern Fiction*.