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**Works Cited**

Ghosh, Bishnupriya. "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, November 2010, pp. 1-4.  
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**Tess of the D'Urbervilles****Thomas Hardy**

**Born:** June 2, 1840; Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England

**Died:** January 11, 1928; Dorchester, Dorset, England

**Quick Reference**

**First published:** 1891

**Type of work:** Novel

**Type of plot:** Philosophical realism

**Time of plot:** Late nineteenth century

**Locale:** England

**Principal characters**

Jack Durbeyfield, a poor worker

Tess, his daughter

Alec D'Urberville, her betrayer

Angel Clare, her husband

### **The Story:**

It is a proud day when Jack Durbeyfield learns that he is descended from the famous D'Urberville family. Durbeyfield never does more work than necessary to keep his family supplied with meager food and himself with beer, but from that day on, he ceases doing even that small amount of work. His wife joins him in thinking that such a high family should live better with less effort, and she persuades their oldest daughter, Tess, to visit the Stoke-D'Urbervilles, a wealthy family who assumed the D'Urberville name because no one else claimed it. It is her mother's hope that Tess would make a good impression on the rich D'Urbervilles and perhaps a good marriage with one of the sons.

When Tess meets her supposed relatives, however, she finds only a blind mother and a dapper son who makes Tess uncomfortable by his improper remarks to her. The son, Alec, tricks the innocent young Tess into working as a poultry maid; he does not let her know that his mother is unaware of Tess's identity. After a short time, Tess decides to avoid Alec and look for work elsewhere to support her parents and her brothers and sisters. Alec, however, manages at last to get her alone and then rapes her.

When Tess returns to her home and tells her mother of her terrible experience, her mother's only worry is that Alec is not going to marry Tess. She works in the fields, facing the slander of her associates bravely. Her trouble is made worse by the fact that Alec follows her from place to place. By traveling to different farms during the harvest season, Tess manages to elude Alec long enough to give birth to her baby without his knowledge. The baby does not live long, however, and a few months after its death, Tess goes to a dairy farm far to the south to be a dairymaid.

At the dairy farm, Tess is liked and well treated. Angel Clare, a pastor's son who rejected the ministry to study farming, is also at the farm. It is his wish to own a farm someday, and he is working on different kinds of farms so that he can learn something of the many kinds of work required of a general farmer. Although all the dairymaids are attracted to Angel, Tess interests him the most. He thinks her a beautiful and innocent young maiden. Tess feels that she is wicked, however, and rejects the attentions Angel pays to her. She urges him to turn to one of the other girls for companionship. It is unthinkable that the son of a minister would marry a dairymaid, but Angel does not care much about family tradition. Despite her pleas, he continues to pay court to Tess. At last, against the wishes of his parents, Angel asks Tess to be his wife. He loves her, and he realizes that a farm girl will be a help to him on his own land. Although Tess is in love with Angel by this time, the memory of her night with Alec causes her to refuse Angel again and again. At last, his insistence, coupled with the written pleas of her parents to marry someone who can help the family financially, wins her over, and she agrees to marry him.

On the night before the wedding, which Tess postpones many times because she feels unworthy, she writes Angel a letter, revealing everything about herself and Alec. She slips the letter under his door; she is sure that when he reads it, he will renounce her forever. In the morning, however, Angel acts as tenderly as before, and Tess loves him more than ever for his forgiving nature. When she realizes that Angel did not find the letter, she attempts to tell him about her past. Angel only teases her about wanting to confess, thinking that such a pure girl could have no black sins in her history. They are married without Angel learning about Alec and her dead baby.

On their wedding night, Angel tells Tess about an evening of debauchery in his own past. Tess forgives him and then tells about her affair with Alec, thinking that he will forgive her as she did him; but such is not the case. Angel is at first stunned and then so hurt that he cannot even speak to Tess. Finally, he tells her that she is not the woman he loves, the one he married, but a stranger with whom he cannot live, at least for the present. He takes her to her home and leaves her there. Then he goes to his own home and on to Brazil, where he plans to buy a farm. At first, neither Tess nor Angel tells their parents the reason for their separation. When Tess finally tells her mother, the ignorant woman blames Tess for losing her husband by confessing something he need never to know.

Angel leaves Tess some money and some jewels that were given to him by his godmother. Tess puts the jewels in a bank; she spends the money on her parents. When it is gone, her family goes hungry once more, for her father still thinks himself too highborn to work for a living. Again, Tess goes from farm to farm, performing hard labor in the fields to get enough food to keep herself and her family alive.

While she is working in the fields, she meets Alec again. He met Angel's minister father and, repenting his evil ways, became an itinerant preacher. The sight of Tess, for whom he always lusted, causes a lapse in his new religious fervor, and he begins to pursue her once again. Frightened, Tess writes to Angel, sending the letter to his parents to forward to him. She tells Angel that she loves him and needs him and that an enemy is pursuing her. She begs him to forgive her and to return to her.

The letter takes several months to reach Angel. Meanwhile, Alec is so kind to Tess and so generous to her family that she begins to relent in her feelings toward him. At last, when she does not receive an answer from Angel, she writes him a note saying that he is cruel not to forgive her and that now she will not forgive his treatment of her. Then she goes to Alec again and lives with him as his wife.

It is thus that Angel finds her. He comes to tell her that he forgives her and that he still loves her. When he finds her with Alec, however, he turns away, more hurt than before.

Tess, too, is bitterly unhappy. She now hates Alec because once again he is the cause of her husband's repudiation of her. Feeling that she could find happiness only if Alec is dead, she stabs

him as he sleeps. Then she runs out of the house and follows Angel, who is aimlessly walking down a road leading out of the town. When they meet and Tess tells him what she did, Angel forgives her everything, even the murder of Alec, and they go on together. They are happy with each other for a few days, although Angel knows that the authorities will soon find Tess.

When the officers finally find them, Tess is asleep. Angel asks the officers to wait until she awakens. As soon as she opens her eyes, Tess sees the strangers and knows that they came for her and that she will be hanged, but she is not unhappy. She had a few days with the husband she truly loves, and now she is ready for her punishment. She stands up bravely and faces her captors. She is not afraid.

### **Critical Evaluation:**

Best remembered as the chronicler of the fictional Wessex, England, Thomas Hardy is considered one of the greatest novelists of the late nineteenth century. Born and raised in a small hamlet in Dorset, Hardy moved to London as a young man and spent most of the rest of his life as an urban professional. He remained part enthralled and part troubled about his native Wessex, however, and wrote with passion about industrialization, the movement of labor to the cities (or the exile of rural people in search of a living), the destruction of agricultural economies (and the ways of life dependent on them), and social dislocation. Almost all of Hardy's best-known novels contrast the social conditions of urban and rural people. While his novels are complex and often deeply tragic, his poems often are eulogies to the rural landscapes he loved.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was inspired by Hardy's concerns over the fragility of the English rural worker's livelihood. The novel was also shockingly honest for its day in its presentation of women's sexuality and power. Tess's unrelenting victimization, often considered the novel's most serious flaw, is, in part, Hardy's indictment of Victorian values, which put the blame of economic deprivation on the poor, and the blame for sexual exploitation on the exploited (women). The theme of sexual exploitation is closely interwoven with the story of Wessex's decline.

Tess's troubles begin with her parents' economic condition; they are representatives of the disaffected and drunken villagers whose houses will soon fall to larger farms mass-producing crops for mass consumption. The novel is strewn with images of the Wessex countryside being gobbled up by machinery (the harvesting machine, for example, that is symbolically referred to as the "grim reaper"), rail tracks, and new farm enclosures. The uncertainty of Tess's parents' fate contributes to their irresponsibility. Since they are drunk at Rolliver's Inn, Tess embarks on a journey with the beehives to the market; this is the journey on which she falls asleep and accidentally kills the family's horse in a collision. The loss of the horse, in turn, prompts Tess to work for her family's upkeep. The events that follow, culminating in her psychological disintegration and final criminal act, are rooted in a cause that is not Tess's fault — her parents' drunken irresponsibility — and perhaps not even her parents' fault; rather, the tragic plot is set in motion by an economic set of circumstances. These economic conditions have social and psychological

effects. Hardy's frankness regarding money was also denounced in his day. Tess, abandoned by her husband, returns to Alec only when she is at a loss to care for her mother and younger siblings.

This is not to say that all the mistakes and wrongs perpetrated in the novel have an economic basis. The rural-urban dislocations generated by England's economic circumstances play a large part in Tess's life. Alec D'Urberville is the city-bred, cultured, streetwise man who takes advantage of Tess. Her rape and later seduction can be read as a metaphor for the city's ruthless exploitation of the country. Angel Clare is educated in the city, and he develops fine sensibilities that unrealistically construct Tess into an ethereal and pure being (he likens her to Demeter). The unrealistic nature of Angel's expectations makes him unable to forgive her for not being a virgin. Alec and Angel both manipulate Tess: the former through sexual and economic exploitation, and the latter through myths and idealistic moral constructs. Hardy continually draws readers' attention to, and calls on readers' compassion for, his female protagonist. The men who exploit her — representative of the deeds and words, respectively, that oppress women — are brought under the readers' critical gaze. In a broad sense, the female is associated with the rural. For example, in one of the first scenes traveling students, of whom Angel is one, survey and "penetrate" the countryside in which Tess dances with the village maidens. Hardy's imagery evokes conceptions of power in the act of the urban gaze focusing on the rural, doubling as Angel's gaze on Tess.

The novel ends a tragedy. Unlike the protagonists of classic tragedies, the protagonist in this tragedy bears very little of the blame for her fate. Her mistakes are at best innocence, helplessness, and an overdeveloped sense of responsibility toward her loved ones. For many critics, such helplessness makes Tess a flawed, almost unrealistic, character. In any case, her fate must be read as a symbolic representation of the social power dynamics that Hardy criticizes. The novel is more than a simple realistic account of a fallen milkmaid.

Hardy is considered to be a realistic, naturalistic writer. His style has been described as cinematic, painterly, and pictorial because of its elaborate and meticulous renditions of landscape and architecture. Some of the ways in which readers make meaning of his narratives — for example, Tess as a symbol — do not fall into the realistic tradition, however, and Hardy's best novels may be read on many levels in addition to those of realistic or naturalistic fiction. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* may also be read for its historical, moral, satirical, and aesthetic concerns.

Essay by: "Critical Evaluation" by Bishnupriya Ghosh

### Further Reading

Casagrande, Peter J. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Unorthodox Beauty*. New York: Twayne, 1992. Focuses on Hardy's intertwining of beauty and ugliness, of moral and aesthetic issues. Examines Victorian attitudes toward women, Tess's "terrible beauty," and parallels between her suffering and the horse's death. Analyzes Angel as a mix of convention and newness.

Kramer, Dale, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. An introduction and general overview of all Hardy's work and specific demonstrations of Hardy's ideas and literary skills. Individual essays explore Hardy's biography, aesthetics, and the impact on his work of developments in science, religion, and philosophy in the late nineteenth century. The volume also contains a detailed chronology of Hardy's life and Linda M. Shire's essay "The Radical Aesthetic of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*."

Kramer, Dale, and Nancy Marck, eds. *Critical Essays on Thomas Hardy: The Novels*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990. Discusses Hardy's plots and rhetoric, with focus on individual novels. Good essay on Hardy's understanding of *Tess* as a woman, examining Victorian debates and postromantic ideas. Treats awareness of language as a shaping force.

McEathron, Scott, ed. *Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles": A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Contains essays and poems by Hardy, some contemporary reviews of the novel, and modern critical essays, including examinations of the postmodern characteristics and color and movement in the novel and an analysis of *Tess's* rape. Explicates key passages from the novel.

Millgate, Michael. *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. This biography enhances and replaces Millgate's 1982 biography, considered to be one of the best and most scholarly Hardy biographies available. Includes bibliography and index.

Moore, Kevin Z. *The Descent of the Imagination: Postromantic Culture in the Later Novels of Thomas Hardy*. New York: New York University Press, 1990. Uses language and cultural dominance issues to discuss *Tess's* quest for beauty and freedom.

Page, Norman, ed. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. An encyclopedia containing three hundred alphabetically arranged entries examining Hardy's work and discussing his family and friends, important places in his life and work, his influences, critical approaches to his writings, and a history of his works' publication. Also includes a chronology of his life, lists of places and characters in his fiction, a glossary, and a bibliography.

Tomalin, Claire. *Thomas Hardy*. New York: Penguin, 2007. This thorough and finely written biography by a respected Hardy scholar illuminates the novelist's efforts to indict the malice, neglect, and ignorance of his fellow human beings. Tomalin also discusses aspects of his life that are apparent in his literary works.

Vigar, Penelope. *The Novels of Thomas Hardy: Illusion and Reality*. London: Athlone Press, 1974. Analyzes Hardy's techniques and style. Examines *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in terms of Hardy's notion of imaginative flights that emerge from visual effects. Examines the novel's structure in terms of its contrasts — *Tess's* purity and guilt, reality and perceptions.

Wright, Terence. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1987. Summarizes critical approaches to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, providing an overview of criticism of the novel. Synthesizes some of the best criticism, emphasizing importance of place, ambiguity of causes, human insignificance, and the inevitability of human tragedy, with *Tess* representing individual and larger tragedy.

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