



# Tess of the D'Urbervilles

by Thomas Hardy

—*The business of the poet and novelist is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things.*

—Thomas Hardy, April 19, 1885

## Content Synopsis

Thomas Hardy's (1840-1928) late nineteenth century English novel "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" (1891), introduces his protagonist, Tess Durbeyfield, in the midst of a dying country ritual, the May Day dance. Villagers of Marlott and passing strangers gather to watch village women, in various shades of white, parade through the neighboring streets and greens. Two fateful events parallel this yearly ritual for Tess. First, her alcoholic father is told by a hesitant parson that surely he must be related to "the ancient and knightly family of the D'Urbervilles" descended from William the Conqueror. In a parallel scene, she has her first visual contact with Angel Clare, the man who will become both her lover and her betrayer. These two fateful events subsequently direct the course of Tess's future life, and of her death.

In short order, Tess's parents drink to drunkenness in a local pub, leaving Tess and her young brother to take their horse and cart loaded with

beehives to market in the early hours of the morning. The horse is impaled on the speeding shaft of an oncoming mail cart, and ending the family's primary ability to support itself. Forced by her mother and her guilt over the loss of the horse to find another means of supporting her family, Tess is sent to claim relationship to a wealthy D'Urberville widow whose lands are some distance from Marlott. Seduced and apparently raped by the widow's son, Alec D'Urberville, on her return from an evening of dancing, Tess will work on the D'Urberville estate until she can no longer bear his unwonted attentions and her pregnancy becomes apparent. After the child's birth, Tess goes to work binding sheaves of wheat behind a primitive reaping machine. Returning from a brutal day at work to find her baby dying, and fearing hell-fire for her un-baptized son, Tess baptizes him with the name Sorrow as her young brothers and sisters in look on. Her father having refused her the ability to call a parson before the child died, the village parson, contacted by Tess after the child dies, refuses to allow her a Christian burial, apparently because of his fear.

Determined to begin anew, in the spring following her baby's death, Tess goes to the idyllic pastoral world of Talbothay's dairy where she is once again conjoined by fate with Angel Clare, who, ignorant of her past despite her many attempts to speak it to him, marries her. Upon learning on their

wedding night that Tess, more idealized as a fantasy than a real woman to him, has had both lover and child before him, a self-righteous Angel abandons Tess for a South American farming venture. Illness there precludes his sending promised monies, and a desperate Tess, having given virtually all he has left her with to her needy family and unable to find sufficient employment in any dairy, once again takes a job in service of a harvesting machine in a grim village called Flintcomb Ash.

Upon her father's death, the family loses their lease on the family home and land; the economic situation of her mother, brothers and sisters is desperate. A chance contact with a now religious, "born-again," but still essentially villainous Alec D'Urberville seals Tess's fate. Angel Clare returns to find Tess living with Alec, who has offered monies to care for her mother and siblings, as husband and wife. Desperate to recover her marital relationship with Clare, Tess drives a knife into Alec's chest. They flee, but are caught at the circle stones of Stonehenge. Tess is convicted of Alec's murder, imprisoned, and finally hanged behind the walls of Wintonchester prison. However, fate comes full circle once again: a chastened Clare is beginning a new life with her younger sister, Liza-Lu, fulfilling Tess's hope that this should occur. The novel ends as they turn from the flag signaling Tess' execution, "joined hands again, and went on."

Hardy structures his novel in a pattern of doubled contrasts of setting, image, character, and event. The color red, which emerges first as the ribbon in the virginal Tess's luxurious hair, repeats itself throughout the novel, most often as the color of pooling blood. The horse's blood pours out on the roadway in the beginning of the novel, and the blood of Alec D'Urberville stains the ceiling of his landlady's parlor at the end. Symbolically, it becomes a metaphor for Tess's lost virginity, as much an emotional and psychological loss as it is a physical one. It also supports the theme of blood-sacrifice, of the human as victim to a larger,

brutal nature and fate that seems in Hardy's hands to be irresistible for such a simple human being as Tess. The whole notion of being literally and figuratively "stained" haunts the character of Tess from early in the novel and at various times throughout, and is connected to the double sexual standard applied to women and men. While Angel may confess to having many lovers and expect to be forgiven, Tess's experience of sexual abuse and her resulting pregnancy is sufficient for Clare to abandon her and their marriage on their honeymoon night.

Angel Clare is starkly contrasted yet also shares dimensions of Alec D'Urberville. Neither man is capable of seeing Tess as a person with real needs, feelings, and desires. While Angel's interests in her are perhaps less rapacious than Alec's, he is as much as is Alec the agent of her downfall when she fails to comply with his pre-established image of his lover, wife and life-partner. His failure to see her with 'clarity' and to genuinely provide and care for her makes his name as ironic as Alec's, a degraded conqueror and master of Tess's body and life. Tess's innocent if voluptuous beauty is contrasted with the prim control of Angel's sometime love interest, Miss Mercy Chant, and with the hardened lives and bodies of the women workers whose lives, at various times, she shares. The life of country people like the Durbeyfields is contrasted with the more urbane worlds inhabited by those with more resources, like Angel's family and the D'Urbervilles, and even with the Talbothay's whose land is their own and whose security is thus guaranteed.

The luxuriant, green, pastoral world of the From Valley where Talbothay's dairy lies stands in stark contrast to the grim and sterile world of Flintcomb Ash and Tess's earlier experience binding sheaves behind a reaping machine. The notion of "paradise lost," of a spoiled Edenic world with a machine now having invaded the garden was a powerful one in a rapidly industrializing 19th

century. This is an instance of Hardy's using setting for symbolic value and social commentary.

The theme of Tess as sacrificial victim is clinched at the end of the novel, as she lies sleeping on a flat, altar-like rock at Stonehenge, a place of primitive worship and probably animal or human sacrifice. She enters the circle of sacrifice and is herself surrounded by her captors; she is executed inside the walls of the Wintoncester prison by hanging, as the circle becomes a noose. Thus does Hardy counterpose the crushing determinism of Darwinism with the individual and so the tragic free will of Tess.

It is argued that the departing Liza-Lu and Angel Clare are meant by Hardy to echo the fallen Adam and Eve after the loss of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, Angel and Liza's fall is a "happy" one, because despite their loss of innocence and of their beloved Tess, they can go off, sadder and wiser, into the larger world and make a new life together, perhaps with a new 'promised land' in their future.

### Historical Context

Hardy's novel functions in a summative way to demonstrate the impact of change and industrialization on agricultural life in England during the 19th century. The noise, speed, and pervasive presence of the steam-driven locomotive were only one of the machines that brought both progress and its accompanying destruction to rural England. Whether it is a reaping machine or a steam-driven loom, the lives of workers in England became increasingly miserable and the lives of the titled and land owning increasingly comfortable. The type of exploitation in the novel of agricultural workers, many of whom were women, is paralleled to that of textile and other factory workers in urban environments. To describe this gap between wealth and its accompanying social status and poverty with its accompanying misery, novelist turned Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli coined the term "two nations," perhaps the most repeated phrase of social criticism in all of the 19th century.

While the great spirit of the age was marked by its celebration of change and much vaunted progress, the circumstance of Tess, of her family and of many of her peers suggests the poignancy of individuals caught in the forces of social change beyond either their understanding or their control. A woman like Tess would not have known about the erection of the Crystal Palace in 1851 in Hyde Park to exhibit and celebrate the Works of Industry of all Nations, or the rising tide of Evangelicalism—with its emphasis on piety and hard work—embraced by the English middle class. Similarly, she would be unaware of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in 1859, the Higher Criticism of the Bible and its accompanying agnosticism among English intellectuals, or Marx and Engels' critique of the exploitation. However, in the novel that bears her name, Hardy brings all of these elements of the Victorian zeitgeist to bear. Thus, historical England comes to inform, profoundly, the social criticism affected by its art.

### Societal Context

Like many novels of the late 19th century period, (called the Victorian Age because Queen Victoria remained on the throne from 1837-1901) Hardy's novel was published first in serial form. As such, it faced the rigorous censorship of Victorian critics, who demanded that no mention be made of Tess's pregnancy and that Hardy's subtitle in the 1891 draft of the title page, "A Pure Woman, Faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy" be omitted.

Increasing efforts through this century to impose rigid control on women's bodies and their movements and to maintain silence about such natural functions as sex and childbearing, parallel an intensified economic dependency on men faced by women at this time. A single event is sufficient to throw a family into desperate straits, and often women and children are the most easily victimized by circumstances beyond their control. The loss of the family horse and the shiftlessness

of her alcoholic father and co-dependent mother make Tess ripe for the opportune exploitation that Alec so effectively seizes upon. Upon the death of her father, his wife and children lose the lease to the family house and land. Tess's dependency is thus driven by her class, but more fully by her sex and the social censure that so effectively ignores the degree of the economic and sexual victimization she experiences at Alec's hands. Her dependency is also driven by English law, which maintained a woman's circumstance as the possession of her husband, much like his animals, his lands, and his furniture. Therefore, Alec can say to Tess with impunity, "I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man's wife you are mine."

The loss of her virginity, her resulting pregnancy, the censure of the church and her fears for herself and her family's survival, as well as her physical, emotional, and even spiritual abandonment by her husband, truly leave Tess alone in the hands of a fate much greater and more vicious than she might ever have imagined. Hardy wants his readers to comprehend the degree of her victimization. The epigraph to the novel is from Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona" (I. ii, 114–115): "Poor wounded name! My bosom, as a bed,/ Shall lodge thee."

That she is only one of many hundreds of thousands of young women in a similar plight, is made clear by the statistic that the population of London grew from two to six and a half million people during Victoria's reign. That thousands of women were prostitutes because they had neither the skill nor the protection of a male family member to guarantee their safety of economic stability is also made clear. If poet Coventry Patmore's Victorian "angel in the house" had no house where she might lay down her head, to "make her living" what she had to sell was quiet literally herself. It is this cruel reality, which Tess, outside the big city, must face as well.

## Religious Context

The role of a benevolent God in such a universe cannot but be called into serious question. In this novel, Hardy represents the extremes that afflicted religious belief and practice as it evolved throughout the century from the righteous Evangelical tradition of his youth, represented in the novel by Clare's family and the prim Miss Mercy Chant, to the agnostic and outright atheistic zeitgeist of his mature adulthood. On more than one occasion, Hardy treats us to the activities of itinerant lay preachers painting their selected Biblical statements of hell and brimstone fires at will on the sides of barns and stiles. His own commentary in the novel makes his position clear, if at a measured distance from himself. Hardy says (carefully) of the warning "Thy, Damnation, Slumbereth, Not" that "Some people might have cried 'Poor Theology!' at the hideous defacement—the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time." Tess's mortal terror when she is confronted by these large red letters leads her to call them "Crushing, killing! I don't believe God said such things" (62–63). What is made of religion in this novel by the majority of its believers, both sincere and occasional, is sufficient to represent its relentless decline as a viable belief system during the years of Hardy's life and of the Victorian period.

Over the thirty years spent composing his In Memoriam poem, Alfred Lord Tennyson used this elegiac lament for his dead friend Hallam to explore the cruelty of human loss and despair much as Hardy did in the story of Tess. However, in 1850, Tennyson's poem could still celebrate Hallam as "...That friend of mine who lives in God/That God which ever lives and loves,/ One God, one law, one element,/ And one far-off divine event,/ To which the whole creation moves" ("Epilogue" 140–144). In contrast to Tennyson's affirmation of faith, Hardy's voice at the end of Tess is grim, unrelenting in its assessment of Tess's fate: "'Justice' was done; and the President of the Immortals...had

ended his sport with Tess. And the D'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing" (314). Hope for the next generation resides only in the clasped hands of "speechless" lovers, Angel Clare and Liza-Lu. Their relationship with God goes un-remarked.

### Scientific & Technological Context

Industrialization drove millions of agricultural workers into increasingly desperate circumstances as more and more land was given over to large land-owning interests and even subsistence farming became difficult to maintain. The invention of the steam-driven engine and its wide application in agriculture and the textile industries meant the displacement of the worker from his or her home village in search of whatever work might be found. Sometimes this was in teeming coal-blackened cities, sometimes, as was true for Tess and her compatriots, this was on farms where seasonal work was available for the harvest, or on dairy farms. Often, the worker became the servant of the machine, rather than the machine rendering the worker's life easier as well as more productive. The act of milking had not yet become mechanized, and so the cycle of nature and human interaction with it remained largely organic at Talbothay's dairy. Tess's time there is presented in idyllic terms, although not without underlying notes of its illusory qualities. The world of Flintcomb Ash, on the other hand, is a vicious one of "blank agricultural brownness" and "joyless monotony" where women are hired to do backbreaking labor as field hands, preferred because they can be paid so much less than the increasingly scarce male labor. Here the organic relationship of human, animal and nature is forever broken, and the cost to Tess and her fellow laborers, as well as the relationship between them and the farmer who employs them, is Hardy's portent of the damaging cost a changing agricultural and industrial world has wrought.

Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published in 1859 when Hardy was only nineteen, but its influence on his thought and writing would be lifelong. While his epigraph from Shakespeare's *King Lear* suggests his wish that readers see Tess as a noble heroine caught in the confluence of many forces beyond her control, the philosophy of "social Darwinism" apparently adopted by Hardy emphasizes the human circumstance of victim and its attendant helplessness and despair. Tess has "inherited" many of her trouble: the evolution of her life story is controlled by her connection to the long-since debilitated D'Urberville line and its corrupted and specious representative, Alec D'Urberville. Moreover, much of what seems to be "chance" in Hardy's novel he in fact means us to understand as Fate playing out its collective hand with Tess as both prize and victim. Peter Morton argues in an essay accompanying the Norton Critical version of the novel:

"In Hardy's universe, as in Darwin's, a large number of chance events may simulate purposiveness, giving the impression of positive malevolence or of design in the natural world. But both novelist and naturalist agree (one implicitly, the other explicitly) that to invoke Chance is only to admit ignorance of the exact links in the causal chain. Neither doubts that the chain exists and is unbreakable" ("*Neo-Darwinian Fate in Tess of the D'Urbervilles: Hardy's Neo-Darwinian Determinism*" note 7, 432.)

### Biographical Context

Thomas Hardy's biographical information indicates that he both understood the plight of the unmarried, pregnant woman, and sympathized with it. Much has been written attributing various characters and events to persons and experiences in Hardy's own life, and his published autobiographical writings suggest the same. His prefaces to

various editions of the novel state that the book is “an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things” and that it “[says] what everybody nowadays thinks and feels” (Elledge ix). This answers critics of various parts of the novel—particularly those that have to do with sex or religion—as being ‘unfit’ for art, and which rejects the notion that “imaginative writings extending over more than forty years would exhibit a coherent scientific theory” (Elledge xiv).

His long life (1840–1928) gave him broad experience and opportunity to reflect on the dramatic changes in religious practice and belief, and in the worlds of Dorset and the From Valley where members of his family lived for generations. Despite his early education in architecture, Hardy remained drawn to literature and began to write poetry in the midst of launching his career as an architect. Through 1866–67, he was writing intensely and had begun sending his work to editors, gradually rejecting architecture as a life pursuit. After a brief attraction to the church and an illness that forced him out of London to recuperate at home, Hardy came to realize how well he knew the life of the country in which his family had lived and where he had grown up. By the mid seventies, the seeds for his early novels were sown, he was meeting significant writers of his day, and his growing attraction to Comte’s positivism was complemented by his deep admiration for George Eliot, by his interest in Darwinian theory, and by his reflection in his notebooks on the Bible as literature rather than revealed truth. By 1889, now fully engaged in his vocation as a writer for over twenty years, Hardy would write in his notebook on April 7:

“It may be questioned if Nature, or what we call Nature, so far back as when she crossed the line from invertebrates to vertebrates, did not exceed her mission. This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences.

Other planets may, though one can hardly see how” (Millgate, selected by Elledge 333).

In July 1891, an edited version of *Tess* appeared in serial publication in the *Graphic*, and in November of that year was published without bowdlerization as a freestanding volume. It was controversial, widely read, and widely translated. Hardy’s prefaces to the novel address the nature of the controversy, and demonstrate his on-going efforts to both defend and assure the accuracy of his novel’s publication and to clarify his views on the many issues it raised for his wide-ranging reading public.

It is often said that great literature tells the story of its day when that day is passing its apex, and the same might be said of Hardy’s work. The railroad was rapidly bringing a way of life, a noise, and a speed to the Dorchester countryside of Hardy’s youth that was incompatible with an older, slower, more measured way of life. Nostalgia is a marker of Victorian fiction not wholly lost on this novel. The violent end to *Tess*’s life can thus be seen as also the end of a way of life no longer supportable by the conditions in which late Victorian people found themselves. Moreover, this is the broader story of *Tess*, that Hardy, by his own admission, saw a truth and tried through his art to make it real for his readers. He does not consider this a didactic practice, but an imaginative one. No more than this is he willing, or desirous of, claiming or admitting.

*Deborah A. Dooley, Ph.D.*

### Works Cited

- Altick, Richard. “Victorian People and Ideas.” New York: WW Norton, 1974.
- Hardy, Thomas. “*Tess of the D’Urbervilles*,” Third Norton Critical Edition by Scott Elledge. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.
- Millgate, Michael, ed. “The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy, by Thomas Hardy.” Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985.

### Discussion Questions

1. In the photocopied draft of the 1891 title page of Hardy's novel, the original title is *Tess of the D'Urbervilles, A Pure Woman, Faithfully presented by Thomas Hardy*. What are the various meanings of "pure" and "faithful" that Hardy might have been suggesting by this title?
2. Novelists often use the names of characters to suggest different kinds of interpretations a reader might make about that character. What are some potential references that Hardy is making by choosing the names that he does, and how do those names help us think about his characters?
3. In what ways are various ideas about religion introduced in this novel? Does Hardy himself seem to have a clear position about religious faith and belief? How do you know?
4. Part of Hardy's argument in "Tess" is that the way of life of the people in his novel is one that they are very used to, but is no longer functional or practical for them. Discuss with specific reference to characters, settings and plot events in the novel.
5. Hardy calls the last section of his novel, "Phase the Seventh: Fulfillment." What are some various meanings of the word 'fulfillment' as he uses it at the end of the novel?
6. Often a character's family and life history are used by a novelist to explain what motivates him or her to behave in certain ways. How does Hardy use these aspects of Tess, Alec, and Angel Clare to make them more understandable to readers?
7. Modern readers recognize that Tess's alcoholic family system has an enormous impact on who she is and what happens to her in her life. Research the sociology and psychology of this type of family system and discuss it in relationship to Tess's experiences.
8. Thomas Hardy is often called a pessimist and a determinist, which suggests that he does not believe humans act according to free will because they have none. Debate the argument of free will vs. determinism in relation to Hardy's characters, especially Tess, Alec, Angel, Tess's parents, and Liza-Lu.
9. Some critics see Tess, Alec, and Angel as a kind of trinity, with Tess caught between the 'good' and the 'bad' angel represented by the two men in her life. Is it that simple?
10. Hardy's settings in this novel are areas of England very well known to him, and they are quite well developed throughout the novel. Catalog the interior and exterior settings of his novel. How does Hardy use settings to advance our understanding of characters, and to advance a theme of his novel?

### Essay Ideas

1. Discuss free will vs. Determinism in “Tess of the D’Urbervilles.”
2. Examine the case for Tess Durbeyfield. Is she a murderess or a battered woman?
3. Analyze the ‘angelic clarity’ of Thomas Hardy’s Angel Clare.
4. Scrutinize Alec D’Urberville and the tradition of the Victorian villain.
5. Investigate the use of Red and White, Green and Brown, Hardy’s symbolic colors in Tess of the D’Urbervilles.



Copyright of Introduction to Literary Context: World Literature is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.