



Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy: Study Questions

1. Look at 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 the words "pure" and "faithful" that Hardy might have been suggesting by this title? In what sense does Tess personify purity? Does Tess, in fact, remain pure? In what respects? Why does Hardy highlight this quality in his title?
2. In the "Explanatory Note" that precedes the novel, Hardy writes that *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* represents "on the whole a true sequence of things" and grew out of his wish "to have it said what everybody thinks and feels." Can this novel fairly be called a "truthful" piece of fiction? Are its characters and situations believable? Do you find its underlying philosophy persuasive?
3. Some who read *Tess* when it was first published in 1891 argued that Tess was a "little harlot" who deserved her death by hanging. Modern readers are rather less likely to respond to Tess so harshly. How do you think the overall change in social mores between 1891 and today affect how you respond to Tess?
4. 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? Demonstrate your understanding of this by specific references to the text of the novel.
5. Alec wrongs Tess through his lack of principles. Angel wrongs her with his excess of principles. Which do you see as the more unforgivable betrayal?
6. 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? While it may be tempting to think of Alec as a "bad" character and Angel as a "good" one, both experience an inner struggle between spiritual purity and erotic desire--a struggle that neither man wages successfully. Moreover, it is Alec the scoundrel--not Angel the moralist--who is there for Tess when she is in need and who supports her family in a time of crisis. What are the real differences between Alec and Angel? How does Hardy use the two characters to complicate the categories of good and evil?
7. Why is the significance of the seven phases into which the book is divided? How are the "Phases" more than mere serializations? What apparent transformations separate each phase from the last? How does this term encourage us to think about Tess, and what does it say about what Hardy meant to accomplish in his novel and about his view of human development? What is the significance of the phase sub-titles? For example, 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?

8. In classical tragedy, the hero is destroyed from within by a tragic flaw in his or her character. Does Tess have a tragic flaw, or is she better understood as a victim of external circumstances?
9. In the course of the novel, Tess Durbeyfield becomes a d'Urberville. In what ways does Tess's transformation from "field" to "ville"—and her move from a country farm to a mansion in a larger town—mimic the change in English agrarian life in the wake of the Industrial Revolution?
10. Tess's tragedy is set in motion by her father's discovery of his noble ancestry. Although Tess herself possesses a kind of natural nobility in addition to her noble heritage, the men in her life continually see her as somehow inferior to them. What does Hardy suggest about the hierarchies that people observe among themselves, whether arising from ancestry, wealth, or gender? What hierarchies seem to exert the greatest influence, and why?
11. Today, in most communities, Tess mothering a child out of wedlock would probably be far less of a scandal than it was in Wessex in 1891. While this greater social acceptance would be good news for a modern Tess, it would considerably impact Hardy's plot. What is the range of tragic art as its traditionally forbidden content becomes acceptable? Can tragedy as a genre exist in a tolerant, permissive culture?
12. Many of Hardy's characters are defined either by their religious beliefs or lack of them. What forms of spirituality are represented in the novel? Which does Hardy appear to favor? Are there any belief systems in the novel that do not, at some point or another, cause harm to the believer or to others? Does Hardy give us any guidance in distinguishing beneficial beliefs from harmful ones?
13. Hardy never explains why Tess, after being drugged and raped by Alec, remains with him for several months. How might you account for her decision not to leave him at once?
14. When describing Tess's "moral hobgoblins" in Chapter XIII, Hardy writes, "It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she." How do you respond to Hardy's suggestion that civilized society is a moral failure because it is out of tune with the "actual," or natural world? What, as Hardy sees it, is the essential conflict between society and nature? What would a "natural" morality look like, and would it be an improvement?
15. In Chapter XV, Hardy quotes a striking statement from Saint Augustine: that God has "counseled a better course than [He has] permitted;" in other words, God demands more decent conduct from people than can be practiced in the world where he has placed us. How does Hardy's novel as a whole support this assertion? Do you find it to be true?
16. Later in the same chapter, after Tess's rape by Alec and the death of her baby, Hardy writes that his heroine has "changed from simple girl to complex woman." Her eyes "more eloquent" and her mind more reflective, she has become a "fine creature." Hardy even suggests that her mistreatment might be deemed "simply a liberal education." Is Hardy right to make the seemingly outrageous contention that Tess's abuse has aided in her growth and improvement? What does he appear to be saying about the natures of suffering and human morality?
17. Hardy offers a marked contrast between the pastoral tranquility of Crick's dairy and the mechanized fury of Groby's farm, shown particularly in Chapter XLVII. What is Hardy's opinion of modern technology?
18. In Hardy's hands, Tess and the landscape seem to have a reciprocal relationship. How does the landscape represent and reflect Tess's outlook and her situation? How do Hardy's descriptions of Tess mirror what is happening to the countryside from which she hails?
19. 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, of

which there are many. How does Hardy use setting to advance our understanding of character, and how does he use some settings in comparison or contrast to others in order to advance a theme of his novel?

20. Discuss the roles of Alec d'Urberville and Angel Clare in Tess's life. Consider the ways in which Hardy describes them and how his choices influence the reader's impressions of them.
21. Before devoting himself to writing full-time, Hardy apprenticed with an architect and intended to become one himself. How do the principles of architecture inform the structural elements of the novel?
22. Is Tess of the D'Urbervilles more accurately seen as a protest against unjust moral and social tenets, or an acknowledgment that such structures will always exist?
23. What, finally, is to blame for Tess's tragedy? Does it stem principally from sexual desire? From her own ready acceptance of the victim's role? From poor communication? From despicable timing? From her parents' benighted ambitions? Or does it result, as her brother Abraham suggests, from living on a "blighted" star?
24. Near the end of the novel, the doomed Tess suggests that Angel should marry her sister, 'Liza-Lu. Do you think this would be a successful marriage? State your reasons.
25. Imagine that you are Tess's lawyer in her prosecution for the murder of Alec. What arguments would you use, and do you think they would succeed?
26. Novelists often use the names of characters to suggest different kinds of interpretations a reader might make about that character. Investigate further some of Hardy's character names in Tess. 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?
27. 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 in the novel. Think about Tess, Alec and Angel, but also about Tess's parents, and about Liza-Lu.
28. Hardy once said that he refused to "[end] a story happily merely to suit conventional ideas." Indeed, his novel took an unconventional moral stance and shocked readers upon its publication. In what ways might Tess of the d'Urbervilles have been controversial? What were some of the mores that governed and epitomized the Victorian age?
29. 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 to continue to cling to. Discuss with specific reference to characters, settings and plot events in the novel.
30. Hardy once wrote, "The best tragedy . . . is that of the worthy encompassed by the inevitable." Using this definition, or substituting your own, assess whether Tess of the D'Urbervilles is one of the "best" kinds of tragedy.