

Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy Reading Guide

About the book

Tess is an innocent young girl until the day she goes to visit her rich 'relatives', the D'Urbervilles, in hope that they might help her alleviate her own family's poverty. Her encounter with her manipulative cousin, Alec, leads her onto a path that is beset with suffering and betrayal. When she falls in love with another man, Angel Clare, Tess sees a potential escape from her past, but only if she can tell him her shameful secret...

'Thomas Hardy's thrilling story of seduction, murder, cruelty and betrayal' *The Times*

'Like the greatest characters in literature, Tess lives beyond the final pages of the book as a permanent citizen of the imagination... Tess is that rare creature in literature: goodness made interesting' Irving Howe

'Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has a lush sensuality about the heat of summer and the heat of lust which makes the gorgeousness of Hardy's heroine and his country of Wessex both seem utterly desirable as the tale of tragic fate unfolds' *The Times*

About the Author

Thomas Hardy was born on 2 June 1840. His father was a stonemason, his mother an intelligent and well-read woman who encouraged his education. He was brought up near Dorchester and trained as an architect before attending Kings College, London. In 1868 his work took him to St Juliot's church in Cornwall where he met his wife-to-be, Emma. His first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, was rejected by publishers but *Desperate Remedies* was published in 1871 and this was rapidly followed by *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). He also wrote many other novels, poems and short stories. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was published in 1891. His final novel was *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Hardy was awarded the Order of Merit in 1920 and the gold medal of the Royal Society of Literature in 1912. Despite the estrangement that had developed between himself and his wife, Emma's death in 1912 came as a great shock to Hardy and many of his later poems explore his grief. He married his secretary in 1914 but remained devoted to Emma's memory. Hardy died of pleurisy on 11 January 1928.

Background

Far from the Madding Crowd established Hardy's name as a writer, but it was *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that brought him financial success. But the book also raised issues which created substantial controversy amongst his Victorian readership.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles attacks the sexual hypocrisy which characterised English social morality of his time. Hardy's subtitle 'A Pure Woman' invites the reader to reconsider preconceptions of morality which are based on strict codes of behaviour. Hardy's suggestion that Tess could epitomise purity despite having lost her virginity out of wedlock and committed murder was shocking to many and caused widespread debate.

Hardy's novel further challenges the Victorian status quo in championing the cause of women. Tess is presented as a victim of her times; she falls prey to the sexual double standard when Angel Clare refuses to accept her 'confession' although it is similar to his own. Equally unjust in Hardy's view is the financial vulnerability faced by women, shown by Tess' destitution following the failure of her marriage to Clare. It is a basic lack of funds that ultimately leads Tess to sacrifice morality and accept Alec D'Urberville's assistance. Again, Hardy illustrates a double standard here; women are expected to be morally 'pure' but have almost no way of gaining the financial independence that could protect them from offers such as D'Urberville's.

Bold statements about social class are also made in the novel. Hardy lived in a society where the increasing number of families with 'new money' was perceived as a real threat to the established aristocracy. His suggestion that Tess' old family name was not only materially useless to her but actually brought about her downfall would have directly contradicted many of his more conservative readers' views about the value of being of 'ancient stock'.

Although Hardy does not romanticise nature – as the descriptions of Tess' time at Flintcomb-Ashe show – he definitely presents natural ways as superior to those of the machine. This directly reflects the turmoil of post-industrial revolution Britain; while Hardy accepts that the world he lives in is industrialised and modern, the idyll he creates is agricultural and traditional. This mirrors a nation ill at ease with the frenetic rate of change brought about by the industrial age.

Points for your discussion:

- ∞ Do you think the subtitle 'A Pure Woman: Faithfully Presented' is an accurate description of Tess? Why does Hardy use this epithet to describe her and how does he challenge accepted conventions of the time in doing so?
- ∞ Hardy remarks that 'Tess' own people ... are never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way 'it was to be': do you think that Tess is a victim of fate or is she ultimately in charge of her destiny?
- ∞ Joan Durbeyfield more than twice advises the 'tractable' Tess on courses of action that prove disastrous for her. How responsible is she for Tess' sufferings?
- ∞ The discovery of Tess' 'ancient blood' is the catalyst for the series of tragic events that follow. Do you think that Hardy is presenting aristocracy as a poisonous force in society?
- ∞ Do you think that Tess was seduced or raped by Alec D'Urberville? Why do you think Hardy leaves this unclear?
- ∞ Is Angel Clare to blame for the way he reacted to Tess' confession, or is he merely a product of his times? How is Hardy attacking Victorian sexual hypocrisy here?
- ∞ In what ways are Tess' moral and practical decisions affected by her status as a woman, and not a 'proper' woman at that? How does Hardy present the constraints of womanhood throughout the novel?
- ∞ 'There was not a tree within sight; there was not ... a green pasture – nothing but fallow and turnips everywhere': this description of the 'starve-acre' farm at Flintcomb-Ashe fully reflects the downturn in Tess' fortunes and her emotional state at this point. Where else does Hardy use landscape to reflect the moods and situations of his characters, and do you find this effective?
- ∞ Was Tess morally justified in finally accepting Alec D'Urberville's offer of financial help, given the benefits it brought her family?
- ∞ Hardy often presents a simple, uneducated life close to the rhythms of nature as being physically and even morally healthier. We are told that 'Angel ... preferred sermons in stones to sermons in churches and chapels on fine summer days' and that the Talbothays milkmaids were 'generous young souls' due to having been brought up in 'lonely country nooks'. In what ways could Hardy's reverential attitude towards nature be seen as a reaction against the process of industrialisation?
- ∞ Was Tess justified in killing Alec D'Urberville? Does this alter your opinion of her as a 'pure' woman?

Other Novels by this Author:

Desperate Remedies 1871
Under the Greenwood Tree 1872
A Pair of Blue Eyes 1873
Far from the Madding Crowd 1874
The Hand of Ethelberta 1876
The Return of the Native 1878
The Trumpet-Major 1880
A Laodicean 1881

Two in a Tower 1882
The Mayor of Casterbridge 1886
The Woodlanders 1887
The Well-Beloved 1892
Jude the Obscure 1895

Recommended Reading

Far from the Madding Crowd Thomas Hardy
North and South Elizabeth Gaskell
Lady Chatterley's Lover D.H.Lawrence
The Woman in White Wilkie Collins
Dracula Bram Stoker

Online Resources

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/hardyov.html>

<http://www.hardysociety.org/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hardy

<http://www.yale.edu/hardysoc/Welcome/welcomet.htm>

<http://www.mantex.co.uk/ou/aa810/hardy-03.htm>