

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

by Thomas Hardy · Language: EN

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Overview

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, subtitled *A Pure Woman*, is a tragic novel by Thomas Hardy, first published in 1891. It tells the story of Tess Durbeyfield, a young woman from a poor rural family in Wessex, whose life is shattered when her father learns they are descended from the ancient noble family of d'Urbervilles. Sent to claim kinship with the wealthy d'Urberville family, Tess is seduced and raped by Alec d'Urberville, an event that sets off a chain of suffering, social ostracism, and personal anguish. The novel follows Tess through her subsequent relationships, particularly with Angel Clare, a clergyman's son who idealizes her but cannot accept her past, and her eventual tragic downfall.

The narrative is a scathing critique of Victorian morality, particularly the double standards applied to women's sexuality and the hypocrisy of a society that condemns the victim while excusing the perpetrator. Hardy's portrayal of Tess as a 'pure woman' despite her 'fallen' status challenges the era's rigid moral codes. The novel also explores themes of fate, the destructive power of social class, and the indifference of nature and the universe to human suffering. Tess's story is one of relentless misfortune, where every attempt to escape her past only tightens the noose, culminating in a devastating conclusion that underscores the novel's bleak determinism.

Why it matters: Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a cornerstone of Victorian literature, renowned for its vivid depiction of rural England, its sympathetic and complex heroine, and its bold attack on social injustice. It remains a powerful and moving read, sparking debate about morality, victimhood, and the role of fate in human life. Its influence can be seen in countless later works of fiction that explore the plight of women in patriarchal societies.

Key Takeaways

- Tess's tragedy is not just personal but systemic, exposing the hypocrisy of Victorian society that punishes women for sexual transgression while absolving men.
- Hardy's subtitle 'A Pure Woman' challenges readers to question conventional definitions of purity and morality.
- The novel illustrates how social class and family legacy can become an inescapable trap, shaping destiny regardless of individual merit.
- Angel Clare's idealization of Tess and his subsequent rejection reveal the dangers of romanticizing a partner rather than accepting their full humanity.

- Fate and coincidence play a relentless role in Tess's downfall, suggesting a universe indifferent to human suffering.
- The natural world in the novel often mirrors Tess's emotional state, from the fertile fields of her early life to the barren landscapes of her despair.
- Hardy's critique of organized religion and its complicity in social injustice is a central theme, embodied in characters like the hypocritical parson and the self-righteous Angel.

Chapter Summaries

Phase the First: The Maiden

Tess Durbeyfield, a beautiful young woman, learns from her father that they are the last descendants of the ancient d'Urberville family. Her mother, Joan, encourages her to claim kinship with the wealthy d'Urbervilles, hoping for a advantageous marriage. Tess reluctantly agrees to work at the d'Urberville estate, where she meets Alec, a dissolute young man who takes a predatory interest in her. After a series of encounters, Alec seduces (or rapes) Tess in the woods, leaving her pregnant and socially ruined. The child, named Sorrow, dies in infancy, and Tess is left with a tarnished reputation and a deep sense of shame.

Phase the Second: Maiden No More

After the death of her child, Tess leaves her village to escape the gossip and finds work at a dairy farm in Talbothays. There she meets Angel Clare, a thoughtful and idealistic young man studying to be a farmer. They fall deeply in love, and Tess is torn between her desire for happiness and her fear that her past will be discovered. Angel, who sees Tess as a pure and innocent 'daughter of nature,' proposes marriage. Tess, tormented by guilt, writes Angel a confession but slips it under his door, only to find it later hidden under the carpet, unread. She believes he has forgiven her and accepts his proposal, though she remains haunted by the secret.

Phase the Third: The Rally

Tess and Angel marry, and on their wedding night, Angel confesses to a brief affair with a woman in London. Tess, relieved, confesses her own past with Alec. Angel is horrified and cannot reconcile his idealized image of Tess with her reality. He tells her that she is not the woman he thought she was and that they must separate. Tess is devastated, but she accepts his judgment, believing she is unworthy of him. Angel gives her some money and leaves for Brazil, intending to start a new life, while Tess returns to her family, her hopes shattered.

Phase the Fourth: The Consequence

Tess struggles to find work and support her family after her father's death. She drifts from one harsh job to another, enduring poverty and hardship. She eventually encounters Alec d'Urberville again, who has undergone a religious conversion but still harbors a desire for her. Alec offers to help her and her family, but Tess refuses, still loyal to Angel. However, as her situation becomes

desperate, she is forced to accept Alec's support, and she eventually becomes his mistress again, though she does not love him. Her family's needs and her own exhaustion wear down her resistance.

Phase the Fifth: The Woman Pays

Angel, having failed in Brazil and fallen ill, returns to England, his views on Tess's past having softened. He searches for Tess, only to find her living with Alec. Tess, seeing Angel, is overwhelmed with grief and rage. She confronts Alec, blaming him for ruining her life, and in a fit of desperation, she stabs and kills him. She flees with Angel, and they spend a few days of fleeting happiness together, hiding in an abandoned mansion. The police eventually find them, and Tess is arrested. She is tried and sentenced to death, and the novel ends with her execution, with Angel and her sister Liza-Lu watching from a hill.

Phase the Sixth: The Convert

This phase is short and focuses on Angel's return and his search for Tess. He learns of her situation and is filled with remorse for his earlier rejection. He finds her at the boarding house where she lives with Alec, and his presence triggers the tragic climax. After Tess kills Alec, she and Angel flee together, and their brief idyll is described with poignant beauty. The phase ends with Tess's arrest and the final, bleak image of the flag being raised at the prison, signaling her execution.

Themes

- Fate and destiny
- Social hypocrisy
- Purity and morality
- Class and privilege
- Nature and the pastoral
- Gender double standards

Notable Quotes

- "A strong woman who recklessly throws away her strength, she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away." — Narrator's reflection on Tess's situation after her confession to Angel.
- "The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among things done, but among things willed." — Narrator's commentary on Angel's judgment of Tess.

- "I have been thinking of you—and what you have been to me—and what I have been to you. I have been thinking that I have been a poor man's wife, and I have been thinking that I have been a rich man's mistress. I have been thinking that I have been a good woman, and I have been thinking that I have been a bad woman." — Tess's speech to Angel near the end, reflecting on her life.
- "Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess." — Final lines of the novel, after Tess's execution.
- "The two men were silent, for the woman was dead." — Closing words of the novel, referring to Tess's execution and the watching Angel and Liza-Lu.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* about?

It's a tragic novel about a young woman, Tess Durbeyfield, who is seduced and raped by Alec d'Urberville, then rejected by her husband Angel Clare when he learns of her past. The story follows her struggles with poverty, social ostracism, and fate, culminating in her murder of Alec and her execution.

Is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* worth reading?

Yes, it's a classic of Victorian literature, praised for its powerful heroine, vivid descriptions of rural England, and its bold critique of social hypocrisy. It's emotionally intense and thought-provoking, though some find it bleak. If you enjoy character-driven tragedies with social commentary, it's definitely worth your time.

How does *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* end?

Spoiler: After Angel returns, Tess kills Alec in a fit of rage and flees with Angel. They spend a few days hiding, but Tess is captured and executed. The novel ends with Angel and Tess's sister Liza-Lu watching the black flag raised over the prison, signaling her death.

Who should read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*?

Readers who enjoy classic literature, tragic romances, and social critique will appreciate it. It's also a great choice for those interested in feminist perspectives on Victorian society, as it challenges the double standards of the time. If you like Hardy's other works or similar authors like George Eliot, you'll likely enjoy it.

How long does it take to read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*?

The book has about 130,000 words. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 8-9 hours. Most readers finish it in a week or two if reading a few chapters daily.