

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

By Thomas Hardy



Plot Overview

The poor peddler John Durbeyfield is stunned to learn that he is the descendent of an ancient noble family, the d'Urbervilles. Meanwhile, Tess, his eldest daughter, joins the other village girls in the May Day dance, where Tess briefly exchanges glances with a young man. Mr. Durbeyfield and his wife decide to send Tess to the d'Urberville mansion, where they hope Mrs. d'Urberville will make Tess's fortune. In reality, Mrs. d'Urberville is no relation to Tess at all: her husband, the merchant Simon Stokes, simply changed his name to d'Urberville after he retired. But Tess does not know this fact, and when the lascivious Alec d'Urberville, Mrs. d'Urberville's son, procures Tess a job tending fowls on the d'Urberville estate, Tess has no choice but to accept, since she blames herself for an accident involving the family's horse, its only means of income.

Tess spends several months at this job, resisting Alec's attempts to seduce her. Finally, Alec takes advantage of her in the woods one night after a fair. Tess knows she does not love Alec. She returns home to her family to give birth to Alec's child, whom she christens Sorrow. Sorrow dies soon after he is born, and Tess spends a miserable year at home before deciding to seek work elsewhere. She finally accepts a job as a milkmaid at the Talbothays Dairy.



Plot Overview Cont.

At Talbothays, Tess enjoys a period of contentment and happiness. She befriends three of her fellow milkmaids—Izz, Retty, and Marian—and meets a man named Angel Clare, who turns out to be the man from the May Day dance at the beginning of the novel. Tess and Angel slowly fall in love. They grow closer throughout Tess's time at Talbothays, and she eventually accepts his proposal of marriage. Still, she is troubled by pangs of conscience and feels she should tell Angel about her past. She writes him a confessional note and slips it under his door, but it slides under the carpet and Angel never sees it.

After their wedding, Angel and Tess both confess indiscretions: Angel tells Tess about an affair he had with an older woman in London, and Tess tells Angel about her history with Alec. Tess forgives Angel, but Angel cannot forgive Tess. He gives her some money and boards a ship bound for Brazil, where he thinks he might establish a farm. He tells Tess he will try to accept her past but warns her not to try to join him until he comes for her.

Tess struggles. She has a difficult time finding work and is forced to take a job at an unpleasant and unprosperous farm. She tries to visit Angel's family but overhears his brothers discussing Angel's poor marriage, so she leaves. She hears a wandering preacher speak and is stunned to discover that he is Alec d'Urberville, who has been converted to Christianity by Angel's father, the Reverend Clare. Alec and Tess are each shaken by their encounter, and Alec appallingly begs Tess never to tempt him again. Soon after, however, he again begs Tess to marry him, having turned his back on his - religious ways.



Plot Overview Cont.

Tess learns from her sister Liza-Lu that her mother is near death, and Tess is forced to return home to take care of her. Her mother recovers, but her father unexpectedly dies soon after. When the family is evicted from their home, Alec offers help. But Tess refuses to accept, knowing he only wants to obligate her to him again.

At last, Angel decides to forgive his wife. He leaves Brazil, desperate to find her. Instead, he finds her mother, who tells him Tess has gone to a village called Sandbourne. There, he finds Tess in an expensive boardinghouse called The Herons, where he tells her he has forgiven her and begs her to take him back. Tess tells him he has come too late. She was unable to resist and went back to Alec d'Urberville. Angel leaves in a daze, and, heartbroken to the point of madness, Tess goes upstairs and stabs her lover to death. When the landlady finds Alec's body, she raises an alarm, but Tess has already fled to find Angel.

Angel agrees to help Tess, though he cannot quite believe that she has actually murdered Alec. They hide out in an empty mansion for a few days, then travel farther. When they come to Stonehenge, Tess goes to sleep, but when morning breaks shortly thereafter, a search party discovers them. Tess is arrested and sent to jail. Angel and Liza-Lu watch as a black flag is raised over the prison, signaling Tess's execution.



Analysis of Major Characters

Tess d'Urberville:

Intelligent, strikingly attractive, and distinguished by her deep moral sensitivity and passionate intensity, Tess is indisputably the central character of the novel that bears her name. But she is also more than a distinctive individual: Hardy makes her into somewhat of a mythic heroine. Her name, formally Theresa, recalls St. Teresa of Avila, another martyr whose vision of a higher reality cost her her life. Other characters often refer to Tess in mythical terms, as when Angel calls her a “Daughter of Nature” in Chapter XVIII, or refers to her by the Greek mythological names “Artemis” and “Demeter” in Chapter XX. The narrator himself sometimes describes Tess as more than an individual woman, but as something closer to a mythical incarnation of womanhood. In Chapter XIV, he says that her eyes are “neither black nor blue nor grey nor violet; rather all these shades together,” like “an almost standard woman.” Tess's story may thus be a “standard” story, representing a deeper and larger experience than that of a single individual.

In part, Tess represents the changing role of the agricultural workers in England in the late nineteenth century. Possessing an education that her unschooled parents lack, since she has passed the Sixth Standard of the National Schools, Tess does not quite fit into the folk culture of her predecessors, but financial constraints keep her from rising to a higher station in life. She belongs in that higher world, however, as we discover on the first page of the novel with the news that the Durbeyfields are the surviving members of the noble and ancient family of the d'Urbervilles. There is aristocracy in Tess's blood, visible in her graceful beauty—yet she is forced to work as a farmhand and milkmaid. When she tries to express her joy by singing lower-class folk ballads at the beginning of the third part of the novel, they do not satisfy her—she seems not quite comfortable with those popular songs. But, on the other hand, her diction, while more polished than her mother's, is not quite up to the level of Alec's or Angel's. She is in between, both socially and culturally. Thus, Tess is a symbol of unclear and unstable notions of class in nineteenth-century Britain, where old family lines retained their earlier glamour, but where cold economic realities made sheer wealth more important than inner nobility.



Analysis of Major Characters

Tess Cont.

Beyond her social symbolism, Tess represents fallen humanity in a religious sense, as the frequent biblical allusions in the novel remind us. Just as Tess's clan was once glorious and powerful but is now sadly diminished, so too did the early glory of the first humans, Adam and Eve, fade with their expulsion from Eden, making humans sad shadows of what they once were. Tess thus represents what is known in Christian theology as *original sin*, the degraded state in which all humans live, even when—like Tess herself after killing Prince or succumbing to Alec—they are not wholly or directly responsible for the sins for which they are punished. This torment represents the most universal side of Tess: she is the myth of the human who suffers for crimes that are not her own and lives a life more degraded than she deserves.



Analysis of Major Characters

Alec d'Urberville

An insouciant twenty-four-year-old man, heir to a fortune, and bearer of a name that his father purchased, Alec is the nemesis and downfall of Tess's life. His first name, Alexander, suggests the conqueror—as in Alexander the Great—who seizes what he wants regardless of moral propriety. Yet he is more slippery than a grand conqueror. His full last name, Stoke-d'Urberville, symbolizes the split character of his family, whose origins are simpler than their pretensions to grandeur. After all, Stokes is a blunt and inelegant name. Indeed, the divided and duplicitous character of Alec is evident to the very end of the novel, when he quickly abandons his newfound Christian faith upon remeeting Tess. It is hard to believe Alec holds his religion, or anything else, sincerely. His supposed conversion may only be a new role he is playing.

This duplicity of character is so intense in Alec, and its consequences for Tess so severe, that he becomes diabolical. The first part of his surname conjures associations with fiery energies, as in the stoking of a furnace or the flames of hell. His devilish associations are evident when he wields a pitchfork while addressing Tess early in the novel, and when he seduces her as the serpent in Genesis seduced Eve. Additionally, like the famous depiction of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Alec does not try to hide his bad qualities. In fact, like Satan, he revels in them. In Chapter XII, he bluntly tells Tess, "I suppose I am a bad fellow—a damn bad fellow. I was born bad, and I have lived bad, and I shall die bad, in all probability." There is frank acceptance in this admission and no shame. Some readers feel Alec is too wicked to be believable, but, like Tess herself, he represents a larger moral principle rather than a real individual man. Like Satan, Alec symbolizes the base forces of life that drive a person away from moral perfection and greatness.



Analysis of Major Characters

Angel Clare

A freethinking son born into the family of a provincial parson and determined to set himself up as a farmer instead of going to Cambridge like his conformist brothers, Angel represents a rebellious striving toward a personal vision of goodness. He is a secularist who yearns to work for the “honor and glory of man,” as he tells his father in Chapter XVIII, rather than for the honor and glory of God in a more distant world. A typical young nineteenth-century progressive, Angel sees human society as a thing to be remolded and improved, and he fervently believes in the nobility of man. He rejects the values handed to him, and sets off in search of his own. His love for Tess, a mere milkmaid and his social inferior, is one expression of his disdain for tradition. This independent spirit contributes to his aura of charisma and general attractiveness that makes him the love object of all the milkmaids with whom he works at Talbothays.

As his name—in French, close to “Bright Angel”—suggests, Angel is not quite of this world, but floats above it in a transcendent sphere of his own. The narrator says that Angel shines rather than burns and that he is closer to the intellectually aloof poet Shelley than to the fleshly and passionate poet Byron. His love for Tess may be abstract, as we guess when he calls her “Daughter of Nature” or “Demeter.” Tess may be more an archetype or ideal to him than a flesh and blood woman with a complicated life. Angel's ideals of human purity are too elevated to be applied to actual people: Mrs. Durbeyfield's easygoing moral beliefs are much more easily accommodated to real lives such as Tess's. Angel awakens to the actual complexities of real-world morality after his failure in Brazil, and only then he realizes he has been unfair to Tess. His moral system is readjusted as he is brought down to Earth. Ironically, it is not the angel who guides the human in this novel, but the human who instructs the angel, although at the cost of her own life.



Themes

The Injustice of Existence

Unfairness dominates the lives of Tess and her family to such an extent that it begins to seem like a general aspect of human existence in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess does not mean to kill Prince, but she is punished anyway, just as she is unfairly punished for her own rape by Alec. Nor is there justice waiting in heaven. Christianity teaches that there is compensation in the afterlife for unhappiness suffered in this life, but the only devout Christian encountered in the novel may be the reverend, Mr. Clare, who seems more or less content in his life anyway. For others in their misery, Christianity offers little solace of heavenly justice. Mrs. Durbeyfield never mentions otherworldly rewards. The converted Alec preaches heavenly justice for earthly sinners, but his faith seems shallow and insincere. Generally, the moral atmosphere of the novel is not Christian justice at all, but pagan injustice. The forces that rule human life are absolutely unpredictable and not necessarily well-disposed to us. The pre-Christian rituals practiced by the farm workers at the opening of the novel, and Tess's final rest at Stonehenge at the end, remind us of a world where the gods are not just and fair, but whimsical and uncaring. When the narrator concludes the novel with the statement that "Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals (in the Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess," we are reminded that justice must be put in ironic quotation marks, since it is not really just at all. What passes for "Justice" is in fact one of the pagan gods enjoying a bit of "sport," or a frivolous game.



Themes

Changing Ideas of Social Class in Victorian England

Tess of the d'Urbervilles presents complex pictures of both the importance of social class in nineteenth-century England and the difficulty of defining class in any simple way. Certainly the Durbeyfields are a powerful emblem of the way in which class is no longer evaluated in Victorian times as it would have been in the Middle Ages—that is, by blood alone, with no attention paid to fortune or worldly success. Indubitably the Durbeyfields have purity of blood, yet for the parson and nearly everyone else in the novel, this fact amounts to nothing more than a piece of genealogical trivia. In the Victorian context, cash matters more than lineage, which explains how Simon Stokes, Alec's father, was smoothly able to use his large fortune to purchase a lustrous family name and transform his clan into the Stoke-d'Urbervilles. The d'Urbervilles pass for what the Durbeyfields truly are—authentic nobility—simply because definitions of class have changed. The issue of class confusion even affects the Clare clan, whose most promising son, Angel, is intent on becoming a farmer and marrying a milkmaid, thus bypassing the traditional privileges of a Cambridge education and a parsonage. His willingness to work side by side with the farm laborers helps endear him to Tess, and their acquaintance would not have been possible if he were a more traditional and elitist aristocrat. Thus, the three main characters in the Angel-Tess-Alec triangle are all strongly marked by confusion regarding their respective social classes, an issue that is one of the main concerns of the novel.



Themes

Men Dominating Women

One of the recurrent themes of the novel is the way in which men can dominate women, exerting a power over them linked primarily to their maleness. Sometimes this command is purposeful, in the man's full knowledge of his exploitation, as when Alec acknowledges how bad he is for seducing Tess for his own momentary pleasure. Alec's act of abuse, the most life-altering event that Tess experiences in the novel, is clearly the most serious instance of male domination over a female. But there are other, less blatant examples of women's passivity toward dominant men. When, after Angel reveals that he prefers Tess, Tess's friend Retty attempts suicide and her friend Marian becomes an alcoholic, which makes their earlier schoolgirl-type crushes on Angel seem disturbing. This devotion is not merely fanciful love, but unhealthy obsession. These girls appear utterly dominated by a desire for a man who, we are told explicitly, does not even realize that they are interested in him. This sort of unconscious male domination of women is perhaps even more unsettling than Alec's outward and self-conscious cruelty.

Even Angel's love for Tess, as pure and gentle as it seems, dominates her in an unhealthy way. Angel substitutes an idealized picture of Tess's country purity for the real-life woman that he continually refuses to get to know. When Angel calls Tess names like "Daughter of Nature" and "Artemis," we feel that he may be denying her true self in favor of a mental image that he prefers. Thus, her identity and experiences are suppressed, albeit unknowingly. This pattern of male domination is finally reversed with Tess's murder of Alec, in which, for the first time in the novel, a woman takes active steps against a man. Of course, this act only leads to even greater suppression of a woman by men, when the crowd of male police officers arrest Tess at Stonehenge. Nevertheless, for just a moment, the accepted pattern of submissive women bowing to dominant men is interrupted, and Tess's act seems heroic.



Motifs

Birds

Images of birds recur throughout the novel, evoking or contradicting their traditional spiritual association with a higher realm of transcendence. Both the Christian dove of peace and the Romantic songbirds of Keats and Shelley, which symbolize sublime heights, lead us to expect that birds will have positive meaning in this novel. Tess occasionally hears birdcalls on her frequent hikes across the countryside; their free expressiveness stands in stark contrast to Tess's silent and constrained existence as a wronged and disgraced girl. When Tess goes to work for Mrs. d'Urberville, she is surprised to find that the old woman's pet finches are frequently released to fly free throughout the room. These birds offer images of hope and liberation. Yet there is irony attached to birds as well, making us doubt whether these images of hope and freedom are illusory. Mrs. d'Urberville's birds leave little white spots on the upholstery, which presumably some servant—perhaps Tess herself—will have to clean. It may be that freedom for one creature entails hardship for another, just as Alec's free enjoyment of Tess's body leads her to a lifetime of suffering. In the end, when Tess encounters the pheasants maimed by hunters and lying in agony, birds no longer seem free, but rather oppressed and submissive. These pheasants are no Romantic songbirds hovering far above the Earth—they are victims of earthly violence, condemned to suffer down below and never fly again.



Motifs

The Book of Genesis

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is evoked repeatedly throughout *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, giving the novel a broader metaphysical and philosophical dimension. The roles of Eve and the serpent in paradise are clearly delineated: Angel is the noble Adam newly born, while Tess is the indecisive and troubled Eve. When Tess gazes upon Angel in Chapter XXVII, “she regarded him as Eve at her second waking might have regarded Adam.” Alec, with his open avowal that he is bad to the bone, is the conniving Satan. He seduces Tess under a tree, giving her sexual knowledge in return for her lost innocence. The very name of the forest where this seduction occurs, the Chase, suggests how Eve will be chased from Eden for her sins. This guilt, which will never be erased, is known in Christian theology as the original sin that all humans have inherited. Just as John Durbeyfield is told in Chapter I that “you don't live anywhere,” and his family is evicted after his death at the end of the novel, their homelessness evokes the human exile from Eden. Original sin suggests that humans have fallen from their once great status to a lower station in life, just as the d'Urbervilles have devolved into the modern Durbeyfields. This Story of the Fall—or of the “Pure Drop,” to recall the name of a pub in Tess's home village—is much more than a social fall. It is an explanation of how all of us humans—not only Tess—never quite seem to live up to our expectations, and are never able to inhabit the places of grandeur we feel we deserve



Motifs

Variant Names

The transformation of the d'Urbervilles into the Durbeyfields is one example of the common phenomenon of renaming, or variant naming, in the novel. Names matter in this novel. Tess knows and accepts that she is a lowly Durbeyfield, but part of her still believes, as her parents also believe, that her aristocratic original name should be restored. John Durbeyfield goes a step further than Tess, and actually renames himself Sir John, as his tombstone epitaph shows. Another character who renames himself is Simon Stokes, Angel's father, who purchased a family tree and made himself Simon Stoke-d'Urberville. The question raised by all these cases of name changing, whether successful or merely imagined, is the extent to which an altered name brings with it an altered identity. Alec acts notoriously ungentlemanly throughout the novel, but by the end, when he appears at the d'Urberville family vault, his lordly and commanding bearing make him seem almost deserving of the name his father has bought, like a spoiled medieval nobleman. Hardy's interest in name changes makes reality itself seem changeable according to whims of human perspective. The village of Blakemore, as we are reminded twice in Chapters I and II, is also known as Blackmoor, and indeed Hardy famously renames the southern English countryside as "Wessex." He imposes a fictional map on a real place, with names altered correspondingly. Reality may not be as solid as the names people confer upon it.



Symbols

Prince

When Tess dozes off in the wagon and loses control, the resulting death of the Durbeyfield horse, Prince, spurs Tess to seek aid from the d'Urbervilles, setting the events of the novel in motion. The horse's demise is thus a powerful plot motivator, and its name a potent symbol of Tess's own claims to aristocracy. Like the horse, Tess herself bears a high-class name, but is doomed to a lowly life of physical labor. Interestingly, Prince's death occurs right after Tess dreams of ancient knights, having just heard the news that her family is aristocratic. Moreover, the horse is pierced by the forward-jutting piece of metal on a mail coach, which is reminiscent of a wound one might receive in a medieval joust. In an odd way, Tess's dream of medieval glory comes true, and her horse dies a heroic death. Yet her dream of meeting a prince while she kills her own Prince, and with him her family's only means of financial sustenance, is a tragic foreshadowing of her own story. The death of the horse symbolizes the sacrifice of real-world goods, such as a useful animal or even her own honor, through excessive fantasizing about a better world.



Symbols

The d'Urberville Family Vault

A double-edged symbol of both the majestic grandeur and the lifeless hollowness of the aristocratic family name that the Durbeyfields learn they possess, the d'Urberville family vault represents both the glory of life and the end of life. Since Tess herself moves from passivity to active murder by the end of the novel, attaining a kind of personal grandeur even as she brings death to others and to herself, the double symbolism of the vault makes it a powerful site for the culminating meeting between Alec and Tess. Alec brings Tess both his lofty name and, indirectly, her own death later; it is natural that he meets her in the vault in d'Urberville Aisle, where she reads her own name inscribed in stone and feels the presence of death. Yet the vault that sounds so glamorous when rhapsodized over by John Durbeyfield in Chapter I seems, by the end, strangely hollow and meaningless. When Alec stomps on the floor of the vault, it produces only a hollow echo, as if its basic emptiness is a complement to its visual grandeur. When Tess is executed, her ancestors are said to snooze on in their crypts, as if uncaring even about the fate of a member of their own majestic family. Perhaps the secret of the family crypt is that its grandiosity is ultimately meaningless.



Symbols

Brazil

Rather surprising for a novel that seems set so solidly in rural England, the narration shifts very briefly to Brazil when Angel takes leave of Tess and heads off to establish a career in farming. Even more exotic for a Victorian English reader than America or Australia, Brazil is the country in which Robinson Crusoe made his fortune and it seems to promise a better life far from the humdrum familiar world. Brazil is thus more than a geographical entity on the map in this novel: it symbolizes a fantasyland, a place where dreams come true. As Angel's name suggests, he is a lofty visionary who lacks some experience with the real world, despite all his mechanical know-how in farm management. He may be able to milk cows, but he does not yet know how to tell the difference between an exotic dream and an everyday reality, so inevitably his experience in the imagined dream world of Brazil is a disaster that he barely survives. His fiasco teaches him that ideals do not exist in life, and this lesson helps him reevaluate his disappointment with Tess's imperfections, her failure to incarnate the ideal he expected her to be. For Angel, Brazil symbolizes the impossibility of ideals, but also forgiveness and acceptance of life in spite of those disappointed ideals.

