

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Tess of the D’Urbervilles”

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AREA 1:

READING & THE STUDY OF TEXTS: TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES

Chapter 1 GENRE

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891) is a Victorian novel best described as a tragedy; perhaps even a tragic love story. The underlying theme of Hardy's novels, to which *Tess* is characteristic, is the struggle of humans against the indifferent forces that rule the world, inflicting on them the sufferings and ironies of life and love. Hardy's novels are certainly morose, if not unrelentingly pessimistic, although the pages do feature a great deal of comedy, especially in their depiction of the rustic life of village communities that feature so heavily. Another key ingredient is Hardy's vivid and affectionate portrait of the natural world, often used to symbolic effect, as it is in *Tess*. The novel is firmly within the Victorian tradition, having a generic preoccupation with diverging religious considerations, social class and morality, and the impact of industrialisation and modern business on the traditional world; indeed, a character like Angel Clare can only come from a Victorian novel: his fastidious and passionless attempt to transcend the attitudes of his time, only to find himself an intellectually thin-blooded exponent of these values that he so shallowly doubts, is very typical of the genre. Alec would also fit as the villain in any Victorian melodrama (all he lacks is the twirling moustache and maniacal laughter). Even so, Hardy's bleakness and emotional dislocation that is tinged with angst at the absurdity of life could allow his novels to be viewed as belonging to the modernist tradition characteristic of the twentieth century; indeed, Hardy is often considered a nineteenth century novelist and a twentieth century poet. To sum up, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* can be considered a Victorian tragic novel, and its construction is heavily influenced by epic and pastoral poetry that has been rendered into prose.

Chapter 2

STRUCTURE

Integrated within the novel's structure is a manipulation of setting to complement the mood of the scene Hardy is depicting. That is not to say that he merely symbolises the mood through the landscape, but that he manages to ensure that the landscape provides another perspective on the events of the novel.

The novel is divided into 58 Chapters, which appear within seven sections that Hardy calls *Phases*. Reading the titles of the phases gives the reader an externalised and plotted rendition of Tess's life: her experiences are divided into neat sections to render her life rigidly defined by these events, as though her life were a linear argument for inexorable fate. Hardy does this to emphasise a fatalistic view of life where one choice linearly leads to a consequence, so that each event becomes a shadowy foreboding of a future end.

The first phase, entitled '*Maiden*', examines Tess before her fall from innocence, when she lives in the rustic environs of the tame, mild Vale of Blackmoor. The title of the second phase, '*Maiden No More*', set in the wilder desolation of The Chase, emphasises the irreversibility of Tess's moral position once she has been seduced- she can no longer be what she was. The title nostalgically rings the death knell to virginity and innocence, and the phase culminates in the burial of Tess's unfortunate offspring.

The third phase is called '*The Rally*', and the heightened tempo of the title prepares for a return to high spirits in the rustic idyll of the Talbothay Dairy. It is within this ephemeral paradise that Tess and Angel coyly notice one another, and the romantic tension heightens until Angel makes his uncharacteristically passionate move. At this stage, the novel could allow itself to end happily, but the fourth phase, ominously entitled '*The Consequence*', shatters this possibility. The 'consequence' ambiguously alluded to in the title does not only refer to the joyous consequence of Angel embracing Tess, which consequentially leads to a wedding, but rather, the consequence refers to the price Tess has to pay for her past. Once Tess confesses to Angel, their bliss is doomed, and the fifth phase called '*The Woman Pays*', set in the harsh desolation of Flintcomb-Ash, charts how a vindictive fate makes Tess pay for her past with an unforgiving existence in an unforgiving landscape.

The sixth phase can be seen as a cruel parallel to the first phase when Alec initially seduces Tess. '*The Convert*', which refers to Alec's discovery of faith, is clearly ironic, because Alec's infatuation with Tess that causes his lapse in faith demonstrates that this penitent had not in reality converted at all. There is a parallel to be drawn with Tess, because like Alec she attempted to convert and live her life differently, but despite her apparent resolve to avoid repeating her fall from grace, she eventually succumbs, and her conversion is in this way as fleeting as Alec's. Hardy forces his readers to recognise that Tess may exhibit different phases, but the Tess of 'Phase the First' has a continuity with the Tess of the 'Phase the Sixth'.

The seventh phase, '*Fulfilment*', captures Tess's final expurgation of her sin (or at least a psychological expurgation that frees her of her guilt). There is an end to Tess's struggle-filled life: she can find 'fulfilment' through the liberating sacrifice of consummating her true love regardless of the moral considerations, and she can finally rid herself of the guilt that has weighed down her life on the fittingly spiritual grounds of Stonehenge. By killing Alec, Tess has no more to suffer - she gives up the struggle and is free to reclaim her life, albeit short lived. Of course, the title of 'fulfilment' could also refer to her

reaping the judgment enacted upon her by the world of men and gods, in the tradition captured in the maxim 'the rewards of sin is death; although Hardy is clearly being ironic here: Tess's end is tragic, but her final moments depicted in the novel are the most life-fulfilling and happiest of her life.

SAMPLE