



Synopsis

The novel charts through seven phases the brief life of a young milkmaid, Tess Durbeyfield, whose striking looks make her prey to the attentions of two very different men: the womanising cad, Alec D'Urberville, and the religiously inspired idealist, Angel Clare. In phase one Tess's father is told that he is related to the aristocratic D'Urberville family and gets so drunk that he is unable to drive to market. Tess goes instead but falls asleep and is responsible for the accident that kills the family horse. To make amends, a remorseful Tess agrees to visit a Mrs D'Urberville to ask for help. Unbeknown to them, the D'Urbervilles are simply successful business people who have recently moved into the area and have taken over the name. While there, Tess meets Mrs D'Urberville's son, Alec, who is immediately attracted to Tess's beauty. He encourages his mother to employ her and continually pursues her, eventually sleeping with her in the woods.

In the second phase, a pregnant and guilt-ridden Tess returns home, where her unsympathetic mother blames her for not forcing Alec to marry her. She returns to field work with her newborn baby and finds the villagers sympathetic to her plight. When the child falls sick and death seems inevitable, she is forced to carry out the christening herself. Following an angry exchange with the parish priest, she manages to get 'Sorrow' buried in the church grounds. Saddened by her plight, she decides to move elsewhere in search of a new start.

The third phase is characterised by the pastoral beauty of summer at Talbothays dairy. Here, under the benevolent guidance of dairyman Crick, she meets the young gentleman who rejected her at the Marlott dance, Angel Clare. He has rejected a university place, and the Christian orthodoxy of his family, in order to learn about farming. Tess and Angel fall in love but she is torn between a conscience that urges her to confess her past and her fear of losing him.

As, in the fourth phase, they move towards marriage, her continual attempts to confess (including a letter that goes astray) are thwarted. On their wedding night, prompted by Angel's revelations of his own romantic past, she tells him her secret — the narrative bringing the phase to an end.

The fifth phase begins with the end of her narrative and Angel's consequent rejection: she is not the woman he loved. After a few frosty days, he sails for Brazil, attracted by the farming prospects, and she

returns home. Her parents remain unsympathetic and unscrupulously take advantage of her good nature to use the money Angel has given her to repair their roof. As a consequence, Tess is forced to look for work over the winter, finding it at Flintcomb-Ash. In harsh conditions that are the **antithesis** of Talbothays, she meets some of the milkmaids who have fallen on hard times. Encouraged by them, she eventually resolves to seek help from Angel's family, who are unaware of the marriage failure. Unfortunately, she overhears Angel's brothers and a former suitor, Mercy Chant, talking disparagingly about the marriage and she therefore runs away without meeting the parents. While walking back, she is shocked to see a newly converted Alec D'Urberville preaching in a cowshed.

In the sixth phase, The Convert, Alec pursues Tess all over again, claiming that he cannot sustain his faith in her company. He presents himself as reformed, offering to marry her and take care financially of her brothers and sisters. For some time Tess resists, but her mother's illness, her father's death, and the loss of the family home, lead to a crumbling of her determination.

In the seventh phase Angel returns from Brazil. His harsh experiences abroad and the words of a dying companion have convinced him that he has treated Tess badly. He tracks her down to a small seaside resort, Sandbourne, and, seeing that she is well provided for by Alec, leaves. Tess, distraught, accuses Alec of lying to her that Angel would never return and murders him in a fit of passion. She runs after Angel and together they evade their pursuers for a blissful week. Eventually, they are caught at Stonehenge, where Tess makes Angel promise that he will look after her younger sister, 'Liza-Lu. Tess is arrested and hanged.

antithesis contrast of ideas expressed by balancing words or phrases of opposite meaning, e.g. being cruel to be kind

Taking it Further

Read Hardy's poem 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' (1903) (available on www.victorianweb.org), which relates a true story that has parallels with the fate of Tess. Set in the vale of Blackmoor and written in strong Dorset dialect, it concerns the tragedy that arises from the love of two men for a single woman.



Chapter summaries and commentaries

PHASE THE FIRST *The Maiden*

Chapter I

Jack Durbeyfield is on his way home to Marlott when he is accosted by the antiquarian, Parson Tringham, who tells him of his descent from the ‘ancient and knightly family of the D’Urbervilles’, now extinct, and that he should reflect on ‘how are the mighty fallen’. Ignoring such advice, the shiftless Jack immediately orders rum and a coach to carry him the rest of the way.

Commentary: **Through detailed references to actual geographical locations, Hardy creates a sense of verisimilitude — a feature emphasised by Durbeyfield’s dialect. Hardy’s decision to open the novel with this incident also foregrounds the theme of heredity that is to be central to the novel.**

Chapter II

The Blackmoor Vale is described in great detail and we are introduced to its historical legacy, particularly the killing of the white hart and the pagan fertility dance of the ‘club-walking’. At this stage Tess is described as ‘a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience’, her momentary happiness destroyed by the entry of her drunken father. Three young gentlemen stop to observe the dancing and one, Angel, joins in. As he is leaving he sees Tess looking after him and wishes that he had danced with her.

Commentary: **Hardy introduces his main characters but, while Tess is associated with innocence, nature and fun, Angel is an outsider, a detached ‘on-looker’, his brothers snobbishly refusing to dance with country girls. His momentary indulgence sets up the irony that will dominate his relationship with Tess and he misses his chance to dance with her because he obeys the**

Task 1

Read the opening two pages of Hardy’s novels *The Woodlanders* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. How do these compare with *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*? Think about:

- Hardy’s description of setting and character
- the syntax (word order) of the opening sentences
- the tone (focus on key words)
- how these openings prepare us for the story to come

church clock. Colour symbolism is important: Tess's white dress associates her with the purity and innocence of the hunted white hart, and through her red lips and the red ribbon in her hair Hardy launches a symbolic train through which he reinforces the inevitability of her tragedy.

Chapter III

Tess returns home and is told of her father's discovery, and her mother goes in search of John, who is out celebrating. When neither of them returns, Tess is forced to go to the Pure Drop in search of them.

Commentary: **We are introduced to the 'shiftless house of Durbeyfield', the 'unspeakable dreariness'. Hardy also indicates the personal qualities that will shape Tess's future: she has evolved beyond her family, which means that they are unable to understand her moral anguish later in the novel; furthermore, she feels a sense of responsibility for the family — 'a chill self-reproach' that she has been dancing while her mother has been working — which Alec will later manipulate.**

Chapter IV

At Rolliver's Inn Mrs Durbeyfield unfolds her plan to send Tess to 'claim kin', hoping that it may lead to 'some noble gentleman marrying her'. Tess and Abraham are forced to take hives to market early in the morning. Exhausted, Tess falls asleep with the result that the morning mail cart runs into them, killing their horse, Prince. Understanding its importance to the family, she blames herself, seeing 'herself in the light of a murderess'.

Commentary: **Joan's willingness to prostitute her daughter for economic gain is contrasted with Tess's readiness to take responsibility for the accident. It is this heightened sense of moral responsibility that will be her undoing. It is a chapter full of foreboding: Tess's pessimistic vision of the earth as a 'blighted one' seems vindicated by events. Her dreams of marriage to a handsome prince are ended by the spearing, as if by a lance, of her horse, Prince, which will in turn throw her into the arms of the false knight in shining armour — Alec. Hardy reinforces the fatalism through the red blood of Prince, which drenches her.**

Chapter V

Tess's guilt leads to her agreeing to visit Mrs D'Urberville. However, the D'Urbervilles are newly wealthy industrialists who have just adopted the

Context

Hardy questions Wordsworth's Romantic vision of 'Nature's holy plan'. These words are taken from Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring' and reflect his belief that the beauty of Nature reflects the existence of a benevolent god.



melodrama

sensational dramatic piece with crude appeal to the emotions; also a staple Victorian literary and dramatic genre

Task 2

Write Tess's account of her first meeting with Alec. You should aim to write in Tess's voice, building upon Hardy's presentation of her character and capturing aspects of the writer's chosen form, structure and language.

name. At The Slopes she meets the arrogant Alec who, during a tour of the garden, makes clear his attraction.

Commentary: **Alec appears for the first time, the caricature womanising villain of melodrama with his moustache and 'bold rolling eye'. It is a meeting of experience and innocence, Hardy evoking the Garden of Eden, with Alec hidden behind his skeins of smoke, observing his Eve as she munches an apple. Colour imagery emphasises the sense of foreboding: Alec emerges from the 'dark' of the tent and adorns Tess's white dress with red. His forcing her to eat strawberries from his hand foreshadows his later seduction of her. Hardy amplifies the inevitability of events through the description of Alec as the "tragic mischief" of her drama' and the 'blood-red ray in the spectrum of her young life'.**

Chapter VI

Tess receives a letter, purportedly from Mrs D'Urberville, offering her a job on the poultry farm. Despite misgivings, she gives in to family pressure and, spurred by her sense of guilt, agrees to go.

Commentary: **Hardy notes with great irony that the thorn of one of Alec's roses that pricks her chin is the only ill omen that she observed that day: as his careful use of colour has made clear, she is already ensnared in a tragic web. She had hoped to become a teacher, Hardy notes wistfully, but guilt for the death of Prince and compassion for her family's poverty drive her against her instincts back to Alec, a pattern that will be repeated later in the book.**

Chapter VII

Joan dresses Tess in the white dress she wore at the Marlott dance and takes her to be met by Alec. She is delighted when he appears in a gig and when Tess, despite some hesitation, sits beside him. Later that night she begins to wish she had made more enquiries about the man's character but quietens her doubts with the reflection 'if he don't marry her afore he will after'.

Commentary: **Hardy builds up the sense of foreboding by having Tess prepared like a sacrificial victim in a dress that emphasises her purity and innocence. Her misgivings are dramatised by her reluctance to mount beside Alec, which we observe at a distance through the eyes of Joan. It is her narrative perspective that allows Alec to become 'the handsome, horsey young buck' and it**

is her reactions to events that are foregrounded to emphasise the extent of Tess's passive sacrifice.

Chapter VIII

Alec drives recklessly in order to frighten Tess into putting her arms around him. Eventually she is forced to allow him to kiss her and, though 'D'Urberville gave her the kiss of mastery', she quickly hatches her own strategy to get away from him. Having exchanged harsh words, they continue on their way, Alec in the gig and Tess walking.

Commentary: **Alec shows his true colours, his violent control of the horse offering a premonition of his treatment of Tess, who is merely a 'cottage girl' to be 'mastered'. Tess, however, proves feisty, not only in her openly wiping his kiss from her cheek but in her matronly observation that 'you ought to be ashamed of yourself...'. The chapter is laced with irony: Alec blames the character of his horse on fate, when the fate of another horse delivered Tess to him; and ironic foreboding in Alec's exclamation 'Kinsman be hanged!'**

Chapter IX

Tess is hired to look after blind Mrs D'Urberville's poultry, which includes whistling to them. Alec treats her with studied charm and civility, which 'removed most of her original shyness of him'.

Commentary: **Class is important: the removal of Tess to the deserted house identifies her as a servant and also foreshadows the family eviction later in the novel. She is also aligned with the caged birds, a common symbol in the Victorian period to indicate female vulnerability. Alec's whistling lessons are full of erotic overtones, not simply because of the sensual aspects of the pursed lips, but also because, according to Darwin, birds sing to attract a mate. Alec, therefore, releases her sexuality and covertly becomes her audience (see the section on 'Birds' on pp. 52–52 of this guide).**

Chapter X

Tess visits Chaseborough on Saturday night and when returning she refuses the offers of Alec, eventually parting with her work colleagues and getting caught up in an argument with an old favourite of Alec's, Car Darch, the Queen of Spades. Alec appears to ride to her rescue and Tess impulsively jumps up behind him — 'out of the frying-pan into the fire' as Darch observes.

Pause for Thought



How might the following feminist perspective enrich your reading of this scene?

'Alec's gig...is not simply the equivalent of a sports-car, his badge of machismo, wealth and social status. It is also a symbolic expression of the way in which Tess is deprived of control over her own body...whether by Alec himself or by the alien rhythms of the threshing machine.' (Mary Jacobus, *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, 1979).



Commentary: **The erotic atmosphere of the dance led to this event's excision from the Graphic version of the novel (and, therefore, from the 2003 Penguin Classics edition). The purity of Tess, who is 'on the momentary threshold of womanhood' is indicated by her refusal to go with Alec. However, she is undone by fate, it is her 'misfortune' to be caught laughing at 'the Queen of Spades', the latter's name reinforcing her symbolic function in the plot.**

Chapter XI

Alec takes a desperately tired Tess into the fog of The Chase — 'the oldest wood in England' — where he continues his wooing by announcing that he has bought gifts for her family. Deliberately losing his way, he stops to make a 'nest' for her while he pretends to go off in search of a landmark. Upon his return he finds her sleeping and, 'as the coarse appropriates the finer', he has sex with her.

Top ten *quotation* >

Pause for Thought

Is Tess raped or seduced? Hardy is deliberately vague (not offending Victorian Morality), but references to the 'primaeval yews and oaks of The Chase' and Tess's ancestors suggest that to some degree Tess gives way to more primitive urges. What do you think?

Commentary: **The whole chapter, most of which was missing from the Graphic, is bathed in fog, which is entirely appropriate because we are not quite sure what happens. Hardy's outrage, however, is palpable, his awkward narrative intervention focusing on the purity of Tess while deriding the Christian idea of a 'guardian angel' or sense of justice. It happened because 'it was to be': fate is simply indifferent.**

PHASE THE SECOND *Maiden no More*

Chapter XII

Four months after her arrival at Trantridge, Tess eventually slips away. She maintains her dignity by refusing Alec's offer of compensation. He remains cynical about her suffering but also admits that he is a 'bad fellow'. She meets an itinerant sign-painter whose red slogans prick her conscience. When Tess arrives home her mother criticises her for not getting Alec to marry her.

Commentary: **Tess enters a relationship with Alec following her seduction, but then blames herself for her weakness. Her helplessness is articulated by her statement 'see how you've mastered me'. The sign-painter offers an attack on the cold rigidity of church morality, which foreshadows her later difficulties, and Tess instinctively exclaims: 'I don't believe any of it!' Experience has been the tutor of Tess, Hardy evoking the**