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CRITICAL APPROACHES

CHARACTERISATION

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is like a medieval morality play, a **psychomachea**, in which Angel and Alec – the former representing virtue and the latter vice – seem to fight for the soul of Tess. Our understanding of each of the characters therefore depends, in part, on their relationship to the others in the novel.

TESS

Tess originally presented a problem for critics because of her 'purity'; today, it is still all too easy to ask, 'Do you support her?', to see her as a real person who is independent of the text. Tess of the d'Urbervilles, a pure woman, is, however, a complex fictional character who is used by Hardy to represent the insoluble social and biological ills of his day. Because of this complexity it is possible to read her, and therefore the novel, in a variety of ways.

First of all it is important to realise that Tess is a figure in whom oppositions like virgin and whore collapse; she is not one thing or the other, but both. Both unapprehending peasant and educated woman, she speaks two languages – the dialect of her home and an educated Sixth Standard English; she acts according to nature, but is sensitive to social convention; the passive innocent, she is still, in part, prideful and responsible for what happens to her; a victim, she is also a murderess. You cannot tell what she is just by looking at her, and the novel is structured around the dangers of misreading her as Angel and Alec do.

Tess initially belongs to the working class, then marries above her station. This representation of social mobility is part of the modern condition and reflects the period in which the novel was written. Because Tess is a modern rather than a Victorian character we, as modern readers, can identify with her. We find the novel painful because she feels the '**ache of modernism**' (Chapter 19, p. 180),

Critical approaches

is impotent and inconsequential, and is the plaything of the 'President of the Immortals' (Chapter 59, p. 489).

Our eye is always drawn to Tess. Among the other binders she is '**the most flexuous and finely-drawn figure of them all**' (Chapter 14, p. 138); it is her work which is described in detail, her arm whose '**feminine smoothness becomes scarified by the stubble, and bleeds**' (Chapter 14, p. 138). Angel is apparently wrong to idealise Tess, yet the text itself sets her above the other women of her class. We are asked to note that '**The cheeks are paler, the teeth more regular, the red lips thinner than is usual in a country-bred girl**' (Chapter 14, p. 138). And, in moments of emotional intensity, she seems to move beyond the bounds of ordinary, everyday life.

Tess is not always elevated; she is also represented as belonging to base nature. We are often given the impression that she communes with the animal kingdom and on these occasions she seems to be more animal than human. Tess is sympathetic to the wounded pheasants in Chapter 41; she is likened to '**a bled calf**' in Chapter 48 (p. 415); as her captors catch up to her at Stonehenge, '**her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman**' (Chapter 58, p. 487). Her animality is used to make her appear vulnerable, but also to highlight her sexuality.

Hardy did not condemn Tess for her baser animal instincts, or for having had an illegitimate child, of course; she remained 'a pure woman' in his view, as the subtitle to the novel says. The problem for contemporary critics was that purity equated with virginity. When Tess is suddenly pitched from the pedestal of natural beauty into the mire of sexuality in *The Chase*, Hardy shows how women are wronged by the standards of his day. She was the exception that Hardy created to prove the rule. A heterogeneous figure, her society could not really understand or forgive a woman who was neither virgin nor whore, but contained aspects of both.

ALEC AND ANGEL

Alec and Angel pull Tess apart. Both are wilful, controlling, and guilty of harming Tess. The over-spiritualised Angel is more developed than the rather too-devilish Alec, but neither is easily



CHECK THE FILM

Look at the way in which Tess is dressed in Roman Polanski's 1979 film: at the start she is in a simple cotton dress, by the end she is in a sophisticated gown and wearing a fashionable hat and veil. Compare this with the way in which Hardy represents Tess's transformation over the course of the novel.



CHECK THE BOOK

When we first meet Tess, 'Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still' (Chapter 2, p. 52). For an interesting exploration of this element of her characterisation, see James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (Routledge, 1992).

World events

1870 Forster's Education Act; elementary education for all; from hereon depopulation of Dorset countryside; from this date county moves from general use of the life lease option to 1-year leases

1874–80 Disraeli prime minister

Thomas Hardy's life

1862–7 Works in London as architect. Begins to lose religious faith
1867 Returns to Dorchester to work for Hicks. Begins working on *The Poor Man and the Lady* (now lost)
1869 Moves to Weymouth to work for architect Crickmay. Begins writing *Desperate Remedies*
1870 Restoring St Juliot's church, north Cornwall, Hardy meets his future wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford
1871 Publishes *Desperate Remedies*
1872 Publishes *Under the Greenwood Tree*
1873 Publishes *A Pair of Blue Eyes*; *Far from the Madding Crowd* serialised
1874 *Far from the Madding Crowd* published. Marries Emma
1876 They go to live at Sturminster Newton. *The Hand of Ethelberta* published
1878 *The Return of the Native* published

Literary events

1859 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*
1860 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*
1861 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*; Eliot, *Silas Marner*
1866 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*
1871–2 Eliot, *Middlemarch*
1877 Henry James, *The American*; Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

World events

1884 Foundation of Fabian Society
1885 Siege of Khartoum
1888 Six Jack the Ripper murders in London's East End
1891 Free education in England

1899–1902 Boer War

1914–18 First World War

Thomas Hardy's life

1880 *The Trumpet-Major* published. Very ill for six months
1881 Publishes *A Laodicean*
1882 Visits Paris after publishing *Two on a Tower*
1883 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' published
1886 *The Mayor of Casterbridge* published
1887 *The Woodlanders* published
1888 *Wessex Tales* published
1891 *A Group of Noble Dames* published; first serialised edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* published
1894 *Life's Little Ironies* published
1896 *Jude the Obscure* published
1897 *The Well-Beloved* published
1898 *Wessex Poems*, his first collection of verse, published
1904 First part of *The Dynasts* published. Definitive edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
1912 Death of Emma
1914 Marries Florence Emily Dugdale, his secretary
1928 Death of Thomas Hardy

Literary events

1880 Richard Jefferies, *Hodge and his Masters*; Maupassant, *Boule de Suif* (*Ball of Fat*)
1881 Jefferies, *Toilers of the Field*
1884 Jefferies, *The Dewy Morn*
1887 Zola, *La Terre* (*Earth*)
1890 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*