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Tess

Who is Tess?

- Tess is a beautiful young woman who has always lived a rural life.
- She is raped by Alec and later married to Angel, and eventually hanged for Alec's murder.
- Hardy presents Tess as a figure of psychological complexity and modernity.

A complex woman

Tess originally presented a problem for critics because of her 'purity'; today, it is still all too easy 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 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' (Chapter 35, p. 232) 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, proud and responsible for what happens to her; a victim, she is also a murderer. We 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.

A figure of modernity

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. 124), is impotent and inconsequential, and is the plaything of the 'President of the Immortals' (Chapter 59, p. 397).

Study focus: Beautiful Tess

Notice how 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. 88); it is her work which is described in detail, her arm whose 'feminine smoothness becomes scarified by the stubble, and bleeds' (p. 88).

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' (p. 89).

And, in moments of emotional intensity, she seems to move beyond the bounds of ordinary, everyday life.



KEY CONTEXT

A04

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.

Animalism

Tess is not always elevated; she is also represented as belonging to 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. 335); and 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. 395). Her animality is used to make her appear vulnerable, but also to highlight her sexuality.

Progress booster: Always a pure woman

A04



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 makes clear. 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 comprehend or forgive a woman who was neither virgin nor whore, but contained aspects of both.

A05 KEY INTERPRETATION

Gemma Arterton's portrayal of Tess in the 2008 BBC mini-series allows us to compare Tess's simple dress and innocent rural attitude in its first instalment with the very differently attired Tess Angel finds at Sandbourne. The screenwriter, David Nicholls, also picks up on the symbolism with which Hardy portrays Tess.

Key quotation: Tragic Tess

A02

Talking to Angel before they are married, Tess confides that she seems to see 'numbers of to-morrows just all in a line, the first of 'em the biggest and clearest, the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel' (Chapter 19, p. 124).

Tess seems to understand that fate is conspiring against her and that her path in life will always be difficult. However, she goes on to tell Angel that he can 'raise up dreams with your music, and drive all such horrid fancies away!', so she still has the capacity for hope and joy. The narrator sees Tess's complex sense of self as part of what makes her modern.

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about the role of **narrators** in tragedies. Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Immediately identifies a particular moment as a means of opening up the debate

Early in the novel, in Chapter 2, the narrator singles out Tess from the group of girls she dances with, just as Angel does. For the narrator she is special and uniquely beautiful but we are also told that to 'almost everybody she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more'. The narrator enables us to see that the tragedy of this novel is not just about an individual but also about the way in which any woman of Tess's class could suffer a similarly tragic fate in world in which women were not valued equally with men. How then do we deal with the narrator's relationship to Tess? Does the narrator serve to make Tess's tragedy seem inevitable in her historical context, or does the narratorial voice hint at the possibility of happiness for the heroine?

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, *In 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles'...*
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about social class in the novel:

short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

When one of Angel's brothers exclaims 'Dancing in public with a troop of country hoydens – suppose we should be seen!', it is more than just a refusal to dance with Tess and the club-walkers. It also sets up the fundamental class divide between Angel and Tess that cannot be ignored.

explicit meaning

inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Freud') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean or who they are
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (e.g. 'Angel is a flawed male character and judges Tess too harshly'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

When Tess and Angel reach their honeymoon destination in Chapter 3 we might anticipate that this moment will be a fulfilment of Tess and Angel's love but Hardy shows the marriage is doomed through the decrepit setting and through devices like the cock's crow. These give the prose an almost Gothic sense of unfolding tragedy.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Something examiners often comment on is that students can confuse 'narrator' and 'author'. Remember that Hardy is not the narrator; the narrator is an anonymous presence who guides our reading but who is distinct from the author.