

S.5 Literature

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Thomas Hardy

Book Summary

Tess Durbeyfield is a 16-year-old simple country girl, the eldest daughter of John and Joan Durbeyfield. In a chance meeting with Parson Tringham along the road one night, John Durbeyfield discovers that he is the descendent of the d'Urbervilles, an ancient, monied family who had land holdings as far back as William the Conqueror in 1066. Upon this discovery, the financially strapped Durbeyfield family learns of a nearby "relative," and John and his wife Joan send Tess to "claim kin" in order to alleviate their impoverished condition. While visiting the d'Urbervilles at The Slopes, Tess meets Alec d'Urberville, who finds himself attracted to Tess. Alec arranges for Tess to become the caretaker for his blind mother's poultry, and Tess moves to The Slopes to take up the position. While in residence at the d'Urbervilles, Alec seduces and rapes Tess.

Tess returns home, gives birth to a son, Sorrow, the product of the rape, and works as a field worker on nearby farms. Sorrow becomes ill and dies in infancy, leaving Tess devastated at her loss. Tess makes another journey away from home to nearby Talbothays Dairy to become a milkmaid to a good-natured dairyman, Mr. Crick. There she meets and falls in love with a travelling farmer's apprentice, Angel Clare. She tries to resist Angel's pleas for her hand in marriage but eventually marries Angel. He does not know Tess' past, although she has tried on several occasions to tell him. After the wedding, Tess and Angel confess their pasts to each other. Tess forgives Angel for his past indiscretions, but Angel cannot forgive Tess for having a child with another man.

Angel suggests that the two split up, with Angel going to Brazil for a year and Tess going back home. Tess agrees and returns to her parent's house. Tess eventually leaves home again for work in another town at Flintcomb-Ash farm, where the working conditions are very harsh. Tess is reunited with some of her friends from Talbothays, and they all settle in at Flintcomb to the hard work routine. Tess is determined to see Angel's family in nearby Emminster but loses her nerve at the last minute. On her return to Flintcomb, Tess sees Alec again, now a practicing evangelical minister, preaching to the folks in the

countryside. When Alec sees Tess, he is struck dumb and leaves his position to pursue her. Alec follows her to Flintcomb, asking her to marry him. Tess refuses in the strongest terms, but Alec is persistent.

Tess returns home to find her mother recovering from her illness, but her father, John, dies suddenly from an unknown ailment. The burden of her family's welfare falls on Tess' shoulders. Destitute now and homeless (they have been evicted from their cottage), the Durbeyfields have nowhere to go. Tess knows that she cannot resist Alec's money and the comforts her family can use. Furthermore, Alec insists that Angel will never return and has abandoned her — an idea that Tess has already come to believe herself.

In the meantime, Angel returns from Brazil to look for Tess and to begin his own farm in England. When Angel finds Tess' family, Joan informs him that Tess has gone to Sandbourne, a fashionable seaside resort in the south of England. Angel finds Tess there, living as an upper-class lady with Alec d'Urberville. In the meeting with Angel, Tess asks him to leave and not return for her. Angel does leave, resigned that he had judged Tess too harshly and returned too late.

After her meeting with Angel, Tess confronts Alec and accuses him of lying to her about Angel. In a fit of anger and fury, Tess stabs Alec through the heart with a carving knife, killing him. Tess finds Angel to tell him of the deed. Angel has trouble believing Tess' story but welcomes her back.

The two travel the countryside via back roads to avoid detection. Their plan is to make for a port and leave the country as soon as possible. They spend a week in a vacant house, reunited in bliss for a short time. They are discovered, however, and the trail ends at Stonehenge, the ancient pagan monument, when the police arrest Tess and take her away.

Before she is executed for her crime, Tess has Angel promise to marry her sister Liza Lu once she is gone. Angel agrees and he, along with Liza Lu, witnesses a black flag raised in the city of Wintonchester, signifying that Tess' death sentence has been carried out. The two, Angel and Liza Lu, leave together, and the tragic tale of Tess ends.

Phase the First: The Maiden: Chapters 1-4 (Summary)

Summary

The setting is in Wessex, in the south of England, during the late 1800s. John Durbeyfield is on his way home after working as a higgler/haggler. He encounters a local parson who tells him of his family history: The Durbeyfields are descended from the once famous d'Urbervilles, a wealthy family dating back to the time of William the Conqueror. John, feeling a rush of superiority, hurries home to tell his family of the good news. The family has had a difficult life, with John a poor provider and his wife barely managing to keep the family fed and clothed. There are seven children in all; Tess, or Theresa, is the oldest. Joan, John's wife, hatches a plan to send the 16-year-old Tess to "claim kin" at a nearby relation, a woman of wealth and position.

When John has had too much to drink, Tess and her brother Abraham set out with the family horse to deliver beehives at a nearby farmer's market. While en route, Tess and Abraham fall asleep in the wagon, and the horse, Prince, is killed accidentally by the local mail cart. Because Tess had allowed Prince to wander into the oncoming lane and had inadvertently caused the accident between the mail cart and the Durbeyfield wagon, she feels it is her responsibility to make matters right. It is at this point that Joan Durbeyfield introduces the plan for Tess to visit their d'Urberville relations. Tess initially objects to the plan, but with the family horse now dead, she relents and goes to the d'Urberville family to seek money or work.

Analysis

Several themes appear early on in the novel. First, is the part that fate plays in our lives. Hardy uses the device of a poor family learning of their former circumstances and former history. It is only by chance that Parson Tringham and John Durbeyfield pass on the road, an encounter that gives the parson the opportunity to share information he has about Durbeyfield's ancestors. In fact, it was even chance that led Parson Tringham to suspect that the d'Urbervilles and Durbeyfields were connected at all; he simply happened to see the Durbeyfield name of John's wagon while he (the parson) was investigating the "vicissitudes of the d'Urberville family." The question becomes, would they have been better off not knowing that they were descended from nobility? Initially, the information seems like a boon to a family that, before the end of these four chapters, is in dire need of help, but it sets off a chain of events that, in the end, bring only tragedy.

A second theme appears in Chapter 1 when Parson Tringham mentions "how the mighty are fallen." In this novel, we will see how the mighty have fallen and how the poor arise from their situations in life only to be forced down again by circumstances beyond their control. Hardy here is preaching against the attitudes that Victorian England held at the time, that the wealthy control the lives of others. He seems

to be making the argument that social position has a devastating effect upon the lives of those who must endure under the weight of class repression.

Hardy's use of the celebration of May Day, or May 1, is also significant. First, this is the where readers get their first glimpse of the young girl Tess. Dressed in white, she is a symbol of innocence and purity and gaiety at the celebration. Tess is among her friends at a May Day dance in Marlott, their hometown. Second, Hardy notes that such clubs, which are forgotten in the cities, still retain their former glory in the country where Tess lives, another indication that Tess is neither sophisticated nor worldly — a character trait that leaves her unprepared for the advances of a worldly man like Alec d'Urberville.

Finally, May Day itself is an ancient celebration, dating back to pagan times, when the Romans celebrated the goddess Floralia, who represented new spring flowers. Maia, the goddess of May, was celebrated for spring growth and replenishment. In this way, Hardy connects the Christian world and pagan world in the celebration of a former pagan holiday that had taken on Christian overtones. In this setting, Hardy describes Tess as "a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience . . . for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkle from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then." In essence, she is a lovely, innocent young girl on the brink of womanhood. (Ironically, Tess meets her future husband, Angel Clare, during the dance the girls perform, but she does not dance with him. Later both will recall this meeting, and both will express the sentiment, "if only . . .")

Glossary;

haggler/higgler a dealer who travels from place to place selling wares or goods, such as fruit.

vamp trudge, tramp, walk (dialect).

clipsing and colling hugging (dialect).

diment diamond (dialect).

Cubit's Cupid's.

fess pleased (dialect).

poppet [Obs.] a doll, or puppet.

Mommet a term of abuse or contempt (dialect).

larry commotion, disturbance (dialect).

Oliver Grumble's Oliver Cromwell['s].

plim swell (dialect).

vee fly; a one-horse hackney-carriage (dialect).

Mampus crowd (dialect).

rafted disturbed, unsettled (dialect).

"Nature's holy plan" from Wordsworth, "Lines Written in Early Spring" (Technique - Allusion)

limed caught with birdlime; here, Abraham is compared to a bird ensnared in bird-lime.

off-license without a license; here, Rolliver's is not licensed to sell alcohol for consumption on the premises.

gaffer a foreman of a group of workers.

sumple supple (dialect).

"green malt on the floor" the expression refers to pregnancy before marriage.

nater nature (dialect

NB: Dialect is a technique.