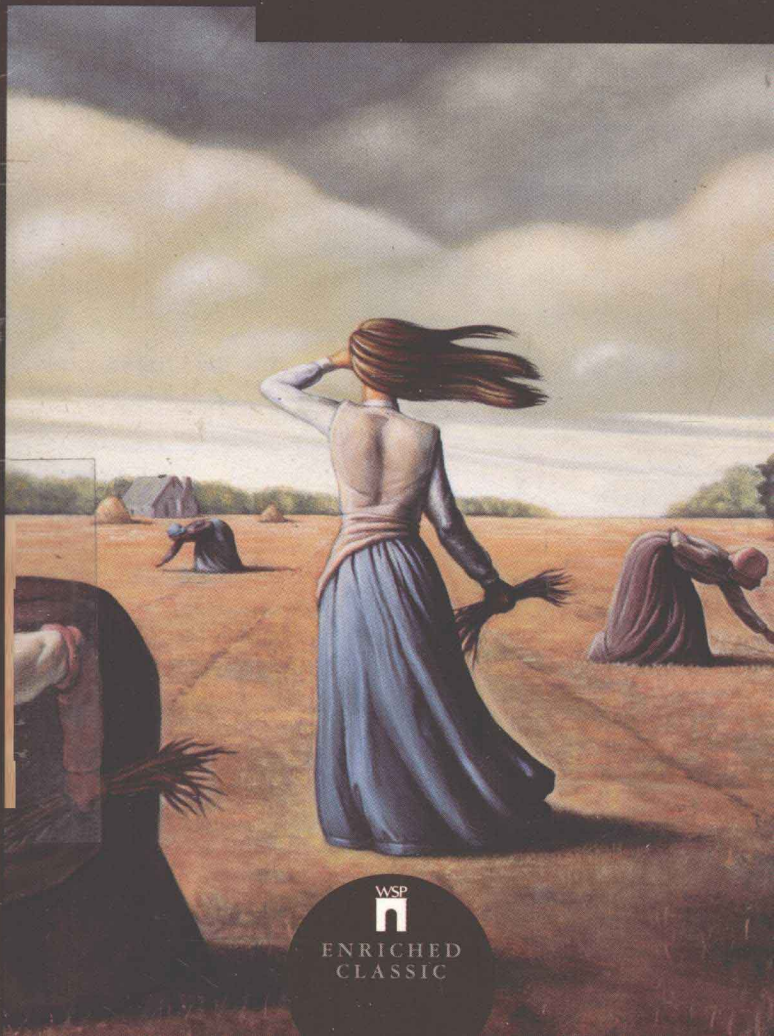


Thomas Hardy

Tess of the d'Urbervilles



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Thomas Hardy

Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Introduced by
Nina Pelikan Straus



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Introduction

Tess of the d'Urbervilles: *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*

Nina Pelikan Straus

In the forty-first chapter of this extraordinary novel, the heroine says a simple thing: "I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me." Far from Thomas Hardy's rural Victorian England and perhaps at this present moment, a young woman who had been raped, who had borne a child and was looking for work, might speak similar words. And like Tess Durbeyfield, she would try heroically (because the child was dead, the man was gone) to build a new life.

The man who created Tess's story was born in 1840 of an old Dorset family that had resided in England since the fifteenth century, but had—like Tess Durbeyfield's family—"declined" over the years. As a son of the yeoman class of men excluded from the great English universities, Hardy apprenticed himself at age sixteen to the more modest and practical trade of architecture. His writing of novels and poetry was self-taught, without literary schooling. His resentment of the rigid British class system was dramatized in novels that chronicled the changes that came to England during what the historian Eric Hobsbawm called "the age of capital" (1848–1875) and "the age of empire" (1875–1914).¹

Hardy witnessed a period of rapid industrialization that introduced social reforms into England through trade unions, working men's colleges, colonialist expansion, and parliamentary acts that broadened the vote. In 1850, when Hardy was ten, the railroad was extended from London to his native Dorchester, and with it came the destruction of his society's traditional folkways. He watched the break-

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down and impoverishment of families (like the Durbeyfields) whose farming skills were being replaced by machinery. Living through a time of reform and controversy, Hardy assimilated the feminist ideas of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, the evolutionary science of Charles Darwin, and the critique of established religion influenced by the German "Higher Criticism" of biblical texts. Modern ideas about women's role in the family affected Hardy's marriage. By the time he wrote *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Hardy's first wife, Emma, was making him aware of what we would call the "sex wars." Hardy's sensitivity to the difficulties of men's and women's relations was represented in *Tess*, but even more starkly in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which Emma Hardy loathed.

The story of Tess's sexual shame, society's disapproval, her family's poverty, and her vulnerability to love was based on the experience of Hardy's beloved grandmother, Mary Head. Like Tess, she had been seduced, had borne a child, and was sentenced to hang for a crime. If most of Hardy's tenderness is reserved in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* for women rather than men, its source was the memory of his grandmother.

Change, chance, the individual's limited perspective, the incompatibility between natural and social worlds: these are the forces that carve the fates of each of Hardy's characters. Each one speaks and feels from his or her own perspective, from a "private little sun for her soul to bask in" (chap. II). The characters Hardy loves most thrive in the lush landscapes of southern England. This is a sensuous, even a sexual novel, and the sexuality of Hardy's description of Tess Durbeyfield and her world have made it popular and controversial for over a century.

Hardy's Wessex is a place of fertile soil, of cows and farms and stone churches. Hardy describes it vividly, but we still need to imagine it as a landscape in which Tess is both a mythic person and a simple rural girl. Her journey from birth to death is a terrestrial one beset by Darwinian forces. Like other educated Victorians, Hardy's vision of nature was transformed by his reading of Charles Darwin's ideas of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. It is Hardy's talent to make us tense with the question of how and

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whether Tess will survive, even as we follow her trek from innocence to experience.

Angel Clare, the traveler from the more industrialized north of England, first sights Tess at a May-Day dance where she wears white flowers and carries a peeled willow wand. Like a plant influenced by the circling of the planet around the sun, Tess germinates, grows, blossoms with experience and knowledge, and is cut down. In this novel we are asked to rejoice but also to suffer with Tess. Yet our individual perspectives, like those of Hardy's characters, may become uncertain at various moments as we read. We may not comprehend why Tess must incarnate this seasonal myth, why she is goddesslike at one moment and so tragically degraded the next.

In the spring of the year, when Angel Clare first spies Tess but passes her by, she is virginal and girlish. In the summer her womanliness flourishes, imbued with strawberries and roses as she cares for the d'Urberville birds. In the fall of the year, in a deep forest obscured by mist, she is sexually ravished by her false cousin, Alec d'Urberville.

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (chap. xi)

The consequence of Tess's encounter with Alec is to be cast out, pregnant. When her infant dies, she leaves her home and wanders by herself to find work. As the seasons take their turn, so do Tess's fortunes. But Tess's story signifies more than a seasonal myth, and the reader may fail to understand what Hardy "means" by his novel; it is so full of contradictions.

Is it because Tess is poor and unprotected that both her lovers dare to mistreat her? Hardy shows us the economic and class basis of Tess's painful experience, the way people

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without power or money are humiliated by those who have it. He suggests that the Durbeyfield family's poverty and lack of education make Tess vulnerable, first to Alec d'Urberville and then to Angel Clare. After the rape "an immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's personality thereafter from that previous self of hers" (chap. xi). But questions remain. Is Hardy an early feminist thinker who champions Tess's attempt at independence against a hypocritical, sexist, and increasingly commercially minded society? Or does he represent her experience as an inevitable part of the "natural" order of things, a Darwinian struggle for existence?

No doubt that Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) influenced Hardy's explanations of human luck and misfortune. Darwin's ideas disturbed Victorian readers of the 1890s who felt, as creationists do today, that the theory of evolution was an offense to Christian beliefs. Hardy's pronouncement that Tess suffered "under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature" (chap. xli) might suggest that he was condoning animalistic (out-of-wedlock) sex. His idea that Protestant teachings formed nothing but Tess's "conventional aspect" (chap. xiv) appeared to replace religious faith with a belief in evolution.

Yet Tess also embodies a romantic myth that connects femininity and nature for Hardy. In *Tess* the word *Nature* is associated with Greek (pagan) religions, and both *Nature* and *Pagan* are capitalized as if they were gods. "Women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than of the systematized religion taught their race at later date" (chap. xvi). Thus Hardy criticized Victorian sexual and religious "systems" and conventions as the *external causes* of Tess's suffering. But he also depicted something *inside* Tess, a sometimes passive, eventually erupting force that led to her early death.

A century of readers have been inspired and frustrated by the way Hardy floats various causes for Tess's tragedy throughout the novel. In some chapters Tess's experience seems *socially constructed*. She is the victim of religious hypocrisy, of economic, class, and gender prejudices. In

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other chapters, especially in the Talbothays ("The Rally") and Stonehenge ("Fulfilment") sections, she appears as a Darwinian version of a Greek tragic figure, a woman blighted by an inherited curse. Hardy was as deeply immersed in his reading of the powerful female figures of Aeschylus's fifth-century B.C. dramas as he was in Darwin's nineteenth-century science. From Hardy's notes for his novel we have the impression that these various elements—from Greek tragedy, from local English folklore, from theories of evolution and heredity—converged unsystematically to shape Hardy's imagination.

Hardy wanted to write a realistic story about a "pure" woman, but he also wanted to imagine the mythologies of ancient Greece duplicated in his own rural Dorchester. The novel is at once "mythic"—an imitation of Greek tragic drama—and "realistic"—a story of English rural life that might have occurred in the late 1800s. Tess appears both as a rural Wessex woman and a heroic female character in a classical Greek plot. Describing one of Aeschylus's characters, Hardy offers us a clue to interpreting the psychological aspect of his own novel: "When a married woman who has a lover kills her husband, she does not really wish to kill the husband; she wishes to kill the situation."²

Hardy's literary ambition, to create a novel that had the impact of Greek tragedy, led him to invent a peculiar writing style that moves between warm intimacy and cool detachment. Like a camera, the novel rolls in for close-ups of Tess's gorgeous mouth as well as for long-distance shots where she appears like a speck upon the earth's surface. Hardy's interest in various perspectives suggests why the novel translated so easily into Roman Polanski's successful 1980 movie version. As the novel opens, for example, we see Tess's penniless drunken father Durbeyfield from a middle perspective as he makes the discovery of his aristocratic ancestors, the d'Urbervilles. Although these "noble skilletons" (skeletons) change nothing for himself, his viewpoint is so narrow and besotted he sends Tess out to "claim" her rich relatives.

Though different from her family's, Tess's own perspective is also limited. Rarely does she achieve the cinematic breadth of Hardy's vision. She cannot, as perhaps readers do not, understand her situation from a panoramic or

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cosmic perspective. Initially Tess does not understand, for example, that her so-called "cousin" Alec d'Urberville is not a relative but a seductive stranger who purchased his aristocratic title with "new" money gained from England's recent colonial adventures in the New World. Angel Clare is educated and intelligent, but also self-deceived. When Angel meets Tess the second time at Talbothays Farm, he fantasizes her as a "pure rural maid," a virgin, a Demeter, or Greek goddess of the moon. What he cannot perceive is that her "purity" and capacity to love him have nothing to do with the state of her hymen.

In the character of Tess, Hardy creates a specially alluring kind of nineteenth-century stereotype: the pure country maid uncontaminated by urban decadence. Hardy describes the "characteristic intonation" of her country dialect as "probably as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech." The shape of her "pouted-up deep red mouth" provokes a desire shared by both author and male characters. This desire suggests nostalgia for a golden age, for a primal innocence which the increasingly complex world of Victorian England is rendering impossible.

Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still.
As she walked along to-day, 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.

Yet few knew, and still fewer considered this.
(chap. II)

In such passages of the novel we are made conscious of the movement of years and of how the novel is divided into seven sections, which Hardy calls "phases." The first phase, "The Maiden," leads quickly to the second, "Maiden No More." Tess's female vulnerability and her capacity for loving-kindness are at stake in this novel; but so is the reader's evaluation of the sexual and class conventions that society imposes on Tess. When she gives birth to Alec's child and the child dies in infancy, Hardy speaks of her situation with grimly ironic detachment: "So passed away

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Sorrow the Undesired—that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law; a waif to whom . . . the cottage interior was the universe . . . and the instinct to suck human knowledge.”

When Tess wishes to give her infant a proper Christian burial and the parson denies her, she performs a simple version of the baptism ritual herself. Yet she cannot escape the effects of the “social chasm” that yawns between her and her once-virginal life. Social status, class, and money make themselves felt even in the graveyard. Tess’s baby is buried “in that shabby corner of God’s allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid” (chap. xiv). So ends the second phase of Tess’s life.

Phase the Third, “The Rally,” is the lushest but most nerve-racking part of the novel. Tess leaves her home for Talbothays Farm where she milks cows, lives communally, and meets Angel Clare, an upper-class gentleman who dreams of living the “natural” life. In the famous scene where she first hears Angel playing his harp (Hardy’s symbolism is not always subtle) Tess experiences an exaltation that goes beyond sexual desire. She walks in the garden listening to notes that “wander in the still air with a stark quality like that of nudity.” More than a garden, Tess seems to return to a decaying Eden, with “juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at a touch; and with tall blooming weeds emitting offensive smells.” Hardy’s description of this first meeting between Tess and Angel is sensual but portentous. The dangers of being “stained” or “blighted” (sexually), or destroyed (“cracked”) or of cracking others are suggested by Hardy’s poetic and synesthetic³ language.

She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights . . . ; thus she drew quite near to Clare. . . . (chap. xix)

In Phase the Fourth, “The Consequence,” all the troubles foreshadowed by Tess’s will to live and love again—to

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“snatch ripe pleasure before the iron teeth of pain could have time to shut upon her”—come to a sudden and grim climax. Unable to confess her past to Angel before their marriage, she chooses the wedding night for the revelation in the hopes that he will forgive her. But she has mistaken the rigid sexual conventionality of her man, despite his tender surface.

Angel Clare's father is a pastor, and Angel's heritage is the puritanical, antisensual Christianity of his ancestors. Wishing to shake himself free from these rigidities, he has come to Talbothays to learn farming, to return to nature. But the puritan impulse in him, with all its sexual prejudices, is too deep to be dislodged by his love for Tess. Struggling against religious conventions herself, Tess finally cannot hold to the belief that she is not to blame for Alec's raping her, for Angel's leaving her when he discovers her past.

Earlier in the novel, Hardy had written: “But for the world's opinion [Tess's] experiences would have been simply a liberal education” (chap. xv). But by Phase the Fourth, “The Woman Pays,” Tess's experience appears more complicated. Confronted with the abyss between the idea of sex as part of (Darwinian) nature and sex as conventional religion's idea of sin, between Paganism (Greek religion) and Paulinism (the Christianity of Paul the Apostle), both Angel and Tess are self-divided. As the critic Irving Howe once observed, Hardy watches over Tess like the tender savior she does not have. He argues in her behalf that “Tess's passing corporeal blight had been her mental harvest” (chap. xix). Yet he also shows us that Tess's mental harvest is Angel Clare's blight. The gentlemanly Angel, who might have rescued Tess from the ravages of Alec, fails to recognize her vulnerability. “Some might risk the odd paradox,” writes Hardy, “that with more animalism [Angel] would have been the nobler man” (chap. xxxvi).

Angel cannot credit Tess's honesty and integrity. He is locked into the masculine prejudices about women which produce the sexual double standard. Just hours before Angel repudiates Tess after her confession, she comes close to a feminist perspective on her situation: “What *have* I done! . . . You don't think I planned it, do you? It is in your own mind what you are angry at, Angel; it is not in me”

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(chap. xxxv). Forgiving Angel for his own sexual mistakes in the past, Tess asks only for sexual equality. But for Angel she no longer appears as the same person. Perhaps the worst of it is that Tess understands Angel, even idolizes him: "She tried to pray to God, but it was her husband who really had her supplication." She understands that Angel has loved the ideal of the "pure" maiden, not the person Tess Durbeyfield. So she says to him, ". . . for she you love is not my real self, but one in my image; the one I might have been!" (chap. xxxiii).

Angel and Tess live far from the urban center of London where women are struggling for suffrage and women's rights. Imagining himself modern and liberated, Angel discovers that he is tradition-bound and psychologically imprisoned. He rationalizes his abandonment of Tess by telling himself that Tess is not a simple rural woman, but a product of a "decrepit" family, the "belated seedling of an effete aristocracy"—the d'Urbervilles (chap. xxxv). Thus we understand Hardy's ironic title, which suggests that Tess is seen simultaneously from two perspectives: as a *Durbeyfield* and a *d'Urberville*.

In a strange sleepwalking scene that critics find melodramatic but Hardy lovers find necessary to the novel's tragic logic, Angel carries Tess to a stone coffin in an old abbey. Dreaming that she is dead, Angel symbolically buries the living woman in his heart, and she submits. Finally Tess herself cannot follow up on her modernist feminist perspective, for there is no feminist advocate or point of view to support her.

Hardy shows how "the woman pays" for her sexual mishaps while the man believes himself exempt. Thus the novel's most anguished theme is its depiction of the way patriarchal sexism ruins women's, but also men's, lives. Equally modern is Hardy's irony, his exposure of how good intentions may lead to evil, how we may say one thing but mean another. Tess's honesty with Angel ironically leads not to their union but to their separation. Angel's cool intellectualism damages Tess as much as does Alec's hot unthinking desire.

In chapter XLIII of "The Woman Pays" the landscape mirrors Tess's inner state. Cast out again, abandoned by

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Angel Clare in winter, Tess “mercilessly nipped her eye-brows off” so no man would look at her (chap. XLII). She finds work grubbing turnips at a “starve-acre place” called Flintcomb-Ash. Here Hardy’s descriptions of nature are grotesque. They suggest that without love, the world is a featureless blank where human beings live like insects.

. . . The whole field . . . was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies. (chap. XLIII)

Into this strange landscape Alec d’Urberville returns, transformed into the shape of a Christian preacher and announcing himself reformed and redeemed. Alec’s “animalism had become fanaticism” (chap. XLV), but his piety does not last long when he sees Tess. Typical of a new class of economic entrepreneurs whose only allegiance is to profit-making and self-gratification, Alec has no traditions, commitments, or ideals. Yet the speech he delivers to Tess in the sixth phase of the novel called “The Convert” also indicates that he, unlike Angel, values Tess for what she is. A revolting skirt-chaser and hypocrite, he is nonetheless capable of a kind of love. Seeing Tess reduced to working at a turnip-slicing machine, he declares that for him she remains “unsmirched in spite of all” (chap. XLVI).

Tess cannot love such a man, and she tries again to resist him. The chapters that follow bring her into a hellish landscape where she “serves” a “red tyrant”—the threshing machine that appears in its “despotic demand” to symbolize the demonic force of Alec d’Urberville himself. The historical context of this scene is important to an understanding of the Durbeyfields’ rural poverty and the reasons Tess returns to Alec. In the second half of the nineteenth

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century, the growth of commerce brought cheap American wheat to English ports. Attempting to cut prices to compete with American imports, English farmers used the threshing machine, which Hardy describes as a "Plutonian"⁴ monster that figures in the hellish chapter XLVII of this novel. In this fiery world of steam engines "at high pressure," Tess is worked to the bone and her resistance to Alec is weakened. Writing to Angel Clare in Brazil for help, she receives no answer. In the meantime, unbeknownst to Tess, Alec struggles with a terrible uncertainty:

What arrested him now as of value in life was less its beauty than its pathos. Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality. Who was the moral man? Still more pertinently, who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses. . . .

How, then, about Tess? (chap. XLIX)

Ironically, the true "convert" is not Alec d'Urberville but Angel Clare. Yet Angel's conversion to the modern perspective on women and morality comes too late to do Tess any good. In Hardy's world timing is everything, and the "wrong" man comes at the wrong time for Tess. It is finally Alec who sees Tess accurately, not Angel. Alec witnesses the woman's degrading labor and the poverty her family suffers after her father's death. Offering her family "assistance," which means that Tess must live with him as his mistress, Alec becomes her "physical" husband, even as she remains faithful to Angel emotionally. In the ironically named Phase the Seventh, "Fulfilment," what is fulfilled is not Tess's love but her fate.

Insisting that Angel is dead, Alec forces Tess to live at Sandbourne, "the fashionable watering-place" on the English channel. At the novel's climax, a broken Angel Clare returns to discover her there. When she hears of her lover's return, when Angel admits that what happened was his fault, Tess cracks. She rushes upstairs to Alec and stabs him.

Hardy does not show us Tess's bloody murder of Alec.

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Instead he describes what the landlady sees on the ceiling of the room above which the murder takes place. Again Hardy emphasizes a particular individual's perspective:

It was about the size of a wafer when she first observed it, but it speedily grew as large as the palm of her hand, and then she could perceive that it was red. The oblong white ceiling, with this scarlet blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts. (chap. LVI)

What then, is the "truth" Hardy wishes to convey in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*? It involves multiple themes. The most modern of these is the barrier in each character's consciousness of the other, their limited and flawed perceptions. For Alec d'Urberville, that barrier has its origin in his undisciplined egotism, his patriarchal sense of entitlement and lust for Tess that destroys her twice. For Tess it is her need to idolize Angel Clare and to blame Alec for an injustice that is not merely personal but social and economic. For Angel the barrier is his idealism and sexism, his preference for his own dream of a "pure rural maid" rather than for the warm and physical Tess who stands before him.

Hardy's ironies about Tess's situation seem cruel. Tess grows into a woman who loves very deeply, who is immensely courageous, who understands many modern ideas even though she is barely educated. "What's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—," she complains to Angel when she first meets him, "finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad. . . . [that] your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands'." Tess needs more than a personal history. She echoes Hardy's own philosophical quest when she asks Angel "why the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike. . . . But that's what books will not tell me" (chap. xix).

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy writes the book that attempts to answer Tess's questions. But these answers may not please everyone, for at the end Tess cries out that "once a victim, always a victim." Neither Hardy's Nature nor Queen Victoria's Great Britain offers the "fallen woman" a

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solution. Tess cannot remain passive; she has too much spirit and energy. Her situation points toward a future in which women will be liberated from the restrictions and prejudices Tess endures. She kills Alec as many women have wanted to destroy the "masters" who have treated them as "servants," who have bound and silenced them with lies. Her closeness to nature, her honesty, her "pagan" capacity for joy, make her goddesslike for Hardy, unforgettable for the reader. "A particularly fine spring came round, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her, as it moved the wild animals, and made her passionate to go" (chap. xv).

Tess is depicted as part of a Nature conceived as both creative and destructive. Yet she is hardly a woman who "runs with the wolves." Her country earthiness is at war with the conventional woman within her. Despite her beauty's "brim-fulness" (chap. xxvii), she seems to embody Hardy's most secret fantasies. Hardy's epithets—she is Eve, Demeter, Artemis, even the Magdalene—suggest his "pagan" dreams about her sensual femininity. If we can accept Hardy's preference for finding beauty in tragedy rather than in happy endings, we can accept this nineteenth-century novel with all its pathos. But if we expect to find twentieth-century solutions for Tess's difficulties, we will be disappointed.

Hardy represents the relations of men and women as difficult. As such he mirrors the burgeoning emancipatory consciousness of his historical period. His imagination works mythically and dualistically, with alternate perspectives confronting each other and clashing in the novel's most heartrending scenes. Against Hardy's evocation of biblical scripture and the grandeur of Greek myths, he sets his characters' smaller egos. Against religious faith he sets skepticism and doubt, echoing the tensions between religion and science that have remained unresolved into our own times. Against conventions and dogma, Hardy sets "modernism," the idea that human beings are motivated not by heavenly powers but by their private desires and their social environments.

Caught between Alec and Angel in a way that parallels Hardy's representations of "Nature" versus "society," Tess

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whirls in an agonizing confusion. One of the questions raised by the novel is whether she has her own perspective, and to what degree her choices are defined by the flawed Angel she loves. As his symbolic name and his harp playing imply, Angel Clare is idealistic, dreamy, and sensitive. Even as Tess falls in love with Angel, she regards him “as an intelligence rather than a man” (chap. XIX), a perspective that makes her idolize him and denigrate herself. Alec d’Urberville is Angel’s opposite, a grossly sensual man. At Flintcomb-Ash, we find Alec with a pitchfork in his hand, plaguing Tess like the very devil. Caught by multiple perspectives and confusions (Who is her “real” husband: Alec or Angel?), Tess is driven to the madness of despair and finally to crime.

The novel’s final paragraph—“‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess” (chap. LIX)—shocked Hardy’s Victorian readers more than the pagan “justification” for the theme of husband-killing. The sentence implied that the gods merely played with Tess’s life (and all our lives), and that Christian compassion or redemption was a delusion. Hardy therefore offended his readers on two counts. He substituted Darwinian Nature and pagan gods for the Christian deity, and he showed no respect for the “proper” behavior of young women. The novel’s subtitle, “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented,” seemed especially immoral to those who believed that a woman bearing a child out of wedlock was “fallen” and damned to hell. But there were other readers who championed Tess. The novel thus catapulted Hardy into both fame and infamy.

As twenty-first-century readers, we may not embrace such rigid Victorian responses either “for” or “against” Tess; yet we can acknowledge them as embodying the tensions that beset Victorians in the last two decades of their own nineteenth century. During the time Hardy wrote *Tess*, the English were entering a period of imperialism, integrating “underdeveloped” countries into the world economy, and creating new kinds of practical, exploitative men (like Alec d’Urberville) who supplanted dreaming romantics like Angel Clare. The competition and economic growth that pushed the British toward modernism also unsettled people