

Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy.

Character List

Tess Durbeyfield - The novel's protagonist. Tess is a beautiful, loyal young woman living with her impoverished family in the village of Marlott. Tess has a keen sense of responsibility and is committed to doing the best she can for her family, although her inexperience and lack of wise parenting leave her extremely vulnerable. Her life is complicated when her father discovers a link to the noble line of the d'Urbervilles, and, as a result, Tess is sent to work at the d'Urberville mansion. Unfortunately, her ideals cannot prevent her from sliding further and further into misfortune after she becomes pregnant by Alec d'Urberville. The terrible irony is that Tess and her family are not really related to this branch of the d'Urbervilles at all: Alec's father, a merchant named Simon Stokes, simply assumed the name after he retired.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Tess Durbeyfield](#).

Angel Clare - An intelligent young man who has decided to become a farmer to preserve his intellectual freedom from the pressures of city life. Angel's father and his two brothers are respected clergymen, but Angel's religious doubts have kept him from joining the ministry. He meets Tess when she is a milkmaid at the Talbothays Dairy and quickly falls in love with her.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Angel Clare](#).

Alec d'Urberville - The handsome, amoral son of a wealthy merchant named Simon Stokes. Alec is not really a d'Urberville—his father simply took on the name of the ancient noble family after he built his mansion and retired. Alec is a manipulative, sinister young man who does everything he can to seduce the inexperienced Tess when she comes to work for his family. When he finally has his way with her, out in the woods, he subsequently tries to help her but is unable to make her love him.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Alec d'Urberville](#).

Mr. John Durbeyfield - Tess's father, a lazy peddler in Marlott. John is naturally quick, but he hates work. When he learns that he descends from the noble line of the d'Urbervilles, he is quick to make an attempt to profit from the connection.

Mrs. Joan Durbeyfield - Tess's mother. Joan has a strong sense of propriety and very particular hopes for Tess's life. She is continually disappointed and hurt by the way in which her daughter's life actually proceeds. But she is also somewhat simpleminded and naturally forgiving, and she is unable to remain angry with Tess—particularly once Tess becomes her primary means of support.

Mrs. d'Urberville - Alec's mother, and the widow of Simon Stokes. Mrs. d'Urberville is blind and often ill. She cares deeply for her animals, but not for her maid Elizabeth, her son Alec, nor Tess when she comes to work for her. In fact, she never sees Tess as anything more than an impoverished girl.

Marian, Izz Huett, and Retty Priddle - Milkmaids whom Tess befriends at the Talbothays Dairy. Marian, Izz, and Retty remain close to Tess throughout the rest of her life. They are all in love with Angel and are devastated when he chooses Tess over them: Marian turns to drink, Retty attempts suicide, and Izz nearly runs off to Brazil with Angel when he leaves Tess. Nevertheless, they remain helpful to Tess. Marian helps her find a job at a farm called Flintcomb-Ash, and Marian and Izz write Angel a plaintive letter encouraging him to give Tess another chance.

Reverend Clare - Angel's father, a somewhat intractable but principled clergyman in the town of Emminster. Mr. Clare considers it his duty to convert the populace. One of his most difficult cases proves to be none other than Alec d'Urberville.

Mrs. Clare - Angel's mother, a loving but snobbish woman who places great stock in social class. Mrs. Clare wants Angel to marry a suitable woman, meaning a woman with the proper social, financial, and religious background. Mrs. Clare initially looks down on Tess as a "simple" and impoverished girl, but later grows to appreciate her.

Reverend Felix Clare - Angel's brother, a village curate.

Reverend Cuthbert - Clare Angel's brother, a classical scholar and dean at Cambridge. Cuthbert, who can concentrate only on university matters, marries Mercy Chant.

Eliza Louisa Durbeyfield - Tess's younger sister. Tess believes Liza-Lu has all of Tess's own good qualities and none of her bad ones, and she encourages Angel to look after and even marry Liza-Lu after Tess dies.

Sorrow - Tess's son with Alec d'Urberville. Sorrow dies in his early infancy, after Tess christens him herself. She later buries him herself as well, and decorates his grave.

Mercy Chant - The daughter of a friend of the Reverend Clare. Mr. Clare hopes Angel will marry Mercy, but after Angel marries Tess, Mercy becomes engaged to his brother Cuthbert instead.

Summary of the novel

ess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented, also known as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or just *Tess*, is a [novel](#) by [Thomas Hardy](#), first published in 1891. It initially appeared in a censored and serialised version, published by the [British](#) illustrated newspaper, *The Graphic*.^[1] Though now considered an important work of [English literature](#), the book received mixed reviews when it first appeared, in part because it challenged the sexual [mores](#) of Hardy's day. The original manuscript is on display at the British Library,^[2] showing that it was originally titled "Daughter of the d'Urbervilles."^[3]

Phase the First: The Maiden (1–11)

The novel is set in impoverished rural [Wessex](#) during the [Long Depression](#). Tess is the eldest child of John and Joan Durbeyfield, uneducated rural peasants. One day, Parson Tringham informs John that he has noble blood. Tringham has discovered that "Durbeyfield" is a corruption of "D'Urberville", the surname of a noble [Norman](#) family, now extinct. The news immediately goes to John's head.

That same day, Tess participates in the village [May Dance](#), where she meets Angel Clare, youngest son of Reverend James Clare, who is on a walking tour with his two brothers. He stops to join the dance, and finds partners in several other girls. Angel notes Tess's beauty, too late to dance with her, as he is already late for a promised meeting with his brothers. Tess feels slighted.

Tess's father, overjoyed with learning of his noble lineage, gets too drunk to drive to market that night, so Tess undertakes the journey herself. However, she falls asleep at the reins, and the family's only horse encounters a speeding wagon and is fatally wounded. The blood spreads over her white dress (which could be viewed as the symbol of the forthcoming unpleasant events). Tess feels so guilty over the horse's death, she agrees, against her better judgement, to visit Mrs. d'Urberville, a wealthy widow who lives in the nearby town of Trantridge, and "claim kin." She is unaware that in reality, Mrs. d'Urberville's husband, Simon Stoke, purchased the baronial title and adopted the new surname, and so is not related to the d'Urbervilles.

Tess does not succeed in meeting Mrs. d'Urberville, but her [libertine](#) son Alec takes a fancy to Tess and secures her a position as poultry keeper on the d'Urberville estate. He immediately begins making advances. Tess dislikes Alec and repels him verbally but endures his persistent unwanted

attention, feeling she has no choice, as she must earn enough to replace her family's only means of support, the dead horse. The threat that Alec presents to Tess's virtue is obscured for Tess by her inexperience and almost daily commonplace interactions with him. He calls her "coz" (cousin), indicating a male protector, not a ravisher. Late one night, walking home from town with some other Trantridge villagers, Tess inadvertently antagonizes Car Darch, Alec's most recently discarded favorite, and finds herself about to come to blows. When Alec rides up and offers to "rescue" her from the situation, she accepts. He does not take her home, however, but rides through the fog until they reach an ancient grove called "The Chase." Here, Alec informs her that he is lost and leaves on foot to get his bearings. Tess stays behind and falls asleep atop the coat he lent her. After Alec returns he rapes her. The rape is also alluded to in another chapter, with reference to the "sobbing [heard] in The Chase" during the season Tess was at Trantridge.

Phase the Second: Maiden No More (12–15)

Tess begins to despise Alec. Against his wishes, she goes home to her father's cottage, where she keeps almost entirely to her room. The next summer, she gives birth to a sickly boy, who lives only a few weeks. On his last night alive, Tess [baptises](#) him herself, after her father locks the doors to keep the parson away. The child is given the name 'Sorrow'. Tess buries Sorrow in unconsecrated ground, makes a homemade cross and lays flowers on his grave in an empty marmalade box.

Phase the Third: The Rally (16–24)

More than two years after the Trantridge debacle, Tess, now 20, is ready to make a new start. She seeks employment outside the village, where her past is not known, and secures a job as a [milkmaid](#) at Talbothays Dairy, working for Mr. and Mrs. Crick. There, she befriends three of her fellow milkmaids, Izz, Retty, and Marian, and re-encounters Angel Clare, who is now an apprentice farmer and has come to Talbothays to learn dairy management. Although the other milkmaids are sick with love for him, Angel soon singles out Tess, and the two gradually fall in love.

Phase the Fourth: The Consequence (25–34)



"He jumped up from his seat...and went quickly toward the desire of his eyes." 1891 illustration by Joseph Syddall

Angel spends a few days away from the dairy visiting his family at Emminster. His brothers Felix and Cuthbert, ordained ministers both, note Angel's coarsened manners, while Angel considers his brothers staid and narrow-minded. Following evening prayers, Angel discusses his marriage prospects with his father. The Clares have long hoped that Angel would marry Mercy Chant, a [pious](#) schoolmistress, but Angel argues that a wife who knows farm life would be a more practical choice. He tells his parents about Tess, and they agree to meet her. His father, the Reverend James Clare, tells Angel about his efforts to convert the local populace, and mentions his failure to tame a young miscreant named Alec d'Urberville.

Angel returns to Talbothays Dairy and asks Tess to marry him. This puts Tess in a painful dilemma: Angel obviously thinks her a virgin and, although she does not want to deceive him, she shrinks from confessing lest she lose his love and admiration. Such is her passion for him that she finally agrees to the marriage, explaining that she hesitated because she had heard he hated old families and thought he would not approve of her d'Urberville ancestry. However, he is pleased by this news, because he thinks it will make their match more suitable in the eyes of his family.

As the marriage approaches, Tess grows increasingly troubled. She writes to her mother for advice; Joan tells her to keep silent about her past. Her anxiety increases when a man from Trantridge, named Groby, recognizes her while she is out shopping with Angel and crudely alludes to her sexual history. Angel overhears and flies into an uncharacteristic rage. Tess resolves to deceive Angel no more, and writes a letter describing her dealings with d'Urberville and slips it under his door. After Angel greets her with the usual affection the next morning, she discovers the letter under his carpet and realizes that he has not seen it, and she destroys it.

The wedding goes smoothly although a bad omen of a cock crowing in the afternoon is noticed by Tess. Tess and Angel spend their wedding night at an old d'Urberville family mansion, where Angel presents his bride with some beautiful [diamonds](#) that belonged to his godmother and confesses that he once had a brief affair with an older woman in [London](#). When she hears this story, Tess feels sure that Angel will forgive her own history, and finally tells him about what Alec did to her.

Phase the Fifth: The Woman Pays (35–44)

Angel, however, is appalled by the revelation, and spends the wedding night on a sofa. Tess, devastated, accepts the sudden estrangement as something she deserves. After a few awkward, awful days, she suggests they separate, saying that she will return to her parents. Angel gives her some money and promises to try to reconcile himself to her past, but warns her not to try to join him until he sends for her. After a quick visit to his parents, Angel takes ship for [Brazil](#) to start a new life. Before he leaves, he encounters Izz Huett on the road and impulsively asks her to come to Brazil with him, as his mistress. She accepts, but when he asks her how much she loves him, she admits "Nobody could love 'ee more than Tess did! She would have laid down her life for 'ee. I could do no more!" Hearing this, he abandons the whim, and Izz goes home weeping bitterly.

Tess returns home for a time but, finding this unbearable, decides to join Marian at a [starve-acre](#) farm called Flintcomb-Ash; they are later joined by Izz. On the road, she is recognised and insulted by a farmer named Groby (the same man who slighted her in front of Angel); this man proves to be her new employer. At the farm, the three former milkmaids perform very hard physical labour.

One day, Tess attempts to visit Angel's family at the parsonage in Emminster. As she nears her destination, she encounters Angel's priggish older brothers and the woman his parents once hoped he would marry, Mercy Chant. They do not recognise her, but she overhears them discussing Angel's unwise marriage. Shamed, she turns back. On the way, she overhears a wandering preacher and is shocked to discover that he is Alec d'Urberville, who has been converted to [Methodism](#) under the Reverend James Clare's influence.

Phase the Sixth: The Convert (45–52)

Alec and Tess are each shaken by their encounter, and Alec begs Tess never to tempt him again as they stand beside an ill-omened stone monument called the Cross-in-Hand. However, Alec soon comes to Flintcomb-Ash to ask Tess to marry him. She tells him she is already married. He returns at [Candlemas](#) and again in early spring, when Tess is hard at work feeding a [threshing machine](#). He tells her he is no longer a preacher and wants her to be with him. When he insults Angel she slaps him, drawing blood. Tess then learns from her sister, Liza-Lu, that her father, John, is ill and that her mother is dying. Tess rushes home to look after them. Her mother soon recovers, but her father unexpectedly dies.

The family is evicted from their home, as Durbeyfield held only a [life lease](#) on their cottage. Alec tells Tess that her husband is never coming back and offers to house the Durbeyfields on his estate. Tess refuses his assistance. She had earlier written Angel a [psalm-like](#) letter, full of love, self-abasement, and pleas for mercy; now, however, she finally admits to herself that Angel has wronged her and scribbles a hasty note saying that she will do all she can to forget him, since he has treated her so unjustly.

The Durbeyfields plan to rent some rooms in the town of Kingsbere, ancestral home of the d'Urbervilles, but they arrive there to find that the rooms have already been rented to another family. All but destitute, they are forced to take shelter in the churchyard, under the D'Urberville window. Tess enters the church and in the d'Urberville Aisle, Alec reappears and importunes Tess again. In despair, she looks at the entrance to the d'Urberville vault and wonders aloud, "Why am I on the wrong side of this door?"

In the meantime, Angel has been very ill in Brazil and, his farming venture having failed, heads home to England. On the way, he confides his troubles to a stranger, who tells him that he was wrong to leave his wife; what she was in the past should matter less than what she might become. Angel begins to repent his treatment of Tess.

Phase the Seventh: Fulfilment (53–59)

Upon his return to his family home, Angel has two letters waiting for him: Tess's angry note and a few cryptic lines from "two well-wishers" (Izz and Marian), warning him to protect his wife from "an enemy in the shape of a friend." He sets out to find Tess and eventually locates Joan, now well-dressed and living in a pleasant cottage. After responding evasively to his enquiries, she finally tells him her daughter has gone to live in [Sandbourne](#), a fashionable seaside resort. There, he finds Tess living in an expensive [boarding house](#) under the name "Mrs. d'Urberville." When he asks for her, she appears in startlingly elegant attire and stands aloof. He tenderly asks her forgiveness, but Tess, in anguish, tells him he has come too late; thinking he would never return, she yielded at last to Alec d'Urberville's persuasion and has become his mistress. She gently asks Angel to leave and never come back. He departs, and Tess returns to her bedroom, where she falls to her knees and begins a lamentation. She blames Alec for causing her to lose Angel's love a second time, accusing Alec of having lied when he said that Angel would never return to her.

The landlady, Mrs. Brooks, tries to listen in at the keyhole, but withdraws hastily when the argument becomes heated. She later sees Tess leave the house, then notices a spreading red spot — a bloodstain — on the ceiling. She summons help, and Alec is found stabbed to death in his bed.

Angel, totally disheartened, has left Sandbourne; Tess hurries after him and tells him that she has killed Alec, saying that she hopes she has won his forgiveness by murdering the man who ruined both their lives. Angel doesn't believe her at first, but grants his forgiveness — as she is in such a fevered state — and tells her that he loves her. Rather than head for the coast, they walk inland, vaguely planning to hide somewhere until the search for Tess is ended and they can escape abroad from a port. They find an empty mansion and stay there for five days in blissful happiness, until their presence is discovered one day by the cleaning woman.

They continue walking and, in the middle of the night, stumble upon [Stonehenge](#) where Tess lies down to rest on an ancient altar. Before she falls asleep, she asks Angel to look after her younger sister, Liza-Lu, saying that she hopes Angel will marry her after she is dead. At dawn, Angel sees that they are surrounded by police. He finally realizes that Tess really has committed murder and asks the men in a whisper to let her awaken naturally before they arrest her. When she opens her eyes and sees the police, she tells Angel she is "almost glad" because "now I shall not live for you to despise me". She is allowed a dignified death through the fact that Angel listens to her (he hasn't throughout the rest of the novel) and through her parting words of "I am ready".

Tess is escorted to Wintoncester ([Winchester](#)) prison. The novel closes with Angel and Liza-Lu

watching from a nearby hill as the black flag signalling Tess's execution is raised over the prison. Angel and Liza-Lu then join hands and go on their way.

Symbolism and themes

Hardy's writing often illustrates the "ache of modernism", and this theme is notable in *Tess*, which, as one critic noted,^[4] portrays "the energy of traditional ways and the strength of the forces that are destroying them". Hardy describes modern farm machinery with infernal imagery; also, at the dairy, he notes that the milk sent to the city must be watered down because the townspeople cannot stomach whole milk. Angel's [middle-class](#) fastidiousness makes him reject Tess, a woman whom Hardy often portrays as a sort of [Wessex Eve](#), in harmony with the natural world. When he parts from her and goes to Brazil, the handsome young man gets so ill that he is reduced to a "mere yellow skeleton." All these instances are typically interpreted as indications of the negative consequences of man's separation from nature, both in the creation of destructive machinery and in the inability to rejoice in pure nature. However, Marxist critic Raymond Williams in *The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence* questions the identification of Tess with a peasantry destroyed by industrialism. Tess is not a peasant, she is a school educated member of the rural working class: she suffers a tragedy through being thwarted, in her aspirations to rise and her desire for a good life (among which is love and sex), not by "industrialism" but by the landed bourgeoisie (Alec), liberal idealism (Angel) and Christian moralism in her family's village (see Chapter LI).

Another important theme of the novel is the sexual [double standard](#) to which Tess falls victim; despite being, in Hardy's view, a truly good woman, she is despised by society after losing her virginity before marriage. Hardy plays the role of Tess's only true friend and advocate, pointedly titling the book "a pure woman faithfully presented" and prefacing it with [Shakespeare's](#) words from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "Poor wounded name! My bosom as a bed/ Shall lodge thee." However, although Hardy clearly means to criticise [Victorian](#) notions of female purity, the double standard also makes the heroine's tragedy possible, and thus serves as a mechanism of Tess's broader fate. Hardy variously hints that Tess must suffer either to [atone](#) for the misdeeds of her ancestors, or to provide temporary amusement for the gods, or because she possesses some [small but lethal character flaw](#) inherited from the ancient clan.

From numerous [pagan](#) and neo-[Biblical](#) references made about her, Tess has been viewed variously as an Earth goddess or as a sacrificial victim.^[5] Early in the novel, she participates in a festival for [Ceres](#), the goddess of the harvest, and when she performs a [baptism](#) she chooses a passage from [Genesis](#), the book of creation, over more traditional [New Testament](#) verses. At the end, when Tess and Angel come to [Stonehenge](#), commonly believed in Hardy's time to be a pagan temple, she willingly lies down on an altar, thus fulfilling her destiny as a [human sacrifice](#).

This symbolism may help explain Tess as a personification of nature — lovely, fecund, and exploitable — while animal imagery throughout the novel strengthens the association. Examples are numerous: Tess's misfortunes begin when she falls asleep while driving Prince to market, thus causing the horse's death; at Trantridge, she becomes a poultry-keeper; she and Angel fall in love amid cows in the fertile Froom valley; and on the road to Flintcombe-Ashe, she kills some wounded [pheasants](#) to end their suffering. In any event, Tess emerges as a character not because of this symbolism but because "Hardy's feelings for Tess were strong, perhaps stronger than for any of his other invented personages."^[6]