

# **TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES – A Pure Woman**

by Thomas Hardy

## **Plot outline**

Tess of the d'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy is a classic English novel of the late Victorian period, a tragedy of perennially urgent themes. Briefly, it is the story of a young girl, Tess Durbeyfield, ignorant and innocent of sexual matters, who experiences a sexual encounter with Alec d'Urberville a local member of the nouveau-riche. She gives birth to an illegitimate child, who subsequently dies. Later she falls in love, and marries Angel Clare, a pleasant young man. On their wedding night, he confesses a youthful sin. She in turn feels permitted to disclose her past, but her husband's idealisation of her purity means that he cannot accept these facts. He insists that they part. The young woman spends some time in hardship and poverty, but feels unable to appeal to her estranged husband. Destitute, convinced that her husband is lost to her and careless of her own fate, she allows the seducer (Alec) to establish her as his mistress, partly in order to secure aid for her impoverished family. Meanwhile her husband has relented. He returns to see his wife. Taunted by her seducer, desperate to regain the love of her husband and in an attempt to negate the past, she kills her seducer. Husband and wife are reunited. After a brief period as fugitives, the young woman is captured, tried and hanged for murder.

2 He was obliged to advance with outstretched hands to avoid contact with  
the boughs, and discovered that to hit the exact spot from which he had  
started was at first entirely beyond him. Roaming up and down, round and  
4 round, he at length heard a slight movement of the horse close at hand;  
and the sleeve of his overcoat unexpectedly caught his foot. 'Tess!' said  
6 d'Urberville. There was no answer. The obscurity was now so great that he  
could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulosity at his feet, which  
8 represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves.  
Everything else was blackness alike. D'Urberville stooped; and heard a  
10 gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his  
face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was  
12 sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears. Darkness  
and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews  
14 and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their  
last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might  
16 some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? where was the providence of  
her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite  
18 spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was  
sleeping and not to be awaked. Why it was that upon this beautiful  
20 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  
22 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  
24 analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. One may,  
indeed, admit the possibility of a retribution lurking in the present  
26 catastrophe. Doubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors  
rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more  
28 ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time. But though to visit the sins of  
the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities,  
30 it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the  
matter. As Tess's own people dawn in those retreats are never tired of  
32 saying among each other in their fatalistic way: 'It was to be.' There lay the  
pity of it. An immeasurable social chasm was to divide our heroine's  
34 personality thereafter from that previous self of hers who stepped from her  
mother's door to try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm.