

Character Analysis of Tess of the D'urbervilles

Tess is one of Hardy's most sympathetic protagonists. She is as likeable as a literary character found in all of English literature. Readers come to understand her plight and her acceptance of the seemingly inevitable things that happen to her. Not once during the novel does Tess exhibit any traits that take away from Hardy's portrayal of her as a good person. As a result, by the end of the novel, we wish for a happy ending for Tess and Angel, but we know that not all stories end on a positive note.

Although overly happy endings were typical of some of Hardy's contemporaries, such as the Brontë sisters and Jane Austin, with Tess, Hardy attempted to infuse into the literature more earthy characters and a story that belies the notion of a happy ending.

Tess is the archetypal anti-heroine. That is, she does not win major battles or influence political decisions; instead, she inhabits her own small world and tries to cope with the fate that life has dealt her. By the end of the novel, she is a complete, whole character, but the scale of her influence in her own world, Wessex, is small indeed. Nonetheless, Tess has heroic qualities that make her worthy of our admiration. These qualities are most evident in the following scenes: when she baptizes her infant son, Sorrow; when she endures the tortures of Alec's violation and Angel's abandonment; and when she finally and irrevocably rids herself of Alec's influence. Thus, Tess is a heroine, but on an everyday, ordinary scale.

Tess is a simple country girl/woman who had a basic education growing up, but had little exposure to the wiles of the world outside Marlott. She has curiosity that goes beyond her basic education, as demonstrated when she debates religious and moral issues with both Angel and Alec. Her weakness is her innocence; she is unschooled "in the ways of the world" and therefore unable to protect herself. Tess chides her mother for not telling her full truth about a less-than-kind world: "Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk?"

Throughout the novel, Hardy develops Tess as a character and describes her simple beauty. She is attractive to all men, and even her attempts to change her appearance are not enough to hide her natural beauty. Further in the story, Tess is depicted as a person of near divine qualities when she baptizes Sorrow before he dies. Hardy calls the effect on her siblings as a "transfiguring effect" and that she looked "with a touch of dignity which was almost regal." Tess' beauty is balanced by her earthy elegance, and this is especially evident when she is being courted by Angel at Talbothays:

Minute diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess' eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and commonplace these dried off her; moreover, Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only, who had to hold her own against the other women of the world.

However, behind that beauty Hardy paints a picture of a tortured mind. Tess could not be described as an exuberant person, she seems to border between marginal happiness to deep depression. And her personality is hidden, like an enigma, even from those close to her. Joan, her mother, says in response to a question Angel asks, ". . . I have never really known her." Early in the novel, we see that this statement is foreshadowed when John remarks about Tess, "Tess is queer."

Fate plays a predominate role in what happens to Tess. The acknowledgement of the role of fate is summed up by the locals in the small town as "It was to be." Even Tess realizes that she and her family are in a tough spot when Prince, the family horse, is killed and she must go to the Stoke-d'Urbervilles for financial recovery. Joan, Tess' mother, realizing that her daughter has suffered several devastating blows by Alec says, "Well, we must make the best of it, I suppose." Tess is resigned to accept Alec's proposal near the end of the novel when she tells Angel, "I don't care what he [Alec] did wi' me!" Her own safety and happiness are of no consequence to her. Even when she must atone for murdering Alec, she accepts the inevitable as she is arrested for Alec's death — "It is as it should be." That is, she knows her attempt to avoid prosecution and ultimate death are futile, and she must accept her fate. She does so willingly.

Tess is able to bear great burdens placed upon her at a young age. She is between the ages of 16 and 23 when we read her tale. This ability to undergo so much at such a young age builds her character so that we see her as a powerful force in the novel. She accepts blame for Prince's death; the death of her infant son, Sorrow; the loss of Angel and the destruction of her marriage; as well as her killing Alec with her own hands and leaving home three times in her life to "test the waters of the world" outside her village.

She is unselfish in her actions towards others, as when she suggests to the other milkmaids at Talbothays and Angel, that Izz, Retty, and Marian are all more acceptable for marriage to Angel than she is. The other milkmaids at Talbothays cannot harbor any ill feelings toward Tess, as she is the one bound to marry Angel. Thus, she becomes a character with no discernable negative qualities.

Also, Tess is passionate in her love for Angel and her hatred of Alec. She strays from her marriage only when it appears that Angel may not return to her from South America and when there is no other way to help her destitute family. When she discovers Alec's duplicity, she makes her mind up that this will be his final deception of her.

The martyr-like passion of Tess engenders the readers' sympathy. She makes several attempts to rectify her "mistakes": the vow to Angel to end their marriage; her offer to kill herself to free Angel from their marriage; and, her refusal to ask Angel's parents for any additional money during Angel's sojourn to Brazil. She is determined to be self-sufficient and willing to sacrifice her well being for the good of others. This makes her selfless and on a morally higher ground than other characters in the novel.

Tess' greatest weakness is for her family, particularly her brothers and sisters, and it is this weakness that Alec exploits to great effect. Her journey to The Slopes, at the beginning of the novel, and her subsequent return to Alec near the novel's end, are all predicated on her willingness to undergo great pains to make her family's life better. Alec promises financial aid to the Durbeyfield family several times, to which Tess cannot object. He has ulterior motives, however: to subdue Tess and make her his own. In the end, Alec fails. Thus, Hardy paints a grand portrait of a well-rounded character in Teresa Durbeyfield.