Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Definition: Tess of the d'Urbervilles from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Novel (1891) by Thomas Hardy. The story tells of the destruction of Tess Durbeyfield, 'a pure woman', by the fecklessness of her once-powerful family, a villain's sexual predatoriness, and the self-deluding idealism of the man she loves. Tess finally kills her seducer and is condemned to death herself. The novel contains some of Hardy's most memorable depictions of human beings at the mercy of malevolent fate.

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Summary Article: Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented from The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English

A novel by Thomas Hardy, serialized in a bowdlerized form in The Graphic from July to December 1891 and in book form the same year. Its rejection of the conventional Victorian heroine provoked a controversy, continued by Jude the Obscure, which encouraged Hardy to abandon fiction for poetry.

Unwisely, Parson Tringham tells John Durbeyfield, a haggler (local carrier) of Marlott, that he is descended from the Norman family of d'Urbervilles. Fortified by this information, he and his wife Joan encourage their daughter Tess to seek the kinship of the parvenu Stoke d'Urbervilles who have adopted the ancient name. She is seduced by their son, the vulgar rake Alec, and bears a child that mercifully dies. To make a fresh start, Tess goes to work in southern Wessex at the fertile Talbothays farm. There she meets Angel Clare, younger son of a parson, and after a struggle within herself accepts his offer of marriage. On their wedding night Tess confesses her unhappy past to Angel, who recoils in puritanical horror. He goes off to Brazil and Tess seeks employment at the grim upland farm, Flintcomb Ash, belonging to the tyrannical Farmer Groby. There she is again afflicted by the advances of Alec d'Urberville, now an itinerant preacher. He is insistent that Tess is more his wife than Angel's and relentless in his pursuit of her. Angel returns to England a wiser man and traces Tess to Sandbourne, where she is living as Alec's wife. She considers it too late for reconciliation and sends him away. In her despair and entrapment she kills Alec and, after a brief idyllic period with Angel, is arrested at Stonehenge, tried, and hanged in Wintoncester (Winchester) jail.

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