

CHARACTERS

TESS DURBEYFIELD, a naïve country girl

JACK DURBEYFIELD, a carter of Marlott, Tess's father

JOAN DURBEYFIELD, Tess's mother

ELIZA-LOUISA, called LIZA-LU, Tess's younger sister

ALEC D'URBERVILLE, the handsome son of a wealthy merchant named Simon Stokes

MRS. STOKE-D'URBERVILLE, Alec D'urberville's widowed mother

ANGLE CLARE, an apprentice farmer

The REVEREND JAMES CLARE, Angel Clare's father

MRS. CLARE, woman of good works and limited interests

FELIX and **CUTHBERT CLARE**, Angel Clare's conventional, rather snobbish brothers

MERCY CHANT, a young woman interested in church work and charity

CAR DARCH, also called **DARK CAR**, a vulgar village woman, nicknamed Queen of Spades

NANCY, her sister, nicknamed Queen of Diamonds

MR. TRINGHAM, the elderly parson and antiquarian

RICHARD CRICK, the owner of Talbothays Farm, where Angel Clare is learning dairy farming

CHRISTIANA CRICK, Farmer Crick's kind, hearty wife

MARIAN, a stout, red-faced dairymaid at Talbothays Farm

IZZ HUETT, a dairymaid at Talbothays Farm

RETTY PRIDDLE, youngest dairymaid at Talbothays Farm

FARMER GROBY, harsh owner of Flintcomb-Ash Farm

PLOT

It is a proud day when Jack Durbeyfield learns that he is descended from the famous D'Urberville family. Durbeyfield has never done more work than was necessary to keep his family supplied with meager food and himself with beer, but from this day on, he ceases doing even that. His wife joins him in thinking that such a high family should live better with less effort, and she persuades their oldest daughter, Tess, to visit the Stoke-D'Urbervilles-- a wealthy family that has assumed the D'Urberville name because no one else claimed it. It is her mother's hope that Tess will make a good impression on the rich D'Urbervilles and perhaps a good marriage with one of the sons.

When Tess meets her supposed relatives, however, she finds only a blind mother and a dapper son who makes Tess uncomfortable by his improper remarks to her. The son, Alec, tricks the innocent young Tess into working as a poultry maid; he does not let her know that his mother is unaware of Tess's identity. After a short time, Tess decides to look for work elsewhere to support her parents and her brothers and sisters. She knows that Alec means her no good. Alec, however, is cleverer than she and manages at last to get her alone and then rapes her.

When Tess returns home and tells her mother of her experience, her mother's only worry is that Alec is not going to marry Tess. The poor girl works in the fields, facing the slander of her associates bravely. Her trouble is made worse by the fact that Alec follows her, trying to possess her again. By traveling to different farms during the harvest season, Tess manages to elude Alec long enough to give birth to her baby without his knowledge. The baby does not live long, however, and a few months after its death, Tess goes to a dairy farm far to the south to be a dairymaid.

At the dairy farm, Tess is liked and well treated. Angel Clare, a pastor's son who has rejected the ministry to study farming, is also at the farm. It is his wish to own a farm someday, and he is working on different kinds of farms so that he can learn something of the many kinds of work required of a general farmer. Although all the dairymaids are attracted to Angel, Tess interests him the most. He thinks her a beautiful and innocent young maiden, as she is, for it is her innocence that had caused her trouble with Alec.

Tess feels that she is wicked, however, and rejects the attentions Angel pays to her. She urges him to turn to one of the other girls for companionship. It is unthinkable that the son of a minister could marry a dairymaid, but Angel does not care much about family tradition. Despite her pleas, he continues to pay court to Tess. At last, against the wishes of his parents, Angel asks Tess to be his wife. Not only does he love her, but he also realizes that a farm girl would be a help to him on his own land. Although Tess is in love with Angel by this time, the memory of her night with Alec causes her to refuse Angel again and again. At last, his insistence, coupled with the written pleas of her parents to marry someone who could financially help the family, win her over, and she agrees to marry him.

On the night before the wedding, which Tess has postponed many times because she feels unworthy, she writes Angel a letter, revealing everything about herself and Alec. She slips the letter under his door-- sure that when he reads it, he will renounce her forever. In the morning, however, Angel acts as tenderly as before, and Tess loves him more than ever for his forgiving nature. When she realizes that Angel has not found the letter, she attempts to tell him about her past. Angel only teases her, thinking that such a pure girl could have no black sins in her history. They are married without Angel's learning about Alec and her dead baby.

On their wedding night, Angel tells Tess about an evening of debauchery in his own past. Tess forgives him

and then tells about her affair with Alec, thinking that he will forgive her as she had him; but such is not the case. Angel is at first stunned and then so hurt that he cannot even speak to Tess. Finally, he tells her that she is not the woman he loved, the one he has married, but a stranger with whom he cannot live, at least for the present. He takes her to her home and leaves her there. Then he goes to his home and on to Brazil, where he plans to buy a farm. At first, Tess and Angel do not tell their parents the reason for their separation. When Tess finally tells her mother, the ignorant woman blames Tess for losing her husband by confessing something he should never have known.

Angel had left Tess some money and some jewels that had been given to him by his godmother. Tess puts the jewels in the bank; she spends the money on her parents. When it is gone, her family goes hungry once more, for her father still thinks himself too highborn to work for a living. Again, Tess goes from farm to farm, performing hard labor in the fields to get enough food to keep herself and her family alive.

While she is working in the fields, she meets Alec again. He has met Angel's minister father and, repenting his evil ways, has become an itinerant preacher. The sight of Tess, for whom he has always lusted, causes a lapse in his new religious fervor, and he begins to pursue her once again. Frightened, Tess writes to Angel. She tells Angel that she loves him and needs him and that an enemy is pursuing her. She begs him to forgive her and to return to her.

The letter takes several months to reach Angel. Meanwhile, Alec is so kind to Tess and so generous to her family that she begins to relent in her feelings toward him. At last, when she does not receive an answer from Angel, she writes him a note saying that he is cruel not to forgive her and that now she will not forgive his treatment of her. Then she goes to Alec again and lives with him as his wife.

It was thus that Angel finds her. He has come to tell her that he has forgiven her and that he still loves her. When he finds her with Alec, however, he turns away, more hurt than before.

Tess, too, is bitterly unhappy. She now hates Alec because once again he has been the cause of her husband's repudiation of her. Feeling that she can only find happiness if Alec is dead, she stabs him as he sleeps. Then she runs out of the house and follows Angel, who is aimlessly walking down a road leading out of the town. When they meet and Tess tells him what she has done, Angel forgives her of everything, and they go on together. They are happy with each other for a few days, although Angel knows that the authorities will soon find Tess.

When the officers finally find them, Tess is asleep. Angel asks the officers to wait until she awakes. As soon as she opens her eyes, Tess sees the strangers and knows that they have come for her and that she will be hanged, but she is not unhappy. She has had a few days with the husband that she truly loves, and now she is ready for her punishment. She stands up bravely and faces her captors. She is not afraid.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Fate

- people are victims of events beyond their control
- the universe is malevolent and absurd; there is no divine providence, no divine justice
- good and evil often have no bearing in the meting out of people's fates

Modernity

- modern ways have severed people from their relationship to nature and community
- the Industrial Revolution improved material happiness at the cost of spiritual happiness
- bourgeois moralism offends society, not nature; such "morality" is both hypocritical and destructive
- organized religion is absolutist, hypocritical, and contrary to both nature and true justice

Gender

- society treats men and women differently (always to female disadvantage); the Angel in the House

norm is destructive for both men and women

- sexual desire is not unhealthy or undesirable; women should be valued for more than their perceived (or actual) purity
- women should not be judged by a double standard that excuses male sexual transgression, but condemns women for the same "crime"

Economic and Social Class

- the wealthy prey upon the poor with impunity, since society values money more than people
- wealth (or the temptations of wealth) tends to inculcate selfish values
- class divisions are largely arbitrary, yet one cannot easily escape these divisions, as the system conspires to destroy those who attempt to rise above their station