

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO THOMAS HARDY'S



TESS OF THE  
D'URBERVILLES

“Clear, concise, eloquent and well-argued, I only wish I’d had this guide when I was still a student.”

DAVID NICHOLLS,  
AUTHOR OF *ONE DAY*

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Cedric Watts & Jolyon Connell*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Thomas Hardy's*

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# Tess of the d'Urbervilles

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*by  
Cedric Watts &  
Jolyon Connell*

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# Introduction

Few novels have caused more of a stir than *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. On December 5, 1892, just over a year after it was published, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to Henry James, declaring *Tess* “damnable”: “one of the worst, weakest, least sane, most *voulu* [i.e. forced] books I have yet read”. James responded in kind:

I am meek and ashamed where the public clatter is deafening – so I bowed my head and let “Tess of the D’s” pass. But oh yes, dear Louis, she is vile. The pretence of “sexuality” is only equalled by the absence of it, and the abomination of the language by the author’s reputation for style. There are indeed some pretty smells and sights and sounds. But you have better ones in Polynesia.

Hardy thereafter referred to James and Stevenson, these “good-natured friends” of his, as “the Polonius and the Osric\* of novelists”. On the other side of the Atlantic, W. P. Trent, in the *Sewanee Review*, said that “everyone is reading or has read the book”:

“How horrible, how pessimistic,” exclaims one reader. “How absurd,” says another, “to attempt to

prove that such a woman was pure” [...] “What is the good of such stories when they only make one weep?” says a third. “It is the greatest tragedy of modern times,” says a fourth. “It is a dangerous book to put into the hands of the young,” says a fifth. And so on through a chorus of praise and blame...

In England, the Duchess of Abercorn stated that she divided her dinner-guests according to their view of Tess. If they deemed her “a little harlot”, she put them in one group; if they said “Poor wronged innocent!”, she put them in another. It is a telling illustration of the novel’s word-of-mouth success. The *Daily News* wittily claimed that “pessimism (we had almost said Tessism) is popular and fashionable”. Fan-mail arrived: Hardy said that his mail from readers even included confessional letters from various wives who, like Tess, had gained premarital sexual experience but, unlike her, had not told their husbands of it.

Hardy’s fame was now so great that he was a frequent guest at fashionable dinner parties. In 1892 he recorded that *Tess*’s fame had spread round the world and that translations were multiplying, “its publication in Russia exciting great interest”. Controversy generated publicity. Publicity generated prosperity.

Sales of *Tess* far surpassed those of any of

\* Shakespeare’s two dim-witted characters in *Hamlet*.

Hardy's previous works. R. G. Cox reports:

Of the three-volume edition of "Tess" two further impressions of 500 each had succeeded the first 1,000 within four months. The one-volume reprint at 6s [six shillings] ran to five impressions totalling 17,000 between September 1892 and the end of the year.

The novel was soon translated into French, German, Dutch, Italian, Polish and Russian, and between 1900 and 1930 was reprinted "some forty times in England alone". (Macmillan published 226,750 copies between 1895 and 1929.)

In addition to making Hardy famous and rich, the scandalous *Tess* attracted, and has continued to attract, an extraordinary range of critical opinion. Victorian reviewers, humanists, neo-Marxists, deconstructionists, cultural materialists, new historicists: everyone has had something to say about the novel. This book, drawing on the best of these critics, will attempt to show why, for all its faults, it has such power, and to explain the angry and uncompromising vision of the world contained within its pages.

## A summary of the plot

Tess Durbeyfield is one of nine children of two poor villagers in Blackmoor Vale in the south of England. Her father, feckless and inclined to drunkenness, is rendered lazier by the information that he is a descendant of the noble family, the d'Urbervilles. Tess, trying to help him, feels responsible for an accident which results in the death of his horse, Prince. Pressed by her mother, she approaches and "claims kin" with a Mrs d'Urberville who lives nearby. She and her son Alec, however, are not really relations at all: the family has annexed the name "d'Urberville", having originally been called "Stoke".

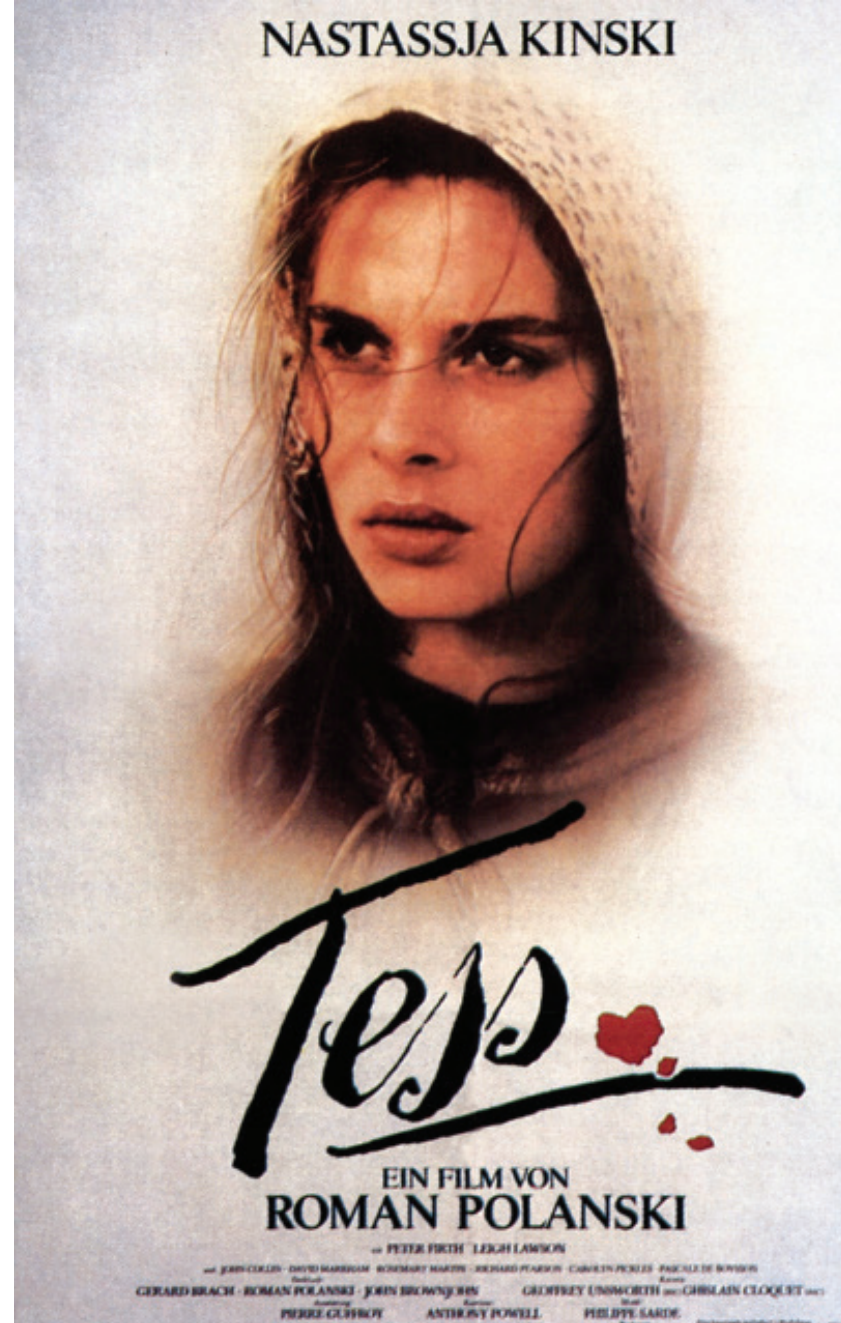
Tess goes to work for Mrs d'Urberville. The sensual Alec is attracted to Tess and strives to seduce her. At first she resists him, but eventually, after being rescued from a potentially dangerous brawl, she is overcome late one night. Afterwards, she becomes his mistress for some weeks, then leaves him. She gives birth to his child, who dies after an improvised baptism.

She leaves home to work as a dairy-maid on a fertile farm, and becomes engaged to Angel Clare, a clergyman's son who apparently holds liberal views. On their wedding night, Angel confesses to a sexual liaison in his past, and is forgiven by Tess; but when she tells him of her affair with Alec, he is horrified and leaves her. She returns to her family

(which becomes increasingly needy), and subsequently toils in harsh conditions on a bleak farm where she is cruelly victimised by the farmer, who had once been assaulted by Angel. Alec, influenced by Angel's devout father, has become a preacher, but, on encountering Tess by chance, is again strongly attracted to her, abandons his piety, and wins her back. Angel, who has travelled to South America, has not responded to her written pleas, and Alec is able to provide financial help for her family. Reluctantly, therefore, Tess again becomes Alec's mistress.

Angel returns penitently from Brazil, seeks Tess, and finds her living with Alec. There follows an altercation between Alec and Tess; Tess stabs Alec to death, and flees with Angel. The fugitives enjoy a brief idyll in the New Forest. When they reach Stonehenge, Tess is arrested; and later, at a prison in Wintoncester, she is hanged. Angel now has a new companion, Tess's younger sister 'Liza-Lu, who had been commended to him by Tess herself.

*Poster for Roman Polanski's 1979 film Tess, with the 18-year-old Nastassja Kinski in the title role*



# What is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* about?

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* marks a turning point in Hardy's life. When it was published, he was already a well-established and successful novelist, and though such earlier novels as *Desperate Remedies* and *The Woodlanders* had caused some controversy, Hardy had claimed that the views expressed in them were not necessarily his own. Indeed, as the critic Penny Boumelha has pointed out, he even denied he had any personal views *at all* on the subjects he wrote about. His Preface to *The Woodlanders*, for example, essentially disguises his real (liberal) views on divorce. With the writing of *Tess*, however, this changed: "Hardy's elaborately constructed, resolutely

non-controversial public persona," says Boumelha, began to break down.

It wasn't so much the plot that caused the fuss – other fictional heroines, after all, had "fallen" (Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* being one). It was the new polemical framework Hardy gave to his story. In few works of fiction is the author's central purpose made as plain as it is in *Tess*. Beneath his restrained public persona, Hardy had always been a passionate moralist, but now he was keen to pick a fight. In his "Explanatory Note" to the first edition (1891), he provocatively claims to have represented in the novel "what everybody nowadays thinks and feels", while *Tess's* aggressive subtitle, "A Pure Woman", makes the point even plainer, with its pre-emptive challenge to any conventional or puritanical reader who might



## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What's in a name? Plenty, when Hardy is choosing it. The nickname "Tess" is a familiar abbreviation of "Teresa", name of the 16th-century saint whose ecstatic trance was

famously sculpted by Bernini. The title's reference to her as Tess "of the D'Urbervilles", or subsequently "of the d'Urbervilles", rather than as Tess "Durbeyfield", heralds the theme of the decline of her family from its aristocratic past. The surname "d'Urberville" has a range of meanings: French *d'*, of, from; Latin *urbs*, city; French *urbain*, urban; Latin

*villa*, country-house, farm; French *ville*, town, city. The suffix's shift from "ville" to "field" stresses the rural situation of the declining family.

Hardy liked to trace his own ancestry through the centuries, claiming descent from the "le Hardys" of Jersey, and considered restoring the "le" to his name. His ancestors, he said, included the Captain

Thomas Hardy who famously comforted the dying Admiral Nelson on the flagship *Victory* at the Battle of Trafalgar. "The decline and fall of the Hardys much in evidence hereabout," the author ruefully recorded in his journal in 1888, adding: "So we go down, down, down"; and *Tess*, Chapter 19, cites the Hardys' decline.◆