

Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Read our overview which shows how teachers can consider *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in relation to the genre of Tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

Overview

There are a number of ways of looking at *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and at Tess' story within it, in terms of "Tragedy". At the most straightforward level, the significance of one of Hardy's definitions of tragedy is relevant: "the worthy encompassed by the inevitable". Although this idea proved controversial at the time of publication, most modern readers perceive Tess as a "worthy" character, and given that Hardy subtitled his novel *A Pure Woman*, it is clear that Hardy wanted to elevate Tess. Her flaws are never presented as being of her own making. Tess' journey from "a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience" to a murderer, whose life story allows her to judge her arrest objectively "It is as it should be" is painful to read. On the way, she is raped, married, abandoned and made destitute; she lives "in sin", buries her infant child, and experiences only brief moments of happiness and fulfilment. Students looking for an Aristotelian pattern in the novel may focus on Tess' fatal flaw and find this approach particularly illuminating. Is it her pride, her passivity, or simply her beauty (she is marked from the start by her "mobile peony mouth" and is frequently associated with the colour red) that singles her out for the punishment of the fates? Hardy gives a title to each of the seven phases of his novel to point towards its tragic structure (Tess' journey is from 'Maiden' to 'Fulfilment'). In the end, Hardy's narrator tells us the "The President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess." The reference to Aeschylus makes Hardy's intention clear: Tess travels a tragic path and her death is inevitable.

Other characters also fall neatly into the tragic pattern:

- Alec, the mustachioed, partly pantomimic and certainly predatory and conniving villain becomes the adversary, or nemesis, to whom Tess' fate is locked

- Angel provides some hope that her fate might be altered, but he hypocritically fails Tess, and his change of heart comes too late for any meaningful reversal of fortune to take place
- many of the country characters take on a choric function
- Tess' parents contrast their daughter's simple virtue
- Angel's parents represent the blindness of power to suffering.

Setting

Hardy uses a number of settings for his story (Tess' home in Marlott, Alec's country mansion 'The Slopes', Talbothays Dairy, Flintcomb Ash, Sandbourne, Stonehenge, the prison in Wintoncester. In each, Tess attempts to live free of the restrictions of her world, tries to live a virtuous existence but after her rape by Alec she is always haunted by the shadow of her past. Much of the novel's narrative drive is provided by the frustrating sense of inevitability that Hardy creates about that past catching up with her; Tess is a victim of her circumstances and hostile forces working against her (her parents, Alec, the draconian church, farmer Groby, for example). In some of the settings, Tess is allowed moments of happiness and peace, particularly when Angel is present (at Talbothays and Stonehenge). Although some of these settings (Flintcomb-Ash and Wintoncester in particular) are presented as being horrible or menacing in themselves, there is an implication that order will be restored once Tess has moved on. Perhaps the novel also suggests that Wessex will be considered a more stable place in her absence.

Status

Classical and Renaissance tragedies use royal or noble characters as protagonists. By the late nineteenth century, this convention was being challenged in the theatre. Ibsen and Strindberg were quite consciously attempting to induce tragic feelings in their audiences in relation to middle class protagonists. It was still some years before Miller would suggest that the fate of working class characters might inspire "pity and terror" to a similar extent to that of princes. Hardy seems caught between these two impulses: his protagonist is a member of the rural working class, but he works hard to aggrandise her status. The novel's first chapter establishes Tess' noble blood. She is educated beyond the level of most of her peers, and her father holds a life-lease. The setting of her arrest at the altar at Stonehenge suggests a certain divinity in her nature. Tess' marriage ceremony prefigures her funeral: the river crossing and the placing of Tess in a coffin in which she immediately sits up have mythic significance. There are at least two ways of responding to this. Some readers may feel that Hardy, in spite of his Realist motives, is controlled by classical generic convention here. Others, perhaps more historically sympathetic, may see the aggrandisement of the life and death of a working class country girl as a radical enough statement in itself.

Fate

Hardy is explicit in presenting Tess as the “Plaything of the Immortals.” He manipulates coincidence and chance to play an exaggerated role. When considering this novel in the light of other tragic texts, it is easy to see the recurring aspect of fate. Hardy uses fate to shape a great deal of the novel’s action, and hence Tess’ downfall. Chance meetings, accidents and sheer bad luck are all telling. However, Tess is not simply “The Plaything of the Immortals”. Hardy is more subtle in constructing causes. The social structures and attitudes of Tess’ world dominate her life and are presented as playing their part in her tragedy. Tess as a young working class female is at the mercy of patriarchy. Alec’s power and status allow him to rape with impunity. Her poverty, the need to work to survive and her sense of shame keep Tess moving from place to place. Angel’s hypocrisy destroys Tess’ marriage before it has even begun. These forces are seen to be as implacable and as impossible to challenge as Fate is in the classical world. Many, if not most, of Hardy’s original readers would be of the same class as Alec or Angel and might therefore have found their own prejudices and assumptions challenged by Hardy’s story. Tess is clearly a tragic victim.

Catharsis?

There is tension between the desire for the narrative satisfaction of Tess’ arrest and death, and the emotional desire to prevent it. The endings of tragedies are never straightforward and this one is no exception. Hardy suggests that the ‘gradual closing in’ of forces hostile to Tess are an essential aspect of the tragic mode, but at the end of his narrative he, as do most who write in the tragic tradition, gives a hint at restoration. Tentatively some positives emerge. Angel and Liza-Lu, having watched Tess hang, join ‘hands again’, and go on. Readers may feel very uncomfortable that Angel is rewarded with a “spiritualised” version of Tess, especially in respect of his proposition to Izzy before leaving for Brazil. For all his shame and regret, his love and his principles, it seems that any girl will do. A Hegelian reading of the tragedy may be helpful finally. The two world views proposed by Hegel might be seen in Tess’ perceived purity in opposition to the practicality or pragmatism and compromise of the world. The reconciliation of these forces can only be resolved by her death, leaving readers to pity her, and also perhaps, leaving them terrified at the potential for change in society. In the end, Tess is removed, and the practical world can continue without her, compromised, diminished but otherwise unchanging.