



[Tess of the D'Urbervilles](#), by Thomas Hardy

In A Nutshell

Thomas Hardy was an English novelist and poet writing at the end of the 19th century, but for today's readers, his novels often seem more modern than Victorian in nature. People usually associate the Victorian period (i.e., the period during the reign of Queen Victoria, or 1837-1901) with sexual repression and general prudishness. Thomas Hardy's willingness to challenge contemporary views of sexual morality and marriage made many of his novels very controversial when they first appeared. In fact, the last novel he published, *Jude the Obscure*, was criticized so scathingly that Hardy resolved not to write any more novels. He switched entirely to writing poetry.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles appeared five years earlier, in 1890, and was just as controversial. The novel is about a young country girl, Tess, whose father discovers that their family is descended from one of the oldest, most aristocratic families in England. But the discovery has tragic consequences for Tess. She is sent off to the wealthy branch of the family to "claim kin" (i.e., to borrow money), and ends up being raped by the son of that branch of the family. Hardy's willingness to describe the rape, and his defiant insistence that Tess herself remains pure in spite of it, made the novel controversial.

Tess was published in 1891, but Hardy had been working on it in some form or other since about 1887. The manuscript went through a lot of different versions, and the controversial bits made it difficult for him to find a publisher. The publishers who rejected the novel put it more

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or less bluntly, but the consensus was basically that *Tess* (both the character and the novel) was too sexy to be put in print. The sexiness made it immoral in their eyes. (See the "What's Up with the Title?" for more on the objections of the publishers).

In 1890, Hardy finally found a magazine willing to publish *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, but only on condition that he censor some of the more controversial scenes. Basically, it's like when NBC started showing reruns of *Sex and the City* – because it's a network station, they had to censor some entire scenes, as well as all the swearing. But *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was produced in the reverse order – first in a censored version, and only later in its original form.

Later in 1891, Hardy was given the opportunity to publish *Tess* in book form, which meant that he'd be able to include the scenes that were censored out of the *Graphic* magazine. He jumped at the chance – he wanted to "[piece] the trunk and limbs of the novel together" after the *Graphic* magazine had forced him to "dismember" it (quoted in the Penguin edition's "History of the Text", p. liv). In the 1891 version, he added the subtitle ("A Pure Woman"), defiantly defending the purity of the heroine in spite of her rape.

Hardy also revised later editions of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* himself, but pressure from contemporary critics forced him to change or even delete some of the controversial scenes. Most modern critics agree that the 1891 version is the closest to his original vision of the novel, so that's the version that we use in this module.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Why did contemporary critics think that this novel was "immoral"?
- 2 Hardy points out various social problems in this novel. Does he offer any solutions?
- 3 How much is Tess to blame for what happens to her?

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