UNIT 15: THOMAS HARDY: *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE:

15.1 Learning Objectives

15.2 Introduction

15.3 Reading the Novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

15.4 Major Themes

15.5 Hardy's Art of Characterization

15.6 Hardy's Narrative Style

15.7 Let us Sum up

15.8 Further Reading

15.9 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

15.10 Possible Questions

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify the important themes that add to the significance of the novel
- discuss the narrative techniques and Hardy's art of characterization
- relate the text with the issues of class conflict prevalent in Victorian society
- examine the position of women in the society of 19th century

15.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this Block, and it is based on a detailed reading of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented.* This novel has been the greatest of Hardy's Wessex novels. It was published in 1891, but Hardy had been working on it since 1887. The manuscript had gone through many different versions, and the controversy revolved around it made it difficult for Hardy to find a publisher. Hardy's willingness to describe the rape, and his defiant

insistence that Tess herself remains pure in spite of it, made the novel controversial. Like in his other novels, in this novel too Hardy has shown his deep sympathy towards the lower classes of England, especially the women. He had also shown his compassion for the victimised women who became the prey of the self-righteous rigid morality of English society of his times. This novel initially appeared in a censored and serialised version, published by the British illustrated newspaper The Graphic in 1891, and in book form in 1892. Though now considered one of the major 19th century English novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* received mixed reviews when it first appeared, in part because it challenged the sexual morals of the late Victorian period. In the following subsections, you will get an opportunity to read about the various important aspects of the novel.

15.3 READING THE NOVEL *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

15.4 MAJOR THEMES

The following are some of the most important themes of the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*:

Wessex as the Locale:

The action of the novel is set at Wessex and it is a perfect specimen of Wessex novel modelled on greater Dorset, one of the maritime counties of southern England bordering the English Channel. Tess's village home is situated at Marlott close to the Vale of Blackmoor (sometimes Blackmore Vale), a pastoral valley that baffles one with tiny lanes and field pathways. The book provides enough details that record the local geography. In addition to this, the countryside and the rural folks who live in that area provide more than a mere backdrop upon which Hardy based his tale. Hardy makes full use of the diversity of his settings stressing Dorset's distinctive geological formations. The different locales have been presented as Tess moves from one locale to another and experiences with wonder the difference in the landscapes, bounty of

nature and so on. In the novel, Hardy portrays Wessex as a geographical locale that includes a variety of landscapes, from fertile valley to arid limestone beds, bordered by heaths, sands and the sea. The whole countryside acquires a life of its own and is almost like a character. The whole setting reflects the happenings in Tess's life. Marlott is a secure place for her where she feels the security of her mother's care. Talbothays is portrayed as a beautiful place, in a rich agricultural region where she meets Angel. The place is presented as fertile and expansive and is apt for any romance to develop. Likewise Flintscomb-Ash where she waits for her husband's return is presented as a desolate place, with mud, rocks, poor conditions everywhere which make it appear almost a wasteland.

Industrialisation and the Breakdown of Peasantry:

One of the major themes that Hardy addresses here is *industrialisation and the breakdown of peasantry*. Tess suffers a great deal from the unavoidable consequences of the rapid process of urbanization and modernisation in the Victorian society. The transformation from the rural to urban lifestyle brought in enormous social changes. Tess is a peasant girl and her struggles and misfortunes represent the sufferings of the peasantry. Again, Angel's act of leaving Tess behind represents the society's rigid and orthodox code of morality with a double standard– one for man and another for woman. Hardy has depicted the rural people's occupations, their problems, their trials and tribulations at the onset of the changing condition. Tess represents this class and through her life Hardy has portrayed the destruction of the peasant class. At the onslaught of industrialisation the old societal structure got changed. Workers were forced off their land and turned into proletarians, either industrial or agricultural. In the novel Hardy captures, the scenario just prior to Industrial Revolution, which transformed the English countryside, and in the novel he very poignantly depicts the inevitable consequences of rapidly changing society in the countryside of Wessex. Wessex represents the real social and economic disruption of the society of Hardy's times. However, in the novel fate is the thematic

basis for the failure of life Hardy projects alienation, isolation, estrangement of characters in the newly emerged impersonalised social bonds as the core motif for the tragedy that occurs.

Position of Women and Men's Domination:

Another recurrent theme is the position of women and men's domination. Women are shown as subjected to the dictates of men. At times even women are presented as passive and are responsible for their own subservience. Alec's seduction of Tess presents in a symbolic way the dominance of men over women. Again, Angel's seeking forgiveness from Tess for his past conduct is a taken for granted kind of a situation. However, he deserts Tess for the same mistake. Thus, society prescribes two different norms for man and woman. Tess accepts her fate passively. She suffers from the wrong doings of others. However, she does not protest or resents it. The conservative society of the Victorian period was patriarchal and so there was no voice of women. Women have to protect the honour and values of the society. However, if some wrong occurs without their being consciously involved, they have to face the opprobrium of the society as in the case of Tess.



LET US KNOW

Portrayal of the Priests:

Hardy in this novel has expressed in a subtle manner his disapproval of the orthodox Christian church. The portrayal of the priests that he presents in the novel is somewhat satirical and he digs at the religious functioning of the churches of that era. Parson Tringham, Felix, the Curate, the writer of the Biblical Text whom Tess meets, the Vicar at Mellstock, Angel's religious scepticism and Alec's conversion, all these hint at Hardy's attitude towards the Christian church. Moreover, Hardy mentions that even the rural folk throng at the church not for any religious purpose but because they regard it as a social duty and habit.

The Injustice of Existence and the Role of Chance:

This can be seen as one of the most prominent themes. Throughout the novel, we see injustice of existence. The death of the horse Prince, seduction of Tess and the slip of the letter under the carpet are all chances that were destined to happen and which had made the tragedy of Tess happen. Again the forces that govern human life are shown as absolutely unpredictable and not necessarily well disposed to us. Tess' life journey remind us of a world where the Gods are not just and fair and this made Hardy conclude the novel as *"Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals (in the Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess"*. You will find many such instances where chance and coincidences play a significant role in bringing about the tragedy of Tess.

Agrarian Order vs Industrial Order:

Tess's fate mirrors the destruction of the agricultural class in England. The novel is a potent document of the 19th century society where the capitalist form of life took over the old peasant's independence resulting in a huge transformation of the society. The difference between the upper class and lower class and the resulting exploitation of the latter in the hands of the former became a glaring aspect of the society. Tess's predicament is one example of such kind of tragedy. The proletariat kind of life at the farm at Flintscomb-Ash made Tess suffer a great deal. There she worked for meagre wages in the most degrading condition. The scene at the threshing is particularly significant as it symbolises the dehumanising relationship at the new capitalist farms. This situation was in stark contrast with the working atmosphere at the Talbothays where there was a feeling of cordiality and fellow feeling among the workers and also with the master dairyman. In a way, Tess represents the old agrarian order in conflict with the new industrial order which is represented by Alec. Alec can be seen as the representative of the newly emerged middle class rulers of Britain who have much money and power that comes from industry. As a symbol of new order, Alec is portrayed as having no communion with nature, irresponsible, unfocused and

insensitive to everyone around. Tess as the representative of the old agrarian order is seen as warm, charitable and always in harmony with nature. The seduction of Tess by Alec is seen as the forceful perpetration of the newly emerged industrial system over of the agrarian life order.

Pessimism:

Pessimism is a pervading note in Hardy's fiction. No other novelist of his times or before him was so acutely aware of the tragic fate of life. This makes his major fiction filled with a note of pessimism –a fact that entitles him to be placed along with Shakespeare and the Greek tragic dramatists. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was a great success, marred only by controversy raised over its frank treatment of sex and its pessimistic view of life. The conservative Victorian society was reluctant to accept it with all the details of Tess's sexual encounter with Alec. Moreover, the all-pervading pessimism in the novel has also raised some controversy. However, Hardy's pessimistic portrayal of life was a known fact by that time. Hardy's subtitle "A Pure Woman" caused enough controversy in his day, but it does succinctly convey the social commentary that is implicit in the novel: that Tess is a victim of circumstances and remains pure in heart and spirit if not in body.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Do you get a picture of Wessex in the novel?

Q 2: How does Hardy portray the position of women in the society?

Q 3: What is the role of chances and coincidences in the tragedy of Tess?

Q 4: Mention briefly how Hardy has portrayed the social issues in the novel.

15.5 HARDY'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

Hardy's creative power is best exemplified in his character portrayal. The most striking feature of Hardy's character portrayal is that

his characters are fixed characters. His characters mostly belonged to the Wessex countryside. He convincingly portrays the characters of peasants, labourers, shepherds and singers with authentic details. But, he is not equally successful in portraying people from the aristocratic society. His characters in general are emotional rather than intellectual. The male characters as vivid, passionate, emotional and impulsive and very often they suffer from indecision. While in his portrayal of women, there can be seen a blend of cynicism and tenderness. Coventry Patmore talks about Hardy's portrayal of women characters: ''It is in his heroines, however, that Hardy is most original and delightful... ...each has the charm of the simplest and most familiar womanhood, and the only character they have in common is that of having each some serious defect, which only makes us like them more." (Cox, 1970:105) Thus, the women characters in Hardy's novels share some kind of commonality.



LET US KNOW

Henry Charles Duffin opines that Hardy's understanding of women characters is deep and absolute. He divides Hardy's women characters into three groups– the first group includes full length portraits of women who are in the higher order of personality, like Tess, Sue, Eustacia, Bathsheba and Elizabeth Jane; the second group consists of full length study of women, but they have less personal significance, like, Ethelberta, Elfride, Grace, Mulberry, Viviette, and Anne; and the third group consists of women of much less significance, like, Lucetta, Arabella, Tamsie, Marty South, Paula and Fancy Picotel. Hardy's grasp of the human personality is not only extensive but also deep and this is very nicely reflected in his character portrayals.

The following are the three immortal characters in the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles:*

Tess Durbeyfield:

Tess, the protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of Joan and John Durbeyfield and is the eldest of the seven children. She is a beautiful young woman living with her family. Her beauty is such that it attracts the attention of the opposite sex. Not only Alec but even Angel is attracted to her by her physical charms, her 'real vitality' and her 'real' warmth. Angel Clare finds something unearthly about her when on one occasion he finds a visionary essence of woman– a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He calls her Artemis, Demeter and so on. Tess has studied till Sixth standard and is considerably ahead of her mother as far as her beliefs and outlooks go. As you must have realised by now that hardships and injustices were heaped upon her, but she never wallows in self pity or gave up hope. She is a very selfless, honest and kind woman and has been presented as a 'pure woman' as the subtitle of the novel indicates. Her purity is part of the spirit and conscience. She has been praised by critics who admire her steadfast hope under adversity. The misfortunes that she faces come in a train. The death of the horse Prince, her seduction, the death of her baby "Sorrow", Angel's deserting her, her marriage with Alec, Angel's return and finally her own act of murdering Alec are a series of misfortunes which she suffers in her own quiet, stoical way. She fights against all the obstacles and fate to the end. In a way, she is stoical about her suffering. Tess endures her misfortunes with a rare fortitude and this makes her character tragic. The entire crisis leaves her crushed, but she moves on. After Alec's seduction, she is haunted by a sense of guilt. She refuses Angel's proposal only for this guilty conscience. She is a deeply moral person who cannot bring herself to hide the truth when Angel accepts her as a spotless woman. After her marriage, she confesses the truth, which is a sign of her sense of guilt. Angel's reaction comes as a big shock for her. Her attempt to meet Angel's parents proves to be futile. Throughout the novel, one observes her sacrificial nature and her concern about her family. When she marries Alec, it is only for the sake of her own siblings and not for herself. She cannot resist the pressure, as her siblings are homeless and her husband Angel does not reply to her letters. Therefore,

she has to succumb to Alec's pressure to marry him and in a vague manner, she starts believing him to be her husband. Finally, she redeems herself from this by killing Alec for deceiving her by telling that Angel will never come back again.



LET US KNOW

Tess is central to the novel and Hardy describes her with all the details needed to present her as physically attractive, emotionally balanced and morally strong. She is almost a human angel 'with a touch of the imperfect'. She has been created as both as an individual and a symbol. At the end of the novel when she lies on the sacrificial stone at Stonehenge she appears more a symbol than an individual. She dominates the novel to the extent that it is given her name as the title.

Alec D'Urbervilles:

Alec is regarded as the villain of the novel who has brought the tragedy in Tess's life. He is the handsome and amoral son of a wealthy merchant named Simon Stokes. He casts an evil eye on Tess the day she comes to work for his mother. He is manipulative and we know about his intentions towards Tess when he drives the carriage very fast to frighten Tess out of her wits and then forces her to kiss him. He is always in the look for an opportunity to get close to Tess. His villainy is revealed when taking opportunity of the situation he forces himself upon Tess and robs her of her virginity. He, however, has no knowledge about the damage that has been done to Tess. Then we hear about his misbehaviour to Mr. Clare, the Parson. Later we find him a transformed man who is converted and has become a priest. However, Tess is sceptical about his transformation which is confirmed when he asks Tess to swear that she will not tempt him by her beauty and charm. However, his conversion proves to be a temporary affair as his newly acquired religious faith begins to crumble. He begins to pester Tess to

marry him. He makes her believe that her husband Angel will never come back to her. He further helps her family to move on after the death of Tess's father. On another level, Alec provides Tess employment when asked for and treats her well to induce her to stay on at Trantridge for three months. His obsession for Tess makes him to go to any extent and he was happy to get her at the end though for a short span of time. He has to pay for his obsession with his life. It is worth noting that Alec is always associated with darkness by which, perhaps, hardy intends to make him a symbol of evil. "I am not going to feel responsible for my deeds and passions if there is nobody to be responsible to" betray his absolute lack of scruple in contrast with Tess's fortitude and acceptance of her 'fate'. Alec is also presented as an outsider to the community of poor farmers to which Tess belongs. He is the son of a moneylender and believes that money can buy anything. In a way, he is the playboy of the world of Wessex and Tess's own attitude to him is more ambivalent than utterly critical and dismissive.

Angel Clare:

Hardy presents Angel Clare as a far more complex character than Alec. He is the son of a Parson, who wanted him to be a clergyman. Angel's father and two brothers are respected clergymen, but his religious doubts keep him away from joining the religious order. He is an intelligent man who decides to become a farmer to preserve his intellectual freedom from the pressures of city life. Unlike his father and brothers, Angel is free from religious dogmas and orthodoxy. He is a secularist who represents a rebel striving toward a personal vision of goodness. His disdain for tradition and the conservative ideologies of the times is evident in his love and marriage with Tess who is a milkmaid and his social inferior. He exhibits a poet's soul in his love for Tess. When he talks to his parents about Tess, he describes her in very practical and rational terms. He mentions about her being religious and her regular going to church, as he knows that these are the things that his parents would want to know. Angel's religious views are exactly those that Hardy is said to have held. However, his double standard nature becomes

evident when he rejects Tess after her confession. While he himself had a sexual encounter with a woman before he met Tess. He expects Tess to understand him and forgive him for his forty-eight hours dissipation with a woman in London where he was in his senses. However, Tess's forced seduction by Alec made him desert her and leave her. He keeps himself away from Tess for quite some time. However, his deep love for Tess is well understood. His sleep walking scene is enough proof of this love. He makes financial provision for Tess so that she does not have to face any financial crunch. Angel finally awakens to his real senses of real world morality when he failed in Brazil, which makes him realize that he has been unfair to Tess and he comes back to her. Their last stay together is very short and at the end, the final separation takes place. Critics opine that though there are several reasons for the tragedy of Tess, it is Angel's deserting her that brings the final blow to her life and the final tragedy. Thus, Hardy delineates Angel's character as a complex blend of good and bad, as one who is crucial enough to reject his newly married wife at the wedding night after hearing her confession and yet feels the pangs of separation and atones for his error by accepting her, albeit for a while only because Tess has become a fugitive after murdering Alec.

15.6 HARDY'S NARRATIVE STYLE

The narrative technique of a novel is a crucial aspect to guide the readers grasp the events as through it the author conveys the time, place and people in the society. In the novel Hardy uses a variety of narrative technique to portray the society in which he or Tess lived. Hardy uses a third person omniscient narrator to present the tragedy of Tess. In the course of the novel Hardy has offered his personal comments on the events of the novel and on the characters. This is done with a view to giving a direction to the events of the story. Again, Hardy has provided a more direct means of communication between the readers and the characters with dialogue, letter writing and songs and poetry. Through the conversation between the characters and even through the letter writing the readers are in a position to judge the characters and the events

directly without the intervention of the author. Hardy has presented religious and mythological allusions too to convey the religious and social environments of the Victorian society in which his characters lived. Through the characters from the religious sphere like Parson Tringham, the Vicar of Mellstock and the Vicar Clare Hardy presents the functioning of the religious institutions and the people involved with it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Discuss briefly the narrative technique that Hardy has used in the novel.



15.7 LET US SUM UP

From a reading of this unit, you have learnt how *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* on the basis of its various aspects, introduces you to the English society and culture of the Victorian era. Though technically it is a 19th century novel, this work anticipates the 20th century in regard to the nature and treatment of the subject matter. By now, you must have realised that in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the plot is developed in seven parts and each part coincides with a new development in Tess' life. The plot of the novel moves on a succession of accidents and coincidences. Tess's tragic fate depends on some disastrous mischance over and over again. In Hardy's works, chance and coincidences always play a greater role in influencing the course of action. The novel also displays several significant contemporary issues of the times including the religious orthodoxy and the change in outlook of the people of the times. With the development of science and technology, men's religious faith had undergone a significant change as they began to question the conservative religious beliefs. This attitude is reflected in the character of Angel Clare who resists the conservative religious beliefs of his father and embraces a more secular outlook towards life. The novel also reflects Hardy's preoccupation with the idea of class struggle, the

destruction of the peasantry, and also the emergence of the urban middle class. The novel very clearly portrays Hardy's attack on the Victorian attitude towards premarital sex and woman's predicament in such situations. Hardy proves that Tess was a pure woman as she was a victim of Alec's clever design to take advantage of her innocence and her mother's selfish desire to get her married off to the rich family. Further, Hardy's pessimistic philosophy, which permeates the novel, has been mentioned along with his insistence on the role of destiny and chance.



15.8 FURTHER READING

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WEB RESOURCES:

http://escholarship.usyd.edu.au/journals/index.php/SSE/article/viewFile/539/510.



15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: The local geography of Wessex region… …the seasonal settings are carefully chosen… …the agricultural problems… …intrusion of machinery in the Victorian era at the advent of Industrialisation… …the rural folk mostly belonged to Wessex, their life style, their hardships, sufferings… …women's position in the society of that region has been presented through Tess and other characters.

Ans to Q No 2: Women are shown as subjected to the dictates of men… …Tess, the protagonist, represents the rural women always at the receiving end in a male-dominated world… …double standard regarding the moral ethics of men and women… …victorian notion of honour, chastity, morality are presented through the women characters who are under the patriarchal dominance.

Ans to Q No 3: The plot of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* turns on a succession of accidents and coincidences… …it begins with the death of the horse… …seduction of Tess and Tess's written confession to Angel going under the carpet… …Tess's chance encounter with Alec… …the death of Tess's father and its consequences… …the overall impact of those coincidences in the total effect of the novel.

Ans to Q No 4: Changing notions of social classes in Victorian England… …clash between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life… …the hardships and drudgery of the rural folks… …impact of industrialisation… …Women's position in society… …attitude towards God and Religion… …rural orthodoxy and religious values are questioned.

Ans to Q No 5: Hardy uses a variety of narrative techniques to portray the society in which he or Tess lived… …use of third person omniscient narrator to present the tragedy of Tess. … …use of personal comments on the events of the novel and also on the characters… …use of direct means of communication between the readers and the characters through dialogue, letter writing and songs and poetry.



15.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Alec wrongs Tess through his lack of principles. Angel wrongs her with his excess of principles. Which do you see as the more unforgivable betrayal?

Q 2: What is the role of fate in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*? To what extent does Tess's tragedy hinge on improbable coincidence?

Q 3: The sub-title of Hardy's novel describes Tess as "a pure woman." Discuss the aptness of the subtitle with reference to Tess.

Q 4: Give your own idea of Hardy's philosophy of life as reflected in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.*

Q 5: Why does Hardy divide his novel into "Phases"? What apparent transformation separates each phase from the other? Discuss in the context of Tess's changing fortunes?

Q 6: Write a note on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a Wessex novel presenting the significance of Wessex as the locale of the novel

Q 7: In what ways, according to you, does Tess' life embody the indomitable will to enjoy and the circumstantial forces against enjoyment?

Q 8: Chose one particular scene from the novel and explain how the author has presented it effectively?

Q 9: Discuss the role of Nature in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.* Critically examine the influence of natural environment upon Tess in various phases of the novel.

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Web Resources:

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