

Tess of the d'Urbervilles: (b) The 'country' theme

☞ refers to links on www.crossref-it.info

- ❖ **Lesson focus:** To understand the rural background of the novel, its significance and Hardy's interest in this theme.
- ❖ **Opening exercise:** Briefly brainstorm the differences between living in a town or city, compared to living in the countryside, in the early 21st Century
 - A few recent newspaper cuttings on urban and rural issues could be examined
 - Think about changes which are taking place and resistance to them.
- ❖ **Discussion ideas:** The critic Arnold Kettle described the thesis of the novel as: 'The destruction of the English peasantry, allied to the fate of a pure woman'.
 - ☞ Social / political background > Agricultural and social conditions. Hardy's presentation of this theme is largely symbolic.
 - Students, in teams, should find examples from throughout the novel under the following headings
 - Each team of students could examine one of the 'Phases'
 - The examples provided can either be given to help students get started or held back in case help is needed.
 - ☞ About the text > Hardy's Wessex
 - **Events** - These provide images of the theme (for example the death of Prince)
 - **Description** - This creates prevailing moods (for example in the ways Talbothays and Flintcomb Ash are described)
 - **Coincidences** - The dice seems to be loaded against Tess in particular (for example the letter under the rug). This heading links with the second half of Arnold Kettle's quotation
- Students need to explain the significance of their examples and how they relate to the theme.
- ❖ **Textual examination:** The interest that Hardy has in this theme, and his symbolic (rather than entirely naturalistic) approach, has been said by some critics to lead to weaknesses in his style
 - Consider the following suggested weaknesses:
 - 'Preaching' directly by the narrator
 - 'Preaching' through the characters
 - Consequent unconvincing dialogue
 - Lack of psychological realism
 - Tendency for characters to be caricatures
 - Students could argue for or against the notion that Hardy is a weak stylist, finding examples to support their view.
 - ☞ Imagery and symbolism in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* > Geographical symbolism in *Tess*
 - ☞ Imagery and symbolism in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* > Landscapes of desire vs. landscapes of community
- ❖ **Recreative task:** Script or improvise a conversation between Tess's parents
 - This should be set at a point early in the novel, perhaps the day when Mr Durbeyfield receives the 'news' about his family connections
 - It should include discussion of the rural lifestyle of the family.
- ❖ **Critical task:** In his Preface, Hardy says, 'A novel is an impression, not an argument.'
 - How far do you think this is true of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*?
 - ☞ Themes in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* > Nature as sympathetic or indifferent > Hardy's use of Nature
- ❖ **Extension task:** Find some description of an urban scene in one of Dickens' novels (in *Hard Times*, for example, or Pip's arrival in London in *Great Expectations*) and compare it with a passage of rural description in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.