

Tess of the dUrbervilles by Thomas Hardy is now considered a great classic of English literature. Tess Durbeyfield is the eldest daughter in a poor rural working family, a fresh, well-developed country girl who looks markedly more mature than she is. A major theme of the novel is the sexual double standard to which Tess falls victim; despite being a truly good woman, she is despised by society after losing her virginity before marriage. In fact Tess is raped when she is no more than sixteen or seventeen years old by Alec Stoke-dUrberville, the libertine son of Simon Stokes and Mrs. dUrberville. However, although Hardy clearly means to criticise Victorian notions of female purity, the double standard also makes the heroine's tragedy possible, and thus serves as a mechanism of Tess's broader fate. Hardy variously hints that Tess must suffer either to atone for the misdeeds of her ancestors, or to provide temporary amusement for the gods, or because she possesses some small but lethal character flaw inherited from the ancient clan.

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