

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

Author: Thomas Hardy

- **Intended Audience**

A.P. English Literature and Composition students—this is a college level course.

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

In late 19th century rural England, a teenage girl is sent by her parents to make connections with the recently discovered aristocratic branch of the family. She is raped by one of her new “relatives” and has a child out of wedlock; after her child dies, she leaves home to find work, falls in love but is torn about whether to reveal her past to her new love. The revelation of her past destroys her eventual marriage, puts her in a desperate state, and she eventually murders the man who raped her. At the end, she is put to death for her crime.

One of Hardy’s most popular yet controversial novels. Hardy stopped writing novels altogether after *Tess*. The novel addresses the changes in English society occurring as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the hypocrisy of Victorian morality, gender role expectations, and social hierarchies

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

Provides examples of literary and Biblical allusions, symbolism, use of setting to convey mood, authorial voice, dialect. Opportunities to demonstrate how to apply literary analysis skills. An example of tragedy, character development, and how diction and syntax help to create tone. It has thematic, plot, and character connections to past and future reading, which allows for discussion of intertextuality. A good book for students to practice the open-ended AP exam essay.

- **Potential problems**

Tess is raped, though the rape is presented in language that is so formal and veiled by Victorian standards that students often miss it. Formal religion is presented in a negative light. Although Tess commits a murder, the context of the story often leads readers to find her act very satisfying, something the victim deserved.

- **Addressing potential problems**

Class discussion of Tess’s rape—including the various interpretations of whether she was truly raped or simply regretted a sexual encounter. Reading and discussing critical reactions to the novel. Discussion and reading about the social/historical context of Hardy’s novels.