

TESS

and Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Study Guide

Roman Polanski says "I had always wanted to film a great love story but what also fascinated me about this novel was its preoccupation with the vicissitudes of fate. The heroine has every attribute that should make for happiness - personal beauty, an engaging personality and a spirited approach to life - yet the social climate in which she lives and the inexorable pressures it exerts upon her gradually entrap her in a chain of circumstances that culminate in tragedy".

The ideas in Thomas Hardy's "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" that inspired Roman Polanski to make his film, "Tess", are perhaps as relevant today as they were when the book was first published in 1891 - an individual's struggle against a hostile society, the power of our character to determine our fate. You may already have read the novel or, having seen the film, you might be encouraged to do so, and indeed literary critics agree that it is one of Hardy's most perfect novels. You might find it interesting to compare how well Polanski has transferred the book onto film.

These notes are intended to help you see the ways in which a film director goes about making a film, the special problems that are encountered when a novel or a play is used as the basis for a film and the means at the director's disposal to overcome these problems for an adaptation to take place successfully. We hope you enjoyed watching "Tess" and that this booklet will not only aid your consideration of the ideas in the film but also concentrate your attention on the ways in which the film director can communicate these ideas.

A book consists of words and a film consists of images.

When you read a book, if you do not understand something you can always turn back and reread, or stop and think about what you have just read. The author can slowly develop his characters taking perhaps ten pages to illustrate one aspect of a character's personality.

Film, however, is immediate. It must condense and focus ideas in an instant. Its story must move along in a direct way and, although it can be subtle, it must make obvious, through its images, exactly what it wants to say.

For example, in "Tess", Tess herself, by the time that she goes to live with Alec d'Urberville in the boarding house in Sandbourne, has been taken over by the modern world. She is no longer the innocent, natural woman that she was at the beginning of the film, In the novel, Hardy can suggest this over many pages but Polanski in the film must make us realise this immediately we see Tess in the boarding house. If you look at the two images of Tess from the film (see illustration 1 below) you will see how Polanski achieves this.



Another problem facing film directors is that they cannot get "inside" a character. They can employ actions and the spoken word, but they cannot show thought. Also, they have always limited time in which to do this. A sense of character must be created through image and sound. Consider the effect that music can have on a film, how it can guide our feelings and responses. What they do, therefore, is to rely on certain filmic conventions, to rely on the audience automatically understanding a type of character when they first see him or her on the screen.

Polanski has provided characters which we can immediately understand. We know from the moment that we see Alec that he is a "wicked Lord of the Manor" with his moustache and sleekly oiled hair, his voice, and his calling Tess "my pretty". Let us look at some other people in the story and consider how they are presented to us and what assumptions we are led to make.

Film directors often rely on stereotyped presentation of characters to guide us to an immediate understanding. In a western, we know who is the "good guy" and who is "the baddie" immediately - by the way that they are dressed, the places in which they appear and their physical appearance.

Polanski uses stereotyping for some of his characters in "Tess". He needs to do this as the main interest in the film centres on Tess herself and our attention must be continually focused on her. Polanski cannot allow us to be diverted into considering aspects of other characters which do not directly relate to Tess herself.

In the chart below fill in the appropriate boxes of each character.

Character	Physical appearance	Dress	Settings in which they appear
Alec d'Urberville			
John Durbey field			
Izz			
Landlady			
Reverend Mr Clare			

As the change in Tess is one of the central ideas in the film, think of how these changes are visually presented. How does Polanski stress that she has changed? Make another chart, listing some episodes in which Tess appears, they show how her clothing and the settings indicate that she has changed.

BOOK INTO FILM

Any art form attempts to communicate and, as we have already said, a novel communicates by printed words while a film communicates by images.

However faithfully a novel is transferred to the screen, it can never be "just like the book". It must show, whereas a book can tell through the suggestion of narrative description and author's comment.

Consider the task facing Polanski -. he must, for example, find a way to picture this Hardy-esque description:

"Towards the second evening Tess reached the irregular chalk table-land or plateau, bosomed with semi-globular tumuli which stretched far between the valley of her birth and the valley of her love.

Here the air was dry and cold, and the long cart-roads were blown white and dusty within a few hours after rain. There were few trees, or none... The stubborn soil around her showed plainly enough that the kind of labour required here was of the roughest kind."

Time and space are also limitations for the film-maker. He must compress and condense yet show

the emotions going on beneath the surface. Here is an excerpt from the screenplay which conveys

this action for the camera. Tess, exhausted from the days work, is confronted by Alec -

ALEC Are you in love with this drudgery? I may be a sham d'Urberville but my little finger can do more for you than all your blue-blooded ancestors. (Tess doesn't answer)

ALEC I'm right. You know I am. Forget all this - and forget that mule you call your husband! (Tess responds by furiously hurling one of her gloves, which strikes Alec on the mouth, He turns pale. With a muscle-tautening effort, he transforms the impulse to retaliate into a smile. Trembling with defiance, Tess says in a low, breathless voice:)

TESS Go on, hit me! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim. That's the law.

ALEC I was your master once. I shall be so again. If you're any man's wife, you're mine.

(Later, Tess sits at a table in the cottage writing a letter by the light of an oil lamp.)

TESS (voice over) My own dear husband. I shall die soon unless I get word from you. All my letters have remained unanswered. Have you even received them? I long for one thing only, and that is to see you again. Come back to me, Angel. Come back and save me from the thing that threatens me. Your faithful and despairing Tess.

You can gain an excellent understanding of the screenwriter's task by reading chapter 47 in Hardy's novel and comparing it with the excerpt here. You will then see how Hardy's intention has been transferred into action that the camera can photograph, all without losing the power of the scene.

Yet film can help us in a way that a novel cannot. It can create landscapes that come alive far more powerfully than a novel ever could. The image on the screen can be like a painting, rich in colour and atmosphere. A film can create a character for us in a visually powerful way, to give us an immediate impression of that character. One must remember, however, that these images are selected and created by the director. They might be different from the original creation of the author but a successful adaptation will remain as loyal as possible to its source.

How true is this of Polanski's "Tess"?

Well, some things have to go. A film cannot contain everything, every scene, every development, that is in a book. Alec, for example, in the novel, becomes a lay preacher before he meets Tess again at Harvest time, Why do you think that this change in character is not portrayed in the film?

If you have read the novel, write a list of the various incidents which have been left out of the film and try to decide why they, in particular, were omitted.

If the film director is to remain faithful to the novel or play that he is adapting then he must choose the scenes that he feels will give his audience the clearest idea of what he thinks the novel is about. Of "Tess" Polanski has said:

"Tess was a pure woman. That's Hardy's subtitle to the book. She broke Victorian moral codes, but she responded to natural law and to nature - her own nature. That's what the book is about. The film is an accusation of the hypocrisy and injustice of rigid Victorian society -and by extension, of any rigid and repressive society."

Perhaps Polanski's comments might help you to decide why he left out certain scenes. Notice the slight change in emphasis that he has made.

PROJECT

In order to realise why this change might occur, you should try to write a screenplay for a short story or chapter of a novel, inserting camera directions as well as acting directions.

Remember that camera angles indicate the best shot to convey the meaning of a scene. For example: low angle shots exalt the subject, long shots show how a scene would appear to a detached observer, fade ins and fade outs act as transitions to show that time has passed etc.

You need not include everything that is in the story; choose the essential action. You might include a sequence of drawings to illustrate your ideas.

Also, think of which film actors you could use to star in your film. This would depend on the type of story that you are adapting. We tend to associate certain actors with certain types of film, e.g. John Wayne with Westerns, Bogart with private detectives, Roger Moore with the Bond movies. Who would fit into your film?

MAKING THE MOVIE

Film is an art in itself, not merely an extension of a novel or a screenplay. What appears on the screen must interest and excite us. It must be beautiful in itself. As the settings are so important in Hardy's novel, Polanski set about creating as realistic a portrait of Victorian England as possible.

Although the story is set in Wessex (actually Dorset), it was made in Normandy, France. Preparations for the production entailed months of work, searching for locations which would mirror Hardy's descriptions, creating costumes, gathering period furniture and early farm implements. Livestock had to be imported and landscape artists and construction crews joined forces to match the period setting by planting flower beds, felling trees and resurfacing modern roads and even creating a replica of Stonehenge. All of this was carried out to create a sense of the reality of the period, to provide an accurate background against which the story could unfold.

The landscape is the dominant feature of Hardy's novel and Polanski strove to reflect this in his film, aided by the camerawork of the late Geoffrey Unsworth - conveying perfectly an ancient land able to outlast all human folly and tragedy.

Shooting began in July 1978 and spanned an eight month period - to cover the rhythm of the changing seasons which reflect the changes in Tess's life.

The various scenes entailed moves to some 40 different exterior locations in addition to the interior scenes filmed in the studios of Joinville and Germany - on the technical side, therefore, a vast army of technicians, of actors, had to be moved from location to location - a production task which involved complex organisation.

With so much care taken to produce the film it is not surprising that "Tess" won three Oscars at the 1981 Academy Awards - for Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design and Best Art Direction - all three areas that created the beauty and tragedy that is "Tess".

Questions for discussion

1. Before Tess is arrested, she sleeps on the altar slab at Stonehenge. The Druids of ancient times were believed to have sacrificed many victims on this slab. What is the symbolism of the slab being Tess's bed on her last night of freedom?

Stonehenge is also believed to have been a place where the Sun was worshipped. Can you think of any other places in the film where the sun is associated with Tess?

2. Why is Tess's husband called Angel? What was Hardy trying to suggest by giving him this name? Is there any irony suggested by this?

3. What does Alec do for Tess that Angel should have done? Name incidents in the film where he genuinely seems to want to help her.

4. Roman Polanski has said that Tess is linked 'to the rhythm of nature within a Victorian society at odds with everything spontaneous and natural.' How is this conflict shown in the film? In what scenes?

5. Does the film show truthfully the consequences of making certain choices in life? Could Tess have acted in any other way than she did?