



# Tess

**Director:** Roman Polanski  
**Country:** France  
**Date:** 1979

**A review by Janet Maslin for the *New York Times*:**

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which Roman Polanski has turned into a lovely, lyrical, unexpectedly delicate movie, might at first seem to be the wrong project for Mr. Polanski in every way. As a new biography of the director reports, when *Tess* was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, the press pointed nastily and repeatedly to the coincidence of Mr. Polanski's having made a film about a young girl's seduction by an older man, while he himself faced criminal charges for a similar offense. This would certainly seem to cast a pall over the project. So would the fact that Hardy's novel is so very deeply rooted in English landscapes, geographical and sociological, while Mr. Polanski was brought up in Poland.



Finally, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is so quintessentially Victorian a story that a believable version might seem well out of any contemporary director's reach. But if an elegant, plausible, affecting *Tess* sounds like more than might have been expected of Mr. Polanski, let's just say he has achieved the impossible. In fact, in the process of adapting his style to suit such a sweeping and vivid novel, he has achieved something very unlike his other work. Without Mr. Polanski's name in the credits, this lush and scenic *Tess* could even be mistaken for the work of David Lean.



In a preface to the later editions of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Mr. Hardy described the work as "an impression, not an argument." Mr. Polanski has taken a similar approach, removing the sting from both the story's morality and its melodrama. *Tess Durbeyfield*, the hearty country lass whose downfall begins when her father learns he had noble

forebears, is sent to charm her rich D'Urberville relations. She learns that they aren't D'Urbervilles after all; instead, they have used their new money to purchase an old name.

*Tess* charms them anyhow, so much that Alec D'Urberville, her imposter cousin, seduces and impregnates her. The seduction, like many of the film's key scenes, is presented in a manner both earthy and discreet. In this case, the action is set in a forest, where a gentle mist arises from the ground and envelops *Tess* just around the time when she is enveloped by Alec.

Alec, as played by Leigh Lawson, is a slightly wooden character, unlike Angel Clare, Tess's later and truer lover, played with supreme radiance by Peter Firth. Long after Tess has borne and buried her illegitimate child, she finds and falls in love with this spirited soul mate. But when she marries Angel Clare and is at last ready to reveal the secret of her past, the story begins hurtling toward its final tragedy. When Tess becomes a murderer, the film offers its one distinctly Polanski-like moment—but even that scene has its fidelity to the novel. A housemaid listening at a door hears a "drip, drip, drip" sound, according to Hardy. Mr. Polanski has simply interpreted this with a typically mischievous flourish.

Of all the unlikely strong points of *Tess*, which opens today for a weeklong engagement at the Baronet and which will reopen next year, the unlikeliest is Nastassja Kinski, who plays the title role. Miss Kinski powerfully resembles the young Ingrid Bergman, and she is altogether ravishing. But she's an odd choice for Tess: not quite vigorous enough, and maybe even too beautiful. She's an actress who can lose her magnetism and mystery if she's given a great deal to do (that was the case in an earlier film called *Stay As You Are*). But here, Mr. Polanski makes perfect use of her. Instead of a driving force, she becomes an echo of the land and the society around her, more passive than Hardy's Tess but linked just as unmistakably with natural forces. Miss Kinski's Tess has no inner life to speak of. But Mr. Polanski makes her surroundings so expressive that her placidity and reserve work very beautifully.

Even at its nearly three-hour running time, Mr. Polanski's *Tess* cannot hope for anything approaching the range of the novel. But the deletions have been made wisely, and though the story loses some of its resonance it maintains its momentum. There are episodes—like one involving Tess's shabby boots and Mercy Chant, the more respectable girl who expects to marry Angel—that don't make the sense they should, and the action is fragmented at times. That's a small price to pay for the movie's essential rightness, for its congruence with the mood and manner of the novel. Mr. Polanski had to go to Normandy and rebuild Stonehenge to stage his last scene, according to this same biography. As is the case throughout his *Tess*, the results were worth the trouble.

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