

Born Under a Blighted Star  
by Brad D. Parker  
(<http://bdparker.cjb.net>)

In Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the setting is used to affect the theme. By using vivid images of nature and rural settings, Hardy develops a theme of isolation and despair. The weather, architecture, and geography all compliment the mood and theme of the novel.

Tess Derbeyfield met her first misfortune early one morning while taking her father's good to be sold. In the darkness of the very earliest morning, the silhouettes of various objects against the sky take on strange, threatening shapes. Above, the stars look cold in the dark hollow of the sky. Her star, she says, must be a blighted one. On the rural landscape only Tess, her young brother Abraham, and their rickety old horse, Prince, are moving. This isolation soon leads to a terrible event when Tess falls asleep in the wagon and Prince is run over by a speeding mail cart. The horse dies and Tess is left isolated and despairing over the loss of her family's only means. Feeling incredibly guilty about her irresponsibility, Tess decides she will try to find financial stability for her family by ingratiating herself with a rich relative that lives nearby. However, the rich young man turns out not to be a relative at all, and not much of a philanthropist either. Alec d'Urberville eventually deceives Tess, leading her on horseback to a dark spot in the woods where he seduces her. The night is covered in an oppressive fog, like a veil between the trees, in a spot far removed from any civilization. The harrowing experience, followed by Tess's pregnancy and childbirth put her in a desperate situation, where she has no one to whom she can turn for help. In the rural landscape where *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is set, there is a constant feeling of isolation and loneliness for Tess,

who does not feel comfortable around people anymore because of her mortification about her illegitimate child.

For a time, Tess's life does improve when she goes to a dairy farm amidst rolling green hills in a placid valley. It is there that she meets Angel Clare, the son of a prominent minister and a student of agriculture. Tess falls in love with him as he likewise loves her, and they plan to become married. On the night of the wedding however, the theme of despair can be seen again in the setting. The two youth's honeymoon is to be spent in an ancient, half-demolished mansion. This "mouldy old habitation" sets up an ominous mood with its haunting pictures built into the wall. Also, the weather changes from the warm clear weather at the dairy to cold, wet weather and the dead leaves blow against the house. The change in weather corresponds with Angel's change of opinion. When he learns that Tess has been with another man, he is angry with her and decides he cannot live with her or love her anymore. Soon he leaves Tess.

The days shorten and become colder as Tess searches the "dark landscape" for new work to support herself and her family. She finds herself sleeping in a dark wood surrounding by dying pheasants, and senses the despair and isolation that has taken over her life. Then, starting out on an isolated highway, Tess heads for Flintcombe-Ash, a "starve-acre place" where she has been told she can find work although it will be a grueling task. "Before her in a slight depression were the remains of a village." In this run down village, the work was grueling and unrewarding. Hardy took this opportunity to paint a vivid description of the landscape, which develops his theme well.

The whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each

other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls [Tess and her friend Marian] crawling over the surface of the former like flies.

There in Flintcombe-Ash, Tess is ill treated and abused by her masters, fellow workers, and the weather. "There had not been such a winter for years;" cold and windy, sometimes raining so hard as to make Tess's work nearly impossible.

Tess finally escapes Flintcombe-Ash, but the new setting is only slightly better. She goes back home, but she goes back to a sick mother and father, both of whom have been known as drunkards, and also to her pitiable siblings who are uneducated and are disrespected for their lack of dedication to the church. This hopeless situation only further enforces the main themes in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* when Tess's father suddenly dies, leaving the family without his trivial income but more importantly without a house. Tess has no place to turn, and no one to help her, so she moves with the family to Kingsbere where they hope to find some sympathy. The situation only become worse, though. On the day that they move, it is raining so that all of their furniture gets wet. Then upon reaching Kingsbere, they find that they do not have a place to stay. In despair, the Durbeyfields take up lodging in the d'Urberville family vault and sleep next to the neglected tombs of their ancestors. This bleak setting further emphasizes Tess's loss of hope, her isolation and despair.

Time passes, and eventually Tess loses all hope that her family might find a better life or that her husband may return. At this point she turns to Alec d'Urberville who provides for Tess and her family everything that they need. Tess then moves with Alec to Sandbourne, a large city to the south, but even here among riches and population, the theme is the same. Tess is still despairing and she feels lonely in the high-class

society to which Alec has brought her. She has lost hope and her identity. It is probably this lost sense of self that allows Tess to murder Alec in bed when her husband returns for her. Even Angel cannot save Tess, though. They are then on the run, hiding from all civilization because Tess is obviously wanted as a murderer. She finally succumbs to the hostile environment and lying on an altar in the center of a pagan shrine, Tess is taken and will soon be executed. The final image Hardy paints is that of a black flag, signifying Tess's death.

Thomas Hardy masterfully uses vivid details of setting and environment to develop the themes in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The landscape, weather, and population all emphasize the ideas of loneliness and despair attributed to Tess Durbeyfield, the tragic heroine. As the themes become stronger, the bleak images from nature and the surroundings also become stronger. Thus the setting defines the theme of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.