

Use of colour

In his essay, 'Colour and Movement in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*' (1968) Tony Tanner writes,

'For an artist as visually sensitive as Hardy, colour is of the first importance and significance, and there is one colour which literally catches the eye, and is meant to catch it, throughout the book. This colour is red, the colour of blood, which is associated with Tess from first to last. It dogs her, disturbs her, destroys her. She is full of it, she spills it, she loses it. Watching Tess's life we begin to see that her destiny is nothing more or less than the colour red.'

1. Find the chapter when we first meet Tess and write down the quotation which reveals her appearance. You will notice that the colours red and white are used together (Tess is the only one wearing a red ribbon in her hair which contrasts with the varying shades of white dress worn by all the women); Tony Tanner writes, 'In that simple scene and colour contrast is the embryo of the whole book and all that happens in it.
This patterning of red and white is often visible in the background of the book.'
2. Now find the extract when Prince is killed and again look at the colours used in the description of what happens. Why do you think Hardy describes the scene in such detail? In what way can it be seen as symbolic?
3. Read through the part of the text when Tess first goes to the d'Urberville house. What colour is it? Why might this be significant? What other building in the novel is this colour? Why has Hardy made them similar?
4. Find the point in the novel when Tess meets Alec for the first time. Read through and note down the colours that are used to describe him and her – note that she blushes a lot too.
5. What food and flowers does Alec press upon Tess as they walk around the gardens? Again think about the possible symbolism. Why do you think Hardy describes these moments in such detail? You need to consider the Victorian readership here and what was and was not considered acceptable; what is Hardy describing without explicitly writing it?
6. What happens to one of the flowers on Tess's way home? Again, think about the symbolism.
7. Read the rape/seduction scene and make a note of the colour used in the description of Tess. How does this fit in with the colours we have noted down previously? Why does Hardy draw attention to this here?
8. Note down other examples in the novel where Hardy depicts people, places, objects, events as having some red or white in their description. Note in particular Tess herself, Alec, descriptions of the sunlight and the farm machinery. When you have compiled a comprehensive list consider why Hardy has done this; what links, if any, is he trying to make; what do the colours symbolise (there can be more than one answer) and what impression does it give you, the reader, of the characters and events in the novel?

Now return to the quotations from Tanner's essay at the top of the page: do you agree with his ideas about the colours? Analyse and explain your views in detail.