The Victorian Novel:

Analyzing *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy

Consider the following statement:

“In her relations with both Alec and Angel, Tess is the victim of her own conscience rather than of male cruelty and criticism/disapproval.”

Do you agree with this statement? OR do you disagree and believe that Alec and/or Angel are the “villains” of the novel?

Directions: Carefully read and annotate the article below. At the top of your paper, write a specific claim about the topic that you will prove. Under your claim, write two well-organized paragraphs (8-10 sentences each) that prove your claim by citing specific evidence from Tess (film = primary source \*look at your chart\*) and from the article (secondary source). Remember the following:

* Introduce your source
* Give SPECIFIC evidence from the source
* Provide commentary/analysis (explain HOW the evidence proves your claim). THIS SHOULD BE LONGEST PART OF YOUR PARAGRAPHS.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Tess of the d’Urbervilles: Overview

Novel, 1891

Author(s): Ellen Lew Sprechman

British Writer (1840-1928)

Source: ***Reference Guide to English Literature.*** Ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick. 2nd ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. From *Literature Resource Center.*

Document Type: Work overview; critical essay.

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is the story of an innocent young country girl who is seduced by the wealthy Alec d’Urberville. She has an illegitimate child, and, although she knows that she will be ostracized, refuses to ask her seducer for aid. The death of her unfortunate child, Sorrow, is devastating, but Tess bravely goes on, eventually meeting and marrying Angel Clare, a minister’s son. Their marriage seems promising, but falls apart when Angel hears about her previous “downfall.” Despite revelations of his own sin, the double standard prevails, and he cannot forgive her for hers. Thus she embarks on a life of hardship and travail, until Alec crosses her path again, having now become a preacher. She resists his offers for a while, but, finally is driven to accept his protection. At this point Angel returns from Brazil and finds her with Alec. Her state of mind no longer able to cope, she murders Alec to liberate herself. Tess’s tragedy concludes at Stonehenge, where she offers herself up as a sacrifice and is soon taken away to be hanged. “‘Justice’ was done,” we are told, “and the President of the Immortals . . .”had ended his sport with Tess.”

But the most important aspect of this novel is Hardy’s concern for the inequitable social conditions of the day. He had always been interested in social issues and had expressed his concerns in his earlier fiction, but in Tess he makes “virtue” the dominant theme. The subtitle, A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented, makes a strong statement which become the controversial issue of this Victorian book. That Hardy would call a girl “pure” who had been seduced and had an illegitimate child was shocking in his day. In doing so, he attacks Victorian double standards. We see, for instance, that although Angel has himself transgressed, he cannot condone a lesser act in Tess. As a consequence she suffers much, but always retains her belief in herself as a “pure woman.” Faced with almost immediate disillusionment and continuing strife, she grows in strength and determination and confronts whatever befalls her. She is deeply aware of her situation and all its implications yet makes conscious choices, not out of desperation, but because of a sense of herself. Hardy sums up his point when he says of Tess that “the beauty or ugliness of character lays . . . not among things done, but among things willed.”

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is one of Hardy’s greatest novels, and the development of the character of Tess is one of his greatest achievements. Far from being merely a victim, this simple girl meets the extraordinary challenges of her life and deals with them, making choices that reflect her integrity. Different critics see this book as representative of various literary themes, but there is a clear consensus that in creating Tess, Hardy developed a memorable heroine who is not only the focus of the book but its motivation.

**Source Citation (MLA 7th edition)**

Sprechman, Ellen Lew. “Tess of the d’Urbervilles: Overview.” *Reference Guide to English Literature*. Ed.D.L.

Kirkpatrick. 2nd ed. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 17 Dec. 2012.