

Open wounds: tess of the d'urbervilles concluding essay



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They say that we are harder on those we love—in this case, whom Tess loves: Angel Clare. Indeed, the reader holds Angel to higher standards, expects more of him, and indignantly reminds others of his greater obligations and ties to Tess. Thus, we are wont to judge Angel more harshly, and quicker to discard judgment of both Angel and Alec on an objective basis. When, however, we place emotions aside and rationally analyze events set into action by the consequences of both men, it is only logical that Alec's actions are the heavier felony. It is he who harms Tess most directly—through his rape and initiation of her ostracizing from society, his detrimental persistence and persuasion, and finally, his merciless taunting and incitement of Tess's last act of desperation which finalizes her long-doomed fate. Alec not only violates Tess as an individual, but condemns her fate for life when he selfishly and deplorably rapes her. A child in all ways, Tess has her innocence shattered and her future destroyed as Alec scars her in every respect—physically, socially, and most enduringly, psychologically—in a single night. Physically, Tess bears the child of Sorrow, her own scarlet letter personified. Sorrow's imminent death furthers the pain as he serves a sort of memento mori, foreshadowing the fate of the damned. Socially, Tess is ostracized from society upon her return, transforming her amiable and social personality into that of a recluse for a year, until her rare stroke of luck in landing at Talbothay Dairy and meeting Angel. But even then, she is psychologically burdened with the albatross of her dark secret, which prevents her from ever fully enjoying herself guiltlessly, as she should. This debilitating self-effacement, coupled with her strong conscience, ultimately destroys any hope of reconciliation and lasting happiness she has with Angel.

Angel truly loves Tess and, up until Tess's revelation of her dark past, treats
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her as something of a deity. His true flaw is not inherent malevolence and disregard for others—as is the case with Alec—but rather, the same limitations of the Victorian society around him: his reactionary values and double standards. As cowardly as this flaw comes to be, it is of utmost importance to note that it would not have emerged had Alec not disgraced Tess from the very outset. Furthermore, while Angel may leave Tess and shamefully shirk his duties as a husband, he does leave her ample money so that she can provide for herself physically, if not mentally. Angel's neglect ultimately causes her major harm indirectly—through intervention of fate, when Tess chances upon his brothers and Mercy Chant and, due to the context of the external situation and her innate pride, chooses not to ask his parents for further funds. Nonetheless, Angel did not consciously and directly refuse care for Tess and cast her out onto the street, and soon feels great concern and guilt when he realizes she has not touched the money. Alec, on the other hand, is solely guilty of this sort of direct harm, in which no additional outside forces are necessary. Alec later returns to his selfish ways in persistently chasing Tess down and persuading her to join him, utilizing a mixture of lying, manipulating, deriding, and playing on her desperation and duty as a daughter to fend for her family. Eventually, he cruelly taunts her and Angel after Angel has returned from Brazil for Tess, and it is this taunting at such an unstable and emotional point in Tess's life that incites her to commit the one act that damns the remainder of her stunted, sorrowful existence. Upon killing Alec, her fate is sealed, and whatever little happiness that is left for her with Angel is only all the more bittersweet and short-lived. Finally, the greatest defense of Angel is that he ultimately does reform his ways, and in a complete turn-around of his beliefs, risks his life

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wholly in effort to save Tess even when she is guilty of manslaughter. Alec, on the other hand, dies sinful and utterly unredeemed. While Angel's initial actions may have been the more psychologically painful for Tess, it is partially because he is adding salt to an open wound—Alec's actions have already established the foundation of Tess's emotional vulnerability and instability. In the end, when she is surrounded by men at Stonehenge, it is her situation in society that leads to her literal destruction—and the cause for that physical, social state can be traced most directly to Alec. Angel may have caused Tess the greater psychological pain by force of her love for him—we care more when the ones we love betray us—but it is Alec who ultimately has the most detrimental effect on her life—by directly causing its end.