

Is Tess in 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' portrayed as being responsible for her own demise?

In 1894, Clement Scott (Scott, 1894, p 353-355) theorised that women were born 'angels', and those who indulged in sex were 'perverse'. Arguably, it was this attitude that led to the polarisation of women into the 'chaste or the depraved, the virgin or the whore' (Boumelha, 1982, p 11). However, during the late 20th century, Christian moral values of chastity were under scrutiny, as they gave way 'to the... authority of biological law' (Boumlha, 1982, p 12). The value of a woman's purity was at the forefront of popular debate, and it is demonstrated in Hardy's 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' (Hardy, 2005). As Hardy himself states, the story is one in which he attempts to show what 'everybody nowadays thinks and feels' (Hardy, 2005, p 3) – expressing the Hellenic ideal of seeing 'things as they really are' (Arnold, 1869). Christian principles would condemn the protagonist as 'immoral', and there are arguments which suggest that Tess' demise is caused by her own failings; for example her passivity and indecisiveness. However, the opposing school of thought, more likely to be adopted by Hellenists, might proclaims her to be guiltless, arguing that the fall of Tess is caused by the manipulation she is subjected to at the hands of her family and lovers, and the alienating conventional views of society.

It is arguable that Tess' passivity renders her responsible for her suffering. Tess is 'asleep, or in reverie, at almost every important part of the plot' (Boumelha, 1982, p 121), for example when Prince is impaled (p 38). This initial mistake foreshadows later events between Tess and Alec. When Alec

seduces, or rapes Tess, Hardy writes that 'his [Alec's] cheek was upon hers. She was sleeping soundly' (p 82). Tess is acted upon, and does nothing herself. Tess' passivity is further represented in her relationship with Clare. Overwhelmed by love for her, Angel embraces her, and she is said to have 'yielded to his embrace' (p 166). Tess is not active – she allows herself to be loved. Tess places her destiny entirely in Angels' hands, stating: "you know best what my punishment should be" (p 272). There are moments where it may have been possible for Tess to alter her future; for example when Angel leaves Tess, the narrator comments 'the greatest misfortune of her life was this feminine loss of courage at the last and crucial moment' (p 320). Arguably, in directly suggesting that Tess may have been capable of changing the course of her life by acting more decisively; the narrator alludes to her faults, and indicates that she herself may be responsible.

Tess is put under immense pressure by her family to improve their financial position and reputation. This pressure causes her to stumble into situations which cause her undoing, but there is a suggestion that Tess could have prevented her demise by being more assertive. It has been noted of Tess that 'her speech, decision making... and even her sense of self are characterised by a curious absence' (Lovesey, 2003, p 913), Tess appears absent in the decision making process' that map out her life. Tess' young brother states that it would be nice if she had not "had to be made rich by marrying a gentleman" (p 38); the use of the modal verb 'had' encourages readers to question the statement, and to consider that Tess does not 'have' to be made rich at all. Furthermore, when Tess is leaving her home, to go to work at Alec's, she is

said to 'put herself quite in Joan's hands' (p 55), allowing her mother to take full control of the situation. As she waits to leave, it is stated that Tess is 'undecided', and that her 'seeming indecision... was misgiving' (p 58). Evidently, Tess is aware that danger may be looming ahead, but she passively allows her mother's seeming confidence to extinguish her fears. It seems that this passivity contributes to the demise of Tess.

Tess' indecisiveness is portrayed in her frequent failures to maintain her resolve. For example, when Tess is watching the villagers of Tantridge dance, she is offered a lift home from Alec but refuses, a decision she later revises (p 73-77). Due to the sexual encounter of this night, Tess decides she may never marry, telling the dairymaids she will refuse Angel, "as I [she] would refuse any man!" (p 161), but the two are later wed. This is mirrored when Alec offers to make her his wife, a proposal she forcefully declines, before consenting to become his mistress. Tess' final unsuccessful resolution is that she will not return to Clare when he comes to collect her. Tess dramatically pleads that he "keep away!" (p 400), indicating that his very presence is enough to ensnare her. The distraught Tess repeats that it is "Too late! Too late!" (p 400), suggesting she believes that it would be impossible for the pair to be reunited. In addition, Tess rather confusingly asks of Clare that he "never come anymore?" (p 401). What would usually be an imperative sentence is transformed into a less demanding interrogative, as though Tess herself realizes that she does not truly mean what she says, and that she is asking Angel to advise her. The insincerity of Tess' words is confirmed by her behaviour, as she murders Alec and runs to join her truant husband. It is true

that many of Tess' failures to maintain resolve come as a result of great hardship. However, the repetitive nature of the protagonist's failures renders her indecisiveness a blatant contribution to her downfall.

Though Tess is at points weak, she suffers intensely, primarily as a result of masculine attitudes. Tess is often subjected to the voyeuristic male gaze, through the 'overt maleness of the narrative voice' (Boumelha, 1982, 120). For example, Hardy's narration examines the 'red interior of her mouth' (p 187), which carries connotations of entering and thus penetration. This theme is furthered as Tess is force fed berries by Alec, and Hardy describes how she 'parted her lips and took it in' (p 47). The sexual connotations here are unquestionable. Contemporary critics, such as Mowbray Morris have asserted that the story is one of 'rather too much succulence' (quoted in LT Laird, 1975, p 10-12), and feminist criticism frequently subscribes to the view that Hardy himself is wrongly objectifying the female form. However, it seems more likely that Hardy is attempting to demonstrate Tess' mistreatment. In contrast to Tess' 'innocent eyes' and 'wholesomeness' (p 45), Alec is described as having a moustache with 'curled points' and 'badly moulded' lips (p 45). Tess is portrayed as the innocent victim of his eyes.

This portrayal of the innocent and pious Tess is obvious in her dislike for her own body, due to the lust it generates. Tess feels that 'in inhabiting the fleshy tabernacle with which nature had enslaved her, she was somehow doing wrong' (p 339). Here we see the effect of the polarisation of women into 'virgin' or 'whore' – as Tess is sexually attractive, it is asserted that she herself

is depraved, not those men who cannot prevent their eyes from lingering, causing her to feel guilty. Conventional male attitudes are placed under inspection, and shown to be unfair and cruel. The apparent objectification is evidently a tool, employed by Hardy for the means of representing and challenging the unfair way in which Tess, and possibly contemporary women, were viewed by men in society. Therefore, it seems that here Hardy is suggesting that it is these attitudes which instigate the demise of his protagonist.

Tess' moral worth and innocence is made apparent when she is compared to her two lovers, both of whom are openly criticised by Hardy for their preconceived assumptions. Alec is shown to be fickle and untrustworthy, in his sudden denial of the religion he previously seemed so convinced by. Furthermore, he is exposed as lacking in intellect, as Tess herself notes, thinking how 'he had mixed up in his dull mind two matters – theology and morals' (p 350). The comment not only portrays Alec's shortcomings, but also covertly encourages readers to see the distinction between the two, and thus subscribe to the view that Tess is 'pure' of heart. In comparison to Alec, Angel has good intentions towards Tess, but he is a 'slave to custom and conventionality'. This point is made even more apparent through the fact that Angel himself is not chaste (p 242), demonstrating the imbalance in society's double standards. Though he is 'the 'god-like' Adam to Tess' Eve" (Brookes, 1971, p 245), he is quite clearly flawed. When Tess is compared to these male rogues, it seems clear that they are, in part to be blamed for her downfall. In comparison to their mistreatment of her, her only 'sin' is 'based on

nothing more tangible than a ... an arbitrary law of society' (p 298). The sin which Tess is held so accountable for is here belittled as nothing more than a social convention. It seems evident that Hardy is defending Tess, implying that it is those who claim to love her that cause her demise, due to their traditional expectations of her.

Readers of 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' may, at times feel that Tess is responsible for her suffering. Tess does not seem entirely aware of herself, and is not sufficiently careful in her decision making. However, as Beach reports, the story is primarily one which encourages readers to examine Tess and 'say, how pitiful!' (JW Beach, 1962, p 217); it is expected for readers to feel pity for Tess. The narrator is no doubt in allegiance with Tess, portraying her as the sad object of men's desire, and the product of blind acceptance of social rules. Although Tess makes mistakes in her conduct, these are often as a direct result of her naivety and good nature. It seems Hardy's narration is designed to encourage readers to hold others accountable for the downfall of 'a pure woman'.

Primary Text

Hardy, Thomas, *'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Secondary Texts

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Boumelha, Penny, 'Sexual Ideology and the 'Nature' of Woman 1800-1900' pp 11-27, in *'Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form'*, The Harvester Press Ltd, 1982.

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