

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' (Boumelha, 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 proclaim 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