

## SUBVERTING VICTORIAN NORMS: SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND TRAGIC REALISM IN THOMAS HARDY'S JUDE THE OBSCURE

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### ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* stands as one of the most provocative and uncompromising critiques of Victorian society, challenging its rigid social hierarchies, institutional elitism, and oppressive moral codes. This paper examines how Hardy subverts the era's norms through a dual lens of social critique and tragic realism. The novel's protagonist, Jude Fawley, embodies the aspirations of an ambitious working-class individual seeking intellectual and social transcendence. Yet, his relentless struggle for education and personal fulfillment is thwarted by an exclusionary educational system, rigid class structures, and the societal constraints of marriage.

Hardy's nuanced portrayal of Sue Bridehead, an androgynous and emancipated New Woman figure, further disrupts Victorian ideals of femininity and challenges traditional gender roles. However, Sue's eventual capitulation to societal pressures underscores the pervasive power of conventional norms. Through its modern urban settings and relentless depiction of individual alienation, the novel presents a stark vision of a society resistant to progress and reform.

Blending tragic realism with biting social commentary, *Jude the Obscure* exposes the futility of ambition in a world governed by inequality and oppression. This paper explores Hardy's subversion of Victorian ideals and his unflinching critique of a society that perpetuates suffering, alienation, and unfulfilled potential.

**Key Words:-** Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, Victorian society, Social critique, Tragic realism, Education and class, Marriage and morality, Gender roles, New Woman fiction.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) was a renowned English novelist and poet, celebrated for his profound exploration of human struggles within the context of an unforgiving society. Born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, Hardy grew up in a rural setting that would profoundly influence his literary works, often referred to as the "Wessex novels" due to their vivid depiction of the fictional region inspired by his native southwest England.

Originally trained as an architect, Hardy shifted his focus to writing, achieving early recognition with novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). His works often delve into themes of love, fate, and the conflict between individuals and societal constraints. Hardy's masterpieces, including *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), garnered both acclaim and controversy for their candid treatment of sexuality, religion, and class issues. The public outcry against *Jude the Obscure* was so intense that Hardy turned away from novel-writing and devoted the rest of his life to poetry.

Hardy's poetry, characterized by its melancholic tone and reflection on time and mortality, established him as a major figure in English literature. His literary legacy continues to influence and resonate, offering timeless insights into the complexities of human existence and societal structures. Hardy passed away in 1928 and is buried in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner, with his heart interred in Dorset.

The novel *Jude the Obscure* delves deeply into various social issues in Victorian England, particularly those concerning marriage, the Church, and education. Hardy explores these themes through striking contrasts. For instance, at the start of their relationship, Jude's strong Christian faith is juxtaposed with Sue's religious skepticism—a difference that becomes even more pronounced when their roles are later reversed. While the characters embody both perspectives, the narrative overall offers a critical view of Christianity and societal institutions.

Jude's journey illustrates the conflicted role of organized religion in his life. Raised in Marygreen, Jude initially saw religion as a solution to an otherwise mundane existence. However, his exclusion from Christminster's university reveals the unattainable nature of his dream to enter the Church, forcing him to pursue less satisfying paths. Similarly, Hardy critiques the traditional institution of marriage. From Jude's ill-fated union with Arabella to their eventual reunion, marriage is portrayed as a burdensome societal expectation that drives the characters toward despair.

Although Hardy denied drawing on his personal experiences for the novel, many contemporary critics noted parallels between its themes and his own life. Like Jude, Hardy faced struggles with rigid class structures, particularly in his pursuit of higher education. Jude's inability to study at Christminster due to financial and social barriers reflects Hardy's

own frustrations with being unable to afford a degree at Oxford or Cambridge. Details such as Jude's late-night Latin studies while working as a stonemason mirror Hardy's experiences, though Hardy's mother, unlike Jude's relatives, was well-educated and actively supported his early learning.

Hardy's personal life also resonates in the novel through Sue Bridehead's transformation from irreligious to deeply devout, mirroring the journey of Hardy's first wife, Emma. Initially free-spirited and indifferent to religion, Emma became increasingly pious with age, creating significant tension in their marriage due to Hardy's critical stance on organized religion. This strain contributed to their growing emotional distance.

Emma strongly disapproved of Jude the Obscure, not only because of its critique of religion but also due to concerns that readers might interpret Jude and Sue's relationship as a reflection of her troubled marriage with Hardy—a connection that, while not literal, was symbolically accurate.

Jude Fawley, a poor orphan raised by his great-aunt Drusilla in the rural village of Marygreen in the West Country, is inspired by his schoolmaster, Phillotson, to study Greek and Latin. A devout Anglican with a passion for the Bible and classical literature, Jude aspires to attend the University of Christminster (a fictional Oxford) and pursue a career in the clergy. However, his dreams of an ecclesiastical life are thwarted by a combination of fate, societal barriers, and his natural desires.

At nineteen, on his way home, Jude encounters Arabella Donn, the attractive yet unrefined daughter of a pig farmer. Arabella manipulates Jude into marriage by pretending she is pregnant. However, their union quickly proves unhappy, as Jude realizes that his expectations of marriage were misguided. Arabella, equally disillusioned, abandons him and emigrates to Australia, where she remarries.

Determined to pursue his dreams, Jude moves to Christminster, finding work as a stonemason while continuing to hope for eventual admission to one of the colleges. There, he meets his cousin Sue Bridehead, an intelligent and unconventional woman whose progressive ideas and rejection of Victorian norms captivate him. Jude develops a deep, albeit conflicted, love for Sue, who embodies the ideals of the New Woman. She smokes, reads modern poets like Swinburne, and challenges societal expectations, making her a striking contrast to the rigid conventions of their time.

Although Jude and Sue share a mutual attraction, they continually drift apart. When they first meet, Jude is a devout Christian, while Sue represents pagan sensuality and the independence of the New Woman. Sue moves to Melchester (modern-day Salisbury) to attend a teacher training college, and Jude follows, securing work in the same town. He helps Sue secure a position as an apprentice teacher under Phillotson, his former schoolmaster, and soon learns of their plans to marry.

One night, Sue visits Jude's lodgings and stays overnight, though their relationship remains platonic. When the college authorities discover this, Sue is expelled for violating social norms. She proceeds to marry Phillotson and relocates with him to Shaston, where they both find work at a local school. However, Sue becomes unhappy in her marriage, feeling an aversion to physical intimacy, and eventually leaves her much older husband.

Meanwhile, Jude continues to pursue his dream of becoming a priest, applying to several colleges in Christminster—a city he reverently refers to as the "Heavenly Jerusalem." Despite his efforts, Jude is rejected and advised to remain in his trade as a stonemason. His growing frustrations are compounded by feelings of guilt over his love for Sue, which he knows conflicts with Christian values and societal expectations.

His passion for Sue troubled his soul; [...] Yet he perceived with despondency that, taken all round, he was a man of too many passions to make a good clergyman; the utmost he could hope for was that in a life of constant internal warfare between flesh and spirit the former might not always be victorious. [III.-ix., 185]

When Jude reunites with Sue at his aunt Drusilla's funeral in Marygreen, she admits her aversion to Phillotson, confessing that she regrets marrying him. She tells Jude, "though I like Mr. Phillotson as a friend, I don't like him — it is a torture to me to — live with him as a husband!" (IV.ii., 203). Shortly after this encounter, Jude fully acknowledges his deep physical desire for Sue and resolves to burn all his theological books..

At dusk that evening he went into the garden and dug a shallow hole, to which he brought out all the theological and ethical works that he possessed, and had stored here. He knew that, in this country of true believers, most of them were not saleable at a much higher price than waste-paper value, and preferred to get rid of them in his own way, even if he should sacrifice, a little money to the sentiment of thus destroying them. Lighting some loose pamphlets to begin with, he cut the volumes into pieces as well as he could, and with a threepronged fork shook them over the flames. They kindled, and lighted up the back of the house, the pigsty, and his own face, till they were more or less consumed. [IV.iii, 209]

Sue informs Phillotson that they cannot continue living as husband and wife because she does not love him, ultimately deciding to leave the marriage. Surprisingly, Phillotson does not feel disgraced by her departure. Instead, he appears to

understand and respect her choice, granting her the autonomy to make her own decisions—an attitude uncommon for a Victorian husband. Sue seeks liberation from the oppressive constraints of her marriage, which she finds intolerable, and Phillotson, in a rare act of generosity, agrees to let her go.

Afterward, Jude and Sue decide to live together as lovers. However, their relationship proves unsatisfactory due to Sue's sexual reserve and her complex, neurotic temperament. During this time, they divorce their respective spouses, making it possible for them to marry legally. Yet, Sue resists marrying simply to conform to societal and religious conventions, and Jude reluctantly accepts her stance.

Meanwhile, Arabella returns from Australia and reveals through a letter that she and Jude have a son. Jude and Sue decide to adopt the boy, nicknamed Little Father Time, who has not been christened. The couple later has two more children of their own. Initially, they appear to have broken free from Victorian moral and social constraints when they settle in Aldbrickham. However, societal pressures force them to leave the town, and they begin a transient lifestyle, wandering for two and a half years without a permanent home.

Eventually, they attempt to settle again in Christminster, but their unmarried status prevents them from securing accommodation. Jude is forced to stay at an inn, while Sue and the children find a separate room to rent.

The novel reaches its harrowing climax with the tragic death of the children. The eldest, Jude's son with Arabella, nicknamed "Little Father Time" due to his precocious and somber demeanor, learns that another sibling is on the way. Convinced that his parents cannot support a larger family, he takes drastic action. While Sue steps out to have a brief meal with Jude, Little Father Time hangs his two younger siblings and then himself, seemingly expressing his despair over the futility of life and survival. He leaves behind a brief suicide note reading, "Done because we are too menny" (VI, ii, 325).

Norman Holland interprets Father Time's act as an attempt at atonement akin to Christ's sacrifice, yet rendered futile in a spiritually desolate society. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy highlights, more powerfully than in any of his works except perhaps *Tess*, the helplessness or indifference of an unseen God toward humanity's struggles and desires. Frederick McDowell further observes that "Hardy not only indicts Christianity, but by inference throughout the novel also condemns modern society for its failure to exemplify Christian ethical values" (236).

After the tragic death of their children, Sue and Jude are consumed by despair. Sue, overwhelmed by guilt, interprets the tragedy as divine punishment for her relationship with Jude. Abandoning her freethinking ways, she repents by returning to her husband, Phillotson, sacrificing her independence and submitting to the societal and sexual conventions she once opposed.

Jude, devastated by Sue's rejection, is manipulated by Arabella into another unhappy marriage. Suffering from both physical and mental decline, he succumbs to heavy drinking and self-destructive behavior, deliberately exposing himself to the elements. Jude dies at the age of 30, cursing the day he was born, a tragic victim of societal pressures and unfulfilled aspirations.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy explores existential estrangement through a tragic Bildungsroman. Jude, an outsider in every setting—Marygreen, Christminster, and Melchester—embodies humanity's disconnection from the physical world. As Virginia R. Hyman observes, Jude's environment is the bleakest in Hardy's fiction. Hardy prefigures Freudian themes in Jude's relationships with Arabella and Sue, portraying primal instincts and naturalistic imagery, such as the controversial scene with Arabella slaughtering a pig, which is both realistic and symbolic.

In *Jude*, Hardy shifts his focus from divine fatalism to societal determinism, as noted by John Alcorn. Social constraints—including limited access to education, rigid class divisions, poverty, and religious and moral restrictions—stifle the ambitions of Jude and Sue. The novel critiques Victorian society, addressing issues like failed marriages, bigamy, unfair divorce laws, illegitimacy, and feminine sexuality. While *Jude the Obscure* functions as a Bildungsroman, it also aligns with New Woman fiction, raising questions about marriage, gender roles, and societal norms. Ultimately, Hardy's sharpest critique is directed at the institution of marriage, highlighting Victorian moralism and sexual hypocrisy.

*Jude the Obscure* defies classification as a traditional Bildungsroman, which typically concludes on a hopeful note, as seen in works like Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Instead, Hardy's novel is better described as a tragic Anti-Bildungsroman, depicting disillusionment with life and society. It highlights the vast chasm between Jude's idealized vision of the world and the harsh realities of society, ultimately leading to his downfall. Jude and Sue live in a state of illusion, unable to grasp the true, hostile nature of the external social world. Their experiences parallel those of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from paradise, reflecting a profound disconnection from societal norms.

Similarly, *Jude the Obscure* is not a conventional New Woman novel like those of Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, or Grant Allen. While Hardy was deeply philosophical in his writing, often expressing existential despair, he also showed a strong interest in the Woman Question and admired New Woman novels that challenged societal norms. However, Hardy's focus was not on the New Woman as a socio-economic figure but on the liberated, free-thinking individuals who rejected traditional gender roles.

Sue Bridehead, one of Hardy's most intricate female characters, embodies a hypersensitive and ultimately tragic version of the New Woman. Her forward-thinking feminism and rejection of conventional roles place her ahead of her time, but she is ultimately crushed by the oppressive Victorian double standards of morality and religious guilt.

## 2. CONCLUSION

*Jude the Obscure* is a poignant novel with disquieting moral and social concerns. Its message aims to put into question the very foundations of traditional marriage and class-based elitist education. In *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy presents a searing critique of Victorian society, masterfully weaving existential despair, social critique, and the profound struggles of human aspirations. The novel defies traditional classifications, challenging the conventions of the Bildungsroman and New Woman fiction by portraying disillusionment, the collapse of idealism, and the tragic consequences of societal constraints. Through Jude and Sue, Hardy exposes the oppressive forces of rigid social norms, religious dogma, and the double standards of morality that suffocate individuality and thwart genuine human connections.

Jude's futile quest for intellectual and spiritual fulfillment, paired with Sue's failed attempt to break free from conventional gender roles, reflects the unrelenting hostility of a world indifferent to their aspirations. Hardy's exploration of themes like restricted education, failed marriages, and societal hypocrisy resonates deeply, making the novel a timeless indictment of human estrangement and institutional failures.

Ultimately, *Jude the Obscure* stands as a profound testament to Hardy's philosophical vision, depicting the tragic consequences of societal rigidity and human frailty. It challenges readers to confront the enduring struggles between personal freedom and societal expectation, offering a powerful reflection on the cost of dreams in an unyielding world.

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