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***Jude the Obscure: A Hardian Critique of Victorian Values and Social Tragedy of Common Man's Thwarted Aims***

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**ABSTRACT**

The first and greatest English regional novelist Thomas Hardy produces *Jude the Obscure* as his farewell work in the Wessex series. A critique of Victorian morality, *Jude* is a social tragedy which depicts the depressing force of societal institutions like class, education and marriage interplaying with each-other to defeat common man in his aspirations and noble purposes. The spirits of its sensitive protagonists, Jude Fawley, Sue Bridehead and Phillotson, are crushed by society and destiny to transform their tragic flaw into tragedy of lives. Through the tragic narrative of Jude's intellectual failure and Sue's psychological collapse, Hardy exposes the inherent cruelty of circumstances which are punitive for innocent idealism, free thought, genuine human relationships and true happiness for challenging social conventions and ethical codes.

**Keywords:** Critique, Frailty, Marriage, Thwarted aims, Tragedy, Victorian morality

**Introduction**

A true representative of his times, Thomas Hardy is a traditionalist in construction and form of his novels and a modern writer in his outlook and perception. The first and greatest English regional novelist Hardy uses Wessex area as the setting of his novels. Pessimist Victorian Hardy believes that it is essential to have a complete view of the life's worst for its full knowledge. He deliberately violates the sex-taboos of the Victorian age and somewhat anticipates though unconsciously the sex-theories of Freud and the psycho-analytical method to describe human mind. *Jude the Obscure* stands as the culmination of Hardy's tragic vision, departing from classical conceptions of tragedy rooted in a hero's fatal flaw or *hamartia* and instead situating the source of suffering in the relentless pressure of a hostile environment. Elliott searches out the vital role played by incidents and circumstances in Hardy's novels. The narrative becomes a chronicle of deeply ingrained social norms through class consciousness, economic status, educational aims and marital sanctity which conspire to thwart the noble aspirations of two sensitive souls of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead.

***Jude as a Social Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims***

*Jude the Obscure* is Hardy's attempt to produce a novel of epic status dealing with harsher and gloomier aspects of life. The human ambition is shattered by innate weaknesses and also due to some extraneous causes such as society and religion as is observed in the fate of the chief protagonist, Jude, a prototype of the novelist himself. Hardy's farewell work, *Jude*, tragic in conception and somber in frustrated experiences, produces the universal feelings of frustration, suffocation and depression making the novel a tragedy of unrealized ambitions. Hardy declares in the Preface of the novel that it is "addressed by a man to

men and women of full age; which attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity; to tell, . . . of a deadly war waged with old Apostolic desperation between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims . . ." (*Jude* vi). The present paper is an effort to capture the essence of Jude's relentless failure and Sue's harrowing spiritual torment contributing in framing a modern tragedy which works as a critique of the social taboos and moral restrictions of Victorian England. The protagonists' suffering is not merely a consequence of poor choices but an inevitable outcome dictated by inexorable social machinery designed to suppress individualism and perpetuate injustice. The novel satirizes the traditional Victorian society and echoes Hardy's philosophy of life by presenting a continuous struggle between spirit and flesh as a background of the tragedy of shattered aims.

#### **Jude's Thwarted Desires due to Social and Educational Inequalities**

Introduced to readers as a lad of eleven years in the fictional Wessex village of Marygreen, Jude having high ecclesiastic inclinations is ambitious of becoming a Doctor of Divinity by getting a degree from one of the colleges situated in Christminster, the university city representing the apex of knowledge and social advancement. He regards the city of Christminster as "a city of light", "a castle, manned by scholarship and religion" and a place where "the tree of knowledge grows" (*Jude* 25). His self-taught mastery of Greek and Latin is a testament to his ambition, yet this intellectual passion ultimately proves futile with the university's rejection of his application for admission on the basis of his class rather than his lack of merit. In a cold and brutal but honest manner, the Dean of Biblioll College advises Jude to remain in his own periphery and thus dismisses Jude as an eternal outsider. Hardy suggests that individuals born into the working class cannot transcend the institutional barriers of class prejudice with talent, effort, or moral uprightness. Jude's subsequent life of manual labor, disappointment and eventual illness directly ensues from this systemic oppression. As a social tragedy, the novel foregrounds the tragic hero's fall from grace not as a divine punishment for hubris but as a socio-economic consequence of daring to dream beyond his fixed social position. The most heartbreaking tragedy of the novel is Jude's systematic exclusion from the intellectual and social mobility.

#### **Marriage: A Social Institution of Disaster**

Hardy is equally critical of the institution of marriage which is portrayed as a prison that confines and destroys human desires and ideals. Jude cannot resist his temptation for Arabella Donn, 'a mere female animal', who tries to attract Jude through a pizzle of a slaughtered pig and then tricks him into marriage on the excuse of false pregnancy but the relationship proves disastrous for Jude because of their incompatible temperaments and Arabella's extreme passionate nature. Jude's desire of getting knowledge is also rudely shaken by this wrecked marriage. It illustrates that even a legally and socially sanctioned union founded on deceit and lust rather than genuine affection can prove merely a self-delusion. Sandlin is of the view that Hardy takes up Mill's question of marriage and personal liberty in the novel but he is not against the idea of marriage; he "simply opposed what was unnatural in the conventions of obligatory unions and repression of innate desire" (8-9). After the separation with Arabella, Jude again visits his dream city Christminster to fulfill his dreams but this 'heavenly Jerusalem' does not show any kind of interest in Jude who is a boy of poor origin.

The sexual passion subdued by Jude once again raises its head and now directs Jude's attention towards his sweet-faced cousin Sue Bridehead whose love is Jude's another ambition. Sue's affiliation with Phillotson disillusioned him and makes him drink-addict in search of comfort. Jude's enthusiasm for studies is already shattered because of his passion for Sue which makes it a hellish experience of failure for him in his career plans as well as in his emotional feelings. Success and failure play hide and seek with Jude and the tantalizing tactics of fate increase the torment of frustration in him. Now he decides to become a licentiate on the advice of a curate. Sue invites him to Melchester but marries Phillotson after feeling his cold behaviour and the absence of intimacy in their relationship. Arabella represents the fleshy nature whereas Sue symbolizes the spiritual aspect of Jude. The desperate Jude again decides to start his studies but then Sue leaves Phillotson and comes to live with Jude. A newly emancipated woman, Sue now refuses to develop any sexual intimacy with Jude and avers that he should not love but only like her that is enough and even denies for marriage with

him because of her unorthodox ideas. According to her, a government stamp may debase their love and a formal marriage in church issues a license to be loved openly.

Sue's disdain for the legal and religious contract of marriage viewed as a relic of male subjugation pushes them to live together and raise their children out of wedlock. The narrative of relationship between Jude and Sue presents an even more profound tragic dimension when it turns out to be a failure partly due to their own frailties and partly due to external repugnant social forces. As cousins who share a deep intellectual and spiritual bond, they embody a new, progressive vision of companionship that rejects the stifling formalism of Victorian matrimony. However, this rebellion is met with constant social ostracism and condemnation resulting in their nomadic existence which demonstrates society's violent reaction to nonconformity. Their tragedy lies in their powerlessness against an external world that refuses to validate their love outside its rigid norms. The tragic death of their children and the social ostracism compel Sue to marry Phillotson again. Jude becomes broken-hearted and his life story of thwarted ambitions ends in his tragic death with his crying statement, "Let the day perish wherein I was born" (*Jude* 345). The ebullient celebration of Remembrance Day on the eve of Jude's death has made his end more tragic. Jude struggling between flesh and spirit cannot find any type of happiness and his ambitious nature leads him to his pre-mature death.

### **Sue Bridehead's Psychological Demise**

Sue's character forms a psychological arc highlighting the most bleak and gloomy aspect of the novel. Sue being an unconventional emancipated woman, independent spirit and embodiment of modern thought shuns religious dogmas and societal norms and so suffers in her life. Her own capricious behaviour, impulsive character and intellectual obscurity also add to her sufferings. Her purchases of figurines of the pagan deities of Venus and Apollo symbolize her intellectual rebellion against Christianity. Her journey from a free-thinking intellectual to a broken fanatic and religiously conformist is a testament to society's destructive power. Sue's hasty decision of marrying Phillotson and then her refusal of developing any sexual contact with her husband lead her to disastrous results.

Sue considers marriage as a sordid iron contract and denies for marriage with Jude also but develops illegal relationship with him. It makes her a disembodied creature, tantalizing phantom and aerial spirit. However, the weight of public persecution and personal tragedy ultimately shatters her spirit. The society cannot bear such Voltairean characters and ostracizes them. Sue interprets the catastrophic incident of the death of her children not as a social consequence but as a wrath of Providence because of her violation of the sacramental marriage and defiance of religious and marital laws. Then she considers it useless to fight against God and decides to leave Jude. Arabella rightly observes, "She's never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she's as he is now (i.e. dead)" (*Jude* 516). In her grief and self-condemnation, Sue abandons her progressive beliefs, her children's memory and Jude himself, returns to a loveless re-marriage with Richard Phillotson and surrenders herself as an act of penance. She acts as a martyr at the altar of sacramental devotion and begins to lead the life of a living corpse. Thus Sue's whimsical nature and ultra modern views cause misery not only to Sue herself but also to Jude and Phillotson. This profoundly tragic reversal of fortune illustrates how even the strongest individual spirit can be annihilated by social pressure and internalized guilt.

### **Shadow of Destruction on Other Characters**

Phillotson, an elderly school teacher and sober personality, desires to get a degree from the university but his poverty proves a hurdle. His ambition to possess Sue's love is also frustrated due to his magnanimity. He allows Sue to live with Jude by defying the moral codes and social rules. This highly conventional man commits the most unconventional act and thus suffers in his ambition and life. Phillotson describes the root of his tragedy as, "Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would!" (*Jude* 409). Arabella's aim to seek financial security in marriage is not realized as Jude has not been able to give her the desired safety.

### **The Role of Fate and Pessimistic Determinism**

Hardy's deterministic worldview underpins the tragic fabric of the novel, suggesting that forces beyond human control—heredity, environment and indifferent chance—conspire against his protagonists. The "obscure curse" on the Fawley family line, a superstition invoked by Jude's Aunt Drusilla, sets a fatalistic tone

from the outset, foretelling a legacy of unhappy marriages. The repeated and cruelly timed coincidences, such as Arabella's return or Sue's marriage to Phillotson, feel less like plot devices and more like the machinations of an indifferent universe. Father Time with his octogenarian face is an instrument in the hands of fate and brings havoc in the life of Jude and Sue. Hardy's pessimistic naturalism depicts his characters as mere playthings of these greater forces. Jude and Sue's struggles are shown to be futile as their efforts to assert free will is ultimately undone by their own temperaments and an unyielding society. In the end, Jude's death in Christminster, alone and listening to the celebratory noises of a graduation ceremony he could never participate in, is a harsh indictment of a world that offers no redemption or escape. The novel offers no comforting catharsis but only the grim finality of dreams extinguished and spirits broken.

#### **Jude as a Universal Tragedy of Conflicts and Fate**

In fact, *Jude* is a universal tragedy of thwarted desires and unfulfilled aims for which deformed passions and ideas of various characters, traditional set-up of the society and indefatigable working of man's destiny are equally responsible. Just prime purpose of Jude of getting out of his obscurity is frustrated because poor family background and absence of social nobility make him unacceptable in the society. Seeing the wall of the university degrading him from others, Jude describes, "Only a wall — but what a wall!" (*Jude* 102). Phillotson also experiences similar suffocated feelings and the norms and patterns of behaviour in society are responsible for his tragedy. McDowell observes, "Hardy not only indicts Christianity, but by inference throughout the novel also condemns modern society for its failure to exemplify Christian ethical values" (236). Fate plays a vital role in bringing the tragic end of the novel. Jude depicts the fate as the nature's scorn for finer human ambitions with a lack of interest in human happiness. In the novel, the role of chance echoes Shakespeare reminding the readers of, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear* 173). Thus if character is destiny, fate and society also determine man's future.

#### **Conclusion**

*Jude* becomes tragic in the end like other novels of Hardy due to various reasons like idiosyncratic behaviour of main characters, their reluctance to conform to the rules of society, heredity, humble origin, fate and society which are jointly responsible for the doomed end of Jude, Sue and Phillotson. It is a powerful social tragedy that uses the downfall of its main characters to deliver a searing indictment of Victorian society's most cherished institutions. Hardy systematically dismantles the myth of social mobility, the sanctity of marriage and the moral authority of religion by showcasing their destructive impact on individuals who do not fit in the prescribed mold. Jude's failed quest for education and Sue's harrowing psychological collapse demonstrate that human happiness and fulfillment are not possible in a world governed by such rigid and hypocritical conventions. The novel as a tragedy of unfulfilled aims and ambitions once again voices Hardy's view of life as a general drama of pain. The general critical opinion often curses the great Wessex novelist for being so pessimistic but Hardy being Hardy could not do otherwise. And this is indeed true in case of *Jude the Obscure* as well. The novel's enduring power lies in its powerful exploration of the conflict between individual aspirations and the suffocating forces of social control. The ultimate tragedy is not the fall of a great hero but the extinguishing of the human spirit itself, rendered "obscure" by a society too cruel to acknowledge its light.

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