

JUDE THE OBSCURE: THE TRAP OF FATE

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This paper deals with the concept of fate in Jude the Obscure and how it is bent on thwarting man's ambitions and expectations. Jude and Sue, the two protagonists, try to realise themselves in a hostile world and they are both defeated tragically. Their life presents a dramatic picture on love, marriage, divorce, learning, labour and human existence in general. The novel reflects a troubled era and portends the complexity and destructiveness of twentieth century civilisation. It is probably the most pessimistic work of the transitional period between Victorianism and modernism.

Unlike *Hard Times* which by and large deals with problems related to the material world, *Jude the Obscure* is essentially a spiritual novel: it dramatises more convincingly and elaborately problems of marriage and divorce and raises questions about the essence of human existence. It portends the modern age with all its complexity and marks a transitional period of sharp conflict between faith and doubt, between old Christian values and new liberal ideas, and between a belief in a purposeful and supervised world on the one hand, and a blind and indifferent universe on the other.

Although Hardy is a professed atheist ('I have been looking for God fifty for years, and I think that if he had existed I should have discovered him,'⁽¹⁾) he examines the possibility of achieving some limited form of salvation through religion. His characters are wholeheartedly searching for a meaning and an outlet out of an apparently chaotic and meaningless existence. Man is bitterly illustrated as a victimised animal of food and sex in a Darwinian battle of survival. His ambitions and aspirations are always thwarted and crushed by 'fate', a vague force which he can neither control nor understand. *Jude the Obscure* is a highly pessimistic novel whose motto can be taken from Jude's final words, 'Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, there is man child conceived,'⁽²⁾ words which reflect a bitter experience annihilated by fateful circumstances.

From the very beginning of the novel Jude's life as a boy is portrayed as a battle between his ambitious expectations and the hard reality of the outside world. Hardy often uses 'prolepsis' to anticipate or foreshadow events which all illustrate a crushed soul in confrontation with harsh reality:

There was a quiver in his lip, now and after opening the well cover to begin lowering the bucket he paused and leant with his forehead and arms against the frame-work, his face wearing the fixity of a thoughtful child's who has felt the pricks of life somewhat before his time. The well into which he was looking was as ancient as the village itself, and from his present position appeared as a long circular perspective ending in a shining disk of quivering water at a distance of a hundred feet down. There was a lining of green

moss near the top, and nearer still the hart's-tongue fern. (p. 30)

In this passage Jude, the child, is visualised as a visionary boy who can somewhat predict his future at least symbolically. Hardy is a naturalist who believes that man is subjected to hard circumstances and to a blind and indifferent universe. Jude, even as a boy, can feel 'the pricks of life' and the pressure of a bitter reality which is imposed on man. The well here can symbolically reflect the future for Jude and anticipates a circular perspective. This is actually what happens to Jude who starts his life as a working boy and ends in the same circle as a cake seller. This also applies to some other characters in the novel and it reflects Hardy's vision that no matter how hard man tries to better his circumstances, the hand of fate will prevent him from achieving his goal.

Jude's problem is crystallised more powerfully in his encounter with animals, which suffer more or less like man in his incessant search to assert himself:

'Don's 'ee, sir - please don't 'ee! cried the whirling child as helpless under the centrifugal tendency of his person as a hooked fish swinging to land, and beholding the hill, the rick, the plantation, the path, and the rocks going round and round him in an amazing circular race. 'I - I - sir - only meant that - there was a good crop in the ground - I saw 'em sow it - and the rooks could have a little bit for dinner - and you wouldn't miss it sir - and Mr Philotson said I was to be kind to 'em - O,O,O,' (p. 35)

In this passage Hardy dramatises Jude's own situation symbolically. Jude is a kind-hearted boy and he is taught by the school teacher Philotson that he should be kind to animals, something which he finds quite natural. The boy finds it difficult to imagine that nature should be so cruel to the extent of not allowing such beautiful and gentle creatures to eat. Ironically his action of feeding the birds causes the loss of his job. This quotation both symbolises and anticipates the future of Jude who, like a hooked and

helpless fish, is trying to achieve his ambitions of obtaining a degree from Christminster (Oxford University). Circumstances are too powerful to be resisted and his hopes are crushed by a cruel and indifferent world. Hardy always illustrates the life of man as subjected to forces that he can hardly manipulate. Jude has to submit eventually to the forces of fate and accept complete defeat.

The cruelty of nature is stressed again in young Jude's encounter with animals:

This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. He carefully picked his way on tiptoe among the earthworms, without killing a single one. (p. 36)

Jude is presented here again as a kind-hearted boy who would not crush worms or even hurt them. He finds it difficult to imagine that nature should be so vicious and indifferent to those that crawl upon it. The situation of worms, or indeed that of many other weak creatures presented as trapped in the novel, resembles Jude's position. He himself is depicted as a helpless man who can neither achieve his ambition nor oppose a fate bent on crushing his life. Jude is made to feel from the beginning of his life as 'a useless boy' and that his existence is 'unnecessary'. The passage anticipates the downfall of Jude and at the same time it reflects Hardy's naturalistic outlook, that man is a helpless victim of circumstances which are too powerful to oppose.

Jude's encounters with the animal world can only teach him of the cruelty of existence and prepares him to confront more difficulties when he sets out to realise himself in an unpleasant world:

The man pointed north-eastward, in the very direction where lay that field in which Jude had so disgraced himself. There was something unpleasant about the coincidence for the moment,

but the fearsomeness of this fact rather increased his curiosity about the city. The farmer had said he was never to be seen in that field again; yet Christminster lay across it, and the path was a public one. So, stealing out of the hamlet he descended into the same hollow which had witnessed his punishment in the morning, never swerving an inch from the path, and climbing up the long and tedious ascent on the other side, till the track joined the highway by a little clump of trees. Here the ploughed land ended, and all before him was bleak open down. (p. 38)

Here Jude crystallises his dreams of becoming a student at Christminster University, a dream which is repeatedly mentioned in the narrative. The fact that there is something unpleasant about the coincidence that Christminster is in the same direction of the field in which Jude had so disgraced himself symbolises that the road to Christminster is rough and difficult to cross. This passage anticipates the barriers which prevent Jude from obtaining his degree at Christminster. Through this dream Hardy shows that there is a conflict between the real and the ideal: the actual and bitter reality of man and what he aspires to be. The fact that Jude cannot later on achieve his Christminster dream anticipates his downfall and tragic death.

The image of Christminster is repeated again and again; Jude thinks it is the 'panacea' for all his problems:

Suddenly there came along this wind something towards him - a message from the place - from some soul residing there, it seemed. Surely it was the sound of bells, the voice of the city faint and musical, calling to him, 'We are happy here!' (p. 43)

Here Jude feels that the wind coming from Christminster carries to him a message of the spirit of the place and those who are living in it. To live in Christminster is a dream which Jude has nourished since childhood. He

finds in this place a way of relieving him from his bitter reality and achieving his scholarly ambition of getting a university degree. Christminster represents the ideal world which Jude aspires to live in and the means to help him alter his present limited life. The conflict between the real and the ideal is anticipated in this passage and it is pervasive throughout the novel. Jude's main problem is that he cannot reconcile himself to reality and he prefers to live in a dreamy world although it is far-fetched. He creates his own fiction about Christminster to help him endure his bitter existence. His failure to get a place at Christminster University anticipates his tragic downfall and points to the battle between a weak and ambitious man and a powerful and indifferent 'fate'.

Indeed it is very early in the novel that Jude is made to feel there will be many barriers in his way of fulfilling his dreams and realising himself:

A glance told him what it was - a piece of flesh, the characteristic part of a barrow-pig, which the countrymen used for greasing their boots, as it was useless for any purpose. Pigs were rather plentiful hereabout, being bred and fattened in large numbers in certain parts of North Wessex.
(p. 58)

Here we have a direct contrast between the ideal and the real. Jude is thinking of the future and of fulfilling his scholarly ambitions; he is symbolically brought back to reality by a piece of pig flesh. Later on Arabella, the female 'animal', is symbolically associated with pig, with the body and sexual drive, and with the elements that prevent Jude from achieving his dreams and ambitions, including having a fulfilling relationship with his spiritual cousin Sue Bridehead. The battle between the real (the harsh reality of life) and the ideal (the dream of man) is a major theme which Hardy materialises through making man's ambitions and expectations crushed by the blind and indifferent force of fate.

The division between flesh (Arabella) and spirit (Sue) is in fact a reflection of Jude himself who resents his attachment to the body and aspires without much success to be as 'ethereal' as his cousin. Neither woman gives him satisfaction: Arabella is a 'Yahoo' who tries to drag him down to earth, while Sue wants him to be a 'Houyhnhnm' ⁽³⁾ and a romantic spirit roaming in the air.

Both Sue and Jude anticipate the rise of a new type of character which later dominates modern literature, the neurotic figure that finds it extremely difficult to adapt to the demands of social life. Both are highly sensitive and resent the impact of modern civilisation on man's psychology. Nothing goes smooth for them and events do not rhyme as they think. Their love relationship is a complex affair which is interconnected with sexual, social, psychological and religious questions.

In his portrayal of Sue, Hardy anticipates the rise of feminism which is a modern political movements whose main demand is that women should have equal rights with men. It rejects the traditional image of women as submissive creatures and sex symbols. In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy dramatises the typical life of a 'female' who refuses to bow to the patriochal society she finds herself trapped in. Sue lives with two men consecutively but rejects the idea of having sex with either, as much as she feels attached to Jude. She calls marriage a 'sordid contract' because women are usually subservient to men in typical traditional marriages. At one time she appears in Jude's clothes to symplise closeness to him and to express her desire for independence. To complicate the matter further Sue is presented as frigid and finds it extremely difficult to respond sexually to her husband Philotson. Although at times she enjoys a bit of flirtation to assert her femininity, she is essentially a spiritual girl. Sue is a liberal spirit who hates being treated as a sex object. At the end of the novel she breaks down possibly because Hardy thinks that the time was ripe for feminist ideas to flourish, but more likely because Hardy believes that circumstances and fate are more powerful than the ambitions of man. Sue breaks down more as a human being crushed by fate than as a feminist living in a conservative Victorian society. It is worth noting that the end of her life is not particularly to the liking of typical feminists who would certainly much prefer to have a female too powerful to break down as Hardy himself cites the reaction of one of them:

After the issue of *Jude the Obscure* as a serial, story in Germany, an experienced reviewer of that country informed the writer that Sue Bridhead, the heroine, was the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousands every year - the woman of the feminist movement - the slight, pale 'bachelor' girl - the intellectualised, emancipated bundle of nerves that

modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities as yet, who does not recognise the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession, and boast themselves as superior people because they are licenced to be loved on the premises. The regret of this critic was that the portrait of the newcomer had been left to be drawn by a man, and was not done by one of her own sex, who would never have allowed her to break down at the end. (p. 26)

Before being involved with Sue, the hand of fate has entangled Jude in an affair with Arabella which ends in their marriage:

He was inclined to inquire what he had done, or she lost, for that matter, that he deserved to be caught in a gin which would cripple him, if not she also, for the rest of a lifetime. (p. 82)

The marriage is looked at here as a trap which hinders the freedom of man and limits his movement and ambition. There is no doubt that Hardy, as it is amply demonstrated in *Jude the Obscure*, is a liberal who resents the bondage of marriage and views it as an unnecessary restriction particularly if either partner desires to break it off. Thus marriage should not only be based on sexual attraction but also on natural understanding and reciprocal love:

Their lives were ruined by the fundamental error of their matrimonial union: that of having based a permanent contract on a temporary feeling which had no necessary connection with affinities that alone render a life-long comradeship tolerable. (p. 90)

A more powerful and sarcastic attack on traditional marriage is provided by Sue who finds the whole process of the marriage ceremony as utterly sickening and excruciatingly dehumanising for women:

I have been looking at the marriage service in the Prayer-book, and it seems to me very humiliating that a giver-away should be required at all. According to the ceremony as there pointed, my bridegroom chooses me of his own will and pleasure; but I don't choose him. Somebody gives me to him, like a she ass or she goat, or any other domestic animal. Bless your exalted views of woman, O Churchman! ... (p. 190)

With her symbolic loss of her family name a woman's individuality is gradually being devoured by the whole institution of marriage. A liberal spirit like Sue is expected to resist this process of annihilating one's personality, but the question is: can she keep on for long and oppose a whole system which is pervasive in social life?

'No, you are not Mrs. Philotson,' murmured Jude.
'You are dear, free Sue Bridehead, only you don't know it! Wifedom has not yet squashed up and digested you in its vast maw as an atom which has no further individuality.' (p. 209)

Certainly the idea of marriage is firmly related to sexual life which is considered in Victorian England as a taboo subject. Fielding can be considered the first English novelist who provides in his novels a view of sex which is both liberal and healthy. In *Joseph Andrews*, for example, he resents the idea that young girls are brought up with a negative view of sex and of men generally and the novel advocates the opinion that sex as such has nothing to do either with morality or with man's goodness. Similarly in *Jude the Obscure* Hardy is quite open about sex and he provides several interesting discussions on the subject between Jude and Sue which reveal the complexity of the issue in addition to presenting a

dramatic picture of characters entangled with this animalistic desire. Certainly if looked at objectively sex is a neutral and biological activity that may be characterised as moral; however, it is interwoven with many aspects of life and man's nature that make it a highly intricate issue.

The difference between Sue and Arabella with Jude caught in the middle can only point to how complex the question of sex is. Arabella is characterised as gross and vulgar; she is rather on the physical side of life and is symbolically associated with pigs. Her large breasts and sexual consciousness unequivocally emphasise her nymphomania. On the other hand, Sue is spiritual, delicate and highly sophisticated and is symbolically associated with birds; her small breasts are a sign of her frigidity. Despite her lack of interest in sex she enjoys a bit of flirtation which is sometimes mixed with sadism, with jealousy of Arabella, with a feeling of possessiveness towards Jude, and with a strong sense to assert her being. She wants to be desired and her presence felt in order to assert her very humanity as if implying that without some sort of sexual reality, as limited as it is, her existence would be meaningless. Jude's dilemma is that he is prepared to provide Sue, his 'bride', with an ideal nest, not the kind of marriage which frightens her, but he can not annihilate his sexual drive. As a man he wants to assert his virility through fulfilling his sexual need, but to his dismay he finds that he can only do this with Arabella who will degrade his emotion and lower him to the level of animals.

For any liberal divorce is the natural outcome for an unsuccessful marriage especially if there are no children. Hardy first treats the process of marriage ceremony sarcastically, then he provides us with images of disastrous marriages, first between Arabella and Jude, second between Sue and Philotson, and third between Sue and Jude; later on all the marriages are treated with mockeries. Sue voices Hardy's own opinion when she comments on divorce:

It is none of the natural tragedies of love that's love's usual tragedy in civilised life, but a tragedy artificially manufactured for people who in a natural state would find relief in parting. (p. 235)

She cites Mill, one of the 19th century proponents of divorce, that one should live as one desires not as others dictate for him. Heidegger would call this submissive life inauthentic existence since man's individuality is

totally annihilated and placed under the mercy of conventions. In other words, if there is no compatibility between husband and wife it would be ridiculous for one partner to inflict an unnecessary suffering on the other. Both religion and convention in this connection are criticised for creating barriers which complicate the question of divorce. One may concede that because of the complexity of the social system the process of divorce should not be that simple because there may be unfavourable consequences; neither should it be that difficult since all attempts have been tried without success to mend things up. The best course of action is probably to give husband and wife a further chance to improve their marriage, but if they fail then nothing should prevent them from freeing each other.

The idea of divorce as it is illustrated in *Jude the Obscure* is one of several images which portray the life of man caught in a trap. This idea is related to the tragic situation of man and indeed to that of all the creatures which suffer on earth. The pig slaughtering scene is depicted vividly and elaborately to symbolise all victims:

However unworkmanlike the deed, it had been mercifully done. The blood flowed out in a torrent instead of in the trickling stream she had desired. The dying animal's cry assumed its third and final tone, the shriek of agony; his glazing eyes riveting themselves on Arabella with the eloquently keen reproach of a creature recognising at last the treachery of those who had seemed his only friends Jude put the pail upright, but only about a third of the whole steaming liquid was left in it, the main part being splashed over the snow, and forming a dismal, sordid, ugly spectacle - to those who saw it as other than an ordinary obtaining of meat. (pp. 85-6)

Jude's bewilderment points out man's reaction to the casual indifference of nature. The blood that stains the snow represents the suffering of existence; it is a kind of sign stigmatising all life which is both meaningless and necessary. The scene is so ironical that the kind-hearted Jude should be degrading himself into slaughtering an animal and

symbolically killing his hopes and aspirations. By the same token, the rabbit that is caught in a gin (p. 234) symbolises Jude himself caught in the powerful machinery of fate, which is both merciless and obscure. Similarly the gin stands for Sue's marriage which is seen as a social psychological trap. When Jude is morally forced to kill the rabbit in order to put it out of its agony he is anticipating his own death by destiny as well as the killing by his own son, Father Time, of his brother and sister 'the children of the world'. It is a kind of mercy killing to release one's suffering from a horrible and nauseous existence. In fact the killing of the children is seen as a 'stab in the back' well prepared by fate (p. 358), as well as a reflection of the 'universal wish not to live'. It is a highly pessimistic view which reminds one of Schopenhaur who visualises life as essentially composed of 'pain and boredom ... between which man oscillates.'⁽⁴⁾

To intensify the image of Jude's suffering and to enrich it with a special connotation Hardy associates him with Jesus Christ (p. 149) who presumably sacrificed his life for humanity. Like Jesus Jude preaches to an ungrateful crowd who also rejects him. The result of his attempt of enlightening the people around him (p. 346) is total rejection. He eventually dies despised and misunderstood like a crucified Jesus. His death is a sign of his defeat in the form of a fate which is bent on crushing him:

"There is something external to us which says,
"You shan't!" First it said, "You shan't learn!"
Then it said, "You shan't labour!" Now it says,
"You shan't love!" (p. 357)

It is ironical that the liberal Sue should turn religious towards the end of the novel urging Jude to submit totally to the power of fate since it is 'no use fighting against God' (p. 364). The gradual change of Jude from a Christian into a liberal has been well prepared for. The reader is not in the least shocked to find somebody whose life has been a series of disasters turning away from traditional faith. By contrast the dramatic change in Sue from a liberal into a Christian is a little unconvincing and it is probably due to Hardy's own outlook which is not particularly pro-feminist in this connection:

Strange difference of sex, that time and circumstances, which enlarge the views of most men, narrow the views of women almost invariably. (p. 419)

In other words, the experiences which are supposed to broaden Sue's vision work differently on her. The implication is that women weaken easily. Sue prefers to 'bury' herself alive than challenge fate and circumstances. One thing is particularly remarkable about her character is that as a liberal she is often confused, perplexed, puzzled and uneasy and this gives her attempt to be independent a special charm and force. The same thing is more or less true of her character when she submits to the force of fate:

'She's never found peace since she left his arms,
and never will again till she's as he is now!'
(p. 428)

Of all Hardy's novels *Jude the Obscure* is undoubtedly the most pessimistic. G.D.Klinopus sums up what a whole generation of readers felt about Hardy's last novel from this point of view:

Jude the Obscure is the one novel which is frequently disliked even by Hardy's admirers. It is in many ways a change of subject and ground. His permanent attitude to the talented poor man, his tendency to exaggerate his own struggles for self-education, his acceptance of the decline of his own world and the emergence of a colourless modernity requiring an effort of adjustment like Jude's uprooting, all these combined with obscure bitterness, possibly influenced by Schopenhauer, about sexuality, marriage, and love to make an action which is oppressive and far from luminous. Well might Edmund Gosse exclaim in a review of the book: 'What has Providence done to Hardy

that he should raise up in the arable land of
Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator?⁽⁵⁾

Indeed the novel anticipates the modern age with all its fear and horror of the image of individuals being crushed by outside forces and of a civilisation which is self-destructive to say the least. Hardy's vision is quite prophetic. His deep insight led him to portray a hero and a heroine whose ambitions are ahead of their time. Many later novelists dealt with the inability of individuals to adapt to a highly demanding world. Typical 20th century works are peopled with characters which are confused and uncertain about anything, and many of them feel that their life is totally meaningless. *Jude the Obscure* has provided modern English fiction with a work which reflects the perplexity of the end of the Victorian age when it is 'looking back in anger' and foreshadowing a lost world 'waiting for Godot'.

يعالج هذا البحث مفهوم "القدر" في رواية "جود الغامض" وكيف أنه مصمم على إعاقه طموح الإنسان وتوقعاته. فكلا البطل والبطله "جود وسو" يحاولان أن يحققا ذاتيهما في عالم عدائي وفي النهاية يهزمان بشكل مأساوي. إن حياتيهما تقدم صورة درامية عن الحب والزواج والطلاق والتنظيم والعمل ووجود الإنسان بشكل عام. وتعكس الرواية حقبة مضطربة وتتذر بقدم حضارة القرن العشرين المعقدة والهدامة، ولطها أكثر عمل تشاؤمي في الفترة الانتقالية بين العصرين الفيكتوري والحديث.

Notes

1. Quoted from Ian Gregor, 'An End a beginning', *The Great Web*, 1974, p. 289.
2. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, (London, 1974), p. 423. All later refernces are to this edition.
3. Yahoo and Houyhnhum are used in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to refer to the bestial and angelic qualities of man respectively. They are used in connection with Arabella and Sue by R.B.Heilman in 'Hardy's Sue Bridehead', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 1965-6 p. 209.
4. Arthur Schopenhaur, 'Will and Knowledge' in *The Modern Tradition*, (ed.) Hichard Ellman (Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 545-8.
5. G.D.Klingopulos, 'Hardy's Ancient and Modern', *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 6. (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982), p. 418.

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