

Jude The Obscure: Topics for Discussion

Part First: At Marygreen

1. Explain the subtitle, actually based on II Corinthians 3:6, and its relation to the book as a whole.
2. Explain the significance of the epigraph for this section.
3. Discuss the animal imagery in this section, especially that associated with Jude and Arabella specifically.
4. Explain the ways in which Arabella is a “sham” or a “counterfeit.”
5. What is the significance of Jude’s portrait in the broker’s shop.
6. Relate Jude’s family history.
7. Why is Jude’s experience with Dr. Vilbert so revealing?
8. In what ways does Jude’s slaughtering of the pig represent a kind of “original sin”?
9. In what ways do the cries of the pig as it is slaughtered parallel Jude’s situation in this part.
10. A possible theme of this part is transformation -- through knowledge, dreaming, sex, killing, etc. Explain.
11. Hardy disparages “romance.” How? Why?
12. Discuss the double meaning of the milestone.
13. Enumerate and discuss the relevance of the biblical allusions in this part.
14. Is Jude self-destructive? Justify your opinion.
15. List the steps for “How to Crush a Child’s Self-Esteem” as demonstrated in this part.

Part Second: At Christminster

1. Explain the significance of the epigraphs for this part.
2. Contrast Jude’s first “introduction” to Sue with his “introduction” to Arabella.
3. Explain the importance of architecture as a symbol, especially on page 89.
4. Demonstrate the relationship between Psalm 119 and the novel.
5. Significant couples are presented in this section -- Cyprus and Galilee, Apollo and Venus, St. Peter and St. Mary Magdalen. How do these couples relate to Jude and Sue, to Jude and Arabella, and to the theme of flesh vs. spirit?
6. What is *erotolepsy* and what does it have to do with this novel?
7. Jude awakens. Huh?
8. In what ways is Jude’s re-acquaintance with Phillotson a disappointment?
9. Explain the relationship between Jude’s drinking and his other weaknesses.
10. Hardy employs numerous allusions in this part, especially in reference to Jude. Discuss Jude as Job, Jude as a “poor Christ,” Jude as Laocoon, and Jude as Robinson Crusoe.
11. Not only do we have a highly symbolic return to the milestone in this part, we also have an interesting meeting between Jude and Sue at the crossmark of the Martyrdoms. Explain.
12. List the steps for “How to Repress a Child” as demonstrated in this part.

Part Third: At Melchester

1. Explain the significance of the epigraph for this section.
2. Explain Sue’s reference to herself as Ishmael.
3. What does Sue mean when she says, “I am not modern either. I am more ancient than medievalism, if you only knew” (142) .
4. How does Sue’s escape from the training school parallel Jude’s “escape” from Christminster?
5. What is Sue’s “peculiarity”?
6. In what ways is Sue’s story of the undergraduate similar to the story about Dr. Vilbert?

7. Why is Sue's examination of the Song of Solomon so revealing?
8. Some critics contend that the episode between Jude and Sue in his room is strikingly like Arabella's initial seduction of Jude by the stream. Discuss.
9. What is especially cruel, and yet ironical, about Jude giving Sue away in marriage to Phillotson?
10. Is there any significance to the "pseudo-marriage" of Jude and Sue when they rehearse her marriage to Phillotson?
11. Why does Jude visit the composer of "The Foot of the Cross," and why is he so shocked by what he learns during that visit?

Part Fourth: At Shaston

1. Why does this particular part take place in Shaston? Consider very seriously the oddities of the town.
2. Explicate the conversation between Jude and Sue on p. 212. How are they like and unlike?
3. Is Sue a flirt?
4. In what ways is Jude like Joseph, St. Stephen, and Don Quixote?
5. Hardy associates Sue with windows, window casements, and window sills. Explain the symbolism associated with several of these "window incidents."
6. How about Sue and the clothes-closet?
7. How do simple acts like hand-holding and kissing figure prominently in this part? How is a kiss a turning point?
8. In what ways is Sue's marriage parallel and antithetical to Jude's?
9. What effect do Jude's meetings and letters from Arabella produce upon Sue?
10. What does making a "good catch" or a "bad catch" of a rabbit in a trap have to do with Jude, Arabella, Sue, and Phillotson?
11. Sue leads Jude into a kind of "original sin" much like Arabella did when she forced him to kill the pig. How does his loss of doctrine parallel his earlier loss of innocence?
12. Jude has recognized the flesh and abandoned the spirit. How is this demonstrated?
13. Why does Sue tell Phillotson about the hand-holding, but not about the kiss?
14. Trace the steps by which Sue escapes her "shiny brass bedstead"?
15. Why *did* Sue marry Phillotson? Why did he marry her?
16. List the steps for "How to Out-Sue Sue" as demonstrated in this part.
17. How does the parting between Sue and Phillotson parallel the first parting between Arabella and Jude?
18. What symbol is used to demonstrate Sue's power?
19. Why does Sue go to Phillotson when she learns he is ill?
20. Who is truly a husband better-suited to Sue?
21. In some ways Phillotson assumes a classical tragic dignity in this part. Discuss the relationship between Phillotson and the rabbit image, feeling vs. reasoning, resignation vs. guilt, forgiveness and illness-in short, connect Phillotson to Christ imagery.

Part Fifth: At Aldbrickham and Elsewhere

1. Sue and Jude mean quite different things by the word "love." Explain.
2. What is the significance of Jude's job making tombstones, and other ecclesiastical stonework?
3. How does Arabella's visit spur Sue to sleep with Jude? How is this sexual self-sacrifice similar to Sue's self-sacrifice to Phillotson in part six? How is it different?
4. In many ways the encounters between Sue and Arabella -- at the door and in the inn -- are pivotal, in that they affect the outcome of the book significantly. Explain. How would the book have been different if Arabella had "made it up with Jude"?

5. How is Jude's son, Little Father Time a caricature of himself?
6. Jude's son is compared to a wave, a breeze, a cloud, time, and Melpone. What is added to our understanding of his symbolic role by these metaphors?
7. In some ways, Sue's mothering of Little Father Time is a kind of "virgin birth," at least in the sense that she becomes his mother without birthing him. Discuss.
8. Is there any significance in the fact that Little Father Time has never been christened?
9. Explain the significance of the "milestone hanging" and Little Father Time's reaction.
10. What does Jude mean by saying that he and Sue are "horribly sensitive"?
11. "If we are happy as we are, what does it matter to any body?" (302) Does it matter'?
12. Little Father Time makes Sue and Jude think of the future, not just the present. What is ironical about this'?
13. Contrast the various meetings (almost all the same characters being present at both) at the Great Wessex Agricultural Show in Stokes-Barehills and the spring fair at Kennetbridge. Consider the Christminster model and the Christminster cakes also.
14. How does Arabella's purchase of the love-philtre figure later in the story 1
15. Contrast how Sue and Little Father Time react to the roses.
16. Explain the importance of the Ten commandments job and the churchwarden's story.
17. When Jude and Sue are eavesdropping on the buyers at the auction, what do they learn about themselves? How does the auction itself reveal the fact that *all* their values -- spiritual and material -- are at odds with the world's?
18. What is significant about Sue's release of the pigeons?
19. Since Jude is synonymous with "jew," what does his wandering indicate?
20. In what ways have both Jude and Phillotson "regressed" or at least "returned"?
21. Contrast Arabella's "chains" for Sue with Phillotson's ideas about chaining Sue.
22. Arabella awakens and perhaps then reawakens. Huh?
23. List the steps for "How to Lose Joy" as demonstrated in this part.

Part Sixth: At Christminster Again

1. Explain the significance of Remembrance Day, Humiliation Day, Judgment Day.
2. Is anything important revealed about the crowd's reaction to Jude at the ceremonies?
3. Examine Jude's reflection on his life as he speaks to the crowd.
4. How does Phillotson's presence at the ceremonies affect the outcome of the book?
5. How does the Fawley's search for rooms parallel the Christ story?
6. In many ways, Little Father Time is remarkably like Jude as a boy. Re-examine part one looking for similarities. Consider also how Sue parallels Dr. Vilbert, at least as a disillusioning force.
7. Jude, Sue and Arabella react quite differently to the deaths of the children. What is revealed about each by their reactions?
8. How can Little Father Time be their "nodal point"?
9. What significance is there in Sue's standing in the children's grave.
10. How do the children serve as symbols -- all four of the children?
11. List the steps for "How to Kill a Child" as demonstrated in this part.
12. Sue awakens. Huh?
13. Is Jude a deaf man watching other people listen to music?
14. The rending of Jude and Sue's marriage is a powerful scene in which many of the ideas central to the book are discussed. Re-examine their conversation on pp. 371-373. Discuss the difference in natural and unnatural marriage.
15. How is Sue's return to Phillotson perverse?
16. How are the re-marriages of Sue and Jude like their initial marriages? Consider all the actual marriage ceremonies.
17. Explain the pig imagery as related to Jude.

18. What is significant about Jude lying down to rest by the moss-covered milestone?
19. How do the “ghosts” of Christminster figure in the last part?
20. Explain how Dr. Vilbert’s return to the story and his budding relationship with Arabella are particularly apt and ironical.
21. Demonstrate the appropriateness of Jude’s reciting of Job as he dies. How is this similar to Jude and Sue’s first meeting with Little Father Time?
22. What does Arabella mean in her speech by Jude’s body?
23. Mrs. Edlin is a minor and yet important figure. How does she figure prominently in the story at pivotal points?
24. Anny is also a minor and yet important figure. How does she figure prominently at pivotal points?
25. As the book closes, the Christ story seems remarkably evident. In what ways are Sue and Jude Christ images?
26. Phillotson awakens. Now really, huh? Look at pp. 386 and 420. Does this have anything to do with Mrs. Edlin’s “strange tales o’ husbands”?