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Works Cited

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Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure

Jude the Obscure (1895) is a grim study of sexual repression, conventional morality, the conflict between desire and duty, and the constraints imposed by social class. Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead are cousins who fall in love with each other but are plagued by social constraints and their own complex emotions. Through their tormented relationship, Hardy showcases the effects that class structure and gender expectations have on nineteenth-century England and the pursuit of job stability, social mobility, and personal satisfaction.

Keywords: Adultery; Nineteenth-Century English Novel; Class Restrictions; Hardy, Thomas; Jude the Obscure; Marriage in the Nineteenth-Century; Oxford University

Plot Synopsis

Part I: At Marygreen

Jude the Obscure follows the character of Jude Fawley, a working-class stonemason who was raised by his aunt. His schoolmaster Richard Phillotson leaves Marygreen for Christminster and tells Jude to be kind to animals and birds, to read, and to visit him. Jude longs to go to Christminster to be a scholar like his teacher. His life in Marygreen is miserable; his aunt blames him for living, for being idle, and for his love for reading. She warns him of the dangers of marriage, saying that it only causes grief and suffering like his own parent's failed marriage.

Jude works as a scarecrow in Farmer Troutham's fields, but Troutham catches him letting the birds peck at the crops. Jude explains that he wanted to be kind to the birds, but this statement only enrages the farmer, who beats and then fires him.

Vilbert, an itinerant charlatan doctor, promises to give Jude some old Latin and Greek grammars to study, but he soon forgets his promise. When Phillotson sends for the piano he has been storing in Jude's aunt's fuel house, Jude puts a letter in the packing case asking his old teacher to send him used Latin and Greek grammars. Phillotson sends the texts, and Jude becomes enraptured and overwhelmed by how much work learning demands.

When Jude delivers baked goods in a cart for his aunt, Jude keeps his eyes on the book he is studying, trusting the horse to guide the wagon. At sixteen, Jude becomes the apprentice to a church-builder and a stonecutter.

At nineteen, Jude meets Arabella. As he walks through the fields daydreaming about becoming a churchman and a scholar, he is suddenly hit in the head by a pig's genitals that Arabella had tossed from behind a hedge.

Arabella eventually spins a seductive web and Jude falls under her spell. When Arabella learns that Jude intends to leave Marygreen for Christminster, she sets about keeping him. She lures him into her bed and afterwards tells him she is pregnant with his child. Without wanting to, Jude marries her. Arabella badgers him to abandon his studies and work as a stonecutter. She tells him she was mistaken and is not pregnant. Later, he overhears Arabella telling her friends she told Jude she was pregnant when she was not. Jude is perplexed that a momentary lapse into sensuality should have such a long-lasting destructive effect on the rest of his life.

Their marriage continues to get worse. Jude fails at a suicide attempt and drinks heavily. When Arabella leaves Jude to go to Australia, Jude is finally able to leave Marygreen and head for Christminster.

Part Two: At Christminster

As three years pass in Christminster, Jude works as a stonecutter but still seeks to enter the university. However, Jude's position in society as a man of the lower class makes gaining admission to the university impossible. He hopes to meet his cousin Sue Bridehead, whom he has heard is working as an artisan in a shop in Christminster. Although he has seen Sue at a distance in her shop painting religious statues, he hesitates to introduce himself and pursue his attraction. Not only is he still married, but Sue is his cousin and both of their families have a history of unhappy marriages.

Nevertheless, Jude watches Sue from a distance and longs for her. Although she paints religious statues, Sue is also attracted to pagan figures and deities. She buys busts of Venus and Apollo and hides them away. Jude continues to study the New Testament.

Having heard that Jude is in Christminster, Sue eventually visits his workplace. She explains that she is about to leave the city because her landlady found and destroyed the pagan busts she was keeping. Jude and Sue visit Phillotson together. Though the schoolmaster does not remember Jude, he invites them in anyway. Jude suggests that Phillotson hire Sue as an assistant teacher at his school, which would allow her to remain in Christminster. Phillotson agrees, and he begins to develop affectionate feelings toward her. Jude notices and becomes jealous. He begins to imagine their happily married life together, despite the fact that Phillotson is twenty years older than Sue.

Jude's application to the university is rejected. The head of one college advises him to come to terms with his station in life as a working man. Phillotson prepares to leave Christminster to open a school in another town, and Jude worries that Sue will opt to leave with him. In despair, Jude gets drunk and makes fun of his pursuit of learning. He walks to Sue's house and confesses he has been drinking. Sue consoles him, and he sleeps on a couch downstairs.

In the morning, Jude feels ashamed and leaves before Sue wakes up. He returns to Marygreen.

Part Three: At Melchester

Jude continues to study and works as a stone-cutter. Sue studies to be a teacher, but dislikes the school where she goes to prepare. Although she forgives Jude his binge, she shows no sign of reciprocating the passion he feels for her. She has, in fact, promised to marry Phillotson in two years, and they plan to open a school.

After a day trip together, Jude and Sue miss the last train back to her school. They stay the night in separate rooms at a cottage. As punishment for being out all night, Sue is put in solitary for a week at school. She manages to break away and visit Jude. They discuss their beliefs: Sue says she is not a believer and scorns the academic medievalism of Christminster, while Jude expresses his Christian faith and love for Christminster's academic traditions. Sue tells Jude of a boy who used to love her and with whom she lived chastely. Jude feels that loving Sue is hopeless.

Because of her disobedience, Sue is expelled from teacher training school and told she ought to marry Jude to protect her reputation. Jude has not told Sue he is married. Sue determines that she will discuss her future with Phillotson. Jude is jealous and tries to practice the discipline of renunciation that he needs to cultivate to be a curate.

Phillotson puzzles over a letter Sue has sent him expressing gratitude that he did not visit her often while at school. He kisses her picture and only learns of her expulsion when he goes to visit the school. In the cathedral nearby, he meets Jude who is repairing stonework. Jude tells Phillotson that he loves Sue but assures him that they have always been chaste. Jude tells Sue he is married. Sue consents to marry Phillotson and Jude consents to give the bride away. The morning of the wedding, Sue and Jude walk to the church together. Inside, they walk down the aisle together, rehearsing the ceremony. Outside, they meet Phillotson. He is surprised to see Sue leaning on Jude's arm. As he gives her away, Jude thinks he sees her expressing pity for him

when what she actually feels is pain at entering a marriage she does not desire.

Jude learns his aunt is ill, and he arranges to meet Sue's train and travel with her to Marygreen. He misses the train when he goes for a drink and meets Arabella, who is back and working at the bar. In order to discuss their legal status, they go to Aldbrickham, where no one knows them. Arabella confesses that she married someone in Australia, but has left him. They spend the night together at an inn, and afterwards Jude feels dirty and considers himself a victim of his own sensuality

Jude meets Sue a day late at his aunt's. He excuses himself but does not tell Sue he saw Arabella. Sue tells Jude that they should no longer see each other. Their aunt gets well and scolds Sue for having married Phillotson. He is a man who would repel any woman, she says. Sue confesses she is physically repelled by him, but that he is a considerate husband and allows her freedom.

Arabella writes to Jude that she and her husband have reconciled and she is going to London with him to keep a tavern.

Sue writes to Jude regretting she was harsh with him and asking him to visit her.

Part Four: At Shaston

Jude and Sue feel a strong attraction when Jude plays a hymn tune on a piano and Sue puts her hand over his, playing with him. Sue is startled by her feelings and tells Jude to go. He misses his train and wanders by Sue's house. Through a window, he sees her looking at a picture. He wonders if it is a picture of him.

Sue sees Jude at their aunt's funeral. Sue tells him that despite her regard for Phillotson, he repels her and she has not had marital relations with him. Jude says he has seen Arabella. Sue permits Jude to hold her hand, but says she will not keep it from Phillotson. Jude embraces her; she pulls back. She admits that she had not understood the actual demands of marriage. When she and Jude part, she gives him a kiss, but still refuses to let him embrace her.

Jude burns his theology books because he feels that the intensity of his sexual desire makes him unfit to be a clergyman. Sue regrets their kiss and decides not to write to Jude. She is sad that he feels so strongly about her that he will suffer because of it, and she pities his suffering. Phillotson thinks her sadness is a sign of her grief at her aunt's death. Sue confesses her aversion to Phillotson and tells him she only married him to avoid a scandal. She wants to leave him and live with Jude. Phillotson only consents that she stays in the house, but in her own room.

One evening, from habit, Phillotson enters Sue's bedroom instead of his. She jumps out the window but is not injured. Phillotson confides to his friend Gillingham that Sue loathes him physically but likes him as a friend. He says that he is willing to let Sue act on her love for Jude by letting her go. Gillingham tells him that all Sue needs is firm discipline. Phillotson disagrees.

Phillotson leaves Sue, and though she offers to remain friends, he insists that they make a clean break from each other.

Meanwhile, Jude consents to divorce Arabella. Sue agrees to live with him, but not as a lover, despite her attraction to him. When they travel, Sue refuses to stay at the hotel Jude booked because he reserved only one room. He takes two rooms at another hotel without remembering that he had stayed there with Arabella. A maid recognizes him and tells Sue she has seen him there before with another woman. Sue is angry but mollified when Jude tells her Arabella is divorcing him.

The school board demands Phillotson resign when they learn the scandalous fact that Sue has gone to live with another man. He refuses and is dismissed. He becomes ill. When Sue visits, he is reminded of her kindness and asks her to return to him. She refuses, and Phillotson is hurt by her ambivalence and pained by the idea of her as Jude's lover. He decides to divorce her so that she can marry Jude.

Part Five: At Aldbrickham & Elsewhere

Sue fears that marrying Jude will destroy their bond, not enhance it. But, Arabella tells Sue that she is getting married and advises Sue to marry Jude. Jude and Sue, nevertheless, put off marrying, afraid it will alienate them.

Arabella tells Jude that she gave birth to a boy eight months after she left him. She asks Jude to take him and care for him. Jude and Sue agree to this and learn that the boy is sad and somber, yet seemingly old beyond his years. Sue decides she and Jude should marry.

Everything Jude and Sue begin to see seems to discourage them from marrying. They fear that the legal coercion at the root of marriage will harm their love. They decide not to tell their child, Little Father Time, that they have not married.

At a fair Arabella sees Jude, Sue, and the boy. Arabella buys a love potion from Vilbert, the quack doctor Jude had known years ago at Marygreen. Sue tells Jude she is happy. Their boy, however, continues to be obsessed with thoughts of death.

When Sue gets pregnant, they go to London and tell neighbors upon their return that they were married there. They soon find work in a cathedral repairing the letters of the Ten Commandments and repainting them. The townsfolk, still suspicious of them, protest and they are subsequently fired. Jude is forced to resign his position on a committee fostering education for workingmen. They decide to auction their goods and leave Aldbrickham.

Arabella encounters Sue at a fair while she sells gingerbread Jude has baked. Arabella is now a widow and has become a Christian teetotaler. Jude is recovering from illness he contracted while working in the rain.

Arabella does not keep her new-found religion long and tells her friend Anny that she is in love with Jude again. When she and Anny give Phillotson a lift in their carriage, Arabella tells him he was wrong to let Sue go, that she had not had adulterous relations with Jude at the time. Even if she had, Arabella says, firm discipline would have tamed her. After Sue tells Jude that Arabella is back, he moves to Christminster again, bringing with him Sue, Little Father Time, and the two children that Sue bore throughout the years.

Part Six: At Christminster Again

As he watches an academic procession, Jude feels the weight of his failure. Sue sees Phillotson in the crowd, and she feels uncomfortable for having violated social mores despite not believing in them. When they look for a place to stay, Jude and Sue are refused lodgings and are only able to get rooms for her and their children. When Jude is out looking for a room for himself, Sue tells the landlady they are not legally married. The landlady insists she cannot stay after that night. Seeing how miserable Jude and Sue are, Jude's son asks Sue if it were better he had not been born. He feels responsible for their difficulties. Believing that having children is the cause of their woe, he gets angry when Sue tells him she is pregnant. He hangs the two other children and himself and leaves a note explaining they were too many. Sue blames herself for having spoken to him about their trouble as if he were adult. Jude cannot console her. Sue is sure that their tragedy is a judgment for choosing to live outside social conventions. She becomes ill with grief and the fetus she is carrying is stillborn.

In response to their tribulation, Jude suggests they marry, but Sue feels she is still married to Phillotson and regrets that she has pursued her own desires. She begins to believe in self-abnegation. She argues that Jude is actually married to Arabella. That Arabella's son killed her children signifies that right killed wrong. As a matter of conscience, not because she does not love Jude, Sue insists they separate. At this time, too, Arabella learns that Jude and Sue are not married.

When Arabella sees Phillotson again, she tells him that Sue and Jude were never married and are living apart now. She gives him Sue's address. Phillotson writes to Sue, offering to take her back. At the cemetery, Sue tells Jude she will marry Phillotson again, despite not loving him, to fulfill her duty as wife. She advises Jude to marry Arabella, for those are the consecrated unions and theirs was a sin for which they paid with the death of their children.

Phillotson realizes Sue does not love him but accepts that she will be obedient in their marriage. Mrs. Edlin, a neighbor, tells him the marriage is wrong because Sue does not love him. Phillotson assures Sue their relations can be non-sexual, as before.

When Arabella begs Jude for shelter, he takes her in, and at her instigation, he allows her to go to Marygreen to find out that Sue and Phillotson have actually married. When Arabella says she feels married to Jude, he dismisses it, goes to a tavern and starts drinking. Arabella finds him, gets him drunk, and takes him to her father's cottage.

At Arabella's, Jude feels hung over and dispirited. She has all his goods brought from his lodging to her cottage and schemes with her father her intent to marry Jude again by keeping him drunk. After their remarriage, Jude feels lifeless without Sue. He becomes consumptive. Arabella is vexed at having to care for a sick husband. Jude asks her to write to Sue and tell her of his condition. She writes but does not send the letter, and Sue does not come. Jude goes to Sue during a rain storm and finds her in the Marygreen church. He berates her for loving him badly and for sacrificing her critical intellect by making her marriage and approving of his. She breaks down and in his arms confesses that although she has subdued her will, her marriage is not consummated. They confess their love but Sue resists. Overcome by a sense of sin, she flees. Jude catches a chill.

Arabella meets Jude at the station. He admits the trip was suicidal. He feels the presence of the spirits of the dead scholars of Christminster. Consumed by guilt, Sue tells Phillotson she has seen Jude and swears on the Bible never to see him again. She begs him to take her as a wife, and she steels herself against her feeling of physical repulsion for him.

Jude refuses to let Arabella tell Sue how ill he is. Mrs. Edlin, their neighbor tells Jude that Sue and Phillotson have consummated their marriage. As Vilbert, the quack, attends Jude at his sickbed, Arabella flirts with him.

Arabella goes to see the town festivities. Jude, suffering delirium, calls out for water, talks to a phantom Sue, and regrets the day of his birth. Arabella returns to find Jude dead. Desiring to go out again to watch the regatta, she tells her friends that Jude is sleeping and she continues to flirt with Vilbert.

Jude's body is laid out, and Arabella and Mrs. Edlin watch over it. Outside, the ceremonies of Christminster take place. Mrs. Edlin says Sue has found peace mortifying herself for Phillotson. Arabella says Sue has not had peace since she abandoned Jude and will not until she is dead.

Symbols & Motifs

Behavior is often symbolic in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude's gentle disposition is represented symbolically through his behavior toward animals. He allows the birds to graze on the crops in the field and purposefully avoids stepping on earth worms.

The pig's organ that Arabella tosses at Jude symbolizes the power she has to befoul him. The way Jude slaughters a pig signifies his tenderness and therefore his incompetence as the kind of husband Arabella wants.

The walls of the colleges at Christminster, besides being actual examples of architecture, symbolize the barriers erected by society against the ambitions of men like Jude. Jude aspires to move upward socially, but the walls that society places prohibit him from successfully doing so.

Other recurring motifs in this novel include books, learning, ambition, disappointment, failure, alcohol, and illness.

Historical Context

When *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1895, there was a strong stratification of class in England, making it difficult if not impossible for a poor working man like Jude to rise outside of his low class. Through Jude's situation, Thomas Hardy shows how a proper university education was closed to men deemed unworthy of such education and status. Men like Jude were assumed to have inadequate intellect, discipline, and desire for learning and were therefore better fit for working-class careers.

Four years after *Jude the Obscure* was published, Ruskin College was established in Oxford. Though it was not a part of Oxford University, its students were allowed to share some of Oxford's facilities. Named for the great nineteenth-century art critic and social reformer, John Ruskin, 1819-1900, the new college was created to serve working men desiring to increase their education and social standing.

Societal Context

Jude the Obscure is a novel written about failed attempts at social conformity at a time when conformity and regimentation were the social norms. It presents a pessimistic world view in a society that believed in optimism, imperial power, the possibilities of progress, and the virtue of industry. Aware that his subject matter was inflammatory, Hardy wrote in the preface to the first edition:

For a novel 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, and to point, without a mincing of words, the tragedy of unfulfilled aims, I am not aware that there is anything in the handling to which exception can be taken. (3)

Religious Context

Religion plays an important role in the lives and attitudes of the characters in *Jude the Obscure*, but it would be a stretch to say that the novel is "about" religion. Rather, the novel reflects the effects that religion has on forming individual personalities and on determining social values. The novel does not endorse some of these religious effects, such as the obligations of marriage and the narrowing of culture (as illustrated by her landlady's destruction of Sue's pagan god busts). The novel suggests that religion plays a detrimental role in the growth of human beings. Arabella's brief adherence to Christianity shows religion, in her case, to be a channel for her self-centered energy. Jude does not love religious practice or God, but he places intense importance on the act of studying and the sanctity of knowledge. Religious characters within the novel, like the church congregation that prevents Jude from doing repairs to their stonework, are shown as being righteous but not charitable.

Scientific & Technological Context

Although *Jude the Obscure* was written at a time when the fruits of the industrial revolution and its accompanying scientific discoveries were transforming England from a land composed of countryside and dominated by rural occupations, the role of science and technology in the lives of Jude, Sue, and the other characters is minimal. The railroad exists, and it allows characters to travel longer distances. Yet developments in transportation manage to result in the increased difficulty of maintaining secrecy. Sue, for example, learns from a chambermaid in a distant city that she has seen Jude with another woman.

In general, the technology of *Jude the Obscure* remains the manual technology that defined western culture until the twentieth-century. Jude is a stonemason and works with his hands. Sue is an artisan who paints statues of Christian religious figures.

The general absence of technology in the lives of the characters of the novel suggests that importance is instead placed on the forces of nature and time that surround the characters and influence their behavior and the story's events.

Biographical Context

Hardy was born in Dorset, England on June 2, 1840. He was thought to be stillborn until the midwife realized he was alive. Hardy's father was a builder and stonemason like Jude. Hardy himself became a successful architect, but began writing poetry in 1862 and novels in 1867. Hardy's mother worked as a servant since she was thirteen years old. His parents' marriage was an unhappy one, as they had only married due to his mother's pregnancy.

In 1874, the year Hardy published *Far from the Madding Crowd*, he married Emma Gifford. Initially a loving marriage, it changed with time and Hardy and Emma became estranged from one another, though they never separated. After Emma's death in 1912, however, Hardy wrote a number of love poems in memory of her. In 1914, Hardy married Florence Dugdale, who had been his secretary since 1905. She was forty years younger than Hardy.

Hardy's novels include *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Hardy also wrote several volumes of short stories and a play, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (1923). Hardy published his first volume of poetry, *Wessex Poems*, in 1898. In 1902, Hardy published the first part of *The Dynasts*, a three-part epic verse drama set in the era of Napoleon. In 1910, Hardy was awarded the Order of Merit.

He contracted pleurisy in 1927, and died on January 11, 1928. His ashes, despite his previously stated objection, were interred in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, but, in partial compliance with his will, his heart was buried in Stinsford beside Emma's grave. A two-volume autobiography was published after his death, but its authorship was first attributed to his second wife, Florence. Nearly all of Hardy's notebooks and letters were burned by his executors after his

death.

Thomas Hardy is known for his dark and pessimistic vision of life, psychological acuity, and critical examination of late-Victorian manners, morals, and social conventions. Because of the censure his novels received, Hardy stopped writing fiction at the end of the nineteenth-century and focused only on poetry.

Complementary Texts

Adam Bede by George Eliot

Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy

News from Nowhere by William Morris

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy

Adaptations

Jude the Obscure. Dir. Hugh Davis. BBC Television, 1971. DVD.

Jude. Dir. Michael Winterbottom. BBC Film, 1996. Film.

Discussion Questions

1. Each of the major characters in *Jude the Obscure* has a defining personality trait. Focusing attention on Jude, Sue, Phillotson, and Arabella, discuss each one's defining characteristic and what effect it has on how the character acts and interacts with others.
2. What part does the social environment play in shaping the lives of each of the major characters?
3. Is Jude a heroic or a pathetic figure?
4. How do you account for the constant changes in Sue's attitude toward Jude?
5. What is the function of Little Father Time, Jude's son, in the novel? Is he a realistic character? Do you think he was intended to be? If so has Hardy succeeded? If he was not intended to be a realistic character, what do you think Hardy intended him to be or to represent?
6. Focusing on individual characters, discuss how Hardy combines specific virtues and vices in his characters. Are these absolute values or can they be interpreted according to a reader's predisposition? Do you think that one particular characteristic in any of the characters can be seen either as a sign of his or her virtue or vice? Demonstrate with examples.
7. Discuss the role of alcohol in *Jude the Obscure*.
8. What is the role of women as it is portrayed in *Jude the Obscure*? Give examples that show those attitudes. How does Hardy seem to view the plight of women in late-Victorian England?
9. Do you think that the social and sexual attitudes and conditions that Hardy describes in *Jude the Obscure* continue to exist? In what ways do they or do they not?
10. *Jude the Obscure* shows the conflicts between contrasting and opposing sets of values.

Without preaching, Hardy makes clear which values he endorses and which he does not. How does he do it? What techniques does he use? Are there choral figures in the book? Consider, for example, how Hardy uses Mrs. Edlin and Phillotson's friend, Gillingham.

Essay Ideas

1. Analyze the role of coincidence in *Jude the Obscure*.
2. Discuss the role that marriage plays in the lives of the major characters, the meaning it has for them, and, in general, how marriage is portrayed in *Jude the Obscure*.
3. Thomas Hardy is often characterized as a pessimist. Discuss the importance of pessimism as a determining factor in the construction of *Jude the Obscure*. How does the attitude of pessimism shape the plot and the attitudes of the people in the novel?
4. Describe the roll that religion plays in Jude's life.
5. Describe the importance of the landscape. How does Hardy portray nature, country villages, and urban centers in *Jude the Obscure*?

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