

JUDE THE OBSCURE BY THOMAS HARDY

Universities, Higher Learning and the Social Order

In the first two parts of the book, the focus is on Jude, a working-class boy firmly attempting to educate himself. He struggles patiently to realize his dream of a university education but is thwarted by a cruel fate and rigid, conservative social order.

When one examines Hardy's presentation of the university and Jude's efforts to enter it, two main views become apparent. Jude's view is the romantic and illusory one. As a child, he was always fascinated with Christminster (representing Oxford). He sees it as a "city of light," where "the tree of knowledge grows"; it is like "a castle manned by scholarship and religion." Even years later, when he realizes his ambitions are futile, Christminster remains a shining ideal of intellectual life, "the intellectual and spiritual granary of this country." Broken and beaten by life, Jude still retains his attachment to the place and returns, wishing to die there.

Sue adopts a different standpoint. She does not share his romantic ideals and viciously attacks Christminster as an "ignorant place, full of fetishists and ghost seers" (Part III, Chapter 4) and a "nest of common schoolmasters" with a "timid obsequiousness to tradition" (Part V, Chapter 8). Its intellectual life is dismissed as "new wine in old bottles" (Part III, Chapter 4).

Jude is not wanted at Christminster, and often Hardy describes the gloom of the university city in unfavorable terms: "the rottenness of the stones--it seemed impossible that modern thought could house itself in such decrepit and superseded chambers" (Part II, Chapter 1). In Part VI, Chapter 2 the "gloom, bigotry and decay" of the place are stressed. The curt note from the master of the Biblical College, crushing Jude's hopes, emphasizes the loneliness of Jude's struggle. Hardy criticizes social and educational structures which are so rigid and orthodox that someone like Jude, bright, hard-working, but lacking in means, is permanently expelled from the academic scene. Hardy wants to emphasize that Jude will always remain an outsider, denied access to improvement, not because of lack of ability, but because of his social class. The end of the book underlines this isolation with the bitter picture of Jude on his death bed while the revelry of Remembrance Day occurs outside.

However, much of this is not always fairly presented. *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1896 at a time when great expansion and liberalization was taking place in the universities. Ruskin College at Oxford had opened its doors to working class people. Both Oxford and Cambridge began to shed their exclusiveness and started to look outward. Cambridge led the way with University Extension lectures, and Biblical College (Oxford) started a similar program in 1878. In the same year Oxford followed Cambridge in founding a women's college. The fact that part of these reforms were well under way is recognized by Jude himself (Part VI, Chapter 10), when he hopes that its doors will be more open to poor students like himself.

Marriage and Relations between the Sexes

In the second part of the book, Jude abandons his idea of entering Christminster and the focus shifts to Sue. The Themes of love, marriage, freedom and sexual relations replace the earlier theme of education and idealism.

Hardy is inclined to view marriage with cynicism, and there are many disparaging comments about the contractual nature of marriage. Hardy was conscious that women were not treated equally in society and that the laws of nature were often heavily weighed against women. He treats the subject with sympathy and understanding. He also illustrates that marriage could victimize both men and women.

There are no happy marriages or contented couples seen in the book. Jude, when married to Arabella, feels trapped in a hopeless situation. Marriage is compared to being "caught in a gin, which would cripple him if not her also for the rest of a lifetime." However, Jude is partly aware even before the marriage that Arabella is the wrong type of woman for him. Intellectually, he recognizes that there is something in her "quite antipathetic to that side of him which had been occupied with literary study and the magnificent Christminster dream. It had been no vestal virgin who chose that missile for opening her attack on him" (Part I, Chapter 6). A few chapters later, the reader is told, "he knew too well in the secret center of his brain that Arabella was not worth a great deal as a specimen of womankind" (Part I, Chapter 9). Naïve and trusting, he does the honorable thing and marries her. But he has married the wrong woman, and the marriage is bound to be a disaster.

Sue's marriage to Phillotson is another example of a disastrous marriage of rashness and thoughtlessness. Jude suspects that Sue has married Phillotson as a reaction to his own marriage, a kind of retaliation, a way of "asserting her own independence from him." She does not realize the enormity of the step she has taken. After the ceremony there is a "frightened look in her eyes," as if she has only just become aware of the rashness of her decision. Barely a month later she admits, "perhaps I ought not to have married" (Part III, Chapter 9). Sue is the loudest critic of matrimony in the novel. She makes sarcastic comments on the custom of giving away the bride, "like a she-ass or she-goat or any other domestic animal" (Part III, Chapter 7). When her marriage is in trouble, she criticizes the institution, explaining the difficulty she experiences fitting into the conventional mold society demands. Some women, she says, find they cannot give their love "continuously to the chamber-officer appointed by the bishop's license to receive it." The nineteenth century tradition of the subjection of women to fathers and husbands is reflected in Gillingham's advice to Phillotson to be firm with Sue until she has knuckled under. Hardy makes it clear, however, that it is the man here who is victimized in this marriage: Phillotson is far from being a cruel, tyrannical husband. Though a conservative in matrimonial matters, he is an extremely patient and "liberal" husband. Sue's views on marriage should not necessarily be equated with Hardy's. Hardy himself points out her emotional inconsistency, and there are several indications that she is not really cut out for marriage. Sue's attitude to sex is complicated by the fact that she has an aversion to any physical relationship. In Part V both Jude's and Sue's divorces come through, but Sue avoids their possible marriage. She calls marriage a "sordid contract" and a "hopelessly vulgar" institution, and she fears that an "iron contract should extinguish" all tenderness between them.

The bulk of her views on marriage are given in Parts V and VI. She feels that the contractual nature of the agreement will kill all spontaneity and romance: "it is foreign to a man's nature to go on loving a person when he is told that he must and shall be a person's lover." The visit to the squalid registry office (Part V, Chapter 4) is horrifying for her, and she likewise shows an aversion to the ordinary church wedding. She sees it in terms of a sacrifice of the bride: "the flowers in the bride's hand are sadly like the garland which decked the heifers of sacrifice in olden times." Sue's views on marriage are rather extreme. It must be pointed out that for all Sue's arguments against matrimony, it is not marriage, but the absence of it that precipitates the final tragedy: the lack of a home, the deaths of the children and Sue's return to Phillotson.

Sue's conversion and remarriage to Phillotson are part of her transformation. Her guilt and the determination to mortify the flesh lead her to embrace the traditional view of the indissolubility of marriage. She remarries Phillotson, whom she does not love, simply to punish herself and to exorcise her guilt over the children's deaths. But neither the church nor civil law decrees that marriage is a punishment. As Jude points out, this marriage will be a "fanatic prostitution."

Hardy also raises some valid criticisms of the overly rigid attitude of society towards the unconventional and the unmarried. Phillotson's humanity and charity in letting Sue go scandalizes the school authorities, and his career is ruined. A kind, decent man who was only trying to be fair is pilloried by society's intolerance. Sue and Jude also became the subject of cruel gossip at Aldbrickham; the neighbors cold-shoulder them, Little Father Time is taunted at school, Jude loses his job, and the family is forced into a nomadic existence. Society is vindictive and intolerant of those who deviate from its codes.

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