# Thomas Hardy

Jude the Obscure (1895)

Part VI, Chapter II

The text under analysis is an extract from Thomas Hardy’s “Jude the Obscure”, a novel published in 1895 (it began as a magazine serial in December 1894) that scandalized Victorian public for its immorality and pessimism. The main characters, that are here shown in action, are the two cousins Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, both coming out of two disastrous marriages. The couple adopted little Jude, son of Jude and Arabella, his first wife, and live together despite not being married. In the present extract, after having looked for lodging for a while (at Christminster they were treated as sinners because of their scandalous relationship), they find accommodation: Jude lives in a tavern, while Sue and her three children (she had two sons with Jude) stay in a room. Hardy follows the tradition of the Victorian omniscient narrator, but the scene is described is a very detailed way and the reader is implicitly invited to identify himself with an imaginary observer.

The scene is set in the early morning, in the room where Sue and the children live. Jude is described while timing the eggs, standing over a kettle; behind him there was the room where his three children were lying. Suddenly a scream from Sue broke the silence: Jude turned to the door of the tiny room, which was open, and saw Sue sunk in the floor. The revelation of the children’s death is anticipated by a very detailed description, that has the function to create a sense of empathy in the reader’s mind: there was no one on the little bed and the two younger children were hanging on two hooks on the back of the door, while the elder boy was hanging in a similar way on a nail, with an overturned chair at his feet. While the girl’s and the youngest boy’s eyes were closed, those of little Jude were open (“his glazed eyes were slanted into the room”), as a sign of his guilt.

After a moment of horror and shock, Jude reacted and cuts the ropes that hanged the children’s little bodies, putting the little corps (it seems they are all dead) on the bed of the room. Sue, who in the meanwhile was “in fainting fits”, was put on a bed in the other room, while his husband went out for a doctor. It is interesting to notice how, despite adopting the Victorian omniscient narrator, Hardy doesn’t follow the Victorian tradition of giving comments about the situation told: in this case the adverb “breathlessly” has only the function to describe the scene in a realistic and almost scientific way, without adding judgements or moral connotations to the narration.

In the three paragraph it is described how the landlady and another woman tried to reanimate the three corps, “a sight which overthrew” Jude’s “self-commend”. Also, the nearest surgeon had come but it was too late for the three children had probably been hanging for more than an hour before Sue and Jude realized what was going on. Then the scene moves to a later time (“later on”), when Jude and Sue were able to reason on the case in a more detached and rationalistic way: the elder boy, probably looking for Sue, not finding her and remembering a conversation they had the evening before, was thrown in a state of desperation, caused both by the misery of his family’s situation and his “morbid temperament”. Moreover, a message left on the floor and written in his handwriting confirmed the hypothesis that it was him to hang the two children and then to commit suicide: “Done because we are too menny”.

Sue’s nerves coudn’t stand the sight of the message: from that moment she was convinced that the main cause of the tragedy was a conversation she had with little Jude the day before. She was thrown in a state of “convulsive agony which knew no abatement” and she was carried away against his will to a room on the lower floor.

The desperate woman kept imploring to go up and see her children, while the women reminded her she had to calm down and take care of the baby who was going to be born (“a coming life”). At last Jude went downstairs and told her there was no hope for the three little creatures, while his wife told him about her conjectures as regards the reason why little Jude decided to commit such an awful act.

The following paragraph begins with Jude’s answer to Sue’s convictions: “No”, according to the man “it was in his nature to do it”. The doctor, which represents the scientific mind influenced by Darwinism, asserts that there are some boys of the new generation who know the terrors of the world before being strong enough to face them. However, this scientific response, despite giving a rational explanation to what happened in the boy’s mind, can give no consolation to the terrible pain felt by the two parents.

Jude, after having tried to keep back his grief in front of his wife, broke down, while Sue was allowed to see her children when everybody had gone.

The next section of the text focuses on the image of the elder boy’s face, which reflected all the darkness of Jude’s first wedding, all the mistakes of the second one . He was the expression of all the misery and fears of his parents’ lives. The writer’s attention on detail in the description of the child’s expression aims at condemning the moralizing principles of the Victorian Age. Moreover, there is no didactic function: the argumentation presented by the doctor presents a distorted view of reality ( it is unlikely that a child of such a young age could develop a theory of philosophical nature).