

JUDE FAWLEY – AN ILL-FATED HERO

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of human tragedy and social determinism in Thomas Hardy's novels, with particular focus on *Jude the Obscure* and its ill-fated protagonist, Jude Fawley. Hardy presents Jude as a figure whose aspirations for education and self-improvement collide with the entrenched class barriers and moral strictures of Victorian society. Through Jude's relentless struggles and ultimate downfall, Hardy dramatizes the conflict between individual desire and external constraint, exposing the harsh realities of a world governed by rigid social hierarchies. At the same time, Jude's stoicism — his refusal to abandon hope and his quiet endurance in the face of suffering—serves as both a critique of and a challenge to institutional authority, from the church to academia. The paper argues that Hardy positions Jude not merely as a victim of fate but as a tragic hero whose resilience underscores the limits of human agency in a deterministic society. By intertwining personal despair with broader social critique, Hardy illuminates the inescapable tension between aspiration and circumstance, making *Jude the Obscure* a profound study of human tragedy under the weight of social determinism. Thus, this study concludes that Hardy, through Jude's tragic endurance, not only exposes the crushing force of social determinism but also affirms the enduring significance of human resilience, positioning his novel as both a critique of institutional authority and a timeless meditation on the limits of freedom.

Keywords: human tragedy; social determinism; alienation; destiny; Victorian novel

Jude the Obscure (1895) is the last novel of Thomas Hardy in which he combines the previous themes presented in his earlier tragedies. It is about the tragedy of character and the influence of the inevitable *Prime Will*¹. The main characters suffer through love, ambition, sensitivity, recklessness and resistance to the human condition. They gravitate under a complex process of education by suffering, leading to an awareness of the universal situation.

Hardy broadens these themes, offering them a new scope. Furthermore, he returns to the social theme, which he earnestly treated in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, after placing it in the previous tragedies.

In 1895 he says, "Tragedy may be created by an opposing environment either of things inherent in the Universe, or of human institutions...".² He points out the difference between universal and social misfortune, restating the idea that society's rules could generate catastrophe. Later, he develops a clearer definition of the relationship between social and natural tragedy in *Jude the Obscure*.

Here, he outlines the tragic motivations at length in the Preface. He discusses the "disaster that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity... a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit [and} the tragedy of unfulfilled aims"³.

The theme of the breakdown of ideals is central in *Jude*; for Hardy the greater part of the story – "that which presented the shattered ideals of the two chief characters... had been more especially, and indeed almost exclusively, the part of interest to myself"⁴. Fawley's own ideal of an intellectual and spiritual, life defines his ambition. Firstly, Jude fails because the achievement of any ambition is not "in the nature of things". Secondly, his ideal, the object of his ambitions, is no longer valid. Like his cousin Sue, he is blinded to the real human condition; the knowledge he has gained in the end does not save him for tragedy.

¹ In Hardy's thought, the *Prime Will* (or *Immanent Will*) is a blind, unconscious, and impersonal force that governs the universe. Unlike the Christian God, it has no concern for justice, morality, or human happiness. It simply is—a cosmic energy that directs events without purpose or compassion.

² Emily Hardy, 1928, p.44.

³ Thomas Hardy, 1994, p. viii.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. ix.

Jude's misfortune stems from his sensitive, conventionally idealistic, yet sensual character; his sensitivity makes him a lightning-rod, to bring down universal misery into his mind:

"He was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything. He had never brought up a nest of birds without lying awake in misery half the night after and often reinstating them.... He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them.... 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"⁵.

The incident with the rooks in Farmer Troutham's field illustrates the uniqueness of Jude's sensibility: "at length his heart grew sympathetic with the birds' thwarted desires. They seemed, like himself to be living in a world which did not want them"⁶.

Jude experiences profoundly the aspect of the universal condition which sets nature's beings one against the other, "the flaw in the terrestrial scheme, by which what was good for God's birds were bad for God's gardener"⁷. This fault in nature and society represents man's inhumanity to man, and the guilt lies in the unavoidable natural laws of the Prime Will. His sensitiveness to the pain of caused by such natural flaws extends into his adulthood.

Jude is a determined man, and his first ambition develops from his purpose. He considers that he could escape life's misery through scholarship and orthodox theology. The symbol of these aims for Jude is Christminster. Like Eustacia Vye, who needs an ideal romantic love and falls in love with her vision of Clym before she meets him, Jude has an ideal, and his vision of Christminster fully satisfies his need.

"It had been the yearning of his heart to find something...which he could call admirable. Should he find that place in this city if he could get there? Would it be a spot in which... he could watch and wait, and set himself to some mighty undertaking like the men of old of whom he had heard? As the halo had been to his eyes when gazing at it a quarter of an hour earlier, so was the spot mentally to him as he pursued his dark way...'It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion...It would just suit me'⁸.

Jude's ambition is different from Phillotson's, who wants "to do something in teaching"⁹; by contrast, Jude "was a species of Dick Whittington whose spirit was touched to finer issues than a mere material gain"¹⁰.

Thomas Hardy attempts a new theme, the destruction of the ideals of youth; ideals in general can fail, but the ideals of young people are especially exposed to disappointment. He portrays Jude as follows:

"...he ran about and smiled outwardly at his inner thoughts, as if they were people meeting and nodding to him- smiled with that singularity beautiful irradiation which is seen to spread on young faces at the inception of some glorious idea"¹¹.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

His desire for happiness, the expression of his youthful energy, has another form than that of sensuousness. In the middle of his intellectual process there comes the conflicting desire for physical pleasure, which disrupts Jude's ambitions. The effect of Jude's sensual urge on his intellectual ambitions is emphasized. Jude is finally caught by Arabella, who tricks him into marriage. Hardy notes are the social source of misfortune implicit in this marriage.

"There seemed to him, vaguely and dimly, something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a cancelling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labour, of foregoing a man's one opportunity of showing himself superior to the lower animals... because of a momentary surprise by a new and transitory instinct..."¹².

He later discovers Arabella's unsuitability: "he knew well, too well, in the secret centre of his brain, that Arabella was not worth a great deal as a specimen of woman kind"¹³. She soon reveals her small vanities, her false plait and her affectation of dimples; Jude also finds out that she has been a waitress. Her worst feature is her entirely materialistic motivation.

"She had gained a husband; that was the thing- a husband with a lot of earning power in him for buying her frocks and hats when he should begin to get frightens a bit, and stick to his trade, and throw aside those stupid books for practical undertakings"¹⁴.

Her hostile attitude makes his study impossible. The pig guts that she throws suggest materialistic anti-intellectualism. It is reinforced by the "smell of piggeries" around her house, and by the killing of the pig. This is repeated when she dirties his books; she thus figuratively defiles Jude's intellectual ideals.

The protagonist observes that it is very hard to live with Arabella and understands that he has made a huge mistake in marrying her, which consists in "...the fundamental error 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"¹⁵.

Hardy does not condemn all marriages in principle; he just believes in the "affinities" upon which a marriage should be based, and he demonstrates those conditions in the union of Jude and Sue. When Jude feels that his marriage casts a negative shade over his purposes and ideals, his sensitivity leads him to attempt suicide as an escape from his intolerable pain. The *Prime Mover*¹⁶ has not yet desired the hero's death, although Jude has declined life and its suffering. He escapes the gloomy marriage in a less extreme way; Arabella leaves Jude because she is dissatisfied with Jude's promised materialistic success. He escapes suffering temporarily because he will devote himself to his spiritual ambition and his union with Sue Bridehead.

At Christminster, Jude discovers that his marriage has overshadowed his ambition in another form. The savings that might have bought him into college are gone.

"Having been deeply encumbered by marrying, getting a cottage, and buying the furniture which had disappeared in the wake of his wife, he had never been able to save any money since the time of those disastrous ventures"¹⁷.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 70.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

¹⁶ The concept of the *Prime Mover* originates in Aristotelian philosophy, where it refers to the first cause of all motion in the universe, an eternal, unmoved force that sets everything else in motion. In theology, it was later associated with God as the ultimate source of order and purpose. Hardy, however, adapts and transforms this concept in a highly pessimistic way. In his novels, the Prime Mover is not a benevolent or orderly God but rather an impersonal, blind, and often hostile force that governs human destiny. He often refers to it as "the Immanent Will", "the President of the Immortals", or simply as Fate. Unlike Aristotle's rational principle or Christianity's providential God, Hardy's Prime Mover is unconcerned with justice, morality, or human suffering. It sets life in motion but offers no guidance, no consolation, and no fairness.

¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, 1912, p. 101.

However, his straitened circumstances do not discourage Jude's ambition. Hardy underlines the social aspect of Jude's ambition, which makes it a prey to defeat. Society debases man's nobler aspirations, bringing the exceptional and the idealistic down to the lowest common denominator of materialistic success. Like Phillotson, he renounces his mundane ambitions for a life of religious dedication. "It was a new idea – the ecclesiastical altruistic life as distinct from the intellectual and emulative life"¹⁸. He is inevitably seduced by his second goal, which is Sue Bridehead "...his interest in her had shown itself to be unmistakably of a sexual kind... he found himself, to his moral consternation, to be thinking more of her instead of thinking less of her and experiencing a fearful bliss in going what was erotic, informal and unexpected..."¹⁹.

His sensual nature condemns him to fail in this ascetic spiritual ambition. Sue entices him away from his spiritual ideal in a different way, her unorthodox ideas clash with his conventional beliefs. Her philosophy will be one of the most important elements in Fawley's education.

The Sue's influence on Jude leads him away from his spiritual ambition. Eventually he recognizes that even though he is married, he is a strong rival to Phillotson for her love. The tragedy of his marriage to Arabella becomes more evident, as Sue turns away from him and marries with the school master when she discovers that Jude is married. He cannot control his love for her even after her marriage, which underlines the inconsistency between his aspirations to preach, his religious beliefs and his lack of self-control and consistency.

The social system and his own impulses trigger Jude's tragedy and the defeat of his purposes. He is aware of the forces opposing his happiness, but he has not yet lost his traditional beliefs. An important aspect of the love between Sue and Jude, which makes their suffering more extreme, is their matched personalities: "their supreme desire is to be together – to share each other's emotions, and fancies, and dreams"²⁰.

The eventual misfortune stems from the fact that this union, like that of Angel and Tess, comes lately after the tragic mistakes – their marriages – have been committed. The effects of the tragedy are extreme because Sue and Jude represent one of the most perfectly matched couple in all the novels discussed. In the last tragedies of Hardy, the major characters suffer because they are mismatched. In this way, the author suggests that affinity and sympathy between lovers does not guarantee calmness and joy.

Jude's final ambition is governed by love and his family. According to this desire, Jude and Sue enjoy a short-lived idyll as illusory as that which Clym and Eustacia experienced. Their well-suited temperaments and the strength of their union, Hardy says that they are "two parts of a single whole"²¹.

Certainly, as we know, in Hardy's universe the First Cause does not allow his characters to be happy; society and fate destroy their attempt to find fulfilment. They become nomad outcast of society for their unorthodox relationship. Their prospects become so grim that Little Father Time kills the children and himself. Jude's ultimate ambition is doomed. From his suffering, Jude finally understands the real human condition; he also understands the overshadowing effect of the Prime Will on ideals, ambition, and love.

Sue, who also gained experience from his suffering is not strong enough to put her theory into practice. The death of her children breaks her down and she trades her true beliefs for a feeling of orthodox guilt and faith, and a fear of a conventional avenging God. Jude tries to explain that the opposing force "is only man and senseless circumstance"²². His struggle to keep her is unavailing, and her return to Phillotson represents her orthodox belief that he is her husband in Heaven. According to Jude's new principles, which ironically, he has learned from her, Sue is unknowingly selling her body and her human dignity for conventional salvation.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 352.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 413.

Their tragedy is in one sense social, as he concludes: "You make me hate Christianity, or mysticism... if it's that which has caused deterioration in you...I am glad I had nothing to do with Divinity – damn, glad – if it's going to ruin you in this way!"²³.

Jude deteriorates physically, but not mentally. He understands the human condition and its inevitability; he failed in all his ambitions, lost his love, and is in danger of losing his human dignity in Arabella's clutches. Here solves for the last time to reject the degradation and pain of life, as compared to his ideal.²⁴ His ultimate gesture could be interpreted as a defiance of a destiny which tried to degrade his soul. He chooses death of his own volition; he dies alone at Christminster (a symbol of his first ideal), repeating the words of Job.²⁵ Moreover, the cheers of the Remembrance Day crowds ringing out illustrate society's carelessness and Nature's unconsciousness of Jude's passing away.

Jude's history, like Tess's and Angel's²⁶, is a journey through suffering to discover the universal condition of man. He starts with traditional views and ideals; he ends up with a knowledge of the invalidity of his earlier beliefs, of the Prime Will's unconscious inevitability, and of the resulting impossibility of success and joy.

Hardy introduces a new theme through Jude's ideals. Sue's classical and natural aims are like Jude's and face a similar destiny. A temperamental idiosyncrasy prevents her from retaining the knowledge of the human condition which she gains through her pain. Thus, she ends in un-heroic subjection to traditional guilt. In contrast to her, Jude makes a noble exit from the world, which reaffirms the dignity of man: "I would have died game!".

Jude the Obscure presents the tragic life story and the failed ambitions of Jude Fawley. From his childhood he wants to surpass his condition, because he is passionate about learning and he dreams to study at Christminster. Richard Phillotson, the school master, inspires Jude's first ideal; he encourages him to study and gives him Greek and Latin books, because at that time these were the major subjects of study.

Jude's ambition is so powerful that he combines learning with working; Also, his cousin Sue represents a good example for him, because his grandmother portrayed her as a beautiful person. Phillotson's moving to Christminster and his interest in teaching raise in Jude a strong yearning to go there and fulfil his wish.

Arabella's manipulation and his marriage to her hinder his departure to his beloved Christminster, before he realizes that it is impossible to live together. His wife sees Jude's struggle for education as a distracting recreation believing that he will "throw aside those stupid books for practical undertakings"²⁷. Her moving to Australia is a breath fresh air for Jude and he goes to Christminster.

His expectations about Christminster are soon destroyed and his image of the place is different from reality. Being an orphaned rural boy, and part of the working class, he is rejected by the college.

Hardy attacks the validity of Christminster before Jude arrives, questioning the glowing "mirage" of the "heavenly Jerusalem" on the horizon. He portrays an exclusive educational system which could, for reason of class, keep out of the universities "one of the very men", as Sue says, "Christminster was intended for when the colleagues were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunity, or friends"²⁸.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 423.

²⁴ Arthur Mizener attacks *Jude the Obscure* as a tragedy because the ideal by which the world is judged is only in Jude's mind. Hardy's feelings that the evil of this world was incurable tragic. "But because he was unable to place the source of the idealism...outside of time...there is no basic, unresolvable tragic tension between the real and the ideal in his attitude". (*Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy*, *Southern Review*, VI, 1940, p. 201). Mizener limits tragedy to the conflict between the squalid real world and the "special providence" which alone may overcome its evil. Mizener, in fact, falls into the error of the Christian interpretation of tragedy. For Hardy there is no ideal outside of time, no benevolent providence to explain away the tragic mystery and reduce man to the status of a guilty sinner.

²⁵ H. J. Muller contends that "Jude Fawley dies in an appalling bitterness of spirit...". (The Novels of Thomas Hardy, *Southern Review*, VI, 1940, p. 222). Jude accepts the inevitability of fate and he calmly refuses life; his last words illustrate a Promethean condemnation of the First Cause rather than passive acquiescence. His death displays an inherently human nobility of spirit.

²⁶ *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

²⁷ Thomas Hardy, 1994, p. 89.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

The letter of rejection from the college is addressed to “Mr J. Fawley – the Stonemason”. Jude is considered not as a person, but as a tradesman; a man who should not seek to go beyond the walls he is committed to patching and restoring. Hardy’s social criticism is direct and unequivocal in defence of labour: “here in the Stoneyard was a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of colleges”²⁹.

The irony hits home when Jude’s only appreciative audience for all his years of painstakingly acquired self-education are his drinking companions in the slums of Christminster. Through Jude, Hardy illustrates the plight of the aspiring individual confronted with society’s rigid, man-made laws, arbitrary taboos and restrictions, only to lose in the end. Any attempt to rise above social convention out of the aspiration to live a passionate, fulfilling existence is doomed to defeat.

In this novel, Jude is the tragic protagonist who embodies the human will to better one’s condition. He grows up with the great idea of studying at Christminster but his ideal fails. The distance between Marygreen and Christminster symbolizes the sinuous process which Jude must undergo to fulfil his childhood’s dream.

The death of his children represents another tragic lesson for Jude; little Jude kills himself and his brothers because he is capable to feel the gloomy effects of poverty and instability. He says, “Done because we are too many!”³⁰.

This horror scene illustrates the horrible effects which society’s moral norms could generate. Little Jude never exists as a round character in the realistic tradition. He is made abstract but sufficiently grown-up to take this incredible decision. His gesture could be interpreted as a revenge or punishment of Fate for all the sins of his parents.

All these events lead to Jude’s death, even if he tried to do something better with his life; his death at Christminster, in loneliness, evokes his failure in attaining his aims and the unique fact which Christminster could give him – dignity in front of a cruel death.

Ultimately, Jude Fawley’s tragic trajectory illustrates Hardy’s most profound critique of Victorian society and its institutions. Jude’s fate is not the result of personal weakness alone but of the systematic exclusion that defines the rigid class and educational structures of his age. His aspiration to enter Christminster embodies the universal human desire for intellectual and spiritual elevation, yet the very institution that symbolizes enlightenment and progress reveals itself to be inaccessible, privileging birth and privilege over genuine vocation. The irony is sharp: the stonemason who literally builds the walls of Christminster is barred from entering its symbolic and intellectual space.

Furthermore, the personal catastrophes that mark Jude’s life, his ill-fated marriage to Arabella, his tormented union with Sue, and the unbearable loss of his children—reveal how social conventions and moral codes compound individual suffering. Little Father Time’s desperate act epitomizes the crushing weight of poverty, social stigma, and inherited despair, turning Hardy’s social critique into a meditation on the destructive power of institutionalized morality.

In this light, Jude emerges not merely as an isolated tragic figure but as the embodiment of Hardy’s pessimistic vision of modern existence: a man whose natural gifts and persistent will are wasted by a world indifferent to talent without status. His lonely death at Christminster, stripped of companionship yet dignified in its symbolic proximity to the city of his dreams, encapsulates both the futility of his struggle and the nobility of his perseverance. Thus, Jude Fawley stands as an ill-fated hero whose downfall exposes the deep fractures of a society that simultaneously exalts knowledge and denies it to those most hungry for it.

In the final analysis, Jude Fawley’s story is inseparable from Hardy’s own vision of the world. Through Jude, Hardy articulates his deep scepticism toward the social, religious, and educational institutions that claimed to uphold progress while perpetuating exclusion and injustice. The novel exposes the paradox of Christminster³¹: revered as a beacon of learning, yet complicit in denying

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Christminster is Thomas Hardy’s fictionalized version of Oxford, the great university city. In the novel, it becomes far more than just a geographical place: it is a symbol and a paradox.

opportunity to precisely those individuals for whom it should exist. Hardy's perspective is both critical and compassionate, critical of a society that privileges convention over humanity, and compassionate toward the individual whose aspirations are crushed beneath those conventions.

By tracing Jude's persistent striving and inevitable defeat, Hardy presents a profoundly pessimistic view of human destiny: that even the most earnest pursuit of knowledge, love, and fulfilment may end in frustration when opposed by entrenched systems of power. Yet Hardy's portrayal is not without dignity. In giving voice to Jude's suffering, he dignifies the struggles of countless anonymous men and women excluded from privilege, ensuring that their obscurity is made visible. From this perspective, *Jude the Obscure* becomes not only the tragedy of one man but also Hardy's enduring moral protest against the cruelty of a world that refuses to recognize merit without status.

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