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The Charm of Thomas Hardy: Jude the Obscure

Published in 1896, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was attacked for its sexual frankness, its morbidity, and its immorality. It was rejected by the lending libraries, condemned by the church, and burned by a bishop. It hurt Hardy so much that he bid good-bye to novel writing for good. Ironically, the same novel has been considered "his most powerful" by eminent critics like Walter Allen and Malcolm Bradbury. The novel is different from Hardy's earlier novels. It is forward-looking and marks a shift from naturalism to realism, from traditional to modern, from heroic to commonplace, from pastoral to urban, from rooted to unrooted. It is a story of thwarted ambitions and aspirations, disintegration, and ostracization.

Sue Bridehead is an artist or designer in an ecclesiastical warehouse engaged in designing characters for churches. She acquired this skill from her father's occupation as an ecclesiastical worker in metal.

Jude is a stonemason at Marygreen. He cherished dreams of rising above his station and worked assiduously to realize them. He gets married to Arabella and moves to Christminster, a town of churches and colleges, to improve his lot. His marriage fails, and Arabella leaves him because he kills a pig with one stroke instead of making him bleed. He hears from his aunt that his cousin Sue lived at Christminster. Jude looks for her and finds her at the warehouse. Sue also comes to know that her cousin Jude was at Christminster, and she too looks for him and meets him at a church. They get introduced to each other, and Jude feels drawn to her, but the consideration of his married life withholds him from baring his heart.

During one of their meetings, Sue tells Jude that she has to leave Christminster as Miss Fontover, one of the partners where she served, has had a row with her. They decide to meet Mr. Phillotson, who had served as a teacher at Marygreen, and Jude was his student. Phillotson takes time to recognize him, but when he does, he welcomes Jude and Sue. Jude tells him that Sue was seeking a job and wondered whether she could be accommodated at his school. Phillotson agrees to take her, helps her become a certified teacher to improve her prospects, and eventually marries her.

However, Sue abhors sleeping with Phillotson. One night, she jumped out of her window when she saw him approaching her bed. The marriage breaks up. Both Arabella and Phillotson divorced their respective spouses. This brings Jude and Sue closer, and they start living in a live-in relationship and have two daughters. Arabella sends her child, as she claims that he was conceived during their marriage. They welcome the child. Their live-in relationship becomes known and is strongly disapproved by the clergy and society, and they ostracize them. They move from one job to another and from one place to another.

The children will become victims of taunts and insults from their schoolmates. The lodgers refuse to take them. Jude proposes to formalize the marriage, and Sue accepts, but they drop the idea at the eleventh hour.

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

In one of their shifts, Jude goes out looking for a job and Sue for lodging. She finds lodging, but when the husband of the lodger returns home, he scolds his wife for letting the place go to a family with children because they would spoil the newly painted walls. The boy called "Father Time" had become bitter over the insults and taunts of his schoolmates. That night, he hangs himself and the two daughters and leaves a note, "Done because we are too many."

The grisly incident leaves both of them numb, and in her extreme sorrow, Sue wails:

"And I was making my baby a new frock, and now I shall never see him in it and never talk to him anymore! My eyes are so swollen that I can scarcely see," and yet a little more than a year ago, I called myself happy! We went about loving each other too much, indulging ourselves to utter selfishness with each other! We said—do you remember?—that we would make a **virtue** of joy. I said it was Nature's intention, Nature's law, and **raison d'être** that we should be joyful in what instincts she afforded us, instincts that civilization had taken upon itself to thwart. What dreadful things I said: And now Fate has given us this stab in the back for being such fools to take Nature at her word? I am a pitiable creature; she said good neither for earth nor heaven any more. I am driven out of my mind by things! What ought to be done?" She stared at Jude and lightly held his hand.

"Nothing can be done," he replied. "Things" are as they are and will be brought to their destined issue! Yes! Who said that?" she asked heavily.

It comes in the chorus of the Agamemnon. It has been on my mind continually since this happened.

The ghastly incident shatters Sue and Jude. In a wave of self-accusation, Sue takes the guilt of her children's deaths upon herself and thinks that she has been punished for the sacrilege of the sanctity of marriage. She feels that she erred by deserting her husband and should return to him. Arabella's second husband, too, dies, and she too wants to return to her first husband. Both Arabella and Sue remarry their former spouses. Though Sue remarries out of a sense of moral compulsion, her aversion to sex with Phillotson remains, and she keeps away from him. Languishing for Sue, Jude hits the bottle and falls sick. When his condition deteriorates, he longs to meet Sue and travels to where she lives. They remained restrained for some time but could not do it for long and gave in to their surging passion for each other.

It leaves Sue raked by feelings of guilt over marital impropriety. She confesses her sin to her husband and submits to him completely.

Jude's condition worsens by the day, and Arabella is unable to nurse him with any devotion, so he finds himself desolate. When his condition gets critical, Arabella is away at an agricultural show. Jude feels thirsty, but there is no one to attend to him, and he dies.

Sue's submission and Jude's death highlight that, apart from external elements, the concepts of morality and social propriety are ingrained in human beings, and they also contribute to the tragic condition of man.

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Jude's death and Sue's surrender against her wishes fill the readers with sadness. But more than that is what fills the readers. with profound sadness is the death of their dreams.

Jude the Obscure is about naturalism, social realism, idealism, philosophical speculation on fate, and determinism. Its plot cracks, and its prose is often clumsy. But all these do not affect Hardy's stature as a tragic novelist, which is "comparable," says Walter Allen, "to Shakespeare and Webster and to the Greek dramatists.