

Thomas Hardy's Failed Attempt at Tragedy

Thomas Hardy aimed for tragedy but ended up with melodrama. In *The Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis calls Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895) an example of his desire to fulfil a philosophical-tragic ambition, while noting it "hasn't the rightness with which the great novelists show their profound sureness of their essential purpose". In *After Strange Gods*, T.S. Eliot accused Hardy of writing for self-expression, and the self he had to express did not strike Eliot as "particularly wholesome or edifying". Frustrated by *Jude's* reception, Hardy stopped writing novels altogether.

What went wrong? Hardy insisted *Jude* was about the tragedy of unfulfilled aims and the deadly war between flesh and spirit. He claimed to be simply giving literary shape to a series of impressions. Calling unfulfilled aims "tragedy", and the war between flesh and spirit "deadly", puts him in an awkward position if he cannot tell the difference between tragedy and melodrama.

Tragic themes are present in *Jude*, but they never become a "tragic vision" as the tragedies of a Euripides or a Shakespeare do. The problem is Hardy's misreading of Nature. His naturalism, grounded in Victorian traditions of realism and social commentary, gave him an ambitious yet naive attitude towards natural law, natural order, and classical *telos*. The aims of his protagonists are unfulfilled because his worldview demands they remain unfulfilled, although there is no logic or reason why they cannot be fulfilled. He claimed to be a meliorist—someone who believes the world can be improved through human effort—but his profession of meliorism cannot be reconciled with *Jude's* dark fatalism.

Reacting to contemporary attacks on *Jude*, Hardy claimed to be misunderstood:

In my own eyes the sad feature of the attack was that the greater part of the story—that which presented the shattered ideals of the two chief characters, and had been more especially

and indeed almost exclusively, the part of interest to myself—was practically ignored by the adverse press.

This also is naive. By his own measure, *Jude* is mainly about Jude and Sue, as individuals and a couple. But their "shattered ideals" are not tragedy, particularly when Hardy treats them like pawns without free will and predetermines their fate to suit his allegorical confection.

Hardy gives his "tragic hero" an eponymous name: Jude is the patron saint of lost causes, Fawley a fall. What kind of lost cause? What kind of fall? Hardy tries to link Jude with Adam, but their falls are different. Adam is not a tragic hero; he is animated dust (*adamah*) made in God's image.

When delineating Jude, Hardy used Hellenistic imagery of the exiled soul. As a child Jude felt alien in the natural order. His exiled soul has descended to earth, for a while, to live in the prison of his material body, in expiation for some fault, hence the gloomy sentiments Hardy puts into the young orphan's mind: "All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it."

Jude believes his exiled soul can escape from its material prison through university education, but his desire for education is inseparable from his longing for transcendence through knowledge—the semiotics of high culture—hence his obsession with Christminster as a fictional representation of Oxford. Hardy wants readers to believe Jude was excluded from Christminster for social reasons, because of his class, but this is unconvincing. He had already obtained, by himself, as much knowledge as many undergraduates approaching their finals.

If it is unwise to downplay the class system as a factor in Jude's academic exclusion, it is equally unwise to overplay it or make it a blanket excuse

for everything that happens to Jude, particularly in the late nineteenth century, a time of British university expansion. Further, the theme of academic exclusion takes up less of the novel than the theme of male-female relationships, marital and extra-marital, although these themes are related. The real question is whether the academic exclusion and male-female relationship themes cohere as a "tragic vision".

Hardy makes Jude an exiled soul trapped in a material body, refusing him the education he believes will release him from his bodily prison, ensuring his desire for transcendence is thwarted by two women who entrap him. Arabella represents flesh; any relationship with her dooms Jude's spirit. Sue represents spirit; any relationship with her dooms Jude's flesh. Either way he is doomed.

Jude dies of consumption just before he reaches thirty. While Hardy gives him consumption, not Arabella or Sue, Hardy makes them the reason for his death. Because both women are as strong as they are selfish, they go on living. This may be closer to the fatalism of Greek tragedy than the humanism of Jewish eschatology, but it is not a "tragic vision".

D.H. Lawrence believes Hardy's portrayal of Arabella Donn is bad art, but he sympathises with her character. To both men, the female principle is flesh, and the male principle is spirit. To Lawrence, in *A Study of Thomas Hardy* (1914), Arabella suppresses the male in herself and is fearlessly female; she is not interested in working towards a yin-yang balance with Jude. Lawrence sees Arabella as a splendid lawless aristocrat who believes in herself and is not altered by any outside opinion: she is the centre of life, all that exists is hers for the taking.

Arabella and Jude meet around his nineteenth year, while he is making plans to attend Christminster. He is enthusiastic about his chances of being admitted, since he knows some Latin and New Testament Greek, has read several ancient classics, has mastered some mathematics—via Euclid and algebra—and knows something of the Church Fathers and Roman and English history. While he is walking in the countryside one day, verbalising his to-read list, Arabella throws a severed pig's penis at him. She has been washing entrails in the river. It is all downhill from there.

Arabella is manipulative but attractive. Jude allows himself to be manipulated but soon real-

ises she is not the woman for him and announces an intention to leave and pursue his studies. She pretends to be pregnant and, a few months into their marriage, when he asks when the child is due, she admits to her mistake, but they both know it was a ruse. Jude makes the best of this, working as an apprentice stonemason while continuing his reading. Arabella focuses on butchering pigs and being resentful of his reading. After three years of unhappiness and sex, she tires of him and moves to Australia with her family.

Arabella eventually returns because Hardy needs her as Jude's co-destroyer. Sue has just married Richard Phillotson and Jude has retreated to a pub where Arabella happens to be working as a barmaid. As they are still legally married, they spend the night with each other. The next day she admits to fleeing from a second husband in Australia. Her Australian husband arrives, becomes a pub licensee, and begs her to return to him. She dismisses Jude from her mind as she does not need him at this point.

All plots are contrived, but *Jude* is exceptionally mechanistic. Arabella temporarily comes to the foreground each time Sue temporarily withdraws into the background. She reappears after Sue leaves Phillotson to become Jude's platonic lover. Arabella has left her second husband, and needs Jude's help, but suddenly a telegram arrives—her husband says he cannot live without her—so she takes

off again. She asks Jude for a divorce, telling him she was pregnant when she first left him. Their son is about to arrive from Australia, her parents do not want to raise him, and neither does she. Suddenly, Jude becomes a supporting parent. The precocious and eponymous Little Father Time turns out to be another exiled soul, doomed, like his father.

In the following years, Arabella shadows Jude, first at an agricultural show, then later at a spring fair; she is now a widow who has found religion for a few weeks. She needs a man, but he is still with Sue, so before Arabella can move in on him she has to wait until Sue leaves Jude and remarries Phillotson. When Sue does remarry Phillotson, Arabella conspires with her father, now returned from Australia, to keep Jude inebriated for several days before blackmailing him to the altar.

Soon Jude becomes weak with consumption, which makes Arabella resentful, as their remarriage is doing nothing for her. She becomes increasingly bored with his illness. As his death approaches, she

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prevents his workmates from calling on him. She heads them off at the front door and goes out partying with them instead. Jude dies, alone, while she is out flirting with his friends and making contingency plans for her next widowhood.

Lawrence believes Hardy's portrayal of Sue Bridehead is great art—an odd view to those who find her character lacking in verisimilitude—but art is not life. To Lawrence, Sue suppresses the female in herself, has a male will, and wants to live in her mind with no experience of her senses. He sees her as a product of Western civilisation, a result of its ideas about female subordination to the male principle, which frightens us because she embodies a lethal anarchy. Lawrence feels Sue “should have some place in society where the clarity of her mental being ... could shine out without attracting any desire for her body” yet admits “the atrophied female in her would still want the bodily male”.

Sue is a purely mental being, pathologically afraid of sex because she believes it will destroy or diminish her, but she still wants to possess a man without accepting the whole package. The Bishop of Wakefield—so enraged by *Jude* he threw his copy into the fire—understood a man's mind comes with a libido attached to a penis (no doubt he had all three himself) and he was probably irritated at having the contrived dilemma of Sue's frigidity, like the contrived dilemma of Jude's academic and clerical aspirations, offered to him as tragic metaphysical speculation. Realism comes in many forms—plots and characterisations cannot be judged against any one measure of psychological or social probability—but there are limits, nevertheless.

Jude and Sue have many affinities. He was once a boy; she was once a girl who did things only boys usually did. They are cousins who share a maiden aunt who reminds them they are products of difficult marriages—the Fawleys and Brideheads make poor husbands and bad wives—so they should not become involved with anyone let alone each other. They are both exiled souls. When his first marriage to Arabella fails, and he transfers his idealism onto Sue, his attraction to her is also sexual. He wants her to work towards a yin-yang balance with him—a balance between feminine flesh and masculine spirit—but she is incapable of balance (being a control freak as well as frigid, she even admits her Hellenism is the reason).

Sue first meets Jude after Arabella has moved to Australia and he has moved to Christminster. He thinks she is a devout Christian, as she works in an ecclesiastical shop which sells Anglo-Catholic requisites, but her gods are Greek. She hates anything

Gothic, prefers Classicism to Medievalism, and believes the West has had enough of Jerusalem: “There was nothing first-rate about the place, or people, after all—as there was about Athens, Rome, Alexandria, and other old cities.”

Jude is aware of the dangers of becoming involved with Sue—he is still married, they are cousins, and the oracles have prophesied tragedy—and she agrees with him at first. He introduces her to Phillotson, a schoolmaster who once taught him privately as a boy, and she becomes Phillotson's pupil. She eventually marries Phillotson, though he is old enough to be her father.

Sue refuses to consummate her marriage with Phillotson, flirts with Jude instead, and convinces her husband to release her so she can live with Jude. Once she is with Jude she insists on a platonic relationship and only allows him kissing and petting. She spends several years controlling him, in a relationship unwholesome even in secular terms.

Possessive jealousy forces Sue to finally consent to sex, to prevent Arabella moving in on Jude. Their illicit relationship has social consequences, which force them to lead an itinerant life. As she approaches her third confinement, Little Father Time asks whether it would be better if the children had not been born, whether they are to blame for their harsh lives. Because she cannot tell a lie, her answer affirms his precocious suspicions, whereupon he kills his siblings and hangs himself. Her third child is stillborn. She becomes hysterical with self-reproach, sees herself as having transgressed Hardy's naive sense of natural law and natural order, and returns to Phillotson, intent on letting his libido and penis destroy or diminish her. Many readers see this as authentic martyrdom, or real tragedy, which is nonsense.

Lawrence believes Sue's older and unhandsome husband, Phillotson, only ever wanted sexual relief from her, plus some kind of “seal which made an honourable man of him”, whereas the young and handsome Jude wanted “the consummation of marriage”. In developing this ageism and lookism far beyond anything the novel says, Lawrence accuses Phillotson of being reptilian and only feeling what a reptile feels. Revisionist critics alter this ageism and lookism only slightly when they sympathise with Sue, and suggest Phillotson took advantage of her vulnerability to get her into his bed. They see her hysterical self-torturing journey into honouring her marriage vows, which takes many years of disturbing pathological behaviour to accomplish, as one of the more horrific themes in literature.

Hardy intends to draw an analogy between the suffering of Jude and the suffering of Job, but Job

is not a tragic hero, and Hardy may not realise Phillotson is a better candidate as Job. He is more closely linked with Hebraism than Hellenistic Jude and he represents a more authentic Jewish or Christian response to the events that overtake him and his fellow protagonists. No divinity speaks to Jude the way God speaks to Phillotson, whose response is more like Job's.

At the beginning of the novel, Phillotson tells Jude his dream is to be a university graduate and then be ordained (this is where young Jude got his academic and clerical inspiration in the first place). When the adult Jude moves to Christminster and meets Sue, they visit Phillotson and discover his university-and-ordination dream has not materialised. Still a schoolmaster, his dream lives on, and he hopes to enter the church as a licentiate.

After Sue becomes Phillotson's fiancée, he discovers she is flirting with Jude, and asks Jude what is going on, in an honourable matter-of-fact way. While Jude suppresses a momentary urge "to annihilate his rival at all cost", apart from that there is no animus between these two men at any point in the novel. Jude is of course hurt when Sue marries and is especially wounded that she should ask him to give her away in place of her father, but he feels Phillotson "looked dignified and thoughtful"; altogether a man who "would make a kind and considerate husband. That he adored Sue was obvious."

In the weeks following the wedding, Sue refuses to consummate her marriage and continues to flirt with Jude. Phillotson wakes up one night and finds her locked away in a closet under the staircase. She begs him excitedly to leave her alone, although he has done nothing except express concern for her welfare. Another night, preoccupied with a hobby, he absent-mindedly enters her bedroom, since she has forgotten to lock the door, and she becomes hysterical and jumps out the window. She asks him to release her, so she can live with Jude (although Jude has not asked her to live with him). Phillotson agrees, having first consulted a male friend. He blames himself for everything, since he is a man and therefore responsible. He comes to the conclu-

sion that "it is wrong to so torture a fellow-creature any longer".

Already a disappointed man when he first meets Sue, Phillotson suffers even more disappointment when releasing her, as what little he has is taken away from him. He is turned out of his teaching position, for having condoned his wife's adultery, and is forced to find work elsewhere on a reduced salary. When Sue returns, he still refuses to take advantage of her and allows her to sleep in a separate bedroom. After several months, she vows to do her duty (she refers to it somewhat campily as drinking her cup to the dregs). She rouses him from a deep snoring sleep, and offers herself to him, not because she desires him but to blot Jude out of her life forever. Cautious and measured, as anyone in his position with his experience would be,

Phillotson makes her swear on the New Testament, reminding her that having her back with him is one thing but consummating their relationship is another. Once it is established that she is acting on her own free will, without any coercion, "he led her through the doorway, and lifting her bodily, kissed her. A wild look of aversion passed over her face, but clenching her teeth she uttered no cry."

Given the sacrifices Phillotson makes while being gentlemanly towards his wife and her lover, it seems outrageous that readers should sympathise with them and treat him as some kind of villain-monster. This is to be expected,

however, because Sue and Jude are participants in the nineteenth-century crisis of belief, cheered on by those who see Hardy anticipating the "immanent critique" of metaphysics—Cultural Marxism's critique of the semiotics of transcendence—while Phillotson commands little or no respect for remaining Christian throughout the novel, and being older and unhandsome as well. Ageism and lookism are easier to comprehend when they are pressed into servicing a critical agenda.

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