

Guilt, duty, and unrequited love essay



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Guilt, Duty, and Unrequited Love: Deconstructing the Love Triangles in James Joyces *The Dead* and Thomas Hardys *Jude the Obscure*

“ Its no problem of mine but its a problem I fight, living a life that I cant leave behind. But theres no sense in telling me, the wisdom of the cruel words that you speak. But thats the way that it goes and nobody knows, while everyday my confusion grows.”

-New Order, *Bizarre Love Triangle*, from *Substance*, 1987

Most people who have watched a soap opera can recognize that the love triangle is a crucial element to the plot. In fact, the original radio broadcasted soap operas seemed to consist almost entirely of love triangles. The love triangle, for plot purposes, seems to be a popular technique employed to change the dynamic, add dimension, and generally spice up an otherwise stagnant monogamous relationship. It would make for a pretty dull and quite unpopular show if such popular daytime soap characters as Luke and Laura or Bo and Hope had enjoyed a smooth courtship, uncomplicated marriage and then grew old and gray together without a single conflict. The viewers watched them go through many conflicts, some of which involved the classic love triangle. Such conflicts as the love triangle keep the story moving. Common elements of triangles in todays soaps consist of lust, greed, jealousy, any of which are interchangeable with the conflicts resulting from situations involving lovers coming back from the dead or paternity uncertainties. Yet love triangles, whether in the soap opera or in the novel, are not all uniformly constructed. James Joyces *The Dead* and Thomas

Hardys *Jude the Obscure*, both modernist novels, each contain love triangles as an integral element of the story.

The key triangles I will focus on are comprised of Michael, Greta and Gabriel, and, Philotson, Sue, and Jude. Although not absolutely identical, deconstruction reveals guilt, duty, and unrequited love as essential components to the construction of both.

Besides the most obvious similarity that both triangles are composed of one woman and two men, guilt also figures prominently. Although the men of the triangles may have their own guilt-related issues, it seems as though it is the guilt felt by the women that presents the most conflict. In *The Dead*, Greta has to live with the knowledge that it is because of her, although indirectly, that Michael died. It is likely that because of this guilt that she pauses on the staircase to listen to *The Lass of Aughrim*, a song that, as she tells Gabriel later, reminds her of Michael. At the time, her husband interprets her expression on the staircase as one of “ grace and mystery as if she were a symbol of something.”(Joyce 2028). He was correct, except not in the way that he thought. All the way to the hotel, the lingering memory of that sight of her incites his passion. However, he experiences a terrible upset as Greta tells him about the song and what it means to her. This is the critical moment where Michael, or rather his memory, enters and completes the triangle, although he may have been there all along without Gabriels knowledge. To Gabriel, this turn of events casts a different light on his entire marriage to Greta as he “ thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lovers eyes when he told her that he did not wish to live”(Joyce 2035). He wonders “ how poor a part

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he, her husband, had played in her life”(Joyce 2035). Although it is a bit peculiar for one of the members of this bizarre love triangle to reside beyond the grave, we see here that Michael plays a significant role, perhaps altering Gabriel and Gretas relationship forever, with Gretas guilt as the instigating factor.

As for Sue, in *Jude*, her guilt operates on a completely different level, a religious one. Like Greta, Sue also had a sick man die after braving the elements just to see her. Yet, unlike *The Dead*, this event has no great impact on the love triangle between Jude, Sue and Philotson. This three-cornered romantic disaster, because of Sues return to Philotson, had already reached its climax. If anything, Judes death made Sues promise never to see him again easier. But because Judes death happens at the end of novel, the reader does not find out if this adds to or detracts from her guilt. All we are told is that she is “tired and miserable,” “years and years older,” “quite a staid worn woman,” and still absolutely repulsed by Philotson (Hardy 431). Sues guilt originates from societal pressures, and then surfaces after the death of the children. She knows that shacking up with Jude after her divorce from Philotson is frowned upon, yet she does not share the same morals and values as the society in which she lived, thus, does not expect any sort of punishment. She takes the horrifying death of her children as a sign of divine admonishment. “I see marriage differently now! My babies have been taken from me to show me this!”(Hardy 369). Therefore, so that their deaths would not have been in vain, Sue becomes religious and returns to Philotson, adding more complexity to the triangle. Sues last words to Jude before he dies are: “Dont follow me dont look at me. Leave me, for pitys sake!”(Hardy

412). This bizarre love triangle may not be broken even after Jude's death, for it is he whom she really loves. For Philotson, Sue only feels a sense of duty.

Richard Philotson is not a bad guy, not at all the villain of the story. He is just as much a victim as Sue and Jude. Actually, the role of the villain seems to co-star Sue's sense of guilt and the judgmental society that causes her to perform such maddening acts of senseless duty that construct the love triangle between them. One chief act of duty is when she becomes engaged to Philotson, despite her feelings for Jude. Another major one occurs when she actually marries Philotson, although it is completely against her principles. Philotson, as a mentor, had ingratiated himself to Sue and she had to appease him somehow when the scandalous rumors about her and Jude emerged. Sue writes to Jude about the impending marriage, "It is so good of him, because the awkwardness of my situation has really come about my fault in getting expelled" (Hardy 176). Yet, Jude fears that the real reason behind her marriage to Philotson stemmed from his confession regarding his marital status. Regardless of the convoluted reasoning, Sue was able to perform the duty of marriage but not the duty of the bedroom. Philotson finds that she would rather sleep in the closet than with him. As her repulsion grows, so does her longing for Jude and freedom from marital constraint. Poor Philotson, aware of Sue's affections for Jude and her aversion to himself, allows her to leave the marriage. So Sue gets her freedom, yet despite her unconventional values, she just can not seem to go long without this sense of duty that overwhelms her. She is torn between her own values and those that society has not only instilled in her, but reminds her of daily. She takes deeply to heart such instances as when she and Jude were not

seen fit to complete their job of painting of the Ten Commandments. “ I cant bear that they, and everybody, should think people wicked because they may have chosen to live their own way!”(Hardy 318). This together with Father Times arrival intensifies her torment over the marriage dilemma. But this is one act of duty that she can never bring herself to perform which makes it much simpler for her, after the death of her children, to return to Philotson whom she dutifully, though illogically, regards as her true husband.

On the other hand, Greta is able to fulfill all of her wifely duties for Gabriel, including bearing his children. He even thinks, until he realizes her attachment to Michael, that she performs these duties blissfully. Greta plays the part of the doting ornament at his aunts party, appearing as though Gabriel were the center of her universe. As they danced Gabriel felt “ proud and happy proud of her grace and wifely carriage”(Joyce 2031). As they are leaving, Greta “ turned towards them and Gabriel saw that there was color on her cheeks and that her eyes were shining”(Joyce 2029). But it was Michael, not Gabriel, who was the reason for the expression. Despite Gretas anguish over the song and the memory it brought, she was not too distraught to attempt to stroke her husbands ego. She kissed him and said, “ You are a very generous person, Gabriel”(Joyce 2032). But Gabriels joy at this attention is later crushed as it is made apparent to him that all along “ she had been comparing him in her mind to another” (Joyce 2033). Gretas sense of wifely duty toward Gabriel had protected him from this knowledge all the years of their marriage. With the truth out, Gabriel may never return to the comfortable illusion that Greta had allowed him to live him for so long. Michael may now always be a haunting presence in their marriage, and the

reader is not told if Greta will favor her sense of duty to her marriage or to his memory.

While Greta sleeps, recovering from the memories brought by *The Lass of Aughrim*, Gabriel contemplates the relationship between his wife and Michael. He realizes the enormity of Michael's love for Greta as something he "had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew such feeling must be love" (Joyce 2035). This must leave him to wonder whether Greta had felt the same for Michael or whether the love, on that level at least, was unrequited. Greta had answered ambiguously that she had been "great with him at that time" (Joyce 2034). Gabriel wonders if she is being completely truthful. He knows that he does not love Greta the way that Michael did, but throughout their marriage he seems to have been under the delusion that her love was greater for him, than his for her. Perhaps, because of Greta's deep attachment to Michael, it was really his love for her that was unrequited. Gabriel seems confident in his role as supreme husband and lover until after Greta's confession when he looks into the mirror and sees "a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts" (Joyce 2033-34). The knowledge of Michael and fear of comparison has reduced him to this state of inferiority and self-doubt.

This may be how Philotson felt when he found that his love for Sue was so undeniably unrequited. How damaging it must be for a man's ego to find that his wife would rather brave sleeping in a closet than with him. Philotson wonders wry, "What must a woman's aversion be when it is stronger than her fear of spiders!" (Hardy 232). The poor man had normal expectations for

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his marriage, only to find that the mere suggestion of intimacy prompted her leap to what could have been her death. He explains to his friend Gillingham, “ She jumped out the window so strong was her dread of me!”(Hardy 241). This is the final straw and Philotson grants her a divorce. Yet, he is not the only one to experience unrequited love. Jude does also, but definitely not to such a severe degree. Although, Sue loves Jude, she does not seem to love him enough to stay with him, at least not in the way he loves her. He wants her as a wife and she is content to go back to just friendship. “ Well be dear friends just the same Jude, wont we?”(Hardy 374). She asks him, as if Jude could so easily dissolve his romantic feelings for her. Sues only real true love appear to be her own values and moral urges, which seem to change with the tide throughout the novel.

Love, with its power to create agony or ecstasy, is a dependable source of drama, whether it be for the novel or the soap opera. As we see in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Dead*, the tension of the love relationship is increased with the addition of a third party. Jude and Sues relationship may likely have been quite simpler without the presence of Philotson. He would not have been an option for Sues need to rectify the death of the children. In fact, she may have seen marriage to Jude as the right thing to do. They may have actually gotten married and been very happy. But for some reason, Hardy did not allow this to happen. Instead, he preferred to leave the reader with the dark view of love, where there is not always a happy ending. As for Gabriel and Gretas relationship, if Greta had not told of Michael, Gabriels evening may have ended much differently. He would most likely have satisfied his lust, yet the novel would lack the epiphany Gretas confession causes him to have.

The components of guilt, duty, and unrequited love, though not universal traits, do well to maintain the complexity and efficacy of these particular love triangles.