

The great sacrifice: happiness versus cultural mores



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Intrigue, murder, and suicide — by all accounts, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was a complete and terrible shock to the religiously conservative readers of the late nineteenth century, and this is exactly what he intended. These were, after all, the very people he was trying to criticize. Through the alienation of female protagonist Sue Bridehead, both self-imposed and outwardly-inflicted, Hardy lambastes the slavish and stoic nature of the society his era had created; women were slaves to men, all were slaves to God, and yet none were slaves to love. More than that, he uses Sue's deteriorating mental condition to show the subsequent effects such harsh cultural standards have on all those who are forced to live under them. Perhaps Hardy thought his work would inspire contemporary readers to break their own chains and avoid a similar fate, or perhaps he simply wanted to write a scathing commentary on accepted Victorian morality. Regardless, *Jude the Obscure* is certainly an effective tool for conveying his message.

The idea that a person fallen on hard times would be unwelcome in her own parent's home would be unimaginable to many, but not to Sue Bridehead, who said of a similar situation: "...I returned to Christminster, as my father [...] wouldn't have me back" (Hardy 119). Why? What happened between her and her father to soil their relationship? Though it's never directly stated, Sue exhibits the signs of a woman sexually abused as a child. To begin, she has an innate desire to know that men find her appealing: "...how much I feel that I shouldn't have been provided with attractiveness unless it were meant to be exercised! Some women's love of being loved is insatiable..." (169). However, at the same time, she is utterly repulsed by the idea of intimacy, even jumping from a window to avoid a situation in which she feels she

might be forced to have intercourse with Phillotson: “ Before he had thought that she meant to do more than get air she had mounted upon the sill and leapt out” (189). These two attributes combine to torment those men with whom Sue has relationships, but in many cases, she seems to enjoy exacting such pain. During an earlier period of her life, she even stayed with a man for fifteen months in the tantalizing closeness of his sitting room despite being well aware that his unrequited love for her was slowly killing him: “ He said I was breaking his heart by holding out against him so long at such close quarters; he could never have believed it of woman. I might play that game once too often, he said” (127). Finally, she is also prone to mood swings, once telling Jude that he must not love her, but then writing back almost immediately: “ If you want to love me Jude, you may: I don’t mind at all; and I’ll never say again that you mustn’t!” (141).

Indeed, the evidence supporting a traumatic childhood is staggering, but what may not be immediately obvious is Hardy’s purpose for writing it in. That is, of course, until one realizes that what Sue lived through is actually a metaphor for, and indictment of, society’s treatment of women. Like the victims of abuse, women were not seen as real people with thoughts, feelings, and opinions, but simply as objects to satisfy the needs of those who had power over them. In this case, that meant handling the domestic affairs and indulging the sexual desires of husbands in a patriarchal country. Therefore, Sue’s constant attempts at alienating her sexuality to avoid reliving the past are symbolic of her trying to alienate herself from the parts of society that wish to enslave her — to pull away her independence of thought and deed. This is evidenced through her constant condemnations of

institutions such as marriage, including her statement that: “ The flowers in the bride’s hand are sadly like the garland which decked the heifers of sacrifice in old times!” (271).

That’s not to say, however, that even if Sue had wanted to be part of society, she could have been. Sue was a free thinker... an internal rebel, even. Never would she obstinately subscribe to the religious mores of the day. In fact, she sometimes experimented with religions outside of Christianity, once buying Roman idols and bringing them back to Christminster: “ Occasionally peeping inside the leaves to see that Venus’s arm was not broken, she entered with her heathen load into the most Christian city in the country...” (82). Other times, she ridiculed Christianity in general, calling saints “ demi-gods” in Jude’s “ Pantheon” (152). Thus, to Sue, there was nothing wrong with her and Jude living together; she was simply following her heart. Yet, to the rest of the world, she and Jude were living in sin, both being adulterers. As a result, she would never be accepted in any social circle. Sue is even told at one point that she and Jude must no longer work together on the Ten Commandments mural they were commissioned to restore because it would, essentially, cast a cloud of sin upon the town.

This is where Hardy’s religious criticism comes in. Through the shunning of Sue Bridehead, he shows how Victorian culture had become so blinded by stringent, subjugating religion that it failed to recognize anything could exist between a man and a woman besides “ animal desire” (153). It failed to recognize a higher feeling of love, one that was not simply biblical, contractual, or carnal, but was a deep, inter-personal attachment. And as this purely clinical view endured throughout the years, it grew into a great,
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black shroud of gloom that could cover even the beauty of nature. Majestic scenery was reduced to “ human dwellings in the abstract, vegetation, and the wide dark world” (262), and there was no reason to stop and enjoy even a few roses, because “ they’d be all withered in a few days!” (281). Worst of all, children were not regarded as beings to be nurtured and adored, but as burdens God expected a man and woman to bear. This view gives rise to the climax of the novel when Little Father Time, representative of society itself, commits suicide and murders Jude and Sue’s two sons just because they were “ too menny” (319).

Sue’s story from that point on is not a joyful one. She has an utter breakdown, believing that God has punished her for her adultery to her first husband, and so she returns to Phillotson. But in the process of obeying what she believes to be God’s will and leaving Jude, she’s sacrificed her happiness, and as Arabella puts it at Jude’s funeral: “ She’s never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she’s as he is now!” (394). And though this quote ends the novel, it is Hardy’s way of posing a subtle question of paramount importance: What truly civilized society would disregard intellect and happiness in the name of tradition and superstition?