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Suzanne Edwards

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## *A Shadow from the Past: Little Father Time in Jude the Obscure*

by SUZANNE EDWARDS

LITTLE FATHER TIME, the morbidly self-conscious child in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* who hangs himself and his younger brother and sister, has provoked considerable critical commentary over the years. He has been variously interpreted as a grotesque monster, a Christ figure, a prophet of Doom, the choric voice of History, and a symbol of the Modern Spirit.<sup>1</sup> He is, to a degree, all of these. But, perhaps more significantly, he is an extension of his father's personality and temperament. In his essential loneliness and isolation, his hyper-sensitivity, his pessimistic outlook, and his suicidal bent, Father Time is clearly Jude Fawley's child. As such, he appropriately functions to advance the plot and to symbolize the significance of the mistakes Jude has made in the past.

The similarity between Jude and Little Father Time is readily apparent. Sue is the first to comment on the likeness just after the boy comes to Aldbrickham to live with his father. Noting the resemblance between parent and child, Sue exclaims to Jude, "I see you in him!"<sup>2</sup> Though Sue sees Arabella in the boy as well, the resemblance between mother and son is only physical whereas the likenesses between father and son are physical, situational, and psychological.

Both Father Time and the young Jude are described by the narrator in similar terms. Jude, as a child, is presented as slender-framed, "puny and sorry" (pp. 13, 16). He is a "thoughtful" boy, one who appears to have "felt the pricks of life somewhat before his time" (p. 11). His son is "a small, pale" child with "large, frightened eyes" (p. 289). Even more somber than his father had been as a boy, Father Time is described as ". . . Age masquerading as Juvenility" (p. 290).

Neither Jude nor his son enjoys a happy childhood. After his parents

1. See Walter K. Gordon, "Father Time's Suicide Note in *Jude the Obscure*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22 (1967), 298-300; Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974); Ward Hellstrom, "A Study of *Jude the Obscure*," Diss. University of Illinois, 1961; Norman Holland, Jr., "*Jude the Obscure*: Hardy's Symbolic Indictment of Christianity," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9 (June 1954), 50-60; Lewis B. Horne, "Hardy's Little Father Time," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 73 (1974), 213-23; and Frederick F. P. MacDowell, "Hardy's 'Seeming or Personal Impressions': The Symbolical Use of Image and Contrast in *Jude the Obscure*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 6 (Autumn 1960), 233-50.

2. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 292. All further references to the novel appear in the text.

die, Jude comes to live with his great-aunt Drusilla, a sharp-tongued, morose old woman who never disguises the fact that she considers supporting the boy an onerous duty. She impresses upon him that it would be better if he too had died: "It would ha' been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi' thy mother and father, poor useless boy!" (p. 13). But, since God Almighty did not take Jude, Miss Fawley voices the wish that the schoolmaster had done so when he moved away. "[W]hy didstn't go off with that schoolmaster of thine to Christminster or somewhere?" she asks the boy (p. 18). After the departure of Mr. Phillotson, the friendless child is left alone with his books and his idealistic dreams for the future, convinced he will "be a burden to his great-aunt for life" (p. 17).

Father Time's early years are much the same. Abandoned by his mother, he is raised by grandparents who soon tire of being "encumbered" and ship him, alone, from Australia back to Arabella in England. Since he is not yet old enough to work in her husband's tavern, Arabella does not "know what to do with him" and, in turn, "despatches" him to Jude who has previously not even been aware of the child's existence (pp. 287, 290). Even after coming to live with Jude and Sue, who show him tenderness and affection, Father Time persists in considering himself a burden. He cries to Sue, "I oughtn't to have come to 'ee—that's the real truth! I troubled 'em in Australia, and I trouble folk here. I wish I hadn't been born!" (p. 350). Despite Jude's anxious desire that his son never think, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived," the thought cannot be cancelled from the child's mind (p. 288).

Pessimistic by nature and by circumstances, Jude also frequently wishes "that he had never been born" (p. 33) and bemoans the meaninglessness of his "undemanded" existence (p. 19). His joy at receiving his first Latin and Greek texts is obliterated by his realization of how difficult it will be to educate himself, and "under the crushing recognition of his gigantic error Jude continued to wish himself out of the world" (p. 33). Throughout his life, Jude has "Modern" feelings of doubt, confusion, and pessimism. As a boy, after he is punished by Farmer Troutham for allowing the rooks to feed in the fields, he is distressed by the realization that "Growing up brought responsibilities. . . . As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering, he perceived. 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." His response is a naive longing to avoid growing up: "He did not want to be a man" (p. 19).

For Jude, the noises and glares do increase as he grows older whereas Little Father Time is born into a recognition of them. The doctor who comes to attend to the three dead children declares that boys like Father

Time are “the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them” (p. 354). Father Time is presented from the first as “singularly deficient in all the usual hopes of childhood” (p. 303). He never experiences the carefree days associated with youth. Even as a boy he is oppressed by what Wordsworth calls “the inevitable yoke” of the material world. Wordsworth’s warning to the young,

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!<sup>3</sup>

has prematurely become reality for Little Father Time. The very things that lift the spirits of others seem to intensify the little boy’s dejection. As he journeys by train to his father’s home in Aldbrickham, across the aisle from him sits a woman whose playful kitten entertains the passengers, all of them “except the solitary boy bearing the key and ticket, who, regarding the kitten with his saucer eyes, seemed mutely to say: ‘All laughing comes from misapprehension. Rightly looked at there is no laughable thing under the sun’ ” (p. 289). Several years later, every effort of Jude and Sue still proves vain to rouse him from his inherent despondency. At the Wessex Agricultural Show, Father Time cannot enjoy the roses, for as he explains, “I should like the flowers very, very much, if I didn’t keep on thinking they’d be all withered in a few days!” (p. 312).

The principle difference between father and son lies in the fact that in Jude periods of depression are offset by hopeful expectations. At the age of eleven, Jude appears “an ancient man in some phases of thought, [yet] *much younger than his years in others*” (p. 27; italics mine). Despite the overwhelming odds against his admission to a college, the young Jude continues to dream of Christminster and to plan for his future there. Several years after Jude has finally abandoned the goal for himself, he remains forward-looking. He idealistically imagines living out his dreams through his new-found son. Ironically, he makes plans to have the boy christened Jude and tells Sue, “Time may right things. . . . We’ll educate and train him with a view to the university. What I couldn’t accomplish in my own person perhaps I can carry out through him?” (p. 292). Unrealistic as such schemes may be, it is Jude’s very ability to hope which distinguishes him from his melancholy “aged child” (p. 312). Jude possesses what Ian Gregor has termed “an instinctive resilience”<sup>4</sup> which allows him, for a time, to endure tragedy: the failure of his marriage to Arabella, the frustration of his plans to enter Christminster, and even the deaths of his children. As Terry Eagleton says, Jude “does not consent to

3. William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 189, 11. 126–28.

4. Gregor, p. 211.

be beaten"; he "continues to struggle almost until the end."<sup>5</sup> Through all his misfortunes, Jude finds something to sustain him. As a youth, his plans to enter Christminster overshadow the disintegration of his unhappy marriage, and, later, having Sue with him gives him the strength to cope with the failure of his plans and with his grief. It is only when he must accept the loss of both Christminster and Sue that he abandons all hope.

Little Father Time, on the other hand, is never hopeful. In him, there is no mitigation of gloom. He is like Blake's schoolboy who wonders

. . . if the tender plants are strip'd  
Of their joy in the springing day,  
By sorrow and cares dismay,  
How shall the summer arise in joy  
Or the summer fruits appear  
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy  
Or bless the mellowing year,  
When the blasts of winter appear.<sup>6</sup>

It comes then as little surprise that he takes his own life. As Sue recognizes, the child's suicide was "part of his incurably sad nature . . ." (p. 357). What is more, Father Time seems to have "inherited" his suicidal tendencies—from his paternal grandmother who drowned herself and from his own father. The nineteen-year-old Jude tempts death by walking out onto an ice-covered pond and ultimately does commit suicide ten years later when, already dangerously ill, he endures driving rain and bitter cold for one last meeting with Sue.<sup>7</sup> Father Time serves then as an extreme embodiment of the psychological tendencies displayed by Jude.

Much harder to understand for Sue and Jude—as well as for the reader—are the deaths of the other two children. John Holloway is not alone in condemning the gruesome scene. Holloway considers the hangings "an unparalleled literary disaster," partly "because the whole incident interrupts the novel almost like a digression, since it seems a far more elaborate disaster than any reader needs to prepare him for the only significant result, Sue's fit of remorse."<sup>8</sup> Yet, just as Father Time's suicide is in keeping with his character, so too is his hanging the other children. Once again, comparison with his father helps to show the truth of this. Like his father, the boy feels responsible for the misfortunes of those around him. Jude first gives up his dream of Christminster and marries Arabella to protect her honor and then forsakes a secure job and his intention of becoming a clergyman to shelter Sue after she leaves Phillotson.

5. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (The New Wessex Edition), ed. Terry Eagleton (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 20.

6. William Blake, "The School Boy" from *Songs of Experience* in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. 31, ll. 23-30.

7. See Frank Giordano, Jr., *Thomas Hardy's Self-destructive Characters* (Little Rock: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1984), pp. 116-34, for a discussion of Jude's suicidal tendencies.

8. John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1965), p. 249.

Similarly, Little Father Time sacrifices himself and his siblings, thinking he can thereby alleviate the sufferings of his parents.

When manifested in his son, Jude's misfortunes and personal weaknesses become exaggerated. Thus, Father Time's childhood is more bleak than Jude's; his outlook is unrelentingly pessimistic. Jude's attempts to assist others are sometimes simplistic, foolish, and self-damaging; but Father Time's attempt is twisted, bizarre, and self-destructive.

Holloway is mistaken when he claims that Sue's fit of remorse is the only significant result of Father Time's unfortunate solution to his parents' problems. To begin with, the hanging scene—admittedly grotesque and melodramatic—is, nonetheless, an outgrowth of the dark tone of much of the novel. In fact, from the second chapter of Part VI in which the deaths of the children are described until the end of the book, the grotesqueness and melodrama, which only periodically affect the characters earlier in the novel, are unrelieved. If anything, in Sue's unnatural submission to a husband she finds repulsive and in Jude's lonely and miserable death, these features are intensified.

Not only does the sensationalistic scene heighten the tone of the book by signaling the beginning of the end of Jude's happiness with Sue, but it also leads to the revelation of the major themes of the novel. Father Time, as a character, signifies the consequences of the mistakes Sue and Jude have made in the past—namely, their ill-advised marriages. Jude's suspicion that his marriage to Arabella will “cripple him . . . for the rest of a lifetime . . .” proves well-founded (p. 66). As Bert Hornback points out, “In *Jude the Obscure*, as in so many of Hardy's novels, the hero's fate is determined inexorably by one significant act.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the novel, characters assume they can rectify the errors of the past simply by changing their lifestyles. Phillotson ingenuously believes that by arranging a divorce from Sue he “will open up a chance of happiness for her which she has never dreamt of hitherto” (p. 267). Sue and Jude are equally naive, believing they can “make a virtue of joy” (p. 356). Sue insists to Jude that separation from the spouse cancels the marriage: “My sense of it was, that a parting such as yours from her, and mine from him, ended the marriage” (p. 257). In an attempt to rationalize their divorces, she claims, “I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one had done so ignorantly!” (pp. 226–27). Sue and Jude fail to comprehend that the consequences of those ignorant actions are too far-reaching. Little Father Time arrives to remind them that the past cannot be undone; nor can it be escaped. As Penny Boumelha points out in *Thomas Hardy and Women*, “Sue and Jude are forced to recognise [sic] that their relationship is not transcendent of time, place, and material circumstance, as they have tried to make it. . . .”<sup>10</sup> It is Father Time who forces this awareness on them,

9. Bert Hornback, *The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1971), p. 130.

10. Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1982), p. 149.

for "it is when Little Father Time arrives that the relationship is forced to adapt, economically and in appearance, to [that of] the conventional marital couple."<sup>11</sup>

Sue accurately describes Father Time as the only "shadow" on her relationship with Jude (p. 312). His dark countenance does cast an ominous shade over their lives, one that fore"shadows" the doom of their relationship. As the product of a conventional marriage, Father Time represents the long-term ill effects of blind adherence to social convention. He also, paradoxically, serves as a dismal reminder of social conventions Sue and Jude cannot escape—social conventions which threaten to destroy them from without, in the form of public opinion, and from within in Sue's inability to feel secure in her nonconformity. After Father Time's death, Jude and Sue gaze upon the small corpse that embodies these messages: "The boy's face expressed the whole tale of their situation. On that little shape had converged all the inauspiciousness and shadow which had darkened the first union of Jude, and all the accidents, mistakes, fears, errors of the last. He was their nodal point, their focus, their expression in a single term. For the rashness of those parents he had groaned, for their ill assortment he had quaked, and for the misfortunes of these he had died" (pp. 354–55).

Senseless and tragic as the children's deaths are, they are made still more senseless and tragic by their profound effect on the lives of Sue and Jude. Not only does the loss of their children increase their misery, contrary to Father Time's childish intentions, but it also leads to a grim repetition of their earlier mistakes. Sue "voluntarily" gives herself to Phillotson a second time, and Jude is duped into repeating his marriage to Arabella to once more preserve her honor. Sue, transformed by her grief, concludes that she and Jude have been punished for "loving each other too much . . ." (p. 356). The couple cannot see their misfortune for what it is—a lesson from the past, but equally a lesson about the harshness of reality.

Determinism accounts for much of the agony Jude and Sue experience. Part of it they unintentionally bring upon themselves, but much of it is unavoidable in a world such as that of the novel where, as Sue tells Father Time, "All is trouble, adversity, and suffering!" (p. 350). David Lodge explains that in *Jude the Obscure*, life is presented as "a closed system of disappointment from which only death offers an escape."<sup>12</sup> Perceiving the truth of this before the adults do, Little Father Time asks Sue, "It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?" (p. 350). After all his sorrows, the "predestinate Jude" (p. 46) shares his son's opinion and welcomes death, longing to "put an end to a feverish life which ought never to have been begun!" (p. 413). On his deathbed, Jude curses his birth with

11. Boumelha, p. 151.

12. David Lodge, "Jude the Obscure: Pessimism and Fictional Form" in Dale Kramer, ed., *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 196.

his last words by repeating the verses from the third book of Job, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man-child conceived." He closes with Job's question to God, "Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul?" (pp. 425-26). In *Jude the Obscure*, father and son have acted out twin roles in a harsh arena where Crass Casualty determines each man's destiny.

Sue, Arabella, and Phillotson have all been recognized as projections of Jude.<sup>13</sup> Surely, Jude's own son is as well. Because he "inherits" so many of his father's weaknesses, though in more exaggerated form, Little Father Time is a fitting reminder to Jude of the errors of his own past and of the grim perversity of each man's fate.

13. See Hornback, p. 128.