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IDEA AND EXECUTION IN JUDE THE OBSCURE

By A. F. Cassis

There has been no such tragedy in fiction — on anything like the same lines — since he [Balzac] died," wrote Swinburne to Hardy after reading Jude the Obscure. Ten days after the publication of the novel, Hardy wrote to a "close friend": "You have hardly an idea how poor and feeble the book seems to me, as executed, beside the idea of it that I had formed in prospect."¹ Eight weeks later, to the same friend, he described it as "a mass of imperfections."² Our purpose is to discover any "imperfections" in the tragedy and assess the "execution" in the light of the "idea."

When he wrote the novel, Hardy believed that the greatest tragedy was "an excursion, a revelation of soul's unreconciled to life."³ This is why Jude, the only one of Hardy's characters whose life is traced from childhood to premature death, is endowed with a sensitivity that amounts to a weakness and so feels "the pricks of life somewhat before his time." Dreams of academic distinction which develop into a ruling passion aggravate Jude's unreconcilement to life at Marygreen especially as Christminster acquires a "tangibility, a permanence, a hold on his life."⁴ A blank refusal from one College brings his dreams to an abrupt end and the tragedy of "unfulfilled aims" comes to the forefront.

Jude's "sin" against his vocation and the sorrow and suffering of his life constitute the tragic idea on which great tragedy is founded. Hardy, perhaps unfortunately, does not dwell long on the "inner" conflict of Jude to show the discord created by the

¹ Florence Emily Hardy, The Later Years of Thomas Hardy (London, 1930), 41.
² Ibid., 43.
³ Florence Emily Hardy, The Early Life of Thomas Hardy (London, 1928), 315.
⁴ Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (London, 1895). 20. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.
conflict of Jude’s absorbing passion for academic distinction and his two “arch enemies . . . weakness for womankind and . . . impulse to strong liquor” (p. 423). Consequently, Jude’s tragic error — his marriage to Arabella — seems largely the result of an uncertain will and a passive acquiescence to external circumstances. His relentless march towards unhappiness is determined by the “concatenation of events” that follows, and we see how the “predestinate Jude” (p. 13) suffers. One may say that Oedipus is just as predestinate, that his march towards unhappiness is equally relentless, if no more; but where Oedipus seems, to say the least, to be the author of his actions and doom and accepts responsibility for what had been done, Jude, buffeted by external circumstances, is more often than not, a “victim” of Necessity.

Though Jude may be inclined to be passive insofar as the tragic error is concerned, his heroic struggle against the “concatenation of events” that follows makes him scale tragic heights. This is particularly so when he renounces his apostleship and approaches Sue’s mental position of free thinking and independence of all social norms, or when his ruling passion for Christminster returns and, aware of the “hell of conscious failure,” sick, poor, and groping after all his fixed opinions were gone, he does not accept defeat. His will is not beaten by the squalid life he was forced to live, and the very agony of his death when his parched lips whisper extracts from Job III is an affirmation of his personality in the face of death. His death is pitiful and terrible because he meets it defiantly and bravely, not peacefully or hopefully. His life-or-death struggle with adversity never falters in its intensity, and his resistance to the blows of Fate lend him enough greatness of soul and dignity to command respect and admiration. This struggle against Fate or the “First Cause” gives Jude Fawley a significance beyond his individual self as he becomes a representative of man fighting the impersonal forces of the universe. “The most distinctive value of tragic art,” says John Gassner, “consists of the high valuation it places upon man as a species and the individual as its representative.”5 However, if Jude’s fight does not “exhilarate” even though he is the “representative of man,” it is not because it wants in struggle, or because the odds against which Jude fights

are not worthy; but because, in Hardy's view, the First Cause gives no hope for a solution, as we shall see later.

The idea Hardy had formed in prospect for Sue Bridehead, the other chief character, is clearly outlined in the Preface: she is "the slight, pale bachelor girl — the intellectual, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing . . . who does not recognize the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession." Hardy endows her with the psychological subtleties of masochism, repugnance to the "gross" sexual act, and the subconscious self-destructive impulse, which make her far advanced over any earlier heroine. Her nervous temperament and perverseness, her peculiarity and "epicene tenderness" (p. 184), her aberrant passions and unaccountable antipathies" (p. 245), her elusiveness and ethereal nature are well portrayed in her relations with Jude and Phillotson. She is a mass of contradictory impulses; there is no order in her sentiments. She is a living character "so vibrant that everything she did seemed to have its source in feeling" (p. 122). Her scintillating intellect which baffles both Jude and Phillotson gives her a certain freshness. However, there are moments when she is not convincing and sounds rather pedantic: her slashing remarks about Christminster and her quotations from J. S. Mill. On the whole, her appeal lies not so much in her tragedy, but in her being one of the first examples of the modern "bachelor" girl.

Leaving aside Hardy's tragic figures, let us turn to his idea of plot in the novel. In one of his letters, he described the plot as being "almost geometrically constructed — I ought not to say constructed, for, beyond a certain point, the characters necessitated it, and I simply let it come." In another letter, he says: "Of course the book is all contrasts — or was meant to be in its original conception."

The following diagram may elucidate what Hardy meant by "geometrically constructed":

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[Diagram of geometric construction]

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This is a semi-circle having AB as diameter. X, Y, Z, are three points on the circumference; X and Z are at approximately equal distances from A and B. Y divides the arc XZ in two. The arc AX represents Jude’s craze for academic distinction, his infatuation with Arabella and his subsequent marriage and separation on which depends most of the suffering to follow. The arc XY represents Jude’s emigration to Christminster, his renewed determination to achieve academic distinction, his meeting with Sue, the renunciation of both his academic and clerical hopes, which culminates in his free union with Sue. YZ represents the gradual decline of their happiness, owing to poverty, their many children, Jude’s illness, ostracism by the people, death of the children and Sue’s return to Phillotson. ZB represents Jude’s “gin-drunk” marriage to Arabella, his last illness and the unrelieved agony of his death. In this way, Jude completed his semi-circle. He started poor and alone and ended his life in similar circumstances.

What further makes for the geometrical construction is Hardy’s use of contrasts. Hardy lists a few examples of contrast: “Sue and her heathen gods set against Jude’s reading of the New Testament; Christminster academical, Christminster in the slums; Jude the saint, Jude the sinner; Sue the Pagan, Sue the saint; marriage, no marriage; &c., &c.” But it is also in the geometrical precision of the inter-relations of characters that we get such contrast: the sensitive Jude pitted against the coarse Arabella; the modern “bundle of nerves” called Sue and the conventional Phillotson.

Contrast is also consciously sought in the description of individual scenes: Jude thinking of the books he must get hold of “Livy, Tacitus, Herodotus . . . The Fathers . . . Bede and ecclesiastical history,” interrupted by the “hoity toity” of the sensual Arabella and the pig’s pizzle that hits him; Jude the “green” lover thinking how “fast” he is and the experienced Arabella in the courting scenes; the sexlessness of Sue and her attitude to Christminster, and Jude’s white hot passions and devotion to Christminster; Gillingham condemning Sue for going to live with Jude and Phillotson justifying her action; Jude’s parched lips

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6 Postscript to Jude the Obscure, April 1912.
7 The Later Years, 40.
8 Ibid., 42.
9 Ibid.
whispering in the agony of death, “Let the day perish,” interrupted by the “Hurrah” of the Remembrance games and followed by Arabella’s designs to net a new husband.

It is particularly in the directions in which both Jude and Sue mentally travel that we get the most striking contrast. They are like two diagonals of a parallelogram that meet and then move onwards: Sue to Jude’s original self-renunciation and religion or as Jude called them, “the old husks of prejudices” (p. 420) and he to Sue’s earlier position of freethinking. These two opposed movements culminated in Sue’s “creed-drunk” marriage to Phillotson and Jude’s “gin-drunk” marriage to Arabella.

That the “characters necessitated” the plot is not as obvious. The action depends on the interplay of characters and circumstances and strict interior causation until Book V, when Jude and Sue are “free” to marry. Had the novel ended here, Hardy’s point about the dissolubility of marriage would have been made. But Hardy seems to have planned Jude’s tragic ending beforehand: “In writing Jude my mind was fixed on the ending,” he says. Bent on attaining that ending, Hardy sacrifices plausibility — partly at least. Jude and Sue may view legal marriage as “hopelessly vulgar” and shrink from contaminating themselves by turning back from the house of the parish clerk and thus “live on in a dreamy paradise” (p. 324). However, faced with the coming of Father Time, they recognize the necessity of legalizing their union: “I suppose, dear, we must pluck up courage, and get the ceremony over? It is no use struggling against the current, and I feel myself getting interviewed with my kind . . . I do want to be kind to this child, and to be a mother to him; and our adding the legal form to our marriage might make it easier for me” (pp. 331-2). Even then, Sue justifies their second fruitless attempt as a result of their previous experience and her “own too squeamish feelings” (p. 340). Even when they are faced with poverty and forced to abandon their residence, they still make no attempt to legalize their union. If “the marriage laws” were to be “the tragic machinery” as Hardy had stated in the Postscript of 1912, the marriage of Sue and Jude should have been portrayed as being impossible. But this is not the case. Jude and Sue are free and deliberately refuse to legalize their union as if to court disaster.

10 Ibid., 48.
Again when they revisit Christminster, their unmarried state is indirectly responsible for the calamity of Father Time. Sue's impulsive confession to the landlady as to her relationship with Jude leads to her notice to quit and Father Time's ominous "I ought not to be born" (p. 396).

Furthermore, Father Time destroys what "truthfulness of the record" that remains: It is not his symbolism that one questions but that through the direct intervention of a symbol the incident that hastens and seals the doom of Jude and Sue is brought about. Strict interior causation gives way to deliberate construction. This weakness in design created by Father Time in the dénouement of Jude the Obscure seems to be characteristic of Hardy's major novels: the closed door incident in The Return of the Native, Newson's return in The Mayor of Casterbridge, the shooting of Mrs. Charmond by an old lover in The Woodlanders, the "murder" of Alec with a carving knife. It seems that Hardy's gothic imagination was sometimes too lawless and powerful to be restrained by his critical sense.

Let us now turn to Hardy's hopeful expectations that the tragedy contains "certain cathartic Aristotelian qualities" as he stated in his Postscript.

The emotional effect of Jude the Obscure is rather varied, ranging from the purely Aristotelian "pity and fear" to horror and cold despair. It is well nigh impossible to formulate with any degree of certainty a reader's reaction to the novel because exceptional suffering and calamity are essential to tragedy and a reader's response to suffering is individual, and largely determined by his personal experience, background and morality. However, I do not think any reader finds Jude's suffering repulsive or horrible. The frustration of his hopes, the mental anguish and depression that follow are impressive, to say the least. Hardy wisely confines his description of Jude's suffering to the realm of the mental. Even the physical pain of his last agony highlights his mental anguish. Jude's suffering overawes the reader by its truth and severity. His death is merely the relinquishment of his power of resistance so that one cannot help feeling what an exceptional being of "shoddy humanity" has gone to waste.

Sue's suffering, unlike Jude's, is limited to the last book. Her affliction and especially the decline of her intellect followed by her "creed-drunk" marriage to Phillotson are pitiable. However, the reader becomes apprehensive when she decides to do
penance by doing “the ultimate thing” (p. 472) in spite of her physical revulsion to Phillotson (she had jumped out of her bedroom window, risking injury, when he accidentally entered her room while she slept). And when Hardy describes in detail Sue’s horror and her actions from the moment she unlashes the door of the snoring Phillotson to the time he lifts her “bodily,” kisses her and she “clenches her teeth” and utters no cry—all but the sexual act—the reader finds it distasteful and unbearable. The horror of the situation is not mitigated—it is the last time we see Sue—and the belief that the nightmare can only be dispelled by her death is an assumption the reader carries outside the novel. Another specific example of horror is the spectacle of Sue’s murdered children and Father Time’s suicide.

The concept of Fate conveyed within the framework of a tragedy also normally arouses and sustains the tragic emotions. Some idea or inference is generally made about man and the universe in a tragic work. And so the question rises: Does Hardy’s tragic view of life as embodied in Jude the Obscure, meet the demands of tragic art?

“The first of the Ancients,” says H. E. Duffin, “is at one with Hardy, the first of the moderns, in knowing and showing the relentlessness and hopelessness of Fate.” Both Jude and Sue struggle against “necessity’s harsh Yoke” which, in the novel, manifests itself as “Nature’s Law . . . mutual butchery” (p. 366) and secondly, the man-made laws of society, specifically, laws of marriage and Christminster. The latter figure prominently for they were designed to be the “tragic machinery” of the novel.

But besides the protagonists’ struggle with temporary man-made laws, or what D. H. Lawrence calls the inability “to detach themselves from the common,” there is the tragic knowledge of an “ill-conceived world” where sex, “the strongest passion known to humanity,” is inextricably bound up with man’s actions and far from contributing towards his happiness, simply reaps disaster and doom. Whether it be Jude’s full bloodedness or Sue’s sexlessness, the result can be almost foreseen. As Phillotson puts it: “Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can’t get out of it if we would” (p. 379). Being born within “Fate’s iron toils” is a condition of man’s very existence.

11 Henry C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy: A Study of the Wessex Novels (Manchester, 1937), 198.
Such a concept of "Nature's Law" surely arouses and sustains the tragic emotions in spite of Hardy's continual harping on the demerits of the "iron contract" of conventional marriage. However, it is when he tries to formulate in scientific terms his concept of "The Will" that he appeals to the reason of the reader at the expense of the emotional appeal. When Sue blames "the universe . . . things in general" (p. 264) for her abhorrence of Phillotson, it is still the poetical mysterious decrees of a Destiny ever present behind the Universe, "the colossal Prince of the World who framed her situation and ruled her lot." The Fates have just not been kind to her. Even in her grief at the death of her children when she cries out: "There is something external to us which says, 'You shan't!'" First it said, 'You shan't learn!' Then it said, 'You shan't labour!' Now it says, 'You shan't love!'" (p. 403) we get the concept of a capricious power that delights in man's suffering as a sport. In fact it is reminiscent of Gloucester's

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods
They kill us for their sport."

But we do not get beyond this to an impression of the Justice of Providence or any justice! On the contrary, both Jude and Sue submit to the belief "that the First Cause worked automatically like a somnambulist, and not reflectively like a sage; that at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity" (p. 409). Such an outlook does not lead itself easily to the demands of tragic art. Not only are the reader's emotions chilled by the logical scientific statement but also reason finds it unpalatable. There is no relief, no justice, no solution, no hope in the shadow of such a belief.

There is no doubt that it is a "novel addressed by a man to men and women of full age" as Hardy says in the Preface; hence, the seriousness of the book. But the earnestness by which Hardy pursues his end seems to blind him to the possibility and necessity of relieving the mounting tragic tension. This is not in line with his earlier works. Gone are the rustics of Egdon Heath, the inmates of the three Mariners, the inhabitants of
Little Hintock and the idyllic account of Tess at Talbothy's Dairy. Hardy proceeds towards Jude's end with the relentless determination of Fate!

As the last of his tragedies, *Jude the Obscure* may not be his most "perfect." Its imperfections lie, as we have tried to point out, in a certain weakness of design in the critical stage of the dénouement, the tendency of his gothic imagination towards the horrible and his impulse to drive home an unmistakable concept of The Will. And yet, in spite of these imperfections, Hardy's sincerity, magnanimity, and sympathy for his "victims" are so impressive that the reader's own sympathy and solicitude for them are aroused and sustained. *Jude the Obscure* still remains a great novel by a great Victorian and especially to those into whose "soul the iron has entered."