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The Tortured Form of Jude the Obscure

by NORMAN D. PRENTISS

In Jude the Obscure Hardy divides the novel into six “Parts,” with the section titles indicating a geographic location (“At Marygreen,” “At Aldbrickham and Elsewhere,” etc.). But although the novel covers so much physical territory, the characters never escape each other, and they never escape embarrassing reminders of their past failures. Each of the sections professes to initiate a new beginning—Jude is “making a new start” at the opening of “Part Second: At Christminster” (I, 89); his move to enter the Church is “a new idea” at the start of “Part Third: At Melchester” (I, 153)—but these “beginnings” quickly collapse into repetitions of the characters’ previous difficulties, reenacted in a new location or a new situation. Phillotson’s return to Marygreen near the end of the novel, resuming his duties as schoolmaster, defines the structural pattern of this novel:

“You are keeping the school there again, just as formerly?”

The pressure of a sadness that would out unsealed him. “I am there,” he replied. “Just as formerly, no. Merely on sufferance. It was a last resource—a small thing to return to after my move upwards, and my long indulged hopes—a returning to zero, with all its humiliations . . . .”

(Part Fifth, VII, 382)

Phillotson’s return to Marygreen is a debased return—he is a disappointed man, slipping back to a previous situation. “Returning to zero” might seem a synonym for a clean slate, a new beginning. But it is “a returning to zero with all its humiliations”—Phillotson’s own memory, his awareness of his “long indulged hopes” and his subsequent failures, prevents him from being able to experience a fresh start. Phillotson remarks that things are not as before, that he is “on sufferance.” Though “sufferance” refers specifically to the terms of his employment (his situation is far inferior to his position at the same job many years ago), Phillotson also puns on the word “suffer”—the awareness of his debased return is painful to endure.

Phillotson’s position at the end of the novel, a weakened repetition of his starting point, follows the pattern of the entire book: the concluding section of Jude the Obscure displays the characters repeating their mistakes in a painful “returning to zero.” As Jude’s ambitions to become a student at Christminster break down into his selling of “Christminster Cakes” at local fairgrounds, as he and Sue renew their failed marriages to Arabella and Phillotson, the structure of
the novel reaches full circle. Hardy underlines the significance of the pattern by having Jude and Sue return to Christminster on Remembrance Day, the graduation ceremony for university students. "My failure is reflected on me by every one of those young fellows," Jude remarks. "A lesson in presumption is awaiting me to-day!—Humiliation Day for me!" (Part Sixth, I, 390). The cycle of events that gives the novel its shape results in the characters’ suffering and humiliation; the final section of the novel is only the culmination of a continuing series of painful repetitions. The sheer number of repetitions in this novel gives it a kind of perverse or grotesque unity; Jude the Obscure has the most tortured formal structure of any of Hardy’s works.¹

In Time and the Novel, A. A. Mendilow asserts that, for the modern novelist, "the static symmetry of the old self-contained plot can no longer be imposed on the dynamic formlessness of life" (8). But a plot could hardly be more self-contained than the plot of Jude the Obscure: where life seems without form or meaning, Hardy’s novel supplies an aggressive unity. Mendilow’s argument suggests that novelists at the turn of the 19th century needed to reject the narrative conventions common to Hardy’s precursors; instead, Hardy intensifies the Victorian plot devices of repetition and coincidence. The resulting unity, however, produces a novel whose structure is forced, tortured: Jude the Obscure has the most claustrophobic atmosphere of any of Hardy’s texts. In the final section of the novel, the narrator observes that "the world resembled a stanza or melody composed in a dream; it was wonderfully excellent to the half-aroused intelligence, but hopelessly absurd at the full waking" (III, 413). The words "hopelessly absurd" would easily apply to many of the situations in the novel, including the various implausible coincidences, and the characters’ reenactments of their past mistakes. But in the phrase referring to "a stanza or melody composed in a dream," Hardy hints at a possible poetry underlying the absurdity.

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WHEN JUDE THE OBSCURE was first published in 1896, many critics attacked its treatment of marriage and its presentation of sexuality. Margaret Oliphant’s review from the January 1896 Blackwood’s Magazine is a striking example:

There may be books more disgusting, more impious as regards human nature, more foul in detail, in those dark corners where the amateurs of filth find garbage to their taste; but not, we repeat, from any Master’s hand.²

If the subject matter disturbed contemporary reviewers, Oliphant’s comment about the “Master’s hand” suggests that the problem is just as significantly in the expression: these ideas have been heard before, but they have never been given credit by a recognized novelist. Oliphant’s objections clearly refer to the content

¹ As will become clear, I mean to use the word in two senses: the form of the novel is “tortured” because it is forced, with the novelist insisting on improbable coincidences that give the book a perverse unity; at the same time, the form is “torturing,” since the novel achieves coherent form through depicting repetitions that torture its characters.

² Reprinted in Cox, p. 257.
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of Hardy’s novel, and such objections became the basis of Hardy’s explanation for why he abandoned novel-writing after the publication of Jude the Obscure. But I want to suggest that the book’s narrative technique is as disturbing as its content, and is partly responsible for the antagonistic reactions of some contemporary reviewers.

Jude the Obscure invites an atmosphere of change in its opening sentence: “The schoolmaster was leaving the village, and everybody seemed sorry” (3). But Hardy quickly establishes that the plot will not move forward as in a conventional narrative. The schoolmaster, Phillotson, allows others to prepare his move, because he “disliked the sight of changes” (3). The novel likewise dislikes the sight (site?) of changes. Although Jude travels from place to place, his movement is ultimately circular: at the end of the second part, he returns to his home in the first part; and the book concludes in a section titled, significantly, “At Christminster Again” (emphasis mine). The structure of the book is like the well young Jude looks into in the first chapter—“a long circular perspective” (5). And when Jude later describes Sue’s behavior, he also describes the frustration of a reader who expects the plot to move forward: “No sooner does one expect you to go straight on, as the one rational proceeding, than you double round the corner” (Part Sixth, IV, 436). The characters continually retrace their steps, and each time Jude returns to his hometown, Marygreen, the setting reminds him that, like the novel, he has failed to move forward. “Surely his plan should be to move onward through good and ill” (Part First, XI, 85) Jude thinks at the close of the first section, but with each return to Marygreen the inscription he carved as a child, “Thither J. F.,” with its arrow pointing to Christminster, reminds him of how little he has progressed.3 The unfortunate coincidences that occur throughout Jude the Obscure suggest that the characters are trapped in a cycle of repetitions. In the third section Jude unexpectedly meets Arabella and travels back to Christminster with her, exclaiming from the railway car, “This is the very road by which I came into Christminster years ago full of plans!” (Part Third, IX, 221). After parting from Arabella, “Jude turned and retraced his steps” (223) only to have another unexpected encounter, this time with Sue. When they board the train together, “it seemed the same carriage he had lately got out of with another” (225). But if this is a trivial coincidence, Jude later makes the more significant mistake of taking Sue to the same hotel room he once shared with Arabella: “The George further on . . . proved to be the inn at which Jude had stayed with Arabella on that one occasion of their meeting after their division of years” (Part Fourth, V, 291). Geographically, the scope of the novel is expan-

3. The typography strengthens the point. “Thither J. F.” is printed in an elaborate typeface that stands out from the rest of the text, centered on the page in capital letters, with a graphic of a hand pointing to the right. The presentation emphasizes that Jude has carved his ambitions in wood: the words are carved, inscribed, physical. Throughout the novel, words have a strikingly physical presence. The Greek letters representing the title of the New Testament similarly stand out on the page, and the letters confront Jude as he enters the room: “There lay his book open, just as he had left it, and the capital letters on the title-page regarded him with fixed reproach in the grey starlight, like the unclosed eyes of a dead man” (Part First, VII, 55). It is also significant that in the fifth section of the novel, Jude and Sue make their living by engraving headstones, and eventually get a special assignment to reletter the Ten Commandments for a small church. See my discussion below of the characters’ awareness of language.

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sive—but the characters often seem trapped in the same rail car, or the same hotel room.

For each situation in the novel, it is easy to find a counterpart, a double. The same observation applies to some of the characters, particularly Jude and Sue. When Jude first meets his cousin, “he recognized in the accents certain qualities of his own voice” (Part Second, II, 103); and later Jude hides Sue in his apartment by dressing her in his clothes: “he saw a slim and fragile being masquerading as himself on a Sunday” (Part Third, III, 173). Phillotson remarks that “They seem to be one person split in two” (Part Fourth, IV, 276). In *The Metaphor of Chance* Bert Hornback suggests that the other three main characters—Sue, Arabella, and Phillotson—are all versions or “aspects” of Jude. Although this view unnecessarily telescopes the population of the novel into one man, Hornback is correct to point out that the similarities among the characters complement the novel’s structure:

As we see this interrelationship of characters, and as we see the structure of the novel linked with it, what is otherwise a grotesque plot of repetition becomes both meaningful and aesthetically acceptable. (128)

But if the repetitions are aesthetically consistent, consistency does not make them any less grotesque. Sue mentions a student who dies of consumption, possibly related to Sue’s refusal to consummate their relationship: “He said I was breaking his heart by holding out against him so long at such close quarters. . . . I might play that game once too often, he said” (Part Third, IV, 177). Jude finds himself in a similar relationship with Sue, and the story “of the poor Christminster graduate whom she had handled thus, returned to Jude’s mind; and he saw himself as a possible second in such a torturing destiny” (Part Fourth, V, 289). As Jude suspects that the Christminster graduate is his double, an earlier version of himself, he worries that the torturing situation will repeat; he ponders his cousin’s “perversity,” and thinks that “Possibly she would go on inflicting such pains again and again, and grieving for the sufferer again and again” (Part Third, VII, 210). For the characters in this novel, the narrative device of repetition becomes a form of torture.

In the 1895 Preface, Hardy refers to the novel as “simply an endeavor to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings” (viii). The shape of *Jude the Obscure* results largely from internal echoes and repetitions; but as Hardy’s comment about the “series of seemings” makes clear, he imposes this shape on random “seemings” that have no real coherence of their own. The repetitions appear forced and obvious: as readers, we see a thematic and structural unity, but we also see the confusion underlying the imposed pattern. Through repetition, Hardy supplies form and unity to the novel, but still manages to convey a world that has lost meaning for his characters. Jude, as a child, notices “a flaw in the terrestrial scheme” (Part First, II, 12), and learns that it is impossible to discern an order to life’s events:

Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. Nature’s logic was too horrid for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony. (15)
Later, Jude visits Christminster, and "When he passed objects out of harmony with its general expression he allowed his eyes to slip over them as if he did not see them" (Part Second, I, 91). Jude's selective vision creates a harmony where it does not exist; by pointing out the flaw in his character's perception, Hardy acknowledges the difficulty in depicting a realistic world in a coherent narrative. In *The Science of Fiction* Hardy defines realism as "artificiality distilled from the fruits of closest observation" (Orel, 136): to be truly realistic, Hardy seems to say here, a work must acknowledge that its shape is selective and artificial. Earlier, I cited Mendilow's argument that modern novelists could no longer impose "the static symmetry of the old self-contained plot ... on the dynamic formlessness of life" (8); Hardy's novel admits that life has no recognizable shape, but through strategic repetitions the text develops a literary coherence. The repetitions in *Jude the Obscure* frustrate the ambitions of the character, and frustrate the forward movement of the plot, but the narrative does follow a conventional chronology, from Jude's childhood to his death, and the structure of the novel displays an almost perverse symmetry, as if the end of the novel is a parody of its beginning. The novel remains true to conventional forms of plotting, but intensifies them in order to accentuate their artificiality.

Hardy's narrative depiction of the world, of the "artificial system of things" (Part Fourth, III, 261), leads, ultimately, to a criticism of language itself. When young Jude tells an old man of his wish to study at Christminster, the elder responds, "You'd have to get your head screwed on t' otherway before you could read what they read there. . . . [They read] on'y foreign tongues used in the days of the Tower of Babel" (Part First, III, 22-23). Jude is not as disenchanted by this observation as he should be, however, because of his naive notions about the translation process:

Jude had meditated much and curiously on the probable sort of process that was involved in turning the expressions of one language into those of another. He concluded that a grammar of the required tongue would contain, primarily, a rule, prescription, or clue of the nature of a secret cipher, which, once known, would enable him, by merely applying it, to change at will all words of his own speech into those of the foreign one. . . . Thus he assumed that the words of the required language were always to be found somewhere latent in the words of the given language. . . . (V, 30-31)

But Jude soon learns there is "no law of transmutation," and that "The charm he had supposed in store for him was really a labour" (31). Jude's early disappointment—"the shabby trick played him by the dead languages" (V, 33)—predicts the later problems with language in the novel. In the fourth part, when Sue leaves...
Phillotson and goes to Jude, she is dismayed that Jude ordered only one hotel room:

“One?”
“Yes—one.”

She looked at him. “O Jude!” Sue bent her forehead against the corner of the compartment. “I thought you might do it; and that I was deceiving you. But I didn’t mean that!”

In the pause which followed, Jude’s eyes fixed themselves with a stultified expression on the opposite seat. “Well!” he said. . . . “Well!”

(Part Fourth, V, 287, Hardy’s ellipsis)

Jude, likewise, can seldom say “What he really meant” (Part Third, VI, 196), and in the same section a page of dialogue between the cousins is framed by the exclamation “I can’t explain!”—uttered first by Jude, and then by Sue (Part Fourth, V, 292-93). Even in their native language, it is difficult for the characters to convey meaning.

Such difficulties often result in strained dialogue. Earlier, when Jude attempts to guess Sue’s unhappiness with Phillotson, he remarks that “her late assuring words [were] so strictly proper and so lifelessly spoken that they might have been taken from a list of model speeches in ‘The Wife’s Guide to Conduct’” (Part Third, IX, 226). But Jude’s criticism of Sue’s words here is equally applicable to the rest of the dialogue in the novel. A. Alvarez says that the dialogue “is, with very little exception, forced and awkward. Even granting the conventions of the time, no character ever properly seems to connect with another in talk” (420). Their inability to connect is part of Hardy’s point: because the medium of language is imprecise, communication is necessarily incomplete.

A brief exchange of letters between Sue and Phillotson will help clarify the connection between Jude the Obscure’s narrative technique and the characters’ manner of communication. The epistolary novel displays a narrative technique that pretends to develop from a realistic circumstance: in the early days of the novel, when characters are separated by distance, letters are the only practical means of communication. Though the technique could still be somewhat artificial—Clarissa Harlowe’s letters seem too long, for example, and the characters’ references to the transfer of letters can sometimes be overly contrived—the physical separation of the correspondents makes the epistolary technique necessary. But in Jude the Obscure Sue and Phillotson rapidly exchange seven letters in less than two pages—while they are still living and

5. Howard Jacobson’s novel, Peeping Tom, contains a marvelous parody of this scene as part of a character’s pamphlet on Thomas Hardy:

“One?”
“Yes—one.”

Sue bent her forehead against the corner of the compartment. “O Jude! I thought you might do it—but I didn’t mean that!”

“So what, for fuck’s sake, did you mean?” Hardy decided against letting him reply. (It was an unnecessary scruple in the event—the book got him into trouble anyway.) (excerpted as “She, to Him” in Butler, p. 81)

6. The explanations can seem especially contrived when they supposedly grow from the concerns of the characters, who often have to write, inside their letters, reasons for narrative conventions that would be important only to a novelist. At one point in Clarissa Lovelace tells his friend: “Thou’lt observe, Belford, that though this was written afterwards, yet (as in other places) I write it as it was spoken and happened, as if I had retired to put down every sentence as spoken. I know thou likest this lively present-tense manner, as it’s one of my peculiaris” (the letter is dated Monday, June 12—just before the rape).
working together. In what amounts to a brief parody of the epistolary novel (a precursor, perhaps, to electronic-mail or fax transmissions), the characters write to each other in exactly the same, troubled manner displayed in their spoken dialogue:

Nearly an hour passed, and then he returned an answer:

I do not wish to pain you. How well you know I don’t! Give me a little time. I am disposed to agree to your last request.

One line from her:

Thank you from my heart, Richard. I do not deserve your kindness. (Part Fourth, III, 271)

The technique is startling, but their words are virtually identical to the dialogue found throughout the book. The series of letters develops because Sue and Phillotson cannot speak to each other directly; the observation that their epistolary manner essentially duplicates their “normal” speech suggests that all the novel’s dialogue is similarly indirect and fragmented. Hardy includes the epistolary sequence between characters who are not separated by distance, making this part of the novel more complex than the situation would seem to warrant. But the awkwardness of the technique in this context underscores that the characters are separated by something more significant than a physical gap: it is an emotional gap; the same gap in mutual understanding that Hardy documents to varying degrees in all his novels.

The problem of communication necessarily affects human relationships, as exemplified by the marriage debate at the center of Jude the Obscure. Of all the elements in the book, Hardy’s treatment of marriage was attacked most viciously by English and American reviewers: he complains in his 1912 Postscript that “some twenty or thirty pages of sorry detail deemed necessary to complete the narrative, and show the antitheses in Jude’s life, were almost the sole portions read and regarded” (ix). But despite the author’s protests to the contrary, the marriage issue is central to Jude and Sue’s relationship and forms the basis of Hardy’s critique of language. Hardy demonstrates that, for the characters in this novel, the word “marriage” no longer signifies anything. When Jude first marries Arabella, he notices that the words in the ceremony suggest a consistency in life which is entirely false:

[They] swore that at every other time of their lives till death took them, they would assuredly believe, feel, and desire precisely as they had believed, felt, and desired during the few preceding weeks. (Part First, IX, 65)

The language of the ceremony implies certainty and order, but the actual experience of marriage is not so easily confined. When Jude learns that Arabella had lied about her pregnancy, he muses that “the immediate reason of his marriage had proved to be non-existent. But the marriage remained” (IX, 71).

7. Alvarez suggests that Hardy may have had a bad ear for dialogue, but then concedes that “clumsiness . . . is part of the nature of the work” (421). I argue that the indirect, strained quality of much of the dialogue points to our inability to understand each other fully.

8. This specific passage offers yet another justification for Hardy’s shifting philosophical and narrative perspectives throughout his writings. When described in this manner, consistency of thought seems impossible.
The meaning of their marriage is gone, but the signifier, the name, remains. "I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas," Jude announces to a crowd at the beginning of the sixth section; the novel's perspective on marriage stresses that it is a social formula, a grouping of words and ideas that fails to represent the actual range of experiences it attempts to define. A striking example of the failure of language occurs when Phillotson allows Sue to leave him for Jude. As the townspeople dispute Phillotson's surrender of his marriage ties, the two factions fail to convince each other. Instead, a physical struggle develops:

they expressed their thoughts so strongly to the meeting that issue was joined, the result being a general scuffle, wherein a blackboard was split, three panes of the school-windows were broken, an inkbottle was spilled over a town-councillor's shirt-front. . . . (Part Fourth, VI, 299)

It is no accident that a blackboard and a bottle of ink are involved: the conflict over marriage disrupts language, and represents the characters' inability to communicate.

Hardy displays similar concerns throughout his career, beginning with his first novel. In *Desperate Remedies* Cytherea Graye comments that other peoples' thoughts of pity would represent only a limited understanding of her actual suffering: "they will not feel that what to them is but a thought, easily held in those two words of pity, 'Poor girl!' was a whole life to me" (XIII, 278-79). Cytherea's awareness that "Nobody can enter into another's nature truly" points to the essential misunderstandings that form the basis of this early novel's sensational plot: the confusion of events results from the confusion of characters. Hardy continues to explore the inability of his characters to understand each other, particularly in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*—but the connection between language and the problem of knowledge, hinted at in Cytherea's early speech, becomes most explicit in *Jude the Obscure*. Sue and Jude, specifically, are Hardy's most literate characters, and they display an awareness of language and literary forms that allows them to confront the novelist's concerns about form and meaning. Throughout the book Hardy gives readers an extensive list of the works Jude and Sue have read, and their dialogue often consists of quotations from Scripture, poetry or philosophy: "J. S. Mill's words, those are," Sue says to Phillotson at one point, "I have been reading it up" (Part Fourth, III, 269). Hardy reinforces the relationship between character and author by allowing Jude and Sue to construct texts of their own. Young Jude imagines the city of Christminster—with a breeze "floating along the streets,

9. Notice here that expressing thoughts becomes a physical act: the discussion gets too heated, and someone throws an inkstand.
10. See, for example, Jude's first visit to Christminster (Oxford), where his imagination summons up the ghosts of authors he has read:

    There were poets abroad, of early date and of late, from the friend and eulogist of Shakespeare down to him who has recently passed into silence, and that musical one of the tribe who is still among us. (Part Second, I, 93)

11. Even better: to conclude an argument, Sue gives Jude the lines of poetry that would satisfy her need for an apology ("Say those pretty lines, then, from Shelley's 'Epipsychidion' as if they meant me!" [Part Fourth, V, 294]).
pulling round the weather-cocks, touching Mr. Phillotson's face, being breathed by him” (Part First, III, 21)—as if he were writing a story. And Sue constructs her own version of the Bible, calling it “a new New Testament”:

“I altered my old one by cutting up all the Epistles and Gospels into separate brochures, and rearranging them in chronological order as written, beginning the book with Thessalonians, following on with the Epistles, and putting the Gospels much further on. . . . I know that reading it afterwards made it twice as interesting as before, and twice as understandable.” (Part Third, IV, 182)

Sue helps Jude letter headstones, and when they get a job relettering the Ten Commandments in a local church, the townspeople worry that they will act as editors, reprinting the laws with the “Nots” left out (Part Fifth, VI, 365). Hardy’s main characters in Jude the Obscure are involved in language and letters to such a degree that they seem aware that they themselves are part of a book: Jude thinks of himself as part of a play, “born to ache a great deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life” (Part First, II, 13), and later he remembers Sue as a series of “subdued lines” (Part Third, I, 184), as if aware that she were represented by lines of type. When Jude tells Sue about his first wife, he observes that “I haven’t seen her for years. . . . But she’s sure to come back—they always do!” (Part Third, VI, 199, Hardy’s ellipsis). He has no reason to believe that Arabella will come back from Australia—unless he knows he is part of a novel which employs coincidence and repetition.

Because of their literary awareness, the characters in Jude the Obscure eventually recognize the same difficulties with interpretation that complicate the novel’s own formal structure, identifying it as artificial. In Part Third, Chapter X, Jude hears a hymn, “The Foot of the Cross,” which seems to express all his own disappointment. In a momentary lapse in judgment, Jude imagines the composer would understand his situation fully:

“He of all men would understand my difficulties,” said the impulsive Jude. If there were any person in the world to choose as a confidant, this composer would be the one, for he must have suffered, and throbb’d, and yearned. (233)

Rejoicing in this vision of mutual understanding, “impulsive Jude” journeys to the composer’s home—only to learn that the author of the hymn has abandoned music in order to make money in the wine business. Jude seeks a confidant, but gets instead a brochure listing “various clarets, champagnes, ports, sherries and other wines” (234). Though the music conveys the emotions the composer had once chosen to duplicate, the stirrings evoked by the hymn no longer match the composer’s state of mind. Music, like everything else in Jude’s world, fails to convey a stable, definite meaning.

12. As a comparison, Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge similarly sees his life as a tragedy, but he does not imagine his experiences being written about, and bound between two covers.

13. Note the plural “they” here, which we could translate to “people of her type.” Jude notices a pattern to Arabella’s behavior that parallels an author’s awareness of characterization and of plot.

14. See also the trick of Fafrae’s apparent emotions in The Mayor of Casterbridge: he sings with “intense local feeling” about Scotland (VIII), but later admits that “it’s well you feel a song for a few minutes and your eyes they get quite tearful; but you finish it, and for all you felt you don’t mind it or think of it again for a long while” (XIV, 108).
But the inability to find definite meaning does not prevent the characters from attempting to interpret their world. When Sue retreats into religion after the death of her children, Jude complains that he does not understand her logic. Sue’s response returns us to music for the analogy:

“Ah, dear Jude; that’s because you are like a totally deaf man observing people listening to music. You say ‘What are they regarding? Nothing is there.’ But something is.” (Part Sixth, III, 424)

The difference between Jude and Sue at this moment—one of them certain that there is no coherent explanation for events (Nothing is there), while the other insists that an interpretation is possible (But something is there)—reproduces the essential conflict of the novel, between experience and order. Earlier in the novel, when Sue asks if she should “overcome her pruderies” and force herself to be happy with Phillotson, Jude must qualify his answer:

Jude threw a troubled look at her. He said, looking away: “It would be just one of those cases in which my experiences go contrary to my dogmas. Speaking as an order-loving man—which I hope I am, though I fear I am not—I should say, yes. Speaking from experience and unbiased nature, I should say no...” (Part Fourth, II, 252)

Jude must speak with two conflicting languages; though he loves order, he cannot help but acknowledge that his experience tends to conflict with his formulas. Phillotson faces this difficulty in response to the same situation: his teachings and social position tell him that he should insist on Sue’s loyalty, but his limited understanding of Sue’s pain insists that he set her free.15 The awareness of different modes of speaking necessitates that the characters consider their dialogue carefully—they must learn to “read” each other, even when they seem to speak plainly. Jude will try to convince himself that he “knew the quality of every vibration in Sue’s voice, could read every symptom of her mental condition” (Part Third, IX, 226, emphasis mine).16 But at the same time they are aware of other layers of meaning, complicating their speech: “there was ever a second silent conversation passing between their emotions” (Part Fourth, I, 244). The characters have dense, literary conversations; interpreting language, they become like authors or critics, constantly sensitive to matters of connotation and ambiguity.17

They display similar concerns in their attempts to interpret events in the novel. The coincidences throughout the novel serve to exaggerate the characters’

15. Phillotson tells his friend: “I shall let her go... I know I may be wrong—I know I can’t logically, or religiously, defend my concession to such a wish of hers; or harmonize it with the doctrines I was brought up in” (Part Fourth, IV, 277). He confronts the conflict between what he “profess[es] to hold” and what his instinct (experience) tells him is right.

16. Another example: Sue imagines “[Jude’s] jealous thoughts, which she read clearly, as she always did” (Part Fourth, I, 244). Such passages seem to affirm a perfect mutual understanding between them, but subsequent passages will dramatize their difficulty in communicating. A few pages later, Sue glosses one of her statements: “I perceive I have said that in mere conversation” (246). There is a distinction between complex, multi-layered dialogue between the lovers, as opposed to bits of “mere conversation,” and such a distinction necessitates that characters constantly work to interpret each other’s language, trying to guess what mode of conversation they adopt at any given moment.

17. In exchanges of letters, the analogy to reading becomes explicit. The narrator observes at one point that “Jude was in danger of attaching more meaning to Sue’s impulsive note than it really was intended to bear” (Part Third, V, 187).
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perception of cause and effect. Jude hears the hymn “The Foot of the Cross” at the end of part three, and Jude’s earlier listening habits seem to cause Sue to play the same hymn at the opening of part four. In relation to another hymn, Jude speculates that his own sins had determined the church’s musical selection for the day:

... he could hardly believe that the psalm was not specifically set by some regardful Providence for this moment of his first entry into the solemn building. And yet it was the ordinary psalm for the twenty-fourth evening of the month. (Part Second, III, 107)

The passage emphasizes Jude’s initial impression, though an actual cause and effect relationship is absent: the selection is only a coincidence, but Jude recognizes Psalm 119 as an exact commentary on his own situation. A more disturbing coincidence occurs when Sue announces that she feels trapped by her marriage with Phillotson: her metaphor is literalized by the cry of a rabbit caught in a trap. The scene is traditionally read as an example of Hardy’s clumsy symbolism: Hardy used the trapped rabbit to comment on Sue’s conversation with Jude. But the symbolism does not exist solely for the reader: the characters see it also. Jude himself validates the “catch” metaphor when he muses in the next chapter about

“... the artificial system of things, under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springes to noose and hold back those who want to progress.” (Part Fourth, III, 261)

The coincidences I’ve cited here are, in the world of the novel, all “accidents”: the characters stumble into external situations that offer appropriate commentary on their lives. The characters’ own methods of interpretation—their conjectures about cause and effect, their attempts to give meaning to their world—make them aware of accidents; they see the structures of coincidence imposed by an order-loving novelist.

The repetitions throughout Jude the Obscure are likewise often accidents, supplied by the narrator to give the novel a coherent shape. Jude’s return with Sue to the same hotel room he recently shared with Arabella, for example, is a repetition he does not intend. But regardless of their origin, the repetitions themselves—or, more accurately, the characters’ awareness of the repetitions—are usually a source of pain to the novel’s inhabitants. Each repetition is a painful reminder of the characters’ failure to move forward: Jude’s ambitious childhood carving, for example—“THITHER J. F.,” pointing to Christminster—taunts him each time he passes the milestone, forcing him to remember his failed ambitions. Phillotson’s own “returning to zero” near the end of the novel involves memory

18. The symbolism is even more exact and gruesome than I indicate here. Sue compares her marriage to the amputation of a limb (Part Fourth, II, 255), and the subsequent discussion of the rabbit in the trap includes a distinction between a “good catch” and a “bad catch,” determined by the amount of damage done to the animal’s limbs: “If it were a ‘bad catch,’ by the hind-leg, the animal would tug during the ensuing six hours till the iron teeth of the trap had stripped the leg-bone of its flesh. . . . If it were a ‘good catch,’ namely, by the fore-leg, the bone would be broken and the limb nearly torn in two” (256-57). The words “good” and “bad” here are, of course, relative: the animal dies either way, but the death is more prolonged and torturous in the first instance.

19. At least, not consciously. For the most extreme argument that “character is fate”—i.e., that the characters themselves determine all that happens in the novels, see Roy Morrell, Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way.
and awareness, “with all its humiliations.” The characters have a literary awareness; they insist on reading a significance into the repetitions they encounter. When Sue watches a wedding ceremony, she compares her own situation to the couple reciting their vows for the first time: “It is not the same to her, poor thing, as it would be to me doing it over again with my present knowledge” (Part Fifth, IV, 344). Their knowledge is the problem: as Jude remarks, “We are horribly sensitive; that’s really what’s the matter with us, Sue!” (345). In this instance Jude and Sue seem to learn from their mistakes, and they return home without repeating those marriage vows. But at the close of the novel, with a horrible sensitivity to what remarriage entails, Jude and Sue renew their vows to Arabella and Phillotson.

I have commented that many of the novel’s repetitions are accidents, but the book’s final marriages demonstrate that the most tragic repetitions result from the characters’ conscious decisions: Jude, although drunk, allows Arabella to engineer their second marriage; Sue forces herself to remarry Phillotson. The characters begin by noticing literary structures in their lives; as the novel progresses, they decide to participate in creating such structures. For example, Jude chooses to return to Christminster during Remembrance Day, as Sue makes clear: “Jude—how sly of you—you came to-day on purpose!” (Part Sixth, I, 389). That Jude forces himself to see “My own failure . . . reflected on me by every one of those young fellows” (390), shows that he is willing to endure pain and humiliation in order to give his life some kind of structure. Adopting the role of the order-loving novelist, the characters “stage-manage” coincidences and repetitions; their desire to locate patterns of meaning leads them to apply a tortured structure to their own lives.

The most torturous event in the book, when Arabella’s boy, Father Time, kills Jude and Sue’s two children and then commits suicide, makes the vital connection between the characters’ language and their attempts to interpret events. A brief discussion with the boy, in which Sue introduces the adult topics of “trouble, adversity and suffering!” (Part Sixth, II, 402), leads Father Time to make a suggestion:

“I think that whenever children be born that are not wanted they should be killed directly, before their souls come to ‘em, and not allowed to grow big and walk about!”

Sue did not reply. . . . (402)

Father Time’s dangerous observation meets with silence. Their conversation concludes with a familiar recognition that language often fails to convey meaning—“I can’t explain” Sue repeats twice (403)—and the child retreats into the back room. Sue notices that Father Time’s subsequent suicide note echoes her earlier conversation with the boy, and “At sight of this Sue’s nerves utterly gave way, an awful conviction that her discourse with the boy had been the main cause of this tragedy” (405). It is the worst reading of cause and effect in the novel, but in some respects Sue is right: the tragedy of Jude the Obscure is the tragedy of discourse. In response to the triplet of tiny corpses, Sue retreats into a decidedly literary interpretation: “Arabella’s child killing mine was a judgment—the right
slaying the wrong” (III, 422). With a sensitivity to language and formal structure, Sue assigns a meaning to her tragedy; she participates in the tortured unity of the novel, to the letter. In the novel’s final pages, Jude, in desperation, exclaims: “Sue! we are acting by the letter; and ‘the letter killeth!’” (VIII, 469). It is a strange epiphany, as if Jude realizes that his quotation from II Corinthians also serves as the epigraph to Hardy’s novel, Jude the Obscure. The epigraph links tragedy with language, but recognizing the tragic pattern does not allow the characters to escape it; instead, their knowledge compels them to participate in the pattern, supplying a tortured form to the novel they inhabit.

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If we read Jude the Obscure as a conventional, linear narrative, we progress from section to section and might attempt to forget the repetitions of situation, where they appear forced or awkward. But the book does not erase its past so easily: Hardy insists on the formal pattern of his novel, pointing out the awkwardness of his repetitions: each time Jude passes his milestone, both he and the reader see the structure that divides the book into six separate sections. Even where the characters attempt to forget the past, Hardy supplies a reminder. At the close of the first section, after he and Arabella have separated, Jude stumbles across a photograph:

It was one which he had had specially taken and framed by a local man in bird’s-eye maple, as a present for Arabella, and had duly given her on their wedding-day. On the back was still to be read, “Jude to Arabella,” with the date. (XI, 84)

Jude buys the photo, and burns it. The photo brings painful memories of their failed marriage, but burning it cannot erase the past: to make the point, an even more powerful reminder—Arabella herself—reappears near the close of the third section. It is significant that such reminders often take a physical form.20 As Jude stares at the photograph he sees his own inscription, written at the height of his love for Arabella; but he also sees “The utter death of every tender sentiment in his wife, as brought home to him by this mute and undesigned evidence of her sale of his portrait and gift” (84). The physical object creates a powerful juxtaposition of two moments in time, creating the kind of poetic structural effect Hardy has explored throughout his career, in the novels, poems and short stories. If we read the entire novel in this manner, the characters’ inability to escape their past—the circular plot that prevents them from moving forward—becomes formally significant. Emphasizing the repetitions and echoes in Jude the Obscure, the six sections of the novel become structures which we must read simultaneously: rather than being a straightforward, linear narrative, the book becomes transparent, and we see its tragedies in its beginnings.21

20. Arabella, I should stress, is the character with the most powerful physical presence in the novel. Even Phillotson’s piano is a physical reminder of his failure: he has never learned to play it, but he transports this large object from house to house throughout the novel.

21. Hardy’s treatment of his characters’ names reinforces these points about memory. Hardy will often delay specifying a character’s name, even when the identity is obvious to the reader. In the fifth section, most of the
Father Time offers a model for this kind of reading. Most critics argue that Father Time fails as a symbol, and as a character: Arthur Mizener criticizes Hardy for “sensational sentimentality” (210n); Ian Gregor says that “Father Time stands apart from the narrative” and “the attempt to integrate Father Time into the novel is not a success” (220-21). Indeed, the novel itself is reluctant to admit him—Arabella mentions a secret on page 222, and nearly a hundred pages pass before we learn that secret is Father Time. Father Time is certainly an awkward presence, but his somber perspective suggests an interesting reading of the novel:

Children begin with detail, and learn up to the general; they begin with the contiguous, and gradually comprehend the universal. [Father Time] seemed to have begun with the generals of life, and never to have concerned himself with the particulars. (Part Fifth, III, 334)

Father Time cannot enjoy any particular scene, because he knows the larger context: “I should like the flowers very very much, if I didn’t keep thinking they’d be all withered in a few days!” (V, 358). An observation about time collapses into a spatial juxtaposition: he sees the living flower and the dead flower in a single moment of vision. Father Time suggests that we can observe the forward movement of the plot, yet still allow all the repetitions of the novel to exist simultaneously—creating a kind of grotesque poetry. After the boy’s suicide, Jude tells Sue “The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us—boys of a sort unknown in the last generation—the outcome of new views of life” (Part Sixth, II, 406). Father Time is not simply a different kind of child, he is the vision of a new kind of narrative. Hardy’s eulogy of Father Time suggests that the child is the focus of the entire novel:

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. (406)

characters converge at the site of the Great Wessex Agricultural Show. “On a certain day,” Hardy writes, “in the particular year which has now been reached by this narrative.” trains arrive from London and Aldbrickham:

from the London train alights a couple; a short, rather bloated man, with a globular stomach and small legs, resembling a top on two pegs, accompanied by a woman of rather fine figure. . . . (Part Fifth, V, 349-50)

The couple is, of course, Arabella and her new husband, Cartlett. Several paragraphs later, another couple’s names are preceded by a similarly anonymous description:

[Arabella and Cartlett] sauntered on, but had barely entered the town when her attention was attracted by a young couple leading a child, who had come out from the second platform, into which the train from Aldbrickham had steamed: . . .

“Sakes alive!” said Arabella.
“What’s that?” said Cartlett.
“Who do you think that couple is? Don’t you recognize the man?”
“No.”
“Not from the photos I have showed you?”
“Is it Fawley?”
“Yes—of course.” (350-51)

A page later, Hardy refers to “The unwitting Sue and Jude, the couple in question” (351). The novel continues to delay names, as if parodying the reader’s obvious knowledge of the characters. The technique emphasizes the characters’ inability to begin their lives again; by not naming them, the prose reads as if we encounter new characters—but, of course, they are all too familiar.
In Hardy’s novel about the failure of language, Father Time’s corpse expresses definite meaning. But this “expression in a single term” is embodied in the most complex figure in the novel. To understand Father Time, we must constantly read in two ways, shifting between child and abstraction, between watching a realistic character and interpreting a formal element. At times it is easy to forget that Father Time is a child—this is Sue’s mistake in her final conversation with him. Such moments, however, do not identify Father Time as an aberration, or suggest that he does not fit into the novel. The jolting movement between character and symbol in the reader’s experience of Father Time, the very awkwardness that many see as this novel’s greatest failure, instead demonstrates that Father Time fits perfectly into the tortured form of *Jude the Obscure*—Hardy’s conventional narrative about the inadequacy of conventional narrative.

**Works Cited**


MIZENER, ARTHUR. “Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy.” *Southern Review* 6 (Summer 1940): 193-213.

