The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims
— The plot and structure of Jude the Obscure —

SATOKO YOSHINO

Introduction

The last novel Thomas Hardy wrote before turning permanently to poetry, Jude the Obscure is considered by many to be his masterpiece. A dark and unrelenting tragedy of unfulfilled aims and thwarted desires, the novel explores the passion of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, their love and their suffering. Hardy's frank presentation of his bleak subject led to contemporary condemnation from critics who found the book too powerful to endure, but that power continues to grasp readers today. In this treatise I would like to explore Hardy's attitude to this novel focusing on the plot and structure.

The structure of Jude is, as Hardy remarks, geometrical. He writes a letter to his friend Edmund Gosse in 1895 as follows:

Your review is the most discriminating that has yet appeared. It required an artist to see that the plot is almost geometrically constructed—I ought not to say constructed, for, beyond a certain point, the characters necessitated it, & I simply let it come. As for story itself, it is really sent out to those into whose souls the iron has entered, & has entered deeply, at some time of their lives.¹

And in 1896 letter to Gosse “The involutions of four lives,” he says, “must necessarily be a sort of quadrille.” (Letters, V2.105) A quadrille is a square dance with five measures for four couples.² Hence the pattern is one of Jude and Arabella, Jude and Sue, Sue and Phillotson, and Arabella and Cartlette. The measures or figures might be seen (just to illuminate the pattern of the quadrille) as dancing to the tune of advances (wishes, dreams) and reversals (disillusion, depression), side-stepping (making changes, compromises) and circling (renewed hopes, renewed frustrations), and returns (a return to any one of the former measures): advances would be noticed in the section of ‘At Marygreen,’ reversals, ‘At Christminster & Melchester’ sections, side-stepping, ‘At Shaston,’ circling, ‘At Aldbrickham and elsewhere’, and returns is in the section of ‘At
SATOKO YOSHINO

Christminster again.¹³

This geometric patterning is also reflected in the journeys and changes of location, frequently undertaken by rail, in keeping with Hardy’s structure. These journeys map a crisscrossing course of lives—ambitions, hopes, dreams, and loves. The first steps are from the birthplace at Marygreen to the city of dreams at Christminster. Then there are crossroads to alternative settings—Melchester, Shaston, and Aldbrickham—where intimate relations between Sue and Jude are complicated by intervening relations: Sue with Phillotson and Jude with Arabella. The last stage of the journey brings Sue and Jude together in Christminster again, but this time as a family, with their children—and thence to the end of the road.⁴

This is a rough sketch of the structure of Jude the Obscure, and in the structure the story develops.

I At Marygreen

In the story of Jude Fawley, who is the stonemason from a poor rural background, Hardy was drawing to some extent to his own experience.⁵ Unlike his Wessex novels, which generally build up gradually, Jude the Obscure plunges us directly into tragedy, or at least the potentialities of tragedy. From the opening pages, Aunt Drusilla reminds us of Jude Fawley’s luckless existence, “I would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi’ thy mother and father, poor useless boy.”⁶ Jude himself has felt “his existence to be an undemanded one,” (15) and indeed wished “that he had never been born.” (31)

The second half of this opening section drives home these feelings without pause—he meets Arabella at the point when his self-education is beginning to take shape, she tricks him into marriage, they have a brutally short and cynical life together, and then she leaves him: Jude walks out to the center of a frozen pond and seeks to drown himself. From the moment when Arabella deserts him some seven or eight years later, he would hardly seem to have known more than the most fleeting moments of happiness.

Looked at simply in the light of events and the speed with which they succeed each other, the whole opening section is so relentless that it operates dangerously near the area of black farce. Perhaps what is so striking about the Marygreen section of the novel is the way in which everything is pushed to extremes—the ugliness of the immediate scene contrasted with the city of light glimpsed through the surrounding mists, Jude’s absorption with the birds and the clout from the Farmer, and the juxtaposition of Jude’s dream of learning:
The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims

‘Livy, Tacitus, Herodotus, Æschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes—’ Ha, ha, ha! Hoity-toity!’ The sounds were expressed in light voices on the other side of the hedge, but he did not notice them. His thoughts went on: ‘—Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Epictetus, Seneca, Antoninus. Then I must master other things:...’ ‘Hoity-toity!’ —but I can work hard. I have staying power in abundance, thank God!...Yes, Christminster shall be my Alma Mater: and I’ll be her beloved son, in whom she shall be well pleased.’...On a sudden something smacked him sharply in the ear, and he became aware that a soft cold substance had been flung at him, and had fallen at his feet. A glance told him what it was—a piece of flesh, the characteristic part of a barrow-pig, which the countrymen used for greasing their boots, as it was useless for any other purpose. (41)

The narrator’s reference to Christ in the early stages of the novel suggests the spiritual nature of young Jude, who describes Christminster as ‘the heavenly Jerusalem’, and later identifies himself with Christminster in scriptural terms: “I'll be her beloved son, in whom she shall be well pleased.”(41) But in the middle of this splendid spiritual reverie Jude is awakened to the reality of the claims of the flesh when Arabella, “a complete and substantial female animal,”(42) strikes him with a pig’s pizzle and therefore years of study are abandoned. “Events did not rhyme as he had thought.”(15) This theme is to be caught again and again in the novel.

What is interesting to note however is that, while the substance of this first section may seem characteristic of Hardy, it is all accelerated in such a way that the impression it makes is laconic, faintly offhand, as if Hardy feels that these extremities of tragedy and unfocused aspiration are much too simple a rendering of experience.

II At Christminster

“It was a windy, whispering, moonless night. To guide himself he opened under a lamp a map he had brought”(91) and so Jude begins his exploration of Christminster. His first encounter is not with the present of Christminster, but with its past: and as he wanders through the deserted streets in the moonless night he hears the voice of the university in the accents of Addison, Gibbon, Peel, Newman and, most clearly, in Arnold’s famous apostrophe:

‘Beautiful city! so venerable, so lovely, so unravaged by the fierce intellectual life of our century, so serene!...Her ineffable charm keeps ever calling us to the true goal of all of us, to the ideal, to perfection.”(94-5)

The clash intimated by Arnold, between the serenity of Oxford and its remoteness from contemporary intellectual concern, foreshadows the stance to be taken by Sue
Bridehead and it is ironically caught in Jude’s first glimpse of her at work in the Anglican bookshop—“A sweet, saintly, Christian business, hers”(103)—while her thoughts dwell on the pagan deities she has bought to decorate her room and the books of Gibbon and Mill which provide her nightly reading.

But for Jude, it is not the intellectual remoteness but the social remoteness which strikes him. “Only a wall divided him from those happy young contemporaries of his with whom he shared a common mental life;...Only a wall—but what a wall!”(100)

Christminster, contemptuously described by Sue as the place where Jude was elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires’ sons, a place composed of ‘fetishists and ghost-seers’, betrays him by its arrogance and exclusivity, represented by the advice of the Master of Biblioll College7 that he should keep to his trade:

‘BIBLIOLL COLLEGE.

‘SIR,—I have read your letter with interest: and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course.

That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. Yours faithfully,

‘T. TETUPHENAY.

‘To Mr. J. FAWLEY, Stone-mason.’ (138)

However, Jude’s fundamental error is his rejection of a moment of realistic insight into the worthwhile nature of his labor as a stonemason, and the opportunities afforded by town life. In any case, he is an impractical dreamer, who has not even found out how to apply for admission to a college. Instead he scrawls his anger on its walls, and in despair recites the Nicene creed in Latin on one of the town’s public houses.

Jude self-consciously regards himself as a symbol of the intellectual and social restlessness of that time. His speech to the crowd, raising the question whether he should attempt to cross social barriers, challenges a complacently exclusive society.

The social criticism of this section is direct and unequivocal: “here in the stone yard was a center of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of the colleges.”(98) But the criticism of Christminster goes beyond a defense of the dignity of labor, it extends to its self-conscious mediaevalism “as dead as a fern leaf in a lump of coal.”(99) The social astringencies of this section, while they are not remarkable in themselves and, are, indeed, commonplaces in the social writings of critics like Arnold, Ruskin and Morris, nevertheless evoke a very different mood from the first section of the novel with its large metaphysical gestures, its sustained air of cosmic gloom.8
III At Melchester

Is it right to equate education with formal learning? Might an education not be found in a vocation pursued away from the college world of Christminster? It is with questions like these in mind that Jude goes to Melchester to the theological college, with a vague intention to enter the Church, but primarily to be near Sue.

Sue Bridehead occupies part of the pattern of contrasts on which Hardy revealed *Jude the Obscure*. Arabella represents the lure of the flesh, but offends Jude by her grossness; while Sue stands for sensitivity and intellect, but frustrates him by her sexual reticence. However, Hardy’s attitude to Sue, who represents Jude’s alternative dream, is profoundly ambiguous. Jude’s first glimpse of her, like his first view of Christminster, is deeply ironic. Her work in an ecclesiastical shop conceals the fact that she is an agnostic intellectual, who among other modern writers reads the philosopher John Stuart Mill. Yet the first image turns out to be the true one, for Sue has a profoundly ambivalent attitude to authority, suggested by her fear of her landlady’s discovery that her little statues are pagan, and confirmed by her decision to marry Phillotson and be a dutiful Christian wife.

She possesses a deeply contradictory personality. A determined individualist who fears marriage as a degrading form of social prostitution, she is deeply narcissistic and neurotically insecure, which results in a farcical vacillation. Having flirted with Jude, enjoyed the games with authority represented by her Training School, and opted for a conventional marriage with a man she does not love, Sue then teases Jude by living with him during the period before her wedding. She also displays her intense jealousy of Arabella’s place in Jude’s sexual life, and her vindictiveness in revenging herself on Jude, while at the same time tormenting herself. Her physical aversion to her husband results in her elopement with Jude. Phillotson recognizes in their almost disembodied unity the kind of intensely spiritual union described by the poet Shelley, and Hardy carries the irony of this understanding further when Sue’s narcissism and desire for control demand that Jude apply to her lines from Shelley’s poem: “A seraph of Heaven, too gentle to be human, Veiling beneath that radiant form of woman...” *(294)*

Up to this point Sue’s role would seem clear and unequivocal. She is, among other things, the skeptical voice of the present age, but scornful of its social exclusiveness and even more of its attachment to a creed outworn. The pieties she respects are those of the free spirit: she is wary of the dead hand of the past, sensitive and open to change. For her, Jude is enslaved to a false dream of learning and an idle religious superstition. The kind of conflict which exists between them is briefly expressed in this exchange:

She was something of a riddle to him, and he let the subject drift away. ‘Shall we go and sit in
the Cathedral?’ he asked, when their meal was finished. ‘Cathedral? Yes. Though I think I’d rather sit in the railway station,’ she answered, a remnant of vexation still in her voice. ‘That’s the centre of the town life now. The Cathedral has had its day!’ ‘How modern you are!’ ‘So would you be if you had lived so much in the Middle Ages as I have done these last few years! The Cathedral was a very good place four or five centuries ago: but it is played out now...I am not modern, either. I am more ancient than mediaevalism, if you only knew.’ Jude looked distressed. (160)

The unhesitating sharpness of Sue’s replies might perhaps alert us to an authorial irony here, but it is a measure of the feeling of the novel that, at this stage, it is Jude’s reactions which take our attention. With our reading of the Christminster section behind us, he would still seem to be the victim of a romantic naiveness, a nostalgic addiction to the past. So when sometime later Sue says, “the mediaevalism of Christminster must go, be sloughed off, or Christminster itself will have to go,” (180) we feel that diagnostic confidence evokes sympathy in the author. When Sue falls foul of the rules governing her Training School, we suppose that the king of criticism against educational institutions operative in the Christminster sections is simply being extended here—the intellectual rigidities of the one being replaced by the moral rigidities of the other.

But it is just here, at the center of the Melchester section, when the pattern of authorial feeling would seem to be becoming increasingly defined, that the novel begins to change tack in an extremely interesting and unexpected way.

Sue having escaped from the confining discipline of the college takes refuge with Jude, and begins to recall her past: “My life has been entirely shaped by what people call a peculiarity in me. I have no fear of men, as such.” (177) For the first time we are given a perspective on Sue other than that of the free spirit, the devoted Hellene, the admiring follower of Mill. The ‘freedom’ she has been at such pains to assert, and which up to this stage in the novel would seem to have provided and unequivocal point of vantage for criticizing Jude’s dream and the institutions which thwart it, is now seen as something much more ambivalent, a nervous self-enclosure, the swift conceptualizing, safe guarding the self against the invasions of experience. Sue’s scrutiny is keen, but it is judiciously angled. The effect of this interplay between her public and private self emerges in this exchange:

‘And I for something broader, truer,’ she insisted. ‘At present intellect in Christminster is pushing one way, and religion the other: and so they stand stock-still, like two rams butting each other.’ ‘What would Mr. Phillotson—’ ‘It is a place full of fetishists and ghost-seers!’ He noticed that whenever he tried to speak of the schoolmaster she turned the conversation to some
generalizations about the offending University. (181)

This is an interesting passage because we can gauge the effect of the personal pressures being exerted on Sue. Her opening remark is of a piece with her general criticism about the intellectual sterility of Christminster and the simile exhibits the familiar self-confidence in her analysis. The effect of Jude's mention of Phillotson is immediately to make that analysis shrill and strained, "It is a place full of fetichists and ghost-seers." (181)

At the very end of the Melchester section there occurs an incident, insignificant in the general development of the novel, but which expresses in a modest but beautifully precise way the series of seemings which the novel as a whole is building up. Greatly moved by a hymn being sung that Easter, 'At the Foot of Cross,' Jude feels that the composer is a man who will understand the problems that beset him, and characteristically, resolves to pay him a visit. The meeting is a crushing disappointment—the composer is interested only in his royalties and has turned to the wine trade for greater financial comfort. (232-5)

The ironies are strident and would seem a further variant on the deceptions of appearance, and generally to be taking up the kind of social criticism present in the Christminster section; there is a gentle deflating of Jude's naiveness. The episode is to have further implications.

IV At Shaston

Shaston, "the ancient British Palladour" (239) is the city of a dream." Settled in Shaston Sue prepared to meet Jude for the first time as Mrs. Phillotson. The afternoon is growing dark and Jude makes his way to the schoolroom where he expects to find her. Seeing it empty he proceeds to play idly on the piano the opening bars of 'At the Foot of the Cross':

Sue sat down, and her rendering of the piece, though not remarkable, seemed divine as compared with his own. She, like him, was evidently touched—to her own surprise—by the recalled air; and when she had finished, and he moved his hand towards hers, it met his own half-way. Jude grasped it—just as he had done before her marriage. (242)

It is the renewal of the relationship which is to culminate in Sue's leaving Phillotson and going to live with Jude. The darkening room and the rich melancholy music conspire to weave the spell which enables their relationship to take on an added intensity, an intensity made possible by the fact that the music succeeds in awakening
SATOKO YOSHINO

Sue’s emotions, but at the same time provides a suitably ‘spiritual’ mode of expression. This episode, coming at the beginning of the Shaston section, initiates an ever increasing concern with Sue which is to dominate the remainder of the novel.12

“We were too free, under the influence of that morbid hymn and the twilight.” (249)

And then an incident occurs: Sue and Jude “kissed close and long.” (260-1) It was a turning point in Jude’s career: his first aspiration—towards academical proficiency—had been checked by a woman (Arabella) and his second aspiration—towards apostleship—had also been checked by a woman (Sue). Sue’s self-reproach and resolution to withdraw from Jude’s company has a fugitive life, and at Shaston we see the break-up of her marriage with Phillotson and the elopement with Jude. When we look at the series of conversations with Phillotson we can see how far Hardy has now taken us into the area of personal relationships. We can catch it revealingly in this exchange, where Sue is attempting some kind of defense of her marital attitudes to Phillotson:

“Yes,’ said she, weeping. ‘I know that! It is wrong and wicked of me, I suppose! I am very sorry. But it is not I altogether that am to blame!’ ‘Who is then? Am I?’ ‘No—I don’t know!’

The universe, I suppose—things in general, because they are so horrid and cruel!’ (266)

That Sue’s reference to ‘the universe’ should come over as simply rhetorical and Phillotson’s pragmatism as both just and solicitous, is an index of the change in mood and direction since the opening sections of the novel. Sue’s critical intelligence may still be on display, but we feel that she is now very much its victim, in the sense that having announced her wish to leave Phillotson and live with Jude, she quotes Mill by way of justifying her action: “J. S. Mill’s words, those are. I have been reading it up. Why can’t you act upon them? I wish to, always.” (269) If this was not so clearly dictated by emotional desperation, it would simply strike us as immature and grossly insensitive to the situation in which she finds herself. This is enforced by the increasing sympathy with which Phillotson is presented throughout the section.

If Jude formally commits himself to Sue now, he does so with an increasing awareness of her enigmatic nature. And Phillotson’s generous farewell tones “You are made for each other,” (288) echo hollowly in the railway carriage as Sue leaves her husband, only to tell Jude that they are not to be lovers in the way he anticipated. He sees her now in a way that he has not seen her before, and though this does not affect his love, a new sharpness of insight is unquestionably present: “Sue, sometimes when I am vexed with you, I think you are incapable of real love” (289): “under the affectation of independent views you are as enslaved to the social code as any woman” (290): “you spirit, you disembodied creature, you dear, sweet, tantalizing phantom—hardly flesh at all; so that when I put my arms round you I almost expect them to pass through you through air.”
(294) And characteristically, Sue's supreme moment of committing herself to Jude is to enter her hotel room—alone.

The deepening analysis of Sue is the main preoccupation and drive of this section of the novel, which is important to see that analysis in its context. And it is a context which is increasingly concerned to ponder the meaning of 'freedom.' All the characters in the Shaston section are, in one way or another, asked to ponder this. Sue, Jude, Phillotson and Gillingham. In Shaston then, Hardy would appear to wipe the slate clean, to give the characters precisely that freedom of decision they have constantly desired and that definition of self they have longed for.¹⁴

V  At Aldbrickham and elsewhere

In the beginning of this section two events are conspired. The first is the arrival of Arabella, when feelings of jealousy precipitate Sue into sharing her bed with Jude. The second is more far-reaching—the arrival of Father Time, the natural son of Arabella and Jude, and it is with this figure that Hardy gives his narrative the last decisive shift.

From his introduction Father Time stands apart from the narrative, and of course at the level of realistic presentation he is very awkwardly accommodated indeed. But Hardy leaves us in no doubt that his role is to be choric:

He was Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through the crevices. A ground swell from ancient years of night seemed now and then to lift the child in this his morning-life, when his face took a back view over some great Atlantic of Time, and appeared not to care about what it saw...He then seemed to be doubly awake, like an enslaved and dwarfed Divinity, sitting passive and regarding his companions as if he saw their whole rounded lives rather than their immediate figures. (332)

It would be foolish to deny that the attempt to integrate Father Time into the novel is not a success: Hardy has set aside the conventions of realism too easily. In a phrase, Hardy is introducing with Father Time the processes of history into the lives of Jude and Sue: his sorrowful contemplative eyes become ours as we watch them desperately attempting to cheat time, repudiating the past, evading the social commitments of the present, indifferent, with their ever increasing family, to the demands of the future. With Father Time their dreamless paradise fades into the light of common day.

This is poignantly revealed in the visit which Jude and Sue pay to the Great Wessex Agricultural Show. It is one of the rare moments when happiness seems to prevail, and it is also one of the rare moments when we see Jude and Sue through the eyes of others, in this case those of Arabella and Cartlett. Jude and Sue arrive by excursion and
wander through the exhibition ground. Entirely lost in each other’s company, they are oblivious of the people around them:

In the meantime the more exceptional couple and the boy still lingered in the pavilion of flowers—an enchanted palace to their appreciative taste—Sue’s usually pale cheeks reflecting the pink of the tinted roses at which she gazed: for the gay sights, the air, the music, and the excitement of a day’s outing with Jude, had quickened her blood and made her eyes sparkle with vivacity. She adored roses, and what Arabella had witnessed was Sue detaining Jude almost against his will... (357)

“I should like to push my face quite into them—the dears!” (358), Sue said. She can encounter the sensual world only when she can impose herself upon it, when it cannot make reciprocal demands, but is simply there to feed the contemplative soul. Such a moment cannot be sustained, and Father Time reflects that in a few days the flowers will all be withered.

The moment of joy is precarious and the shadows of Arabella and Father Time, cast emblematically at the Show, begin to acquire a social reality. Ironically, Jude’s and Sue’s trouble begins with a return to the law which they have both, in their various ways, tried to set aside—a law at once human and divine. Jude, commissioned to re-letter the Ten Commandments in a nearby church, causes a scandal when he is joined in his work by the pregnant, unmarried Sue, and is duly dismissed.

Jude’s life of wandering now begins, his home is uprooted for the second time, his goods are sold. Father Time asks why they must go, and Jude replies sardonically, “Because of a cloud that has gathered over us; though ‘we have wronged no man, corrupted no man, defrauded no man!’” (371) To which Father Time might have added that they have sought to meet no man either. They have neglected ‘the disposition of the universe,’ and in consequence the ‘aerial part’ and ‘the body’ have been kept at war.

The descent into tragedy occurs when Jude’s obsession with Christminster reasserts itself. This comes after the visit of Jude and Sue to the Great Wessex Agricultural Show, a point of equipoise and holiday from care. But the omens of tragedy are present.15

VI At Christminster again

In Jude’s decision to return to Christminster we find a summoning of will and a recognition of the disposition of the universe which has never been present in Sue. For Sue the place still remains what it has always been, ‘a nest of commonplace schoolmasters whose characteristic is timid obsequiousness to tradition.’ But for Jude,
The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims

though he recognizes himself as permanently excluded from it, 'it is still the center of the universe.' This acceptance of possibilities, of change, is a note which characterizes Jude throughout the last tragic section of the novel, a section drawing out a radical difference in response, as Jude and Sue become increasingly enmeshed in the society they have sought to reject.

Once again the epigraph of this section catches the main emphasis. "And she humbled her body greatly, and all the places of her joy she filled with her torn hair." (388) The 'aerial part' now seeks to annihilate 'the body,' and the freedom it seeks is the last freedom of all—the freedom of self-destruction. But 'the body' can no longer be thought of as 'the individual body,' and in destroying herself, Sue destroys the lives of those around her.

The full meaning of Father Time is to become clear in this last section where the social body and the individual body become inextricably united, a recall to Hardy's abiding theme that the human race is 'one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider's web if touched."16

Jude's attitude of mind in returning to Christminster is made clear in his speech to the crowd who have gathered for Remembrance Day. Though it is certainly not free from bitterness, it is clear in its emphasis:

'And what I appear, a sick and poor man, is not the worst of me. I am in a chaos of principles—groping in the dark—acting by instinct and not after example. Eight or nine years ago when I came here first, I had a neat stock of fixed opinions, but they dropped away one by one: and the further I get the less sure I am. I doubt if I have anything more for my present rule of life than following inclinations which do me and nobody else any harm, and actually give pleasure to those I love best...I perceive there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas:'...'(394)

These sentiments give a suggestively defining edge to the way in which Jude has evolved throughout the successive stages of his life—the early metaphysical glooms, the unfocused intellectual and theological ambitions, the formal denial and the retreat into self, and now the attempt to come to terms with a social reality which, harsh and forbidding as it might be, is resistant to prophecy and to judgment. In the last analysis, but a sad irony, assertions of the free spirit are to catch the inflexible tones.

The narrative now leads into the most terrible scene in Hardy's fiction—the killing of the children by Father Time. Although the scene is brutally disturbing in a way which the novel can hardly accommodate, nevertheless its animating purpose is rooted deep within the evolving structure of the novel, and it does not represent a deflection of Hardy's into a momentary despair. The scene is obviously an attempt at the same kind of choric effect as that represented by Father Time himself, a reaching out beyond the

117
SATOKO YOSHINO

particulars of the narrative to an impersonal tragic dimension, a dimension where Father Time ceases to be a child and becomes the whole tale of their situation. So that the author can go on to say: "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)

To say this is not to argue for the success of the scene, but merely to suggest its nature. It also directs attention to the way in which it arises out of the previous narrative, though its relationship is more with the inner drama than with overt incident. And because it is a drama related to Sue rather than to Jude, it demands a new directness of treatment, now that the two characters are treading rather different paths.

To establish a context for the scene we might go back to a conversation at Shaston, referred to earlier, where Sue asks Phillotson for her freedom. To support her point she quotes Mill:

She continued: 'She or he, "who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation." J. S. Mill's words, those are. I have been reading it up. Why can't you act upon them? I wish to, always.' 'What do I care about J. S. Mill' moaned he. (269)

Hardy, like Sue a warm admirer of Mill, chooses this passage—in which the variety and independence of human behavior are defended—to expose Sue's rigidities and intolerance of opinions other than her own. And encompassing that is her total inability to enter into Phillotson's feelings: her intellect is at odds with her sensibility. The point is emphasized later when having left Phillotson, she comes to visit him in his illness, though she "did not for a moment, either now or later, suspect what troubles had resulted to him from letting her go; it never once seemed to cross her mind."(301)

It is precisely this mixture of insensitivity and forthright statement that she displays again in her conversation with Father Time when they are frustrated in their search for lodgings at Christminster. He begins by asking Sue:

'Mother, what shall we do to-morrow!' 'I don't know!' said Sue despondently. 'I am afraid this will trouble your father.' 'Can I do anything?' 'No! All is trouble, adversity and suffering!' 'It would be better to be out of the world than in it, wouldn't it?' 'It would almost, dear.' 'He got up, and went away into the closet adjoining her room, in which a bed had been spread on the floor. There she heard him say: 'If we children was gone there'd be not trouble at all!' 'Don't think that, dear,' she cried, rather peremptorily. 'But go to sleep!' (401-3)
The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims

The situation is now set for the tragedy, and however grotesque the actual incidents that follow, Sue has established a structure of feeling which the boy will carry to a remorseless conclusion: "Done because we are too meny."(405)17

It is literalism for literalism. The opening epigraph of the novel ‘The letter killeh’ has been made fact. Sue reads her own indictment, and her world is shattered. But imprisoned within extremes, she can only exchange the letter of freedom for the letter of renunciation, and though she recognizes that her literalness has provoked the boy’s action, she is unable to assimilate the recognition into behavior. So that she remains unmoved by Jude’s agonized response to her proposed remarriage to Phillotson, “Sue, Sue! we are acting by the letter: and ‘the letter killeth!’” (469)18

The deaths of the children are a decisive point for her, driving her ever deeper into herself, so that although her behavior is now in striking contrast to her previous conduct—the return to the church, the remarriage to Phillotson—her fundamental disposition is unchanged. ‘The aerial part’ and ‘the body’ are still held together only by a fanatical act of will, her ‘enslavement to forms’ of self-renunciation replacing her earlier enslavement to forms of self-assertion. Enclosed within herself, she seals herself off almost literally from human communication: "clenching her teeth she uttered no cry"(480) when Phillotson takes her into his bedroom, and when Jude leaves her for the last time she "stopped her ears with her hands till all possible sound of him had passed away."(472) She has transformed herself into pure will.

To turn to Jude is to find that he has continued to move in a significantly different direction. Since his return to Christminster he has increasingly perceived his tragedy to be inextricably involved with time, place and person. ‘Events did not rhyme as they should,’ that sentiment stands, but the cause is no longer abstract, metaphysical, nor ‘summat in our blood’ as Aunt Drusilla thought. It is Sue, the free spirit, who now voices that position:

‘We must conform!’ she said mournfully. ‘All the ancient wrath of the Power above us has been vented upon us. His poor creatures, and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God!’ ‘It is only against man and senseless circumstance,’ said Jude. ‘True!’ she murmured. ‘What have I been thinking of! I am getting as superstitious as a savage...But whoever or whatever our foe may be, I am cowed into submission. I have no more fighting strength left: no more enterprise. I am beaten, beaten!... ‘We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men!’ I am always saying that now.’ ‘I feel the same!’ (413-2)

And that remains Jude’s attitude to the end. He recognizes with perfect clarity his differences from Sue, that “events which had enlarged his own views of life, laws, customs, and dogmas, had not operated in the same manner on Sue’s.” (415-6) and more

119
generally: “Strange difference of sex, that time and circumstance, which enlarge the views of most men, narrow the views of women almost invariably.” (484)

His remarriage with Arabella is a black parody of Sue’s with Phillotson, the one made possible only by will, the other through torpor. And it is Jude’s remarriage that drives home his own personal tragedy. However much he has come to recognize his tragedy as contingent on circumstance, “the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us,” (484) : however much he has sought to keep the letter informed by spirit, his own tragedy if stark and unrelieved. ¹⁹

Truly, as Hardy says in his preface, Jude’s is a tragedy of ‘unfulfilled aims,’ and that unfulfilment is both public and private, educational and sexual.

Conclusion

In the 1912 Postscript to the original Preface, Hardy said he thought that the cruelty of marriage to one of the parties rendered it ‘essentially and morally no marriage,’ and that this ‘secured a good foundation for a tragedy.’ ²⁰ Jude the Obscure is an angry novel in which marriage is treated bitterly as a tragic farce. Jude is married twice to Arabella, Sue is married twice to Phillotson. Arabella the lawless sensualist and irresponsible mother subverts the stereotype of the fallen woman who traditionally suffers shame and social exclusion, by committing bigamy with Cartlett, marrying Cartlett, and at the end of the novel is pursuing Vilbert with a further marriage in view.

The polarized treatment of these marriages is represented by Arabella and Phillotson. Governed by earthy realism, Arabella regards a husband as a convenient provider of sexual and material comfort, while Phillotson becomes, with his cynical friend Gillingham, the spokesman for the supremacy of social convention. Marriage is revealed as a meaningless contract institutionalizing sexual inequality.

These patterns of futility, in which action is negated by the way individuals end where they began, draws attention to what Hardy admitted is an almost ‘geometric’ narrative structure. ²¹ It is evident in the way Jude and Sue change intellectual positions, but more significantly it offers a pattern of repetition that gives emotional intensity to the novel’s tragic design. Each part of Jude the Obscure begins optimistically but records a process of disillusion and defeat.

Jude’s sense of high purpose at the beginning of Part First is thwarted by his marriage to Arabella, and the part ends with his attempted suicide. At the beginning of the Part Second, Jude enters Christminster with a sense of renewed mission, but this ends in his desparing self-judgment by the well at Marygreen. Part Third sees the flowering of an alternative dream of love with Sue, only to find it dashed by her marriage to Phillotson. Part Fourth promises a new relationship with Sue, but ends
The Tragedy of Unfulfilled Aims

with a frustratingly spiritual bond. Part Fifth begins with Sue’s divorce from Phillotson, but ends in destitution; while Part Sixth opens with the gaiety of the Christminster Remembrance Day crowds and Jude’s hope of finding some work, but ends with his death.

This inexorable but intermittent decline towards tragedy underpins the fatalistic structure of a novel which Hardy himself described in the 1912 Postscript as containing ‘certain cathartic Aristotelian qualities.’ Jude, the sensitive, idealistic tragic hero, in striving to overcome the social obstacles to his vision and his need for love, brings upon himself his own nemesis, but through suffering he gains a tragic understanding of his identity, and also of the forces that have shaped his experience.

Notes

2 A quadrille is a square dance performed typically by four couples and containing five figures, each of which is a complete dance in itself.
3 The real names of the places described in Jude the Obscure: Marygreen is a village in Berkshire, Christminster is Oxford, Melchester is Salisbury, Shaston is Shaftesbury, and Aldbrichram is Reading. (Letters, V2.), 130-31.
5 Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 32-33.
6 All quotations from Jude the Obscure are taken from The works of Thomas Hardy in prose and verse, with prefaces and notes, Prose Vol. III (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1984).
7 Biblioll College might be Balliol College of Oxford University.
9 Like Sue’s case, Hardy’s attitude to Jude is profoundly ambivalent, veering between sympathy, mockery, and bitterness at Jude’s victimization. Hardy’s complex treatment of Jude and Sue depends on a shifting point of view, which ranges from admiration and sympathy to mockery and anger. However, underlying this changing perspective is the novel’s major ironic pattern: the way Jude and Sue exchange places.
10 “Say those pretty lines, then, from Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion’ as if they meant me,” she solicited, slanting up close to him as they stood. But Sue Bridehead is more Shelleyan than even Shelley’s Emilia in the poem.
11 At the beginning of Shaston section Hardy describes: As Drayton sang it, “Shaston, the ancient British Palladour, ‘From whose foundation first such strange reports arise,’” was and is, in itself the city of a dream.
12 In “Sue Bridehead, The Woman of the Feminist Movement” (Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure, ed. Harold Bloom, 1987), Kathleen Blake analyzes Sue: “Sue attempts a daring and dangerous combination of gravitation and rejection. This is her method. She says that she owes all of her advantages to a certain peculiarity that has shaped her life.” 87.
13 Hardy, like Sue a warm admirer of Mill, chooses this passage in which the variety and
independence of human behavior and defended to expose Sue's rigidities and intolerance of
options other than her own.
14 Ian Gregor says in the above writing: “Sue begins a life with Jude. Jude formally turns his
back on ambitions, burning his books, and going to live the woman he loves. Connections with
the past too are formally severed as Aunt Drusilla dies, and with her the old Wessex of legend
and the family curse.” 47-8.
15 Sue's final capitulation to convention is brought about by the horrible deaths of her children at
the hands of Father Time.
16 In a letter to Florence Henniker dated November 10, 1895, Hardy writes on Jude the Obscure:
“Though not a novel with a purpose, I think it turns out to be a novel which ‘makes for’
humanity—more than any other I have written.” (Letters, V2.), 94.
17 Here Hardy's allusions to tragic Greek drama (Antigone and Agamemnon are quoted by
Jude), culminate in a tragic conclusion intensified by the extraordinary suffering of Jude and
Sue, and by the overwhelming sense of waste. Furthermore, without the children the plot
advances in tune to the rhythm of tragic climax.
18 Hardy's epigraph to the title epitomizes the plot structure: “The Letter Killeth” (2 Corinthians
3:6). The full quotation goes, “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” It refers to the law
of matrimony, but more generally it applies to the bureaucratic impact of church and state on
individual lives.
19 Janet Burstein, “The Journey beyond Myth in Jude the Obscure” (Thomas Hardy's Jude the
like the ‘one corporeal frame’ envisioned by Hardy, but the novel does suggest that this may be
a new ‘harmony’ to be sought by those who would journey beyond myth.”
20 In Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel,1966, Hardy writes: “a marriage should be dissolvable
as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties...and it seemed a good foundation for the
fable of a tragedy.” 34.
21 See Geoffrey Harvey, Thomas Hardy (London: Routledge, 2007), 92. Hardy's characters try
to act within their 'geometrically constructed' system of marital and symbolic associations to
accommodate their desires and needs.