

An Examination of Hardy's Idea of New Woman in *Jude the Obscure*

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Jude the Obscure (1895), written by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), is his last novel. After this novel was published, he was bitterly criticized by critics and readers for indictment in late Victorian England: "the Bishop of Wakefield announced in a letter to the papers that he had thrown Hardy's novel into the fire" (Hardy, *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*, 288). Hardy said that the critical attacks "completely cured me of further interest in novel-writing" (294). He, therefore, became a poet in his second great career:

Perhaps I [Hardy] can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. (302)

However, *Jude* is not a problem-novel obviously although Hardy was criticized because he deals with sexual relationships between men and women and a heroine who suffers from an unjust marriage in this novel. *Jude* is positioned as one of the New Woman novel. Sue, heroine in this novel, is an example of a New Woman. The word "New Woman" is defined in *Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era* as follows.

Largely a literary phenomenon of the 1890s, the New Woman became a symbol for the changing perceptions about women's roles in society that emerged during the 1860s and 1870s. The New Woman was middle-class, single, university educated, well-read, employed, athletic, rationally dressed, open about sexuality, and desirous of attaining political and sexual equality. She valued independence and action for the common good over traditional ideals of feminine self-sacrifice. (110)

Sue struggles to be liberated from her traditional role and personality. According to *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1891* Hardy has recorded the fact that Sue was "a type of woman which has always had an attraction for me" (272) although "the difficulty of drawing the type" (272) had delayed his attempt to represent her. She is an attractive New Woman. I will particularly focus on Sue's disobedience to the marriage system and sexual issue and examine her in relation to elements of the New Woman.

Sue Bridehead boldly refuses a civil marriage. She hesitates to marry Jude, who is her cousin, although she loves him. The reason why she refuses marriage to him is due to

her idea of being liberated from the Victorian marriage system. She hates the relationship between husband and wife, which is accepted as loving each other under a Government stamp. She thinks that relationships with the opposite sex are not composed by the law.

I [Sue] think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp, and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you—Ugh, how horrible and sordid! (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* 259)

This quotation shows her disobedience to the marriage system. In her opinion a couple need not get married as long as there is a strong bond of affection between men and women. In addition Sue points out that

Fewer women like marriage than you [Jude] suppose, only they enter into it for the dignity it is assumed to confer, and the social advantages it gains them sometimes. . . (260)

She thinks that marriage is for respectability and convention for a lot of women so they follow the marriage law. On the other hand, she does not follow it and marry Jude because she is quite willing to be without “a dignity” and “the social advantage” and she is bound to him by a strong affection. She gets rid of social convention and desires male-female relationships which are not restricted by a law, a rule and a system. She is a progressive woman because her value toward marriage is different from the traditional value in Victorian era. Therefore she has an aspect of New Woman who has an independent spirit. Moreover her opposition to the marriage system intensifies the reason of her marriage with old Phillotson. Although she does not love him as a man, she accepts a proposal from him impulsively because she is offended by the fact that Jude was married to Arabella, who was a glamorous woman. As a result she takes an increasingly strong attitude toward a marriage system. She has understood that women are not equal to men in a civil marriage. Actually women’s situations were much lower than men at that time as mentioned in *A Short History of the Woman’s Movement in Great Britain* by Ray Strachey:

This, in plainer language, meant that the property, the earnings, the liberty, and even the conscience of a wife all belonged to her husband, as did also the children she might bear. The incorporation and consolidation were complete, “my wife and I are one, and I am he”. . . (15)

Sue appreciates that a civil marriage is unequal for women after her marriage to Phillotson. She claims that a marriage ceremony in a church is humiliating:

I [Sue] have been looking at the marriage service in the prayer-book, and it seems to me very humiliating that a giver-away should be required at all. According to the ceremony as there printed, my bridegroom chooses me of his

own will and pleasure; but I don't choose him. Somebody *gives* me to him, like a she-ass or she-goat, or any other domestic animal. (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* 170)

According to the prayer-book men are given the right to choose their wives while women are not. Furthermore women are handed over to their bridegrooms by a giver-away as if they are domestic animals. This representation reveals that women are not treated even as human. Sue finds such an unfair treatment toward women and heightens anti-marriage sentiments. However, she is also inexperienced and naïve because she does not understand the real significance of marriage. As a result, she makes a mistake by marrying Phillotson.

One of the reasons for her objection against marriage is that it is unfair for women. Another reason is an acceptance of a sexual relationship with her husband. She rebels against having intercourse with Phillotson, as can be seen in the following quotation: “. . . that though I [Sue] like Mr. Phillotson as a friend, I don't like him—it is a torture to me to—live with him as a husband!” (212) As the marriage with Phillotson is a warning to Jude for her, she only obeys the law formally. Therefore in her opinion marriage does not require a physical relationship with her husband while for him a platonic relationship with his wife is unexpected. It is clear that she does not understand the meaning of marriage. She is selfish and inexperienced. However, she has an element of a New Woman in a sense that she never compromises on a marriage system as she leaves her husband. Let us consider the following quotation.

Jude, before I [Sue] married him [Phillotson] I had never thought out fully what marriage meant, even though I knew. It was idiotic of me—there is no excuse. . . . I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one had done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women, only they submit, and I kick. . . (215)

The last sentence of this quotation is particularly important, because her word “I kick” proves that she is a New Woman who is disobedient to an unsatisfying social system, although most women submit. In a 1912 postscript, Hardy describes his idea about women's unreasonable situations under a marriage:

My [Hardy's] opinion at that time, if I remember rightly, was what it is now, that a marriage should be dissolvable as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties – being then essentially and morally no marriage. . .¹

In fact Sue offers Phillotson a divorce although it is difficult for women to ask their husband to divorce. However, she refuses to follow social conventions when she realizes

¹ Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. (London: Macmillan, 1979) 29.

that they are wrong. She wants to live honestly with her feeling. She is liberated from the roles of a wife and bucks a social convention. It follows from what has been said that Sue is a New Woman. This section mentioned her critical opinion about the marriage system. Next, I will focus on her idea of sexuality.

As I said earlier, Sue expresses clearly that she feels displeasure at sexual intercourse with Phillotson. Thus sexual issues are depicted vividly in *Jude* so this novel was criticized in many fields which include critics and readers. Hardy was worried that sexual issues may offend his readers. However,

When the tempo of the feminist debate on sexual matters reached a peak in the nineties, Hardy, by then famous, felt accordingly released from editorial fetters, and presented his readers, in *Jude the Obscure*, with an uninhibited exposition of their sexual dilemmas. (Fernando 135)

Sexual issues are important theme in this novel.

Sue is fastidious about the sexual relationship between men and women, as Lloyd Fernando, in "*New Women*" in *the Late Victorian Novel*, supposes that "Sue personifies the extreme refinement of sexual sensibility" (143). She firmly rejects having sex with Phillotson during their married life. She jumps from the second floor dangerously to avoid a sexual relationship with him. In addition, another example is shown by her relationship with an undergraduate at Christminster which is a model of Oxford.

We [Sue and an undergraduate] used to go about together—on walking tours, reading tours, and things of that sort—like two men almost. He asked me to live with him, and I agreed to by letter. But when I joined him in London I found he meant a different thing from what I meant. He wanted me to be his mistress, in fact. . . (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* 148)

She has lived together with him without being formally married. Her remark that "He wanted me to be his mistress" shows that platonic love is her ideal. She forces him to live with her without sex but he expects sexual relations with her. She, therefore, consequently leads him to death. It seems that Sue trifles with men as Robert B. Heilman acutely pointed out that Sue is "the true ultimate coquette". However, her ideal in companionship with men is platonic love and friendship. The reason why she is fastidious about sex is that she keeps an equality of position with a man, as I have mentioned in the preceding section. She describes association with an undergraduate as "like two men almost." She thinks that she can keep a relationship "like two men almost" by holding platonic love. A sexual relation is a threat to women's independence when they want to be equal with a man. For her independence she associates with men like a relationship between two men. However, that does not mean she does not have sexual desire at all. She suffers from restraining her

sexual desire toward Jude because she is genuinely attracted to him. In their romantic scene she says "But there, there, darling; I [Sue] give you [Jude] back your kisses; I do, I do!" (389-90) She cannot restrain her passion for him while she criticizes herself for a grossly woman after this occurrence. She struggles with a dilemma as she has violent and uncontrollable passion. She shows a negative attitude toward sex while she cannot completely contain sexual drive. However, it is natural for men and women to have irrepressible sexual feelings "because sexual passion ruled them [men and women] far more strongly than was acknowledged." (Fernando 134) Sue has children as a consequence of passion with Jude. Sue and Jude raise their two children and Little Father Time, Jude and Arabella's son, without being married. After having children she tries to return to social convention gradually in spite of violent anti-marriage sentiments: "I [Sue] suppose, dear, we [Sue and Jude] must pluck up courage, and get that ceremony over?" (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* 279) It is difficult for a mother to resist the social system because children need to be raised in society. The disfavor with which Jude is dismissed from his job and they are ejected from their lodging is the symbolic representation of society never permitting resistance against rule and convention. Her reason is ruined by the grotesque death of her children. Little Father Time kills his two brothers and commits suicide because he cannot stand a severe life which lodgings are given his family and his father is fired from his job. Their deaths show that society kills them because of their parents's disobedient way of living. Her independent spirits are grievously impoverished because of the shocking occurrence. The following quotation shows her feeling about her children's deaths: "Arabella's child killing mine was a judgement—the right slaying the wrong." (350) Sue takes it for granted that Arabella's child, Little Father Time, killed Jude and Sue's two children. The phrase "the right slaying the wrong" shows that it is right that a legitimate child between a married couple, who are Jude and Arabella, kills illegitimate children. She accepts that her way which objects against a Victorian marriage law is wrong and she returns to a Victorian marriage system although she bitterly refused it. Therefore she remarries Phillotson because she admits that the connection between Sue and Jude which need not marriage as long as they love each other is a mistake. She returns the more fervently to the traditional fold and asks with gritted teeth for Phillotson's conjugal embrace. The characteristic of being vivid as the New Woman is not shown her ironically although she returns to the Victorian social convention.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy presents with a hard precision some of the new truths which had emerged about the relationship among sexual desire, women's liberation, and social convention. It is obvious that Sue is a New Woman who has an independent spirit and claims an equal right to men. Actually, in his 1912 Postscript, Hardy noted a critic's

view that Sue “was the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousands every year—the woman of the feminist movement—”.² However, she fails as a New Woman in the end of the story, that is to say the New Woman’s limitation. Hardy does not describe a strong New Woman who urges a resistance against social rules and traditional conventions although he has “his sympathy with, and his understanding of, issues involved in the movement for female emancipation” (Fernando 134). Hardy’s idea about “the question of matrimonial divergence” is shown the following quotation:

Women often had the worse part to bear in marriage, and he [Hardy] showed this with increasing explicitness in every new novel. However, he did not consider that “the question of matrimonial divergence” could be resolved fully by simply restoring women to equal status with men. (Fernando, 134)

Even though equal rights with men maybe given to women, it is difficult to solve the problem of husband and wife completely. The power of a social system which has continued to exist for a long time in British society is extremely strong. Therefore Sue is defeated in a social system’s force and her heart is torn in the end. By describing her defeat Hardy caricatures the power of a social system, law and convention with irony.

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² Hardy 30.

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