

## Thomas Hardy's Feminist Consciousness in *Jude the Obscure*

FANG Liqing<sup>[a],\*</sup>; JIANG Weiqing<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Zhejiang A&F University, Lin'an, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China.

\* Corresponding author.

Supported by Hangzhou Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences (No. B14WX03).

Received 5 November 2014; accepted 25 January 2015

Published online 16 April 2015

### Abstract

This paper tries to explore Thomas Hardy's feminist consciousness in his last novel *Jude the Obscure* by analyzing the characterization of the heroine Sue Bridehead, his deep sympathy for this Victorian woman, and his criticism of patriarchal ideology. It is argued that Sue's anti-marriage pronouncements, her refusal to conform to the traditional feminine role, and her challenge of accepted ideas of marriage and maternity, are actually a projection of Hardy's personal views and criticism on marriage as a social institution, all of which are evidence to unveil Hardy's sensibility that is feminist.

**Key words:** Thomas Hardy; Feminist consciousness; Anti-marriage; Sue Bridehead; *Jude the Obscure*

Fang, L. Q., & Jiang, W. Q. (2015). Thomas Hardy's Feminist Consciousness in *Jude the Obscure*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(4), 89-93. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6445> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6445>

As a writer of novels, Thomas Hardy had a deeply intuitive understanding of female nature, and was especially good at dealing with women's grief, and experience of sorrow—female fragility, women's pain, the pain of living as a woman. His novels are love stories, connected with gendered—based issues and ideologies of the Victorian society. As D.H. Lawrence observes, tragedy in Hardy's novels is associated with the fate of individuals revolving against the society's conventional standards of behavior. Women in Hardy's novels struggle to achieve

self-fulfillment in the society deeply entrenched in the concept of male superiority and female submission (Kaur, 2005, p.52). They were the weaker sexes, subject to that law which makes the weaker the natural prey of the stronger. In presenting these dumb, even dim specimens of females going like cattle uncomplainingly through the slaughter of human life, Hardy is alternately moved by the dynamic of agonized pity for which he has become famous, and a lingering irritable suspicion of women's worthlessness, their inherent deserving of such a fate.

Hardy became more and more outspoken in displaying his interests for women's causes with the passage of time. This paper tries to explore his feminist sensibility in his last novel *Jude the Obscure* (Hardy, 1969), from the following perspectives: the figure of a New Woman heroine Sue Bridehead, and Hardy's cynicism about marriage as a social institution.

### 1. SUE'S NEW WOMAN FEATURES

Thomas Hardy was among novelists who joined the battle for artistic freedom and began to write explicitly about topics associated with the New Woman. Heroines refused conform to the traditional feminine role, and challenged accepted ideas of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or in any way argued the feminist cause (Cunningham, p.3) *Jude the Obscure* appeared at the point of its highest popularity, in which his earlier views on marriage are projected onto the then fashionable figure of a New Woman heroine Sue Bridehead (Cunningham, 1978, p.103).

Sue, though taking many of her characteristics generally from the earlier heroines, has the distinctly contemporary features of the New Woman (Cunningham, 1978). Hardy said he had been told by a German reviewer that Sue Bridehead was "the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice in her thousand every year—the woman of the

feminist movement—the slight, pale bachelor girl—the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities as yet; Who does not recognize the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession...” (Williams, 1984, p.184) Sue is a daring and brilliant thinker. “Her intellect sparkles like diamonds” says Phillotson (p.242), Jude calls her “a woman-poet, a woman-seer” (p.369). She emerges as “a distinct type — a refined creature, intended by Nature to be left intact” (p.361), and is “impossible as a human wife to any average men” (p.197). She is Hardy’s most intellectual heroine, emancipated and unconventional in many ways. Sue’s New Woman feature emerges in a variety of ways.

One striking element in the early character of Sue is her rationalism and anti-church bias. Hardy ironically contrasts this with her money-earning employment, which is designing illuminated texts for churches. The model of Jerusalem, displayed for the edification of the school children, cannot hold her interest for long. From her standpoint, her words on the subject are perfectly just and logical, however disconcerting to the orthodox: “There was nothing first-rate about the place, or people, after all — as there was about Athens, Rome, Alexandria, and other old cities” (p.113). Christminster, to her, is “a place full of fetishists and ghost seers” (p.159). She is impatient of its medievalism because she has reached the stage of thought, which recognizes that a beautiful thing is not necessarily true in the objective sense, and that underneath outward peace and grandeur may exist a world of prejudice, injustice and narrowness. Jude, finding her employed as an ecclesiastical designer, expects her to be imbued with the Christminster spirit; instead of which she proves to be out of sympathy with the place, with her occupation and with the beliefs, which it subserves. This distaste extends even to Gothic architecture, and the immediate cause of her dismissal from Miss Fontover’s shop is a quarrel over two statuettes of Venus and Apollo.

Sue has been no ordinary girl. She lives away from her family and mixes with men as friends without any sentimental complications ensuing on her side. Her lifestyle is of exceptional freedom for a woman at that time. Her “curious unconsciousness of gender” (p.157) is indeed the salient point in her character. Sue’s basic assumptions are quite different from the sheltered Victorian heroine. One of her fundamental objections to marriage is that

“It is as culpable to bind yourself to love always as to believe a creed always, and as silly as to vow always to like a particular food or drink” (p.253).

She feels that her honor and conscience allow her to be released from marriage

“if it is only a sordid contract, based on material convenience in house holding, rating, taxing, and the inheritance of land and

money by children, making it necessary that the male parent should be known” (p.220).

Sue has in mind particularly an extreme sexual fastidiousness, which makes her withhold herself from even those men to whom she is keenly attracted. “I have never yielded myself to any lover”, she tells Jude, “I have remained as I began.” (p.156) She takes some pride in her ability to mix with men “almost as one of their own sex” (p.115). In her disclosure to Jude of her early life — so unlike Tess’s confession to Angel! — She describes how she lived with a Christminster undergraduate in London for fifteen months of “friendly intimacy” (p.115), refusing to become his mistress because she was not

“in love” with him. In her dealing with Jude, she is happy to live with him, but she will be neither his wife nor his mistress. One of her excuses for refusing to marry Jude is that “an iron contract should extinguish your tenderness for me and mine for you” (p. 271).

Later she marries Phillotson in the sense of having no physical life. When she discovers that physical and intellectual incompatibility makes her marriage to Phillotson impossible, she goes to Jude to continue the spiritual marriage, bodiless. Her shrinking from sex partly of course, a personal peculiarity, can also be turned against the conventions of marriage:

“What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes... the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a matter whose very essence is its voluntariness.” (p.224)

To Hardy, Sue is a distinctly modern product, conditioned by the growth of intellectual skepticism and modernist sensibility when the situation of women changed radically in the last third of the nineteenth century: from subordinate domesticity and Victorian repression to the first signs of emancipation. So that while Sue is an intensely individualized figure, she is also characteristic of a moment in recent history; indeed, the force with which Hardy has made her so uniquely alive depends a great deal on the accuracy with which he has placed her historically. Sue is Hardy’s equivalent of the advanced intellectual circle at his time. Her rebellious spirit represents the sentiments of advanced intellectuals at large, and it suggests that men wishing to be more than dumb clods must live in permanent doubt and intellectual crisis, and that for men life has become inherently problematic, because conventions and religion have become stale and outworn. When Hardy presents to readers Sue’s advanced ideas, he is foreshadowing the turmoil of an entire social group.

---

## 2. SUE’S BREAKDOWN

---

Sue, a natural rebel, is to be broken like a horse at the end of the novel. Women were still the ‘Weaker’ on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and most likely to go to pieces if anything

went wrong (Williams, 1984, pp.182-185). Hardy seems to be building her up into a model of the New Womanhood in her theory, but on the other, he shows her to be an entirely typical feminine woman in her practice.

*Jude*, in the last analysis, is a novel dominated by psychology, and the psychological portrait of Sue Bridehead is great in literary history. One aspect of Hardy's characterization of Sue is his almost prescient understanding of the psychology contradictions which independent thought and action could set up in a woman. Like Angel Clare, Sue Bridehead has all the intellectual qualifications for being "advanced", but breaks down when her ideals are confronted by experience. Intellectually and in theory she is mistress of herself and knows what she ought to do; but when faced with an emotional problem, she cannot gauge her own feelings from one minute to the next. She is swayed by every wind that blows —affection for Jude, jealousy of Arabella, repulsion for Phillotson. She lacks the force and power to take her destiny into her own hands. It is this inconsistency between practice and principle that drags her down in the end.

Sue's discontinuity between practice and theory appears in many ways. Look at her remarks on marriage service:

"I 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, the 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." (p.179)

At the same time she is quite willing to go through this ceremony with a man she is not in love with anyway, so she hardly acts on her principles.

Sue's self-contradiction is evident right from the beginning, for example very early in the book when she buys the two plaster statuettes of Venus and Apollo — gods of love and beauty ousted by sin-soaked Christianity. Apparently trivial, this incident is in fact very significant as it is the first time we see Sue at all closely. The statuettes symbolize Sue's emancipation from conventional religion — Hardy carefully contrasts them with the images of Catholic saints Sue sells every day in the religious knick-knack shop where she works: "Anything is better than those everlasting Church fallals!" (p.100) she says. But although much excited by her purchases, Sue also feels guilty and embarrassed by them:

They seemed so very large now that they were in her possession, and so very naked. Being of a nervous temperament she trembled at her enterprise... After carrying them a little way openly an idea came to her, and, pulling some huge burdock leaves, parsley and other rank growths from the hedge, she wrapped up her burden as well as she could in these, so that what she carried appeared to be an enormous armful of green stuff gathered by a zealous lover of nature... But she was still in

a trembling state and seemed almost to wish she had not bought the figures (p.99).

The incident must be seen as characteristic of Sue's emotional instability over issues where she wishes to assert her intellectual independence.

Such duality of her nature makes her extremely liable to self-destruction. When Father Time kills himself and the children of Jude and Sue, Sue is unbalanced by this disaster. In spite of her disdain for Christian doctrine, she cannot rid herself of the belief that it is a sign of God's displeasure with her unconventional marriage to Jude, and feels herself to be a sinner pursued by a just God. Marriage she comes to regard as a holy and sacrament bond, which cannot be dissolved. She is still, in the eye of God, the wife of Phillotson. And so the horror mounts in the closing scenes. She leaves Jude, goes back to Phillotson, forcing herself to do the housework which she dislikes "to discipline myself" (p.415) and assuring her husband that, in the words of the once-despised marriage service, she wants to honor and obey him to make amends for her momentary surrender to "the flesh —the terrible flesh —the curse of Adam!" (p.362) she determines to make her ultimate sacrifice "on the altar of duty" (p.362), and thus destroys forever the possibility of happiness for either herself or her lover. The intellectual framework of emancipation in her totally breaks down.

Sue's bleak progress sliding from clarity and courage to breakdown and fear is closely linked with her nervous frailty. The "nerves" which seemed to an early reviewer of *Jude* to qualify Sue Bridehead as the "first delineation in fiction of ...the woman of the feminist movement" prepare her from the beginning for her final abandonment of independent choice. She is seen as a "pert little thing...with her tight-strained nerves" (p.117), as an "ethereal, fine-nerved, sensitive girl" (p.230). Sue's personal strength is an ambiguous benefit. The "fine nerves" which make her sensitive constitute her exceptional vulnerability. Hardy shows the steps in Sue's weakening for the "mental volte-face" (p.374), which is her defeat. Hardy shows these stages in language, which gives slightly more weight to their psychological than to their emotional character. After Sue and Phillotson agree to live separately in the same house, for instance, "the irksomeness of their position worked on her temperament, and the fibers of her nature seemed strained like harp string" (p.237). When she actually leaves Phillotson and joins Jude, her behavior is marked by "discontinuity". She says to Jude, "I suppose I ought to suddenly love him, because he has let me go so generously and unexpectedly" (p.251). The cause of this discontinuity is nervous. When the disaster of the children's death occurs, "Sue's nerves utterly give way...throwing her into a convulsive agony which knew no abatement" (p.354). Finally, when she sacrifices herself on "the altar of what she pleased to call her principles" (p.388), her nerves, we are told, have made

their outrage visible on her body: "the strain on her nerves had preyed upon her flesh and bones, and she appeared smaller in outline than she had formerly done" (p.389). Sue's shrunken outline is not merely physical, for by the time she had decided to go back to Phillotson, to allow the triumph of orthodoxy, she had already become "such a mere cluster of nerves that all initiatory power seemed to have left her" (p.379).

### 3. HARDY'S CRITICISM OF MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Sue is damned partly by her very being. She contains always the rarest, most deadly anarchy in her own being. But she is far more the victim of the institution of marriage. The reader can perceive that it is society which has ordained the marriage contract to be all but irrevocable, which is mainly responsible for condemning Jude and Sue to a fate much worse than they deserve. If Jude had not been bound by his tie to Arabella when he and Sue first met, Sue might have married him rather than Phillotson and overcome her repugnance for the irrevocableness of marriage that was later accentuated by society, or even just tolerated by society, without the sanction of a license for their living together, their peculiar hereditary repugnance for the strongly tied bonds of marriage would never have spoiled their life together. It was the sacerdotal view of marriage as an indissoluble bond, which led her back to Phillotson and brought about the final sordid ending. So we come again to the opinion of the world —to the "conventions" and "moral hobgoblins" —as the provoking cause of the action. The novel criticizes more strongly than does any previous work the irrevocable character of the marriage contract, which permanently bound together people whose temperaments were, or had become, incompatible.

Sue and Jude are unconventional, rebellious and critical of the social order. Just as Hardy chose to present Tess as "a pure woman", so here he invites the reader to regard Jude and Sue as living in sin — or at any rate unworthily — when they are with their legal spouses, but pursuing an ideal when they are living together without the benefit of a marriage ceremony. In effect Hardy is renewing the questions asked about Tess's relationships with Angel Clare and Alec D'urberville. What really does constitute a marriage? How do you reconcile the inner subjective forces with social circumstances? Where does the flesh have mastery, and where the spirit? (Fang, 2003, pp.75-88).

Hardy, whose first marriage was unhappy, had unconventional views on marriage. He thought that marriage should be 'primarily' for the happiness of 'the parties themselves' rather than for any abstract notion of the good of the community. As for the existing laws governing marriage, he called them 'the gratuitous cause

of at least half the misery of the community', and could only account for them as the product of 'a barbaric age' of 'gross superstition' (Stubbs, 1979, p.60). Hardy's bitter views of marriage are threaded through the novel.

Apart from Sue's anti-marriage pronouncements mentioned previously, which are indeed Hardy's own personal ideas; attacks on marriage pervade the commentary. Hardy writes in his description of Jude and Arabella's wedding:

The two 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. What was as remarkable as the undertaking itself was the fact that nobody seemed at all surprised at what they swore (p.61).

As a careful reading of this passage shows, the real criticism is directed against the social necessity of marriage in every case, even when people are as ill fitted for marriage as Arabella and Jude.

Hardy also comments fairly directly on Sue's return to Phillotson — it is "the self-sacrifice of the woman on the altar of what she was pleased to call her principles" (p.388). And when Jude begins to reflect on his matrimonial situation his thoughts are expressed in a style far closer to that of Hardy's narration than what we know of Jude's tone:

There seemed to him... something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a canceling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labor, of forgoing a man's one opportunity of showing himself superior to the lower animals, and of contributing his units of work to the general progress of his generation, because of a momentary surprise by a new and transitory instinct which had nothing in it of the nature of vice, and could be only at the most called weakness (p.66).

Though Jude is said at the beginning of the passage to hold these views "vaguely and dimly", they develop into a pretty cogent argument. It sounds very like Hardy himself speaking through his character.

On the other side, characters that express support for marriage do so in terms just as damaging as those who speak against. Arabella advises Sue to marry Jude because

...Life with a man is more businesslike after it, and money matters work better. And then, you see, if you have rows, and he turns you out of doors, you can get the law to protect you, which you can't otherwise...And if he bolts away from you...you'll have the sticks o' furniture, and won't be looked upon as a thief (Cunningham, 1978, p.283).

It is no wonder that Sue's conversation with Arabella makes her feel "how hopelessly vulgar an institution legal marriage is" (p.284).

Unhappy marriage, which law and social customs refused to acknowledge, is a key theme in *Jude*. In Sue's case, her life with Phillotson brings much misery both to her and Phillotson. After she accepts sexual relations with Jude, and her proud independence has gone, as Arabella complacently points out, and her vitality drained by the

new circumstances so that we can hardly recognize in her the “bright intellect” of her “bachelor” days. Such marital unhappiness embraces not just the central characters, but marginal figures as well. Jude’s family, for instance, has a long history of bad marriage. Other figures are brought in purely to amplify the theme—such as the two nameless couples whom Jude and Sue briefly encounter at the registry office. The bride, “sad and timid” (p.298), is heavily pregnant and has a black eye; the groom, a soldier just out of prison, is “sullen and reluctant” (p.298). Hardy also makes a few cynical comments on quite unimportant characters. Jude’s landlord, for example, observing a show of affection between Jude and Arabella is about to give notice on suspicion of their not being a married couple,

...till by chance overhearing her one night haranguing Jude in rattling terms, and ultimately flinging a shoe at his head, he recognized the note of genuine wedlock, and concluding that they must be respectable, said no more (p.406).

All this creates an almost obsessively closed system in which no marriage in the novel can be happy.

Another aspect of the conventional marriage Hardy attacks is the domineering power of a husband over his wife. In the historical stage of androcracy the subjection of women had almost been rendered completely. Hardy argues that a man is not entitled to force any woman, even his wife to live with him. Phillotson tries to behave in a civilized way, but after her breakdown Sue doesn’t want rational treatment. She insists that she is her husband’s inferior—“I shall try to learn to love him by obeying him” (p.380) — and that he has total rights over her body, because he is the man “to whom I belong, and whom I wish to honor and obey, as vowed” (p.419). She is of course, only echoing what most people then believed, for Phillotson faces strong disapproval and even loses his social position when he sets her free, and Arabella tells him:

I shouldn’t have let her go! I should have kept her chained on—her spirit for kicking would have been broke soon enough! There’s nothing like bondage and a stone-deaf taskmaster for taming us women. Besides, you’ve got the laws on your side (p.334).

And she reminds him that the Church, too, discriminating against the weaker sex, “Then shall the man be guiltless; but the woman shall bear her iniquity. Damn rough on us women; but we must grin and put up wi’ it!” (p.334). Phillotson forsakes liberal for paternalist ideas, admitting his “error in not restraining her with a wise and strong hand” (p.386), and saying:

“Women are so strange in their influence, that they tempt you to misplaced kindness. However, I know myself better now. A little judicious severity, perhaps...

Yes, (says Gillingham) but you must tighten the reins by degrees only. Don’t be too strenuous at first. She’ll come to any terms in time (p.386).

Sue, a natural rebel, is to be broken like a horse at the end of the novel. She pays a bitter price for nonconformity. Hardy suggests strongly that however much a woman “kicks”, the man can always break her spirit because of the entrenched, male-dominated traditional exclusiveness in society.

Sue is strong-minded in the sense of rejecting convention. She is part of the “ache of modernism”, a pioneer of the new urban element in an era of painful change. She has educated herself out of her class and region, but her struggles have led to the poverty-haunted union of a non-marriage; her loss of professional status and independence; her mothering of another child, who murders her own family, and destroys her. Her tragic end demonstrates the powerful force of convention, which could crush even the liberated mind.

Sue is emancipated in the sense that she takes up the issue of personal freedom not only in the choice of lovers but also in the most private matters of sexuality and marriage. In her disregard for marriage system, she becomes the spokesperson of the author. Through his characters, Hardy questions why marriage should curb the individuals’ freedom, why it should bring misery instead of happiness to their lives. Hardy’s criticism of the formalized marriage system is parallel to the contemporary feminist debate on the topic, which attacks the mores and conventions of society curbing the individual growth of women. Hardy’s choice of radicalism of his theme, his attack against the conventional ideology, and his profound sympathy for the suffering of Victorian woman in the patriarchal society are sufficient to demonstrate his feminist stance and interest in women’s cause (Kaur, 2005).

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Cunningham, G. (1978). *The new women and the Victorian novel*. London and Basingstoke.
- Hardy, T. (1969). *Jude the obscure*. New York: Bantam Books, Inc.
- Kaur, M. (2005). *The feminist sensibility in the novels of Thomas Hardy*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- Fang, L. Q. (2003). *A Study of Thomas Hardy*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press.
- Stubbs, P. (1979). *Women and fiction: Feminism and the novel 1800-1920*. The Harvester Press.
- Williams, M. (1984). *Women in the English novel*. London: Macmillan Press.