

THE DESTRUCTIVE INFLUENCE OF VICTORIAN MORALITY ON INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND HUMAN POTENTIAL

Niyazova M. Kh

Scientific Supervisor, PhD, Bukhara State University

Baxshillayeva A. B.

Master Student of Bukhara State University

Abstract

Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) stands as one of the most controversial novels of the Victorian era. This article explores Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) as a critique of Victorian morality, examining how rigid social, religious, and ethical codes constrained personal freedom, emotional fulfillment, and intellectual ambition. The study analyzes Hardy's treatment of marriage, sexuality, and social conformity, showing how these institutions functioned to enforce societal expectations rather than nurture human relationships. It investigates the psychological and emotional consequences of moral repression, particularly the impact of gender inequality and class hierarchy on the protagonists, Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead. The article also considers the role of religion as a mechanism of control and the broader social critique embedded in Hardy's narrative. By highlighting the conflict between individual conscience and societal orthodoxy, this study demonstrates how *Jude the Obscure* functions as a powerful work of protest against the moral absolutism of Victorian England.

Keywords: Victorian morality; social conformity; religious orthodoxy; gender inequality; marriage; class hierarchy; Thomas Hardy.

Introduction

Published in 1895, *Jude the Obscure* provoked outrage among Victorian readers and critics for its uncompromising treatment of sexuality, marriage, illegitimacy, and religious doubt. The novel appeared at a time when English society was governed by strict moral codes that regulated private behavior as well as public conduct. These codes were supported by religious institutions, legal systems, and deeply rooted social traditions. Hardy, writing in the final decade of the Victorian era, openly questioned the moral assumptions that defined respectability, virtue, and success. Golding presents civilization not as an inherent state of moral goodness but as a fragile construct that restrains the darker impulses of human nature. Characters such as Ralph and Piggy embody reason, cooperation, and ethical responsibility, whereas Jack and his followers illustrate the seductive power of cruelty and savagery. Through symbolic devices like the conch, the "beast", and the Lord of the Flies, the novel conveys the psychological and societal consequences of moral collapse.

This research examines the conflict between good and evil in *Lord of the Flies*, analyzing character behavior, symbolism, and social dynamics. By integrating textual analysis with scholarly interpretations, the study demonstrates how Golding interrogates the nature of morality and exposes the ease with which human society can descend into chaos.

Literature Review

Many scholars agree that *Jude the Obscure* is one of Thomas Hardy's strongest protests against Victorian morality. When the novel was first published, it caused public shock because it questioned marriage, religion, and social rules. Early readers often saw the novel as immoral, but later critics began to understand it as a serious criticism of Victorian society and its strict moral system.

Millgate explains that Hardy's own life experiences influenced the novel and its characters [2]. He shows that Jude is not a failure because of laziness or lack of talent, but because society refuses to accept someone from a lower class. According to Millgate, Hardy uses Jude's struggle to criticize a system where moral rules are used to block opportunity instead of encouraging learning and fairness.

Schorer focuses on how morality works as a form of control in Hardy's fiction [4]. He argues that in *Jude the Obscure*, institutions like marriage and religion are not truly about goodness, but about keeping social order. Characters who do not follow the rules are punished, even if they are honest and kind. This idea helps explain why Jude and Sue suffer so much for choosing their own path.

O'Neill studies Sue Bridehead as an important female character who challenges Victorian ideas about women [3]. Sue does not want to live according to traditional rules about marriage and female obedience. However, society reacts harshly to her independence. O'Neill argues that Hardy shows how Victorian morality treated women unfairly and forced them to feel guilt for wanting personal freedom.

Pinion looks at the emotional and psychological side of Hardy's characters [5]. He suggests that Jude and Sue suffer because they accept society's moral judgments and blame themselves. Their pain shows how strict moral rules can damage people emotionally. The death of their children, in this view, represents the extreme harm caused by social pressure and moral cruelty.

Overall, critics agree that *Jude the Obscure* is not about immoral behavior, but about the dangers of rigid morality. Hardy exposes how Victorian moral rules destroy happiness, limit freedom, and punish people who do not conform. These studies support the idea that the novel is a powerful criticism of Victorian society and remains relevant for understanding how social rules affect human lives.

At the center of the novel are Jude Fawley, a working-class young man with intellectual ambitions, and Sue Bridehead, an unconventional woman who rejects traditional definitions of femininity and marriage. Their struggle to live honestly within a society that demands conformity exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy of Victorian morality. As critics such as Millgate [2] and O'Neill [3] have noted, Hardy uses their personal tragedies to reveal a broader social critique, presenting morality not as a source of ethical guidance but as a mechanism of control. In this sense, *Jude the Obscure* functions not merely as a tragic novel, but as a deliberate protest against the moral, religious, and social orthodoxy of Victorian England.

Methodology

This study conducts a textual and thematic analysis of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* to examine how Victorian moral codes are critiqued through the characters and plot. By closely reading key episodes, relationships, and character decisions, the research identifies the

intersections of marriage, sexuality, religion, gender, and class as sites of moral conflict. The study also draws upon existing scholarly interpretations [2][3][4][5] to contextualize Hardy's critique and support the analysis of social and psychological consequences of rigid moral structures. Key themes such as marriage as social conformity, moral repression, religious authority, gender inequality, and class hierarchy are examined, with attention to the effects on the protagonists' emotional and intellectual development.

Analysis and Discussion

Marriage and Social Conformity

One of Hardy's most direct critiques of Victorian morality appears in his treatment of marriage. In *Jude the Obscure*, marriage is depicted not as a union based on love or mutual understanding, but as a social institution designed to enforce conformity. Jude's marriage to Arabella Donn is founded on deception and social pressure rather than emotional compatibility. Arabella embodies conventional Victorian values, emphasizing practicality, sexual possession, and social respectability. Through this relationship, Hardy demonstrates [1] how societal expectations can trap individuals in unhappy and morally empty unions.

Sue Bridehead's rejection of legal marriage represents a more radical challenge to Victorian norms. Sue values intellectual companionship and emotional freedom over legal or religious sanction. Her refusal to marry Jude legally, despite their deep attachment, directly contradicts Victorian beliefs about female virtue and domestic duty. Society responds to this defiance with condemnation and exclusion, revealing that marriage functions less as a moral safeguard and more as a punitive institution. As Schorer argues [4], Victorian marriage often served to discipline individuals who resisted social norms rather than to nurture genuine human connection.

Sexuality and Moral Repression

Hardy also exposes [1] the psychological damage caused by Victorian sexual repression. The era's moral framework demanded strict control over sexual desire, particularly for women, equating virtue with chastity and obedience. Sue's complex attitude toward sexuality reflects this conflict. Although she loves Jude, she experiences fear, guilt, and emotional withdrawal as a result of internalized moral pressure. Her struggle illustrates the tension between natural human desire and socially imposed moral restraint.

The tragedy of Jude and Sue's children represents the most devastating consequence of moral repression. Their deaths are not merely personal losses, but symbolic indictments of a society that intrudes into private life and condemns nonconforming relationships. Hardy suggests that when sexuality is governed by fear and guilt rather than understanding and compassion, it becomes a source of suffering rather than fulfillment. As Pinion observes [5], sexuality in Hardy's fiction is repeatedly distorted by external moral judgment, producing shame, despair, and tragedy.

Religion as an Instrument of Moral Control

Religion plays a central role in reinforcing Victorian morality in *Jude the Obscure*. The Church functions as an institution that regulates acceptable behavior and legitimizes social exclusion.

Jude's aspiration to study at Christminster is repeatedly denied, not because of a lack of intelligence, but because of class prejudice and moral judgment rooted in religious authority. His failure exposes how religious institutions prioritize conformity over intellectual merit.

Sue Bridehead openly questions religious doctrine and resists institutional authority, choosing instead to follow her personal conscience. However, her independence makes her vulnerable to intense public condemnation. Hardy portrays religious morality as hypocritical, emphasizing outward obedience while ignoring human suffering. O'Neill argues [3] that Hardy presents Victorian religion as a force that suppresses individuality and moral complexity in the name of social order, a view clearly reflected in Sue's ultimate psychological collapse.

Gender Inequality and Moral Double Standards

Hardy's protest against Victorian morality is particularly strong in his portrayal of gender inequality. Although Jude and Sue are both punished for violating social norms, Sue suffers far harsher consequences. Victorian morality imposed strict expectations on women, demanding purity, submission, and domestic loyalty, while granting men greater moral flexibility. Sue's intellectual independence and emotional autonomy challenge these expectations, marking her as a social outcast.

Hardy exposes the injustice of this double standard by showing how Sue's nonconformity is interpreted as moral failure rather than personal integrity. Critics such as Millgate [2] and Schorer [4] note that Sue's tragedy reflects a society designed to restrict women's choices while disguising oppression as moral virtue. Through her suffering, Hardy condemns a moral system that equates female obedience with goodness.

Class Hierarchy and Moral Authority

Victorian morality in the novel is closely linked to social class. Jude's working-class background prevents him from accessing education and social mobility, regardless of his intellectual ability. His exclusion from Christminster reveals that moral judgment is often a disguise for class discrimination. Society presents its rejection of Jude as morally justified, while in reality it protects existing power structures.

Sue, though more socially mobile, also experiences marginalization because of her unconventional behavior. Together, their experiences demonstrate that Victorian morality functions as a tool of social regulation rather than a universal ethical standard. As Schorer suggests [4], morality in Hardy's fiction frequently operates to preserve class boundaries and punish those who challenge them.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences

The cumulative effect of moral repression, religious judgment, and social exclusion produces profound psychological damage in both protagonists. Jude's life becomes dominated by guilt, despair, and disillusionment, while Sue experiences intense inner conflict, fear, and self-blame. Hardy's portrayal of their mental suffering reflects a growing concern with psychological realism and highlights the emotional cost of moral absolutism.

The deaths of their children and the eventual breakdown of their relationship illustrate the ultimate failure of Victorian morality to protect human life or happiness. Instead of offering

guidance or compassion, moral orthodoxy intensifies suffering and destroys emotional resilience. Hardy thus presents psychological collapse as a social consequence rather than a personal weakness.

Jude the Obscure stands as Thomas Hardy's most powerful protest against Victorian moral orthodoxy. Through the tragic experiences of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, Hardy exposes the destructive consequences of rigid norms governing marriage, sexuality, religion, gender, and class. The novel demonstrates that Victorian morality suppresses personal freedom, intellectual ambition, and emotional authenticity, particularly for women and individuals of lower social status.

Hardy's critique remains relevant because it reveals the dangers of moral absolutism and the human cost of forced conformity. By challenging the belief that morality is inherently virtuous, Jude the Obscure invites readers to question systems that prioritize social order over compassion and individual dignity. In doing so, the novel secures its place as a landmark work of social protest and moral inquiry.

Conclusion

In Jude the Obscure, Thomas Hardy delivers a sustained and uncompromising protest against the moral framework of Victorian society. Through the tragic experiences of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead, Hardy exposes how rigid moral codes governing marriage, sexuality, religion, gender roles, and class function not as ethical safeguards but as mechanisms of social control. The novel demonstrates that Victorian morality prioritizes conformity over compassion and social stability over individual fulfillment, resulting in emotional repression, psychological suffering, and the destruction of human potential.

Hardy's critique is particularly powerful in his depiction of marriage as a coercive institution and religion as a system that enforces obedience rather than moral understanding. Jude's intellectual aspirations are denied on the basis of class and moral judgment rather than ability, while Sue's independence is punished through social condemnation and internalized guilt. Their suffering reveals the inherent injustice of a moral system that claims universality yet operates selectively, reinforcing gender inequality and class hierarchy [2][4].

By portraying the devastating consequences of moral absolutism, Hardy challenges the Victorian belief that social order equates to moral progress. Instead, Jude the Obscure suggests that moral rigidity dehumanizes individuals and suppresses authentic emotional and intellectual life. The novel ultimately argues for a more humane, flexible ethical vision grounded in personal conscience rather than institutional authority. As a result, Jude the Obscure remains not only a product of its time but also a timeless warning about the dangers of enforcing morality without empathy, making it one of the most radical and enduring novels of protest in English literature.

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