

## Empathy in *Jude the Obscure*

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Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) copied the quote from Anthony Trollope's notebook that 'no novel is anything if there is no sympathy in it', showing his preoccupation with writing a story that would 'touch his reader's heart & draw his tears' (*Notebooks* 163-4). In this essay I will explore how Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), is designed for the reader to feel empathy with Jude, rather than to be directed to feel emotions—whether it be sorrow, pity, condescension, frustration, blame, or exasperation—for him as a privileged reader. By a privileged reader we mean one who stands separate from the main character and feels emotions, including sympathy, that are built upon his or her perspective. Such style can be seen in other novels by Hardy such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1885), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), but by the time Hardy reached his final novel, he had moved on to utilise the device of empathy, or fellow-feeling, in order for the reader to be able to imagine the world from Jude's perspective and thus feel with him. As we shall see, Hardy's method for this was to write a narrator who distances himself from the protagonist, in order that the reader will experience the world as harsh and uncaring, and it is in this way that the novel is an empathetic one.

In the late nineteenth century, the term 'sympathy' had a wider meaning than it does for us today, encompassing the modern meanings of both 'sympathy' and 'empathy', for the latter was not yet part of English vocabulary. In fact, it was only just being introduced into the English language. One of its advocates, the English writer Vernon Lee (Violet Page), introduced the German term *Einfühlung*, or 'Infeeling' to a London audience in 1895, the same year that *Jude the Obscure* was published in novel form. Today, we make the distinction between the two terms. To give an illustration, imagine that you see someone fall over. If you think 'poor guy!' that is sympathy—to feel sorry for that person, usually from a higher position. However, if you think 'ouch!' that

is empathy. You are feeling pain with the person (Keen, *Novel* 4-5). Yet back at that time, the English language did not provide words to distinguish them.

Nevertheless, Hardy's novel forms suggest that he was contemplating on the differences between sympathy and empathy, and his narrative style evolved. Sympathy arguably entails the act of passing judgment, because feeling pity for someone means acknowledging that the sympathised deserves justice. Herbert Spencer, for example, wrote on how justice is rooted in sympathy (Schliesser 332). In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy tries arguing that sympathy can be extended to the so-called undeserving. He sets up the story like a moral fable, but when Henchard past grievances start to bring consequences, the punishment is too harsh. In *Tess of D'Urbervilles*, he presents the narrator's sympathetic point of view to prove that Tess is a pure woman. In both novels, the narrator makes gestures to guide for readers and invite them to release appropriate feelings for the characters. It is true that the readers response can vary upon a wide range of emotions, so the narrator is shown as to be an example. On the other hand, the narrator in *Jude the Obscure* could be said to be more neutral, apparently choosing not to apply a filter to his narrative, thus making the readers response have an important role in the narrative.

Part of the initial reaction to *Jude the Obscure* was a storm of rage concerning the portrayal of Sue and her radical ideas on women and marriage, although Hardy had famously asserted that his novels are 'an impression, not an argument' (Preface to *Tess* 463). Surely, there must have been an element of deliberate provocation on Hardy's part as he sought to challenge his readers to reconsider their assumptions about social rules, especially sex and marriage (Wright 8). The challenge to set aside one's perspective for another proved very difficult.

Hardy's final novel is his ambitious attempt to create the reader's sympathetic response in which he erases the boundary between the narrator and Jude in order to allow mutual understanding between them. By doing so, the narrator does not show sympathy for Jude, but rather mirrors his feelings. As we will see, the reader is not presented with what sympathy looks like as in the earlier novels by Hardy, but the reader is given a direct experience of Jude's misery and pain. The result will be that the narrator of *Jude the Obscure* appears to be the most indifferent and unconcerned of Hardy's novels. There is an element of callousness, almost vivisection. However, we will see that the

narrator chooses to be so, in order that the reader may share Jude's misery and be able to understand him.

The novel opens at Marygreen, and Jude Fawley, a young boy of eleven, sees his schoolteacher off. Phillotson left the village for Christminster in hopes of entering the university, and since then Jude had also fostered dreams of becoming a scholar. However, as the narrator states, 'his dreams were as gigantic as his surroundings were small' (22). Jude studied hard between his work hours, which included reading on the road while making deliveries for his aunt's bakery. He became an apprentice of a stone-cutter because he calculated that it was a job that would support him in Christminster which had many stone buildings. His marriage with Arabella, a village girl, detained him for a while but after their agreed separation, Jude finally headed for the city. However, while he had no difficulty in finding work, he soon discovered that entering a college was a different matter. His working-class background denied him access to the realm of scholars, and in despair Jude turned to drinking. He was saved by his cousin, Sue Bridehead, an intelligent young woman who held new ideas about relationships with the opposite sex. and consequently about marriage. When Jude revealed that he had strong feelings for her, as well as already having a wife, Sue decided to marry Phillotson, with whom she had a purely intellectual relationship. Jude and Sue's feelings, however, proved to be stronger than they could suppress and after getting understanding and permission from Phillotson, Sue left with Jude. However, their troubles had only begun. Fraught with unpleasant experiences of wedlock, Jude (somewhat reluctantly) agreed with Sue to live together without becoming officially married. However the couple soon discovered that their personal happiness could not remain isolated from society. They could not settle in a home because of the negative opinions of people around them and had to keep wandering from one job to the next. Jude's family was inevitably dragged down by poverty, death and sorrow. When their eldest son took his life and that of his siblings, Sue suffered a breakdown. Despite Jude's pleas, Sue was convinced that she must submit to the rules of society from which they had tried to escape. She returned to Phillotson and Jude was left with nothing to cling to. In the end, even his health deteriorated and he died alone, utterly forsaken.

My interest lies in the dismal ending of the novel, when Jude lies helpless and alone in his bedroom. All the narrator chooses to give is a dry, unemotional

account of how his final moments are punctured by the joyous noise of celebrations from outside, where people remain ignorant of Jude's existence, much less his pains and struggles. One may wonder how can this narration be anything but by an indifferent 'chronicler', who is content to watch over individuals struggle in a world from a detached position and refuses any involvement? Determinist and pessimist, labels often used for Hardy, seem to fit here. However, we will endeavor to discuss this phenomenon within the framework of empathy.

It should be noted that Hardy's first phase of being a downright pessimist began during the 1860's when he first read Darwin, Spencer and Huxley. His ideas are exemplified in his early poem 'Hap' (1866), in which the first-person laments against fate which brings pain in life are 'purbblind' (3.5). We see this in works such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in which a blind force seems to drive Henchard to his bitter end. The troubles that bear upon Henchard are fatalistically deterministic but there is no purpose or intent behind them. Hardy's works often portray what the author refers to as the Immanent Will. Miller defines it as 'a version of the inherent energy of the physical world as seen by nineteenth century science . . . an unconscious power working by regular laws of matter in motion. Though what happens is ordained by no divined law giver, the state of the universe at any one moment leads inevitably to its state at the next moment' (*Distance* 44). Howe also comments that in Hardy's work 'Fate itself seems absentminded' (89). The universe of his novels seem to be driven by what matches Herbert Spencer's, a contemporary scientist and philosopher, description of Nature as a force 'which everywhere carries on the struggle for life with unqualified severity, so as even to prompt the generalization . . . [and] cares not for the claims of the weaker, even to the extent of securing them fair play' (*The Principles of Ethics* 270).

From around 1886 to 1908, Hardy began to draw from his readings of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann and their ideas of the Universal Will and the Unconscious Mind, respectively. More importantly Hardy began to think, like von Hartmann, that it is in fact possible for the Unconscious Mind to become conscious through human agency (Bailey 577). Hardy believed that in evolutionary meliorism, first comes awareness, which then allows the development of compassion. In a letter to Edward Clodd in 1907, Hardy wrote,

That the Unconscious Will of the Universe is growing aware of Itself I believe I may claim as my own idea solely . . . the whole will become conscious thereby: and ultimately, it is to be hoped sympathetic. (*Life* 361).

According to Miller (1970), Hardy's answer to a world ruled by the Immanent Will is a passive withdrawal. In some ways his novels can be interpreted in that way. However, in a later work Miller also states that the act of reading is completed by the reader's response (*Ethics* 7). To respond is to become involved and this involvement prompts the wakening of human consciousness, which Hardy so desired. With this in mind, our understanding of the novel starts to take a different outlook.

From here we will look at one way how Hardy invites the reader to respond. From the beginning of the novel, Jude is introduced as having immense sympathy for other creatures, but what is significant is that this comes from him relating to their experience, and understanding how the world looks from their perspective. As a child Jude works for farmer Troutham and watches his crops from the birds. However, as he sounds the clacker Jude grows sympathetic towards the rooks because he understands their 'thwarted desires' are similar to his own situation, and therefore knows what it must be like for them:

He sounded the clacker till his arm ached, and at length his heart grew sympathetic with the birds' thwarted desires. They seemed, like himself, to be living in a world which did not want them. Why should he frighten them away? (15)

Jude's sympathies are aroused by the ache in his arm. The initial motivation could be called egocentric—in accordance with the seventeenth century ideas of Spinoza and Hobbes that ethical actions are done in self-interest (Schliesser 175; Haworth 82)—but nevertheless it results in Jude's realisation that the birds need kindness. '[L]ike himself' is inserted into the sentence and creates a slight pause, an imitation of the moment in which he makes this recognition. Only afterwards, Jude questioned whether he should continue sounding his clacker, 'Why should he frighten them away?', then

allowed the birds to feed on the crops. It seems as though the narrator is careful to portray the process through which Jude decided to quit his duty in order to express his sympathy with the rooks. The order in which Jude ‘grew sympathetic’ is vital in understanding that although the birds’ lives are said to be, using a rather condescending adjective, ‘puny’, Jude does not feel mercy for them as their superior, but adopts a very close position of being one of them.

True, the excerpt above can arguably be seen as an instance where the narrator is trying to describe Jude’s situation where no one wants him, with the purpose to make readers feel pity for him. As Keen explains, the passage is not only about the ‘connection forged by sympathy’ but also reveals ‘Jude’s low self-esteem’ and ‘self-pity’ (‘Hardy’ 378). Nevertheless, I believe that more emphasis is put on the fact that Jude is simply feeling with the birds. This is made clearer in the continuing text:

A magic thread of fellow-feeling *united* his own life with theirs. Puny and sorry as those lives were, they much resembled his own (*Jude* 15, emphasis mine).

The sense of complete oneness is described by the word ‘united’. It contains meanings such as ‘to combine’ or ‘to join’ (*OED*), so that the narrator could hardly have meant for readers to compare Jude and the birds, or use the birds as a mere illustration of Jude. They are in the same boat, connected with, as the narrator states, a thread of ‘fellow-feeling’.

The importance of the word ‘fellow-feeling’ being used here needs to be emphasised. Although ‘sympathy’ could have been a convenient term, that the narrator chose ‘fellow-feeling’ could perhaps suggest that the narrator might have felt the need to be exact about what kind of emotional connection is reached between the characters. Therefore although in 1895 the word ‘empathy’ was not yet widespread, from the scene of Jude and the rooks, it may be that the narrator meant to specifically describe not what we today define as sympathy, but more simply the fact that Jude recognized their state to ‘much resembl[e] his’. Therefore the ‘puny and sorry’ lives of the birds were not the object of Jude’s sympathy, neither was he feeling sorry for them. He simply saw that they were hungry and that their life was a struggle, and thus his

response was to let them eat.

Hardy's use of the narrator is one of the key points to understanding his sympathetic/empathetic portrayals. J.H. Miller makes an interesting remark that Hardy's reason for turning to poetry was not only because critics had so fiercely attacked *Jude the Obscure* (1895), but also because—starting with *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872)—the distance between his narrator and protagonist became closer and closer until it could no longer be contained by the novel form (*Distance x*). In *Mayor and Tess*, Hardy kept a conscious distinction between the narrator and his characters, which allowed him to express sympathy in a relatively straightforward way, but in *Jude*, Hardy erases the boundary between the narrator and Jude.

Stewart has done an extensive study that focuses on how the trope of 'Dear reader' is used, or not used in novels. He finds a general tendency for direct address to grow less common and less straightforward at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in New Woman fiction (401). Therefore it is no surprise that in *Jude* the narrator never seems to appear in an explicit way. This striking absence has led to a reading of *Jude* as an indifferent or pessimistic representation of the world, but it can also create, as Keen states, 'diagnostic shocks designed to provoke the altruism of the future' ('Hardy' 363). The painful experience of reading the text may be in undergoing what Jude is feeling.

That readers share Jude's experience in a direct way was important to Hardy, who believed that sympathy was the humane answer to an impersonal and indifferent world, but was also aware of how difficult it is for people to share feelings with others whose lives they have never experienced. Various critics have noted how many Victorians were also conscious of the limits of sympathy and even made it a theme of their novels (Mitchell 2-3). Hardy, too, was concerned about the limits to his reader's tolerance; however, he adopted a different technique for creating an experience within the reader through his or her act of reading the novel. The narrator in *Jude* does not act as a sentimental guide for the reader's feelings as we might experience in many earlier Victorian novels, but he uses subtle devices to enable readers to experience obscurity and despair similar to Jude's.

Hardy blurs the line between narrator and Jude by his intricate use of

sentences that fluidly move from direct discourse, indirect discourse, to free indirect discourse, but as we will see in an early scene from Jude's childhood, which will be taken up for analysis because of its remarkable mixture of language between the young Jude and the adult narrator, the narrator uses his own eloquent words to express Jude's emotional turmoil more vividly. After being beaten by farmer Troutham, and told off by his aunt, Jude felt that his existence is unwanted. He lay down outside with his straw hat over his face, and thought to himself,

As you got older, and felt yourself to be at the centre of your time, and not at a point in its circumference, as you had felt when you were little, you were seized with a sort of shuddering, he [Jude] perceived. All around you there seemed to be something glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it.

If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man. (18)

In this paragraph where young Jude's feelings are heightened, he gives full vent to his anguish, saying that 'glaring, garish, rattling, and the noises and glares hit upon the little cell called your life, and shook it, and warped it'. His words have us leave the pile of litter near the pig-sty and enter a dark, harsh, confusing, and abstract world. All this said in free indirect speech, which allows Jude's point of view full reign. However, the focalisation changes, and the narrator reverts back to third person: 'If he could only prevent himself growing up! He did not want to be a man.' Here the sentence is simple. It is just as strong in despair, but expressed more crudely or naively, and we find ourselves back with the boy Jude. An interesting phenomenon has occurred, where the narrator enters Jude's mind and takes his perspective, but he also seems to outdo the likely abilities of an eleven-year-old boy to express himself.

It is also worthwhile to add that *Jude* is considered Hardy's most autobiographical novel, and elements in Jude's life, such as being given no opportunity of university education and working as a stonemason, align with the author's life. The scene of young Jude lying down with his hat over his eyes is recorded as a childhood memory in *Life*. It is easy to imagine how this personal experience of lying in the sun, which 'stood out . . . more distinctly



than any', influenced Hardy when writing the scene in *Jude* (*Life* 20). Although few would argue that *Jude* is a purely autobiographical work, for there is much complete invention as well as facts that correspond with the novelist's life, it is interesting to point out that Miller quotes the passage from *Jude* above as an example of Hardy's belief about life (*Distance* 13). 'The young Jude, like the young Hardy,' Miller writes, 'finds that a man is not born free' (2). Thus we see an overlapping between the author's perception of the world and the protagonist's.

This bond between young Jude and the narrator becomes more significant later, as a demonstration that although the depiction of the death of Jude seems to be obscure, in fact, the narrator's empathy was shown towards him at the beginning of the novel. Does it not seem a little odd that at age eleven, Jude feels 'older' and 'at the centre'? Why is he shown as already aged with wisdom before he has gone through the experiences that are to follow in the next 400 pages? Christminster is thought, by many characters including Jude and Phillotson, to be the 'centre' of their dreams, but at this point young Jude is still 'under the centrifugal tendency of his person', as the narrator states, while farmer Troutham swings Jude around in punishment for feeding the birds (*Jude* 16). In other words, we may assert that it is the adult narrator speaking at this moment, though from a later point in the novel: the final scene of the novel, when Jude lies on his deathbed.

Jumping ahead to the close of the narrative, we see that although Jude failed to achieve his goals, as an adult he at the very least physically makes it to Christminster, and spends the last stage of his life there. Significantly, after the remarriage of Jude and Arabella, they took lodgings 'nearer to the centre of the city' (384), and later, Jude moved again 'to a yet more central part of the town' (398). He has made it to the centre of Christminster, although it turned out different from what he dreamed of as a child. As a boy he envisioned the city to be an escape from Marygreen, where he did not belong and was unwanted. In Christminster he hoped that his laborious studies would be appreciated and he would rise to become a bishop. However in reality, he remained in obscurity, 'an outsider to the end of his days', deserted by friends and family (328). In the cell of his room, he lay sick, and is dealt cruel blows by noises of celebration and ironical music. The rhythmical joyful shouts of 'Hurrahs!' from the festivities outside, kindly inserted in parenthesis, punctually interrupt

Jude's final recitation (403). The sensations they create are uncannily like the narrator's earlier description: 'glaring, garish, rattling' (18). This scene is the last glimpse we get of Jude before his death. At the moment of his last breath, even the narration has left him to absolute solitude.

On one level, the reader is meant to experience the narrator's cold irony; the text is meant to make the reader feel misery, despair and hopelessness, because that is what Jude is going through. The reader would be put in the same situation as the characters so that he would be able to see the world through Jude's eyes, in order to be able to have empathy for him. For this to work, the narrator must assume the role of 'the chronicler' who records everything in an unbiased way, refusing to block out festive sounds from outside so that the reader's focus can be entirely on Jude.

This alone however can invite pessimistic or even sadistic interpretations of the text, and so it is essential that we are able to know that the narrator is speaking out of empathetic openness towards Jude. His understanding was already revealed to us at the beginning of the novel. As we saw, in the scene when Jude lay near the pig-sty, the narrator entered into his thoughts and used words that would gain more meaning at the end of novel. When the narrator spoke out on young Jude's feelings of being at the 'centre' and shaken by glaring noises, he was also describing Jude at the end of his life. Although at the deathbed scene, the narrator's presence is made scarce and he seems to have deserted Jude, in the early childhood scene he has revealed before his time in the narrative that he shares fellow-feeling with Jude. The narrator knew of Jude's agony and foretold it before Jude would experience it himself. Not only does he feel Jude's despair but he also devotes himself to telling Jude's story to the end.

Hardy's *Jude* leaves the reader feeling miserable from the despairing end that provides no salvation for Jude. The reader's empathy is, in fact, evoked by the narrator's aloof narration. In the early scenes of the novel, the narrator merges with Jude. But as the story progresses and in the final scenes of Jude's life, in particular the deathbed scene, the narrator's projection of pessimistic emotions becomes more appropriate. As Jude had fellow-feeling for the birds, the readers can share Jude's experience with him. We may know from the use of empathy from the beginning of the novel that the narrator has already revealed his understanding of Jude's situation. Although the withdrawal of

a prominent narrator and the decrease of direct address might be seen in the tradition of late nineteenth century novels, for Hardy it may have meant an alternative way to draw readers into a subjective perception that would draw them to responding to the text emotionally.

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