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# The Return of the Poor Man: Jude the Obscure and Late Victorian Socialism

## **Abstract**

This essay examines Hardy's decision at the end of his career as a novelist to return to the "striking socialistic" themes which had defined his first (unpublished) novel. *Jude the Obscure* is Hardy's exploration of the spiritual and intellectual deprivation that attends the condition of the working-class poor. While the novel was reviled at the time as blatantly "anti-marriage," its fiercest polemic is reserved for the soul-destroying economic and social systems which continued to keep the class structure rigidly intact. While Hardy was never a socialist himself, his final novel has much in common with the numerous socialist and radical movements that were emerging, merging, and dissolving during the final decades of Victoria's reign.

## **Keywords**

education, inequality, jude the obscure, karl marx, social class, social systems, socialism, william morris, working class

## **Disciplines**

Literature in English, British Isles

# THE RETURN OF THE POOR MAN: *JUDE THE OBSCURE* AND LATE VICTORIAN SOCIALISM

SUZANNE J. FLYNN

This essay examines Hardy's decision at the end of his career as a novelist to return to the "striking socialistic" themes which had defined his first (unpublished) novel. *Jude the Obscure* is Hardy's exploration of the spiritual and intellectual deprivation that attends the condition of the working-class poor. While the novel was reviled at the time as blatantly "anti-marriage," its fiercest polemic is reserved for the soul-destroying economic and social systems which continued to keep the class structure rigidly intact. While Hardy was never a socialist himself, his final novel has much in common with the numerous socialist and radical movements that were emerging, merging, and dissolving during the final decades of Victoria's reign.

**Keywords:** *Jude the Obscure*, socialism, social class, education, working class, inequality, Karl Marx, William Morris, social systems

**I**N 1868, WHEN THOMAS HARDY was a struggling architect's assistant in London, he submitted the manuscript of his first novel, tentatively titled *The Poor Man and the Lady; By the Poor Man* to Alexander Macmillan for his consideration. Hardy later described that first work as "a sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church restoration, and political and domestic morals in general."<sup>1</sup> Macmillan rejected the novel, and Hardy then submitted it to Chapman and Hall, receiving a similar rejection. Chapman's reader happened to be the novelist George Meredith, who met with the young would-be author and advised him not to "nail his colours to the mast" so clearly in his first book.<sup>2</sup> Hardy swallowed his disappointment, put aside what he later called his "striking socialistic novel,"<sup>3</sup> and turned his fictional talents towards the sort of pastoral romances and tragedies that would make him one of the late nineteenth-century's most successful novelists.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, Ed., Michael Millgate (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 62-3; hereafter cited as *Life*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Despite this seeming shift away from controversial topics, however, Hardy never moved far from the theme that had inspired his first attempt at prose fiction. In most, if not all, of the fourteen novels that he would write over the next three decades, he explored the issue of socio-economic class through the well-established marriage plot. In some of those novels, most notably *Far From the Madding Crowd* (his first great success), the poor man courts and sometimes marries the lady. More often in his fiction, a poor, or at least working-class, woman is wooed and won (frequently with tragic results) by a “gentleman,” a man of higher social and economic standing if not of higher moral caliber. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is the most notable example of this plot pattern. Class is always an issue in Hardy’s novels and short stories; Peter Widdowson has gone so far as to suggest that not only are the novels “imbued with an obsessive class consciousness,” but also that the “‘poor man and the lady’ theme is indeed at the heart of all Hardy’s fiction.”<sup>4</sup> Still, the poetry of the pastoral settings and the pathos of the romantic tragedies can often blunt the force of the social critique which lies just below the narrative surface of these works. Early on, Hardy had struck on a successful formula, and while not exactly compromising his moral and ethical principles, he generally heeded Meredith’s advice of 1868 not to nail his colors too firmly to the mast.

By the 1890s, however, and partly as a result of the financial success he had enjoyed, Hardy chose to return – and with a vengeance – to the “striking socialistic” themes which had first motivated him to write fiction, albeit with a new and less conventional approach. While that first (unpublished) novel had dwelt on the romantic implications of class disparities, *Jude the Obscure*, a novel which Hardy almost certainly planned to be his last,<sup>5</sup> explores the spiritual and intellectual deprivation that attends the condition of the working-class poor. The novel was reviled at the time as blatantly “anti-marriage,” and a great deal of attention then, and to this day, focused on its ostensibly *avant-garde* heroine Sue Bridehead. Hardy quietly accepted the reading public’s and reviewers’ fascination with Sue, even to the extent of claiming (disingenuously I would contend) that she was “the first delineation in fiction of ... the woman of the feminist movement,”<sup>6</sup> notably the fin-de-siècle New Woman.

While Jude and Sue’s unconventional relationship and her extremely progressive views undoubtedly tie in to the novel’s social critique, Hardy shifts from a focus on *The Poor Man and the Lady* (or the *Poor Woman and the Gentleman*) to a full-blown examination of the Poor Man at Odds with the modern world. In one of the few favorable reviews of the novel, H. G. Wells notes that: “For the first time in English literature the almost intolerable difficulties that beset an ambitious man of the working-class – the snares, the obstacles, the countless rejections and humiliation ... – receive adequate treatment.”<sup>7</sup> The novel’s fiercest polemic is reserved for the soul-destroying economic and social systems which continued to keep the British

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 205. Widdowson goes on to note that Hardy’s treatment of class was “in no way constrained by the specific gender orientation of the title of that first novel.”

<sup>5</sup> Describing Hardy’s 1892 trip to Fawley, Michael Millgate contends that Hardy “seems already to have foreseen that [*Jude the Obscure*] would be his last major work of fiction.” See *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 302.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, [1895] 1999), 1912 Postscript.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Cox, ed. *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2002), 292.

class structure rigidly intact. While critiquing these systems in his work, Hardy was nevertheless not advancing any radical alternative system. He was never an avowed socialist himself. In a 1908 letter to Frederic Harrison, he wrote: "My quarrel with Socialists is that they don't make it clear what Socialism is." He went on to note, however, "I have a suspicion that I am of their way of thinking."<sup>8</sup> Whatever his political leanings, his final novel clearly has much in common with the numerous socialist and radical movements that were emerging, merging, and dissolving during the final decades of Victoria's reign.

Hardy's own background and life story seem to belie the rigidity of the British class system. He belonged to what he called in one of his novels "the metamorphic classes of society."<sup>9</sup> Born the son of a stonemason and a domestic servant in a rural backwater village of Dorset, Hardy was able to work his way up the social scale through hard work, education (both formal and self-directed) and, like many of his characters, through marriage. Although in later years, Emma Hardy was something of an embarrassment to her husband, her solidly middle-class status – she was the niece of a bishop – augmented Hardy's own ambitions to obscure his humble origins. Emma, however, never quite let her husband forget those origins; she complained that their proximity to Hardy's family home required her to mix with "the peasant class"<sup>10</sup> more than she would like.

In his professional life as well, Hardy was keenly aware that he lacked the educational experience, in particular a university degree, which would ordinarily give one *entrée* into the intellectual circles of London. Despite his talents, both as an architect (his first profession) and as a writer, Hardy's sense of class inferiority never left him. As Roger Ebbatson has noted, "England remained a society constituted by complicated hierarchies of status in which nuances of accent, deportment and rank were crucial but ever-changing signifiers," and for Hardy, "the issue of class is ... intimately entwined with his problematic entry into the Victorian literary field."<sup>11</sup> As his success and fame as a novelist grew, Hardy made his way into the upper echelons of the London social scene but his own writings at this time suggest that he was conscious of being perceived as an *arriviste*, one whose acceptance into these social circles rested tenuously on the success or failure of his most recent novel.

Despite this sense of insecurity, by the late 1880s, Hardy had every reason to feel good about his place within the literary world. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) had been followed rapidly by *The Woodlanders* (1887), and then his first collection of short fiction, *Wessex Tales* (1888). Yet, within a week of the latter's publication, Hardy jotted down an idea for a new piece of fiction in his notebook:

"April 28. A short story of a young man – 'who could not go to Oxford' – His struggles and ultimate failure. Suicide. [Probably the germ of *Jude the Obscure*.] There

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<sup>8</sup> Letter to Frederic Harrison, 11 March 1908, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, Eds., Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978-88), III, 304; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, (New York: Penguin Classic, [1876] 1998), ch. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Emma Hardy to Louisa MacCarthy, 3 November 1902; quoted in Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography Revisited*, 367.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Ebbatson, "Hardy and Class," *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 112, 115.

is something in this the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them."<sup>12</sup>

Five years were to pass before Hardy took up this challenge to himself in earnest, but the defiant tone of his remark reveals the motivation behind what would be his last novel.<sup>13</sup> Hardy had a score to settle. Despite his own financial and social success – and perhaps even as a result of that success – he resented the social systems which would exclude an aspiring young working-class man with a “passion for learning”<sup>14</sup> from the educational institutions which alone could confer intellectual respectability. Twenty-five years had passed since he had been cautioned by editors and readers to mute the radical tone of his fiction and he had gained great success by becoming not merely a “good hand”<sup>15</sup> but an expert at Victorian serial production. By the mid 1890s, however, Hardy had nothing to lose by nailing his colors to the mast.

The critique of British social systems in *Jude the Obscure* may have been less shocking to editors and readers than his first attempt in fiction in part because of the change in the political climate which took place over the course of those intervening twenty-five years. In fact, the beginning of Hardy’s literary career in the late 1860s coincided with the appearance of the first volume of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* in 1867,<sup>16</sup> and the rise in influence of Marxian theory over the next several decades parallels the rise in Hardy’s stature as a novelist and poet. While it would be simplistic to posit a cause and effect linkage here between the two, John Goode has rightfully pointed out that

if Marxism has any undeniable feature it is that it is preoccupied with the fate of the working-class. And ... Hardy explicitly concerned himself in a large number of novels, stories, poems, and even, to some extent, *The Dynasts*, with sections of the working-class in their specific social role as subordinate workers.<sup>17</sup>

The emphasis on socio-economic injustice, on issues of work and wealth in Hardy’s novels coincides with a growing interest during these decades in political remedies to perceived inequities in British society.

In the 1880s in particular, a number of political groups sprung up which offered a challenge to the status quo, especially in regards to the socio-economic conditions of the laboring classes of England. One commentator in 1891 wrote that

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<sup>12</sup> *Life*, 216.

<sup>13</sup> *The Well-Beloved* (rewritten), serialized in 1892, was published as a book and added to the Wessex Novels in 1897.

<sup>14</sup> *Jude*, III-iv.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, in 1874 Hardy wrote his famous note to Leslie Stephen, his editor, that while he might eventually “be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work,” at that point in his literary career he wished “merely to be considered a good hand at a serial.” See *Life*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> *Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* was published in September 1867, and was the sole volume published in Marx’s lifetime. The first part of *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* was published in English by Marx’s collaborator, Friedrich Engels, in 1887, four years after Marx’s death, although volumes II and III were not published until the 1890s.

<sup>17</sup> John Goode, “Hardy and Marxism,” in *Critical Essay on Thomas Hardy: The Novels*, Ed., Dale Kramer (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1993), 22.

in 1883 a socialist movement seemed to break out spontaneously in England, the air hummed for a season with a multifarious social agitation, and we soon had a fairly complete equipment of socialist organizations – social democratic, anarchist, dilettante – which have ever since kept up a busy movement with newspapers, lectures, debates speeches, and demonstrations in the streets.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, during the years leading up to Hardy's own examination of the condition of the working-class man in England, the British public was being introduced to a number of revolutionary and reform movements. The Social Democratic Federation was established in 1881 as Britain's first organized socialist political party; its founder H. M. Hyndman had been converted to a socialist view by reading Marx's writing. Within a few years, two other important groups arose: in 1884, key members of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), including William Morris and Eleanor Marx, split off and founded the Socialist League, a group with a more clearly revolutionary mission than the original SDF. In hindsight the Socialist League's greatest contribution to the cause of socialism and reform was literary. The League's newsletter, *The Commonwealth*, provided the venue for a number of important works, most significantly Morris's own *Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*. Also in 1884, the Fabian Society was formed; early and later members included Edward Carpenter, Olive Schreiner, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Havelock Ellis, H. G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw.<sup>19</sup> The Fabians shared many of the goals of the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, but they favored a more gradualist approach; their mission was reformist rather than revolutionary.

From the mid 1880s through the mid-1890s, these socialist groups along with radical liberals (or New Liberals as they were then called) took varying approaches to the social problems confronting British society. Marxist socialists such as Morris advocated a complete overhaul of the social system; nothing short of revolution and a redistribution of capital would bring about the fundamental shift in society which they sought.<sup>20</sup> The Fabians and New Liberals, on the other hand, believed in the possibility of reforming the system and working for change beneath the radar of traditional political parties. In the end, the gradualists prevailed. The formation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 (the year Hardy began work on *Jude the Obscure* in earnest) in some ways marked the death-knell of the radical or revolutionary socialist movement in England. Although ostensibly socialist in outlook, with the goal of securing "the collective and communal ownership of the means of production,"<sup>21</sup> the Independent Labour Party sought to marshal the power of the labor unions while working within the parliamentary system to effect change.

Hardy's stance towards all these merging and diverging socialist trends was noncommittal. This position was typical; in 1883, when labour union activity was on the rise amongst agricultural workers, Hardy contributed an essay, "The Dorsetshire

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<sup>18</sup> John Rae, *Contemporary Socialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), 84.

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough review of late Victorian socialist movements, see Stephen Yeo, "A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896," *History Workshop Journal* 4 (1977), 5-56.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that, although he never met William Morris, Hardy thought highly enough of him to send him a presentation copy of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in December 1891. Richard L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, [1954] 2002), 73.

<sup>21</sup> Gidon Cohen, "Myth, History, and the Independent Labour Party," in *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*, Ed., Matthew Worley (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 105.

Labourer,” to *Longman’s Magazine*. About this piece, he wrote to a friend, “Though a Liberal, I have endeavoured to describe the state of things without political bias.”<sup>22</sup> Later, he would write to another correspondent that he had “always been compelled to forego all participation in active politics, by reason of the neutrality of my own pursuits, which would be stultified to a great extent if I could not approach all classes of thinkers from an absolutely unpledged point.”<sup>23</sup> His private writings reveal a more nuanced understanding of his own political leanings. In 1888, just a few months before his notebook entry on his idea for a story of the “young man - who could not go to Oxford,” Hardy wrote: “I find that my politics really are neither Tory nor Radical. I may be called an Intrinsicist. I am against privilege derived from accident of any kind, and am therefore equally opposed to aristocratic privilege and democratic privilege.”<sup>24</sup>

This remark ties in with an essential element of Hardy’s treatment of class in his novels, stories and poems. While he focuses on agricultural and village laborers extensively in his work, he treats these subjects as individuals struggling against social, economic, and metaphysical forces, rather than as representative members of any particular socio-economic group. Gabriel Oak from *Far From the Madding Crowd* loses his social position because his sheep-farming venture is undercapitalized. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard reverses Gabriel’s pattern by becoming a model capitalist even as he loses his moral center. Tess Durbeyfield is both a “field woman, pure and simple”<sup>25</sup> and a figure of tragic grandeur. As John Goode has noted, “Hardy deals with the working-class, but never as a class, always as individuals experiencing ‘history’ only as a meaningless manipulation thwarting their lives.”<sup>26</sup> While confronting the economic and social forces which seemed to consign large swathes of the population to poverty, or at least hardship, Hardy recognizes the intrinsic nature of each individual’s rise or fall.

Along with the socialists and radicals of his day, however, he was also keenly aware of the destructive effects of inequality. In his early novels – in particular *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* – class inequities are sometimes obscured by traces of an almost utopian world of work and community. Even in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, the central Talbothays chapters present a rosy picture of working-class life. At the dairy, the “household of maids and men lived on comfortably, placidly, even merrily. Their position was perhaps the happiest of all positions in the social scale, being above the line at which neediness ends, and below the line at which the *convenances* begin to cramp natural feelings.”<sup>27</sup> In scenes almost reminiscent of William Morris’s socialist utopia *News from Nowhere*, labor becomes pleasure, all needs are met with abundance, and the only catalyst for conflict lies in human passion.

Those chapters are, of course, succeeded by the Flintcomb Ash chapters, in which Tess finds herself brought nearly as low as a human being can be, grubbing up the remnants of frozen turnips left behind by foraging animals. Economic and thus physical hardships return with a vengeance. Hardy was too much of a realist to believe

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<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, I, 119.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 272.

<sup>24</sup> *Life*, 213.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (New York: Norton Critical Edition [1891], 1990), V-xlii.

<sup>26</sup> Goode, “Hardy and Marxism,” 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, III-xx.

that the blissful balance achieved by the Talbothays dairy maids and men could be anything but an interlude. He had little faith in the possibility of a lasting redistribution of wealth. In fact, another comment made in his journal in 1893, the year he began writing *Jude the Obscure*, may hold a clue to his attitude towards radical ideas of economic revolution. He writes

There cannot be equity in one kind. Assuming, e.g., that the possession of £1,000,000 or 10,000 acres of land be the coveted ideal, all cannot possess £1,000,000 or 10,000 acres. But there is a practicable equity possible: that the happiness which one man derives from one thing shall be equalled by what another man derives from another thing. Freedom from worry, for instance, is a counterpoise to the lack of great possessions, though he who enjoys that freedom may not think so.<sup>28</sup>

This remark creates an interesting matrix of land, wealth, and happiness, and it is perhaps no accident that in one of the first scenes of Hardy's final novel, the young Jude Fawley stands in the middle of Farmer Troutham's fields, where he is being paid sixpence a day to use a "clacker" to scare away the birds who would eat the grains of corn. In an action of sympathetic identification with the birds' "thwarted desires," eleven-year-old Jude throws down the clacker and addresses the birds: "Poor little dears! ... You *shall* have some dinner—you shall. There is enough for us all. Farmer Troutham can afford to let you have some. Eat, then my dear little birdies, and make a good meal!"<sup>29</sup> Within minutes, Farmer Troutham appears, uses the clacker across Jude's backside, and fires him. From the beginning of the novel then, we are in a world which has no tolerance for the communal instinct to share the surplus.

In fact, at no point in *Jude the Obscure* do we have the sense of community which characterizes the early novels and which even in *The Woodlanders* and *Tess* appears in idyllic interludes. Although raised in a rural village, Jude spends his adulthood in a series of towns. An orphan from a young age, he never knows the sense of being rooted in one stable place. The rural home which in Wessex villages might be occupied by the same family for generations is replaced in this novel by lodgings rented by the month or the week.

At one point, however, it appears as though Jude might be entering a real community – a community of fellow workmen. He takes up the trade of stonemasonry, working on Gothic restoration as a stopgap to his dream of attending university. Hardy's choice of this trade for his working-class hero may owe something to his father and grandfather's having been stonemasons and to his own former career as a restoration architect, but the Victorian reading public would almost certainly have associated Gothic stonework with the writings of John Ruskin, in particular "The Nature of Gothic" chapter of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). And as Jude enters the Christminster stone yard for the first time he has a Ruskinian moment of revelation:

For a moment there fell on Jude a true illumination: that here in the stone yard was a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest colleges.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Life*, 267.

<sup>29</sup> *Jude*, I-ii.

<sup>30</sup> *Jude*, II-ii.

Once he is excluded from the community of scholars at Christminster, “elbowed off the pavement by millionaire’s sons,”<sup>31</sup> as Sue puts it, Jude takes up his position within a community of laborers and craftsmen. He even eventually joins one of the working men’s reading groups which sprang up throughout the last third of the nineteenth century, in this case an “Artizans’ Mutual Improvement Society,” a group of “young men of all creeds and denominations ... their one common wish to enlarge their minds forming a sufficiently close bond of union.”<sup>32</sup> This close bond of union is shattered, however, as soon as the other members of the Society learn that Jude and Sue are living together unmarried. It seems that the laboring classes hold the same bourgeois ideas of marriage as their middle-class counterparts. True to his “intrinsicist” approach, Hardy does not privilege or romanticize the working-class position; the workers of the world are unlikely to unite for the simple reason that they are prone to the same narrow prejudices and self-centeredness as those found in other socio-economic groups.

Near the end of the novel, Jude returns to Christminster with Sue and his children, and having been recognized by some on the street as the young stonemason who had had such high ambitions, he addresses the small crowd. He tells them

It is a difficult question, my friends, for any young man – that question I had to grapple with, and which thousands are weighing at the present moment in these uprising times – whether to follow uncritically the track he finds himself in, without considering his aptness for it, or to consider what his aptness or bent may be, and reshape his course accordingly. I tried to do the latter, and I failed.<sup>33</sup>

While he goes on to say, “It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one,” the truth is that Hardy’s examination of the Poor Man at odds with the world offers very few glimpses of hope to the working-class individual who would seek to improve his or her condition.

Despite its tragic conclusion, *Jude the Obscure* did reach a wide audience, including those struggling to rise from their disadvantaged positions. In his study of the reading habits of the working classes, Jonathan Rose gives several examples of young workers reading Hardy’s novel for inspiration, even tracing Jude’s steps in Oxford, but he also relates a more tragic tale:

One Coventry millworker and WEA [Workers’ Educational Association] student claimed that he pushed his son to educate himself for a better life, until one morning the boy was found dead in his room, with a phial of poison beside him and *Jude the Obscure* under his pillow. He feared he would fail his examinations, and the story apparently deepened his depression.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., III-iv.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., V-vi.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., VI-i.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 399; Rose takes the story from Harold Begbie, *Living Water: Chapters from the Romance of the Poor Student* (London: Headley Bros., 1918), 119.

Such an extreme response was thankfully rare, but Hardy's readers were overwhelmed by the novel's misery and "coarseness," one reviewer going so far as to consider one episode of the novel (the pig killing) "an act of literary suicide."<sup>35</sup> As mentioned previously, a great deal of critical scorn was directed at the novel's alleged anti-marriage stance and frank treatment of sexual issues. Perhaps the hardest blow, however, came from Hardy's close friend, Edmund Gosse, whose first review of *Jude* began "It is a very gloomy, it is even a grimy, story that Mr. Hardy has at last presented to his admirers."<sup>36</sup> Gosse's second review, published two months later, was meant to be more supportive, but he seemed to intuit the "socialistic" bent of his friend's novel, and like George Meredith almost thirty years earlier, he patronizingly urged Hardy to give up his radical ways and go back to the pastoral world of Wessex:

Is it too late to urge Mr. Hardy to struggle against the jarring note of rebellion which seems to be growing upon him? .... He should not force his talent, should not give way to these chimerical outbursts of philosophy falsely so called. His early romances were full of calm and lovely pantheism; he seemed in them to feel the deephued country landscapes full of rural gods, all homely and benign. We wish he would go back to Egdon Heath and listen to the singing in the heather.<sup>37</sup>

When nearly a decade earlier, Hardy had jotted down his idea for a story of "a young man – 'who could not go to Oxford' – His struggles and ultimate failure" and furthermore decided "I am the one to show it to them," he must not have anticipated the deeply engrained class snobbery that would rise up against this son of a stonemason and domestic servant. Those among whom he had been socializing, and even those whom he had grown to consider friends, were quick to let him know that his proper role was that of a chronicler of "homely and benign" Wessex romances. Of course, Hardy had been straining against this condescending position for decades; after the success of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, he declared that "he had not the slightest intention of writing for ever about sheepfarming."<sup>38</sup> His final novel would be his last chance to return to the concerns that had first prompted him to take up prose fiction, and as Michael Millgate has suggested, in it "he deliberately incorporated views and feelings which had been largely suppressed since the time of *The Poor Man and the Lady*."<sup>39</sup>

Despite the storm of criticism that greeted his last novel, Hardy could not help but feel that *Jude the Obscure* had had an impact on the condition of the working classes in England. In 1899, Ruskin Hall (later Ruskin College) was founded in Oxford, with the mission of offering the benefits of an Oxford education to members of the working-class. In his Postscript to the 1912 Wessex Edition of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy wrote that some readers thought "that when Ruskin College was subsequently founded it should have been called the College of Jude the Obscure." While the two American philanthropists who founded Ruskin Hall might have disputed this notion,

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<sup>35</sup> Laurence Lerner and John Holmstrom, Eds., *Thomas Hardy and His Readers* (London: Bodley Head, 1968), 113.

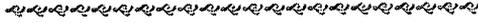
<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Millgate, *Biography Revisited*, 341.

<sup>37</sup> Cox, 280.

<sup>38</sup> *Life*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (New York: Random House, 1971), 341.

there can be no doubt that Hardy's examination of the frustrated ambitions of his working-class hero illuminated the same social and economic inequities that stirred socialists, liberals and labor activists in the last decade of the nineteenth century.



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