

Investigating Thomas Hardy's Reaction to Victorian Religious Forces through Reading *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian era during the nineteenth century was marked by the Church of England and was greatly associated with “Victorian values,” strict rules, formal manners, rigidly defined roles and highly moralistic standards of behaviour. Considering the main religious thoughts of that period, this study examines the basic religious notions of the time which had an effect on Thomas Hardy and provoked him to question the existing religious and social forces of the time through *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Due to his many bitter and tragic stories, most readers consider him a pessimist writer—a description that he himself does not agree. Rather, Hardy considers himself a ‘meliorist’; therefore, he cannot accept being a pessimist. It is significant to note the religious clues in his two mentioned novels, which help the reader to see a reflection of his inner beliefs and his religious outlook on his characters as well. This article, based for the most part on several quotations of the two novels, attempts to extrapolate religious and social problems of the Victorian age and the way Thomas Hardy responds to the so-called Victorian notions through considering his emphasis on repeating the consequences of these forces in the selected novels.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, Christianity, Victorian era, Evangelicalism, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era, broadly designated as the distinctive period during which Queen Victoria reigned from 1837-1901, is also known as the ‘Age of Transition’—change from medieval tradition of social and

religious hierarchy to scientific revolution. Besides religious and scientific discoveries, many social acts and transformations occurred during this time which inevitably affected the theme of many novels and literary works. There were also various political and religious notions and movements that altered the outlook of the people at that age. The most important religious movement of the time was the 'Evangelical Movement.' Pierard (2006) defines Evangelicalism as a Protestant Christian movement which began in Great Britain in the 1730s, and it was a belief that emphasised the need for personal conversion or, in a way, being born again (p.15). Evangelicals were social reformists and the term 'Evangelical' had its etymological roots in the Greek word for 'gospel' or 'good news,' so in this sense, to be Evangelical would mean to be a believer in the gospel—that is the message of Jesus Christ (p.17). As Evans (2001) explains, Evangelicalism provided one central influence on the definition of home and family. It emphasised the creation of a new life-style, a new ethic, and provided the framework for the emergence of the Victorian bourgeoisie (p.1). It is believed that Evangelical morality was probably the single most widespread influence in Victorian England and Evangelicals were loyal members of the Church of England, who believed in their reform. Quinlan (1941) states that the evangelicals' other attempt was to change national morality to redefine the available cultural norms and during that time the attack on morality was a highly organized movement (p.15).

Additionally, Evans subscribes to the Evangelical concern with national morality, mainly the belief that religion should be a daily rule of life rather than a question of doctrinal purity. As Evans declares, they emphasised the importance of a well-ordered daily routine and their irresistible sense of sin required the formulation of rules for daily life (p.2). In this case, Wilberforce (1797) gives the clearest statements of Evangelical views and states that: "Christianity is a state into which we are not born, but into which we must be translated; a nature which we do not inherit, but into which we are to be created anew" (p.298).

Between 1790 and 1820 the Evangelicalism movement was increasingly successful in establishing itself as a part of the dominant culture. Eventually; however, it lost its early purity and could justly be accused of priggishness, conventionality, hypocrisy and conservatism (Evans 3). Also, Evangelicals insist that men and women are not equal and the sexes are naturally distinct, so women should be better educated, beyond just being better wives and mothers (p.22).

In the 1790s, Evangelicalism has been described as 'the religion of the household' and it is clear that the notion of home and family was central to their religious views. Home was one place where attempts could be made to control and limit sin in the world outside. According to Evangelicals, the household was seen as the basis for a proper religious life and morality began at home. The basic split was between the world as hostile and the home as loving.

It was a split that became commonplace in Victorian England and eventually the split between the private and the public spheres became a split between the sexes of an unusually exaggerated kind. This linking of the religious with the domestic was extended to the division between the public and the private area, and was the ideal of the Evangelicals' idea of the home. Home became the sphere of women and the family, and the world outside became the sphere of men. Family prayer became a symbol of the togetherness which was mainly done by mothers (pp.7-9).

As More (1777) states, Evangelicals considered cultural differences as natural differences and according to them, women were naturally more delicate, more fragile, morally weaker, and all this demanded a greater degree of caution, retirement and reserve. According to them, women could act as the moral regenerators of the nation and they occupied the main position in the struggle for reforming and reviving the nation. In their viewpoint, a good woman had recognizable characteristics, which were being modest, unassuming, unaffected and rational. Being 'rational' meant to be not 'sentimental' or having violent feelings. Also to the Evangelicals, it was clear that man was the wiser partner and could guide woman into the appropriate area; therefore, he could introduce to her new ideas (p.5).

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born in such a time within all these mentioned notions and movements. He experienced the Victorian Age that was full of conflicts and contradictions. They were all very important

and significantly influenced his thinking and beliefs. All these notions influenced him in such a way that he tried to reflect all of them in his writings. Many of the Evangelicals' ideals of good woman, social and Christian attitudes can be traced in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Also as in Evangelical life, the right choice in marriage was vital, since the religious household was the basis of Christian practice; therefore, the image of marriage was very central to Evangelicalism and Hardy showed this image in his mentioned novels. In a way, the Victorians treated their women in a distressing manner—even in religion. Their harsh distinction between women and men forced women to be well and to do well all the time. It gives the impression that it was women's duty to be well and to behave well and this was the main sexual discrimination of that time. As Gisborne (1801) suggests, within marriage it was clear that the wife was subordinate to her husband and it was quite essential for her to be faithful and obedient (p.41).

Thomas Hardy as a young man had an important Evangelical phase that left a deep impression on his thoughts. Despite the claim by Henry Bastow (who was an enthusiastic Baptist) that Hardy was an Evangelical, scholars have generally dismissed his remarks largely on the basis of the autobiography (Williams, pp.70-71). Also according to Dalziel (2006), Hardy had lifelong connections to the orthodox Christianity he was soon to abandon. His family's associations with the established

church, his lifelong love of church music and the language of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, his continued attendance of religious services, his poetry's occasional expression longing for belief, his conviction that the Church was, and should remain, the social, ethical, and educational centre of a community, all support his religious connections. However, despite all these lifelong connections, Hardy repeatedly expressed his certainty that "the 'Cause of Things' must be unconscious" (pp.12-13). Considering all the mentioned Victorian notions and the way critics define Hardy's religious views, this article investigates the many ways that Hardy responds to the existing Victorian religious and social forces in his mentioned novels, in order to make the readers aware of the problematic situation of his time.

DISCUSSION

Hardy's biography clearly shows that he is very familiar with Christianity and in stating his society's problems and its attitudes toward women he is merely reacting to Victorian social and religious forces. In describing the situations of different people from different social classes of his time, in his selected novels, he is in sense of paving the way for a change in some of the existing forces of his time. Hardy describes the situations of different people from different social classes of his time and arouses the readers' pity in order to relieve himself of the burden of the problematic Victorian society. The dominant situation of the Victorian era disappoints him and he

seeks refuge in his novels, but even there he cannot state his ideas freely and his novels face lots of harsh criticism. Despite all this, he attempts to express himself and his ideas through his characters. For this, he uses some Victorian social and religious matters to show his reaction to the established Victorian Christianity as well as the Victorian social problems. Through such analysis, this paper tries to unveil Hardy's direct or indirect religious reactions to Victorians' society.

To start with *Tess*, Hardy makes use of his 'meliorist' ideas and tries to criticise as many social and religious matters and beliefs as possible to emphasise that the existing Victorian norms are not fair and if people want to have a better life, they all should struggle because there is no 'guardian angel' to save them as they may think. At the end of the first phase, when Tess is raped by Alec, Hardy writes: "But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked" (p.91). Here Hardy tries to talk to his readers in an ironic way, as if in the middle of the story he wishes to state his ideas of how much this world is shallow and absurd. He wants to mock the whole system of religious beliefs, that there is always a great power, who controls their destiny and moderates the cruelty upon their lives. In a way, Hardy aims to prove his own state of being a 'meliorist', that the world can be better, just if people try. So according

to him, it is not enough to put everything in God's control and wish that he fixes them all. All the people have important roles in each other's lives so they themselves have to try to make good situations for each other.

On her way home, Tess visits a man who writes religious slogans on the wall, "THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERTH, NOT". As Hardy describes, these words seem to shout themselves out, "Some people might have cried 'Alas, poor Theology!' at the hideous defacement-the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served mankind well in its time. But the words entered Tess with accusatory horror" (p.101). These words are crushing and killing for Tess and they impress her. It is significant that these words, which are meant to prick the conscious of the guilty ones, impress the innocent like Tess. This is Hardy's way of implying that religion is not supposed to threaten the innocent, but to pave the way for all people to find their ways through life, to have salvation and not something which is considered as crushing, fearful and threatening.

This particular page of the novel is religious and symbolic. At first, the presence of this man with his harsh sentences gains the reader's attention. Secondly, Hardy uses 'poor theology' to say that the time for Christianity is finished. His sentences here suggest that Christianity has become useless in his era, because according to him while it saved people in its time, now it cannot. On the other hand, Tess is a lonely girl who feels lonelier from reading these words. She thinks this man knows everything about her,

which prompts her to ask: "Suppose your sin was not of your own seeking?" His answer is: "I leave their application to the hearts of the people who read 'em." In a way Hardy tries to say that even preachers do not try to preach and guide people completely. Whenever they feel that they are not able to answer people's questions, they put them in another dilemma instead of guiding them. Also, here Hardy seems to suggest that Christianity of his time has come to be equated to mere slogans. These slogans are written or spoken and you have to interpret them yourselves. It is not something helpful that can pave the way for people's better future. It depends on how you interpret them and it is therefore something which is totally subjective and personal.

Tess feels sinful because Alec has raped her, so she wants to purify herself and feels the need to go to church on Sunday mornings: "She liked to hear the chanting ... That innate love of melody, which she had inherited from her ballad-singing mother, gave her the simplest music a power over her which could well-nigh drag her heart out of her bosom at times" (p.106). Here, Hardy uses the word 'inherited' to question what kind of religion can be an inherited one. He wants to signify that Tess, just like many people, becomes accustomed to religious rites. Tess feels better in the church because of her childhood memories and because she is familiar with all these ballads and melodies rather than a mere love of going to church. Whatever Tess' intention is of coming to church, for some moments she really feels good and calm, but she begins

to feel uncomfortable when she realises the presence of others around her and feels like hiding herself, as Hardy describes it: “She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more” (p.107). This shows that even in church she feels lonely and inferior to others. Then Hardy describes the parishioners coming to church pretending to pray when they do not really do so. All these lines are significant and show Hardy’s reactions towards people’s behaviour and the preachers’ as well.

Some pages later, he writes: “One could feel that a saner religion had never prevailed under the sky” (p.109). Here Hardy refers to religion and mentions that there never has been a sensible and reasonable religion under this sky. Hardy seems to hint of his belief that if there were, everything would be better than this. In all ways, it is obvious that Hardy tries to show and present his own feelings and religious attitudes through Tess. Whenever Tess wanders she praises Nature and thinks about God, as one day Tess is in her way to the dairy and she searches for a song in her mind to sing then she chants, “She suddenly stopped and murmured: ‘But perhaps I don’t quite know the Lord as yet’” (p.134). Tess feels that she has a bad life just because she is not a perfect, pure and religious worshipper to God as she must be. On the other hand, Hardy wants to show how much Tess is close to God, because most of the time, deep inside she praises and talks to God. In a way, Hardy wishes to show his reaction to the religious forces and make the point that it is not important to

just do the rituals and religious ceremonies, but more important is to be with God inside and be a grateful creature as Tess is. In many parts of the novel, Hardy signifies this matter that faith and Christianity in his time are not alive anymore. So, in this case, he wants to prove that now it is people’s turn to make a change and pave the way for their better lives and happiness.

As an example we can refer to the time when Tess is in the dairy and two men are telling a story of past times. She hears one of them saying: “It’s a curious story; it carries us back to mediaeval times, when faith was a living thing!” (p.143). Here, and in several other parts of the story, Hardy compares the faith of his time to that of the past and hints at it being less strong than before. Again when Angel is reading some books on philosophy, his father says:

“How can you think of reading it?”

“How can I? Why – it is a system of philosophy. There is no more moral, or even religious, work published.”

“Yes – moral enough; I don’t deny that. But religious! – and for you, who intend to be a minister of the Gospel!” (p.148).

Hardy highlights this conversation between Angel and his father to reflect his own ideas and says how religious people of the time narrowly limit their knowledge by reading just religious books. Angel’s father thinks that if Angel does not want to become a minister, there is no need for him to go to university. Totally, the

belief appears to be that their life has one target – to be knowledgeable in religion and to be physically present in church. As the quotations in this part illustrate, in *Tess*, Hardy tries to bring and repeat many social and religious problems that cause people's misery instead of their happiness. Therefore, it becomes clear to the reader that Hardy wants to show his reactions to these religious and social matters to pave the way for a change for betterment by awaking the readers' minds through these reactions.

Another important aspect that Hardy emphasises in *Tess* and *Jude* is the question of divorce in some branches of Christianity. Tess' life is ruined because Angel thought religiously she is Alec's wife, also Jude and Sue both face problem in their relationship because they are not divorced from their respective spouses. It is to show how much this is a troublesome matter. In an indirect way, Hardy shows how such a situation leads to tragic ends for the parties involved. Is Hardy asking the question: 'If a person marries the wrong one for the first time, why must he or she be under oath to her or him for the rest of his or her life?' In a way Hardy wants to change the readers' mind about the existing notions, in order to make life better and easier. Hardy wants to force the reader to think about these religious facts by repeating them in his selected novels to pave the way for a solution; also, he aims to criticise some of the existing rules and regulations of his time. Hardy wants to suggest that many of these rules and forces are not helpful and they just act in opposite. This idea is seen in this part of the novel when Jude becomes

more and more interested in Sue, she tells him that she wants to go to London to work. Jude suggests that she should work under Mr. Phillotson's supervision and try to be a teacher instead of going to London. In that case he would not be alone and she accepts: "It was part of his [Mr. Pillotson's] duty to give her private lessons in the evening, and some article in the Code made it necessary that a respectable, elderly woman should be present at these lessons when the teacher and the taught were of different sexes" (p.126). This situation is ironic here, for although the rules and regulations of the time were very strict and despite the presence of an elderly woman in Mr. Phillotson's classes, Phillotson eventually falls in love with Sue. Thus, Hardy wants to point out that none of the strict rules and regulations of the era are successful and they end up producing the opposite of what is desired. Even in strict Victorian time, it is obvious that people will always be tempted to do what they should not. Later, when Jude finds out that Sue and Richard are going to marry, he invites Sue to the cathedral for a talk, but Sue says: "Cathedral? Yes. Though I think I'd rather sit in the railway station," she answered, a remnant of vexation still in her voice. "That's the centre of the town life now. The Cathedral has had its day!" (p.160) . More and more, Hardy tries to suggest that sticking to religion and church is not enough. In a way, he wants to suggest that one must not close one's eyes and forget about all the scientific and social progress that is happening just because they may appear to be against church and religious

attitudes and he appears to advocate an open mind that is prepared to accept change for the better.

Several parts through the story Hardy wants to convey that it is not important to just follow the rituals and ceremonies. In a way, he wants to suggest that it is more religious to be inside with God and try for the betterment of the world and all the people, not just doing the rituals and reading the Bible out of fear of God. Most of the characters in *Tess* and *Jude* just try to go to church and do the ceremonies to mask their lack of faith, but in reality they do not help each other and rather with their interferences in each other's lives make many problems for their fellow creatures. That is why Jude and Sue fail very badly and cannot continue as they wish. Also, when Jude reveals his love for Sue, she becomes nervous because of Arabella and says:

"How strange of you to stay apart from her like this!" said Sue, her trembling lip and lumpy throat belying her irony. 'You, such a religious man. How will the demigods in your Pantheon – I mean those legendary persons you call Saints – intercede for you after this? Now if I had done such a thing it would have been different, and not remarkable, for I at least don't regard marriage as a Sacrament. Your theories are not so advanced as your practice!" (p.199).

Again here it is signified that whatever people bear in their mind as religious

theories cannot be helpful for their life, unless they really believe in it and accept it. Through *Jude* Hardy shows that most of the people just pretend to be religious but in reality they just act the opposite. Hardy places the emphasis on this matter and suggests that even people like Jude, who studied a lot about religion, does not practice what he preaches.

In another part, when Jude's aunt dies, Sue goes there for her funeral. There, Sue explains how much she is disturbed and what marriage means to her:

"... I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one has done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women; only they submit, and I kick. ... When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say!" (p.256).

Sue is in trouble with the marriage rules of their religious society. The fact that a married couple cannot divorce is a killing fact for them. Although this matter is very troubling for many people in her time, Sue mentions that most of them tolerate it. In a way Hardy wants to suggest why a religious fact must be something killing and troubling for its followers. After all, it is expected that religion, as God's way, should be something that guide people and lead them to the best.

Another important social reaction that Hardy highlights in *Jude* is people's interference in each other's lives. This

problem ruins the lives of both Jude and Sue. As an example, when Little Time (Jude's son) goes to school, other children scorn him because his parents are not legally married. When Jude and Sue hear it, they become really sad. Thus, they go to London for a while and after that when they return, they announce themselves as a married couple. This just makes the situation worse and: "Nobody molested them, it is true; but an oppressive atmosphere began to encircle their souls, particularly after their excursion to the Show, as if that visit had brought some evil influence to bear on them" (p.355). Soon after, people shy away from doing business with Jude and gradually he becomes poor. This is an indication of how social controls can negatively impact people's lives. Even when Jude finds a job in the Church to paint the Ten Commandments with Sue, they again see that Little Time comes and cries because of his classmates' insults. Also, one day during their work two men are talking in the Church and they intentionally tell a story of two people who many years ago painted the church and because they were sinful, nobody attended that church for many years. When they go out, Sue cries and says: "I can't *bear* that they, and everybody, should think people wicked because they may have chosen to live their own way! It is really these opinions that make the best intentioned people reckless, and actually become immoral!" (p.360). Soon afterwards, the contractor goes to the church, talks to Jude and asks them to leave.

These lines clearly suggest the idea that Hardy wants to highlight the religious biases

of that time just like prejudiced notions can ruin people's lives. The orthodox characters in the story cannot pave the way for a better life for poor people like Jude and his family, but instead force them to death with their bias. While the basic tenets of Christianity are friendship, helpfulness, brotherhood and forgiveness, it seems that these characters have never heard any of them and just try to stick to the Christian ceremonies. When Jude sees people's reactions to him and his family, he cannot tolerate the situation anymore and says: "People don't understand us, I am glad we have decided to go." Then Sue answers: "The question is, where to?" (p.363). As the society cannot accept their unreligious relationship, they eventually lose everything. One by one, Jude sells whatever he inherited from his aunt and they become very poor. Finally, Jude concludes that they have to go somewhere else. The troublesome fact of people's interference continues to the end of the story and through this it seems that Hardy wants to ask which way is good: to let people be themselves, make decisions for their lives and be happy or to ruin people's lives because they do not act according to conventions and religious rituals?

When Sue tells Jude about her conversation with Abbey and the fact that Abbey's husband is dead, Jude decides to go with his family to Christminster. When they arrive, they rent a room and Jude goes out to walk, then the landlady talks to Sue: "Are you really a married woman?" (p.394), at first Sue hesitates, then she tells the truth and the landlady goes out and talks

about these matters to her husband, but her husband becomes very angry and shouts. So, the landlady comes to Sue and tells her that she would be very glad if they leave the next day. Sue tells the truth and her honesty becomes her biggest problem. Throughout the whole story the reader can see that Sue and Jude are both honest and they are punished because of their true purity and honesty. This is because their society forces people to pretend to be religious while true purity and moral integrity matter not.

All these social reactions worsen the situation for Jude and his family. When Little Time feels Sue's sorrow, he gets really sad and asks: "I ought not to be born, ought I?" (p.396). Sue talks to him for hours about their problems but Little Time is not assured. The day after when Sue returns, she finds that Little Time has killed the two babies and hanged himself. She finds a letter in his hand writing on the ground, which says: "Done because we were too menny" (p.401).

Jude and Sue's whole life turns into a real mess, just because their so-called religious society cannot accept their non-religious union. The people around Jude's family ruin several lives just because of their prejudice. These people act irreligiously and respect all the ceremonies to pretend that they are religious. That is why the above facts are considered as religious forces in Hardy's time and he tries to react to them in *Tess* and *Jude*.

CONCLUSION

Hardy cannot accept the existence of any such thing as Providence, that is, a force

which makes everything in the world work towards good, which is a favourite Victorian belief. In his later novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, his message is clear—that there is no supernatural force which looks after the innocent. Especially in *Tess*, he highlights this matter in different parts of the story, leading several critics to consider his works as examples of 'pessimism,' which he does not accept. According to Williams, this is because Hardy considers himself rather a 'meliorist', that is, one who believes that the world can be made better only if people try and make it so (p.74).

Altogether, it can be concluded that it is not just one notion or religious attitude that affects Hardy's manner, but rather a series of movements and ideas that shape his thoughts and reactions. These influences are often reflected in his mentioned novels in various ways and they include Darwinism, along with the Evangelicals' movement, and Hardy's own personal belief in some 'Unconscious Will' that move him towards being a 'meliorist.'

Hardy's portrayal of Tess, Sue and Jude is merely to state his personal reactions to the values and attitudes toward religion and social correctness of his time. He highlights peoples' religious biases that make them blind. In doing so, he tries to show the real norms of Christianity, to suggest what features and ideas are good to have and which ones are not. He does his best to suggest that religion is not something just for pretention or ceremonies, but should be about the true purity and goodness of people

that guides them through their lives. Many times in these novels he suggests that it is not enough to just follow religious rituals to have a good life. To Hardy, what is more important is that people should try to pave the way for the betterment of their lives with their kindness and helpfulness towards each other. Thus, in these novels, he tries to reconcile all the ideologies with all the new findings of his age to suggest new notions about God, life and fate.

Hardy is seen as constantly seeking answers through reactions to the religious forces and the religious pretensions of his time. At the same time, he doubts the sincerity and faith of both theologians and the people and thinks they are doing nothing more than merely using conventions and ceremonies to mask their lack of faith. This paper highlights various examples in these novels to justify this particular view point. Through repeating the question of divorce in these novels, Hardy is protesting against the social problems of his time. The other social matter which is very dominant in Hardy's *Jude* is the religious hypocrisy of the people, pretending to be religious and placing great importance on ceremonies while not possessing true faith and belief. Hardy also draws attention to the fact that in Victorian society, people seem to interfere with the lives of others and at the same time close their mind to new ideas and anything that seems to contradict their traditional religious thinking. Hardy does his best to suggest that religion should be based on the self purity and the good feeling inside which guides people through their lives. He

even tries to suggest that it is not enough to just follow religious rituals to have a good life. More important is to try to pave the way for better lives through kindness and helpfulness towards each other. It is the sense of being a 'meliorist' in Hardy that implies all these.

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