

## Sue Bridehead- The Most Tragic Heroine of Thomas Hardy

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**Abstract:** *Thomas Hardy was born at upper Bockhampton, near Stinsfor in Dorset in 1840. He went first to the village school and then to a school in Dorchester. At the age of 16, he was made an apprentice to John Hicks an ecclesiastical architect, but he continued to study Greek by himself. A Dorset poet, William Barnes encouraged by Horace Moule. Horace Moule, brilliant son of a vicar, gave great intellectual stimulus to Thomas Hardy. He went to London in 1862 where he became assistant to Arthur Bloomfield and worked hard at his profession, still he was not certain whether literature or architecture should be his life's work. Though he was interested in poetry, he started his literary career by publishing a humorous prose sketch. He published his first novel in 1871 with the title 'Desperate Remedies'. In 1872 appeared his next novel 'Under the Greenwood Tree' and this is the novel which gave Thomas Hardy a solid base as a novelist. It was followed by 'A Pair of Blue Eyes' a tragedy in which there is enough of irony. In 1874 Thomas Hardy's first marriage took place with Emma Lavinia and in the same year appeared his first popular success 'Far from the Madding Crowd'. Henceforth, Thomas Hardy never looked back and between 1878 and 1912, he wrote nine more novels, three volumes of short stories, three collections of poems and composed 'The Dynasts' – a collection of prose, dramatic lyric and philosophic verse. He died in 1928.*

**Key words:** *Dorchester, Apprentice, Ecclesiastical, Architect, Horace Moule.*

It is commonly believed that before writing his last novel, Thomas Hardy had been thinking of writing a story about a young man who committed suicide on the mere pretext that he could not get admission to oxford. The unfortunate young man was Hardy's friend, Horace Moule. Later he dropped the idea of suicide for his forthcoming novel, as there occurred another death, this time of a woman. Thomas Hardy had written in the preface to 'Jude the Obscure' that parts of the novel had been suggested by the death of a woman. This woman is identified as Tryphena, a cousin of Thomas Hardy, whom Thomas Hardy loved but did not marry and who died prematurely in 1890. It was in this way that Thomas Hardy's last novel was designed. According to this plan, the novel gives us the story of 2 cousins who love each other, but circumstances force each other of them to marry a wrong person. Jude, the hero of the novel, is a young working man who fails to become a scholar at Oxford but it is tricked into marriage by a voluptuous girl Arabella. The hero's cousin, Sue Bridehead, gets whimsically married to a person called Philloston, who is a gentleman in every way with the only exception that he doesn't prove a compatible husband. Round these four characters, Thomad Hardy has woven

such a tragic web which enabled him to produce the greatest tragic novel in the whole range of English fiction. According to Thomas Hardy, happiness in human life is an occasional episode in general drama of pain. It is the most sombre novel of Thomas Hardy and his pessimistic view of life deepens further in this novel. Some critics are of the opinion that the novel exceeds the minds of the readers to an unbearable extent. Most probably Hardy has filtered much of his life's bitterness into this last novel of his career as a novelist. One of his biographers has pointed to the fact that, early in his life, Hardy had loved and courted his cousin, Tryphena Spark, but for some reason could not marry her. Hardy had himself placed his young cousin under the guidance of his trusted mentor and friend, Horace Moule who was twenty years older than her and who had developed a passion for her just in the same way as, Jude, the hero of the novel places his young cousin, Sue, under the guidance of his old school master, Philliston and with the same result. Sue gets emotionally attached to Philliston and gets married to him whimsically. Sue is, indeed, a replica of Tryphena. Hardy, Moule and Tryphena all took their separate ways. Two main characters of the novel, Jude and Philliston met the same fate and Sue became a living corpse. Besides, the relations between Hardy and his first wife, Emma, were far from cordial when the novel was being planned. Emma had tried hard to stop the publication of the novel. Hardy was a pessimist by nature and surely his pessimism had taken a more bitter tinge from his own personal bitterness. Non can deny the fact that an atmosphere of gloom spreads over all his novels but he has surely added a larger measure of sad feelings into his last novels to make it more gloomy. According to his own statement the novel pointed to the tragedy of "unfulfilled aims" while it told a story of "the deadly war waged between flesh and spirit". Besides, it dealt with the "fret and fever, derision and disaster" that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity ..... the passion of love. All this is happening in the novel but Hardy too seems to suffer from unfulfilled aims himself and all this has given more poignancy to the novel. Whatever Hardy's views and whatever his principles, he preaches it all through his characters which makes all of them suffer badly but it is Sue and Sue alone who is the worst sufferer and, as she belongs to female sex, she is more vulnerable to moral criticism. She thought ahead of her times found social conventions and religious dogmas wanting and revolted against the trend of the times. It was for nothing that the novel got banished from public libraries and it was given out that the book was the greatest "literary scandal" of the times. Hardy's own wife, Emma, thought it an insult to her

own self as Hardy had shown irreverence towards the church. Then Hardy thought otherwise, being dead sure that he had not written an immoral book and whatever he had written, he had written it honestly. As stated in the original preface, the novel pointed to the tragedy of "unfulfilled aims" while it told a story of the "Deadly war waged between flesh and spirit". With these proclaimed aims, which definitely provide warp and weft for his novel, Hardy would have simply produced a tragic novel similar to such other novels of English. But there is enough of 'fret and fever, derision and disaster' which surely gives a unique tragic glory to this novel. All the main characters of the novel fail and fall and all of them are the pillars of this tragic structure but

Sue Bridehead is the central pillar of it and it is round this character that the most tragic story of the English fiction revolves. It is Sue bridehead whom Hardy makes frisk here and there and all action, involving other characters, is set into motion by her. In his delineation of Sue, Hardy shows more insight into the female heart. Sue is regarded as Hardy's most complex psychological invention. It requires psychological analysis on the part of a reader to bring out the inner working of her mind and soul, which retained nobility till her virtual end even when physically she was crushed to defeat. She comes fairly close to her mysterious nature in her self-analysis, but it is better to note what the fellow characters in the novel say about her and what the critics and other literary personalities including Hardy himself have to say on her behalf or against her. In the light of these statements, we can analyse her own statements in a better way to give us a true estimation of her character. Giving an account of Sue, Hardy wrote to a friend, there is nothing perverted or depraved in Sue's nature. The abnormalism consists in disproportion, not in inversion, her sexual instinct being healthy as far as it goes, but usually weak and fastidious. Her sensibilities remain painfully alert notwithstanding, as they do in nature with such women..... Though she has children her intimacies with Jude have never been a more than occasional even when they were living together and one of her reasons for fearing the marriage ceremony is that she fears it would be breaking faith with Jude to withhold herself at pleasure or altogether, after it, though while uncontracted she feels at liberty to yield herself as seldom as she chooses. Hardy confesses that all this helped to break. Jude's heart, as he never really possessed her as freely as he desired. Hardy is not clear in his judgment against Sue, though he clearly says that her marital behaviour broke Jude's heart. These are the comments of Hardy, the creator of Sue bridehead. Let us see how that great critic Walter Allen interprets Sue's peculiar behaviour. Walter Allen agrees that in this novel everything is subordinated to the depiction of the increasingly tragic situation of Jude and Sue and then says, "Sue Bridehead is a departure for Hardy. She is the opposite of Eustacia, Bathsheba and Tess not merely in the fact that she is an intellectual. But She is much more than Hardy's version of the 'New Woman'. His Rhoda Nunn in "The Old Woman" is now an oddity of history. But she survives because of her ambiguity, her sexual ambivalence, which she is aware of all the time but can not understand." It shows co-existence of positive and negative feelings within Sue drawing her simultaneously in opposite directions. Sue has these feelings directed towards a person, an object or an idea. Her complex nature constituting of contradictory impulses and creating a sense of mystery about this dignified girl has been dramatized by Hardy with great craftsmanship puzzling the readers and the critics alike. We get convinced when Walter Allen talks about Sue's ambiguity and sexual ambivalence. She is ambiguous a girl of dubious nature but the words, 'sexual ambivalence' point to a great psychological problem. It shows co-existence of positive and negative sexual feelings in Sue pulling her in opposite directions. All this is well displayed in the novel. At the age of 18 Sue formed intimacy with an undergraduate at Christminster and shared a sitting room with him for fifteen months. Then the young man died and he is followed by Phillotson. When Sue is expelled from the Training college, she resolves the awkwardness of her situation, by marrying Phillotson in haste but does not want to share sex with him. Even once

she jumps out of the windows when she feels apprehensive that Phillotson wants to sleep with her. Next comes the turn of Jude to whom she goes after leaving Phillotson, under a fit of jealousy for Arabella, she yields to him physically and even fears children to him. At the end of the play, she again leaves Jude, to live with Phillotson. All this clearly shows her ambiguity and sexual ambivalence. Allen's statement that her ambiguity and sexual ambivalence help her to survive needs some qualification.

Apparently Sue's ambiguity and her sexual ambivalence culminate in the tragic end of all the chief characters, yet these traits in Sue's character give tragic glory to her, as well as other characters. How these negative qualities in Sue get changed into positive ones demands our great understanding and thus needs great probity on our part. Sue's intellectual power is unique of its kind which illuminates her inner-self but proves sorrowfully destructive for her worldly life. Walter Allen says, "perhaps key to her is in Hardy's word 'intellectualized'. The passage which describes her leaving her husband, Phillotson, also describes her quoting J.S. Mill. Walter Allen says, "Instead of Mill, it could just as well have been Freud or Lawrence and this exposes her completely ...and it is significant that the only writer on Hardy who fully understands his achievement in creating her is D.H. Lawrence". Walter Allen himself a great critic highly praises Hardy for his creation of Sue but still he does not claim full understanding of her character and leaves it to Lawrence, the greatest follower of Hardy. Both of them thought physical experience as the base of all values. Lawrence was inspired by Hardy's new and frank treatment of Sex and unconscious eternal struggle between flesh and spirit. Like Hardy, Lawrence vigorously rejected the moral and ethical premises of traditional Victorian society. We find all this in 'Jude the Obscure'. There is frank treatment of sex and we find Sue Bridehead a new kind of woman in regard to sex and marriage. May be her thinking collides against the commonly accepted traditions of the Victorian age and we can only blame her for being ahead of her times. She thinks and acts against the long standing social values and religious dogmas. To give this character more and more complexity, Hardy uses Shelleyan idealism also. Sue is a figure of Shelleyan idealism. Phillotson compares Jude and Sue to Loan and Cythans, the idealized pair in Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam'. Then Sue asks Jude to apply certain lines of another poem of Shelley to her and the very lines contain the picture of a seraph of heaven, too gentle to be human. Throughout the novel, we see Sue behaving under this notion and this proves a powerful factor for her troubles in this material world. We need not miss the fact that material world needs material things and not the heavenly things. Such a contrast was sure to produce tragic results and it did so when Hardy applies the Shelleyan phrase 'Scraph of heaven' to Sue, she is not to be measured by this worldly rod. Sue comes close to Jude and Phillotson and both get harmed by her though not deliberately, yet none of them bears any grudge to her and they get equally dazzled by her mysterious charm. It seems that Hardy has been too surcharged with emotions that he makes Sue speak for herself and the truth about her greatly lies in her own statements and the statements of her co-partners in the novel. These statements provide us with an internal source of evidence which gives us a correct estimation of Sue's character. We hear

her saying to Jude, “At first I did not love you Jude that I own when I first knew you, I merely wanted you to love me. I did not exactly flirt with you, but that inborn craving which undermines some women’s morals almost more than unbridled passion\_\_\_\_\_the craving to attract and captivate\_\_was in me and when I found I had caught you, I was frightened” . We come to know that she is not a flirt and she is not possessed of any such unbridled passion which can prove her moral degradation. She has the inborn craving to attract and captivate men folk. We can not blame her for such a craving as it is to be found in the blood of every adolescent girl . It is woman nature and we can not single out Sue Bridehead for it. This frankness of Sue gives us great insight into her mind . She is speaking to Jude without caring whether her words may or may not hurt his feelings . This statement of Sue proves that she can well differentiate passion of women from their inborn craving to attract and captivate. Even philloston agrees that there is no ignoble or merely animal passion between Jude and Sue. He says, “ there is an extraordinary affinity or sympathy in their attachment, which takes away all flavour of grossness . Their supreme desire is to be together, to share each others emotions and fancies and dreams.” When a husband evaluates his wife in such terms , there remains no one to accuse her. ‘Marriage as an institution’ is not to her liking and she is opposed to prevailing conventions of the times. She declines the marriage proposal of Jude saying, “ Marriage is only a clumsy, sordid iron contract”. Sue is of the view that legal obligations regulating from the ceremony of marriage will be destructive to a passion whose essence is its gratuitousness. The most distinctive and unique element in this woman’s nature is a certain sexlessness which always results in her desire for ‘marriage sans sex’. Even Hardy admits that her sexual instinct is healthy but weak and fastidious. Jude calls her a “ bodiless creature, with very little animal passion in her”. But then Sue replies logically, “I am not so exceptional a woman as you think. Fewer women like marriage than you suppose, only they enter into it for the dignity it is assumed to confer.” But why did she marry Phillostan?. According to her own version, when she married him she had never thought out fully what marriage means. “ I was old enough, and I thought I was very experienced . So I rushed on, when I had got into that training school scrape with all the cock-sureness of the fool that I was”. If she is not an exceptional woman in terms of sex, her aversion to it is all meaningless. Marriage sans sex’ is a meaningless expression. Her complexity is really baffling and the people who call her an enigma may not be unjustified. She marries philloston hurriedly but avoids any sexual relations with him. Soon she leaves him and with his consent, goes to lead the most unconventional life with Jude when she refuses to any sexual relations with him the first time they are together , Jude addresses her thus , “ You spirit, you disembodied creature , you dear tantalizing phantom\_\_ Hardly flesh at all.” Jude simply thinks her to be a ‘phantasmal presence and a bodiless creature’. She always refers to Arabella in contemptuous terms and calls her a fleshy, coarse woman. When Jude informs her in the hotel in which they are staying that he had spent a night in the same hotel with Jude, she gets annoyed and says, “You have been false to me; you, my last hope! And I shall never forget it, never.” When the two divorces of Arabella and Sue are granted, Sue and Jude are free to marry each other but Sue still thinks such legality unfavorable to the freedom she has just acquired . Her aversion to marriage

is merely because of the fear that her love for Jude will be debased by 'the government stamp'. In part IV of the novel, Hardy gives us his unorthodox ideas about marriage and here we see him linked to Shelley. Sue wants certain lines from Shelley's poem *Epipsychidion* applied to herself and the lines describe the beloved here as 'a seraph of heaven'. Both Shelley and Hardy thought love was an affinity of mind and spirit to be considered more important than sex, still Hardy did not fully agree with Shelley and rejected the Shelleyan orthodox concept of marriage. Even though he gives free run to his imagination about divorce and free love in this novel, but he comes to the final conclusion that his Shelleyan like characters as, Angle Clare and Sue cause more trouble than good. We can not help saying that Sue is fastidious by nature, hard to be pleased just like a pampered child. This trait of her character seems in itself harmless but here Sue crosses all the limits and uses the same principle in her sexual ambivalence, the matter gets worsened and leads her to final destruction along with Jude and Phillotson proves whimsical in marrying Phillotson and just after one month she tells to Jude, "though I like Phillotson as a friend, I do not like- it is torture to me\_\_ to live with him as a husband". She marries Phillotson only because sometimes, 'a woman's love of being loved gets the better of her conscience'. This is true that Sue's whimsical nature is undoubtedly responsible for her ultimate catastrophe, the role of social conventions and religious beliefs can not be underestimated. The conventional marriage-bond and its sanctity proves a great burden for Sue to resist. She lives with Jude as his unwedded wife and even gives birth to three children by him in total defiance of the social conventions. This unconventional attitude seems meaningless though full of exceptional courage and boldness. She is unconventional in other ways also. To her railway station is the centre of the town life and not the cathedral. According to her the learning seat at Christminster has lost its significance. She considers conventions as needless restraints and always fights against them. Jude is entrapped by Arabella into marriage under social pressure and this closes all the doors of happiness for Jude and Sue. Because of social non-conformity, Jude loses a professional job as he is sacked by the contractor who hired him for some work at a church. Sue feels hurt to find that people should think Jude and her wicked "because they have chosen to live their own way". Because of this social ostracism they are compelled to leave Aldbrickham. Their way of life is not acceptable even to orthodox people of Christminster even where residential accommodation is denied to them. Now transformation of Sue takes place and it is caused by the unnatural death of her children. Fate has also to play its part in the novel and its doings are revealed through Father Time. The birth of this morbid child points to some supernatural power which is definitely inimical to human happiness. We get the impression that fate has designed Father Time to give the last flow to Sue's happiness. Father Time hangs himself to death and also kills Sue's children. This certainly means that fate is working to extinguish in human beings the desire to live. Fate also appears in the shape of heredity. Aunt Drusilla warns Jude and Sue against marriage because wedlock has always been a source of misfortune to the members of the Fawley family. This story is supported by a family friend, Mrs Edlin. This supposition or superstition forces Jude and Sue change their minds about getting legally married. This change of plan proves disastrous for both of them. All the factors acting

simultaneously and collectively give us a sense of mystery of life. After the death of her children, Sue now speaks of 'self – abnegation', instead of 'self delight'. She takes resort to God and begins to visit the Church. She firmly believes that she is still the wife of Philliston to whom she had sacramentally joined. She says good bye to all her rationalism and takes refuge in the traditional modes of thought. Sue, the free spirit of old days takes up an abstract, metaphysical position and says to Jude, "All the ancient wrath of the power above us has been vented upon us, his poor creatures and we must submit. There is no choice. It is no use fighting against God". Sue became a living corpse soon after Jude's death mainly because of her misdoings but none can forget some loveable traits of her character. She had keen awareness of her conscience and she acted always according to her inner voice. Her conscience forces her to go back to Philliston. She has a fair sense of justice and, in order to make amends to him she surrenders her body to him. We can apply to Sue all that she says to Jude as a parting tribute, "Your worldly failure, if you have failed, is to your credit, rather than to your blame. Remember that the best and the greatest among mankind are those who do themselves no worldly good. Every successful man is more or less a selfish man. The devoted fail".

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