

Hardy's Sue and Her Failure in the Mirror of Foucauldian Concept of Individuality

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ABSTRACT

*The paper is a study of Thomas Hardy's female character, Sue, in *Jude the Obscure*. To discover the reasons for Sue's failure in dealing with both society and her personal life, the character is analyzed from the framework of Foucauldian power relations and the concept of individuality. According to Foucault's dynamic view of power relations, individuals or subjects in every society are free and dynamic and power produces individuals who act, and are not simply objects upon whom others act. Individuals change and take shape after they engage in power relations, and this is how our participation in power relations literally makes us who we are. In other words, an individual is not passive and a victim of power relations, but free to succumb to the demands of power relations or use the possibilities before him and practise his own ethics. To Foucault, subjects can practise their individual freedom through 'care of the self'; that is, one can achieve a self other than what power relations impose. Considering Foucault's ideas in this regard the authors of this paper argue that while the female protagonist of Hardy's novel enjoys all three Foucauldian necessary elements for creating a new self other than the normalized self that power relation has created for her, what she creates as her new self is only a shadow, and a fading illusion. Her bitter defeat at the end is the proof of her illusive self and demonstrates that she has been unable to shake her normalized self off. When looked from a Foucauldian point of view she is a failure – still a normalized self masked under the figure of a new self.*

Keywords: Foucault; individuality; Hardy; freedom; power relations

INTRODUCTION

The present study begins with a brief introduction to Foucault's concept of individuality and then continues with a close study of Sue, a Hardian character using a Foucauldian framework. This does not seem to have received enough attention by the researchers. A survey of the literature related to *Jude the Obscure* shows that it has been mainly approached through frameworks of determinism, feminism, psychoanalysis among others. However, Sue's failure as presented in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, we believe, is firmly grounded in Foucault's concept of power and individuality. Here, we study Sue, the female protagonist of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, in the light of Foucault's concept of individuality, and try to shed light on this character and put her in

the context of a postmodern concept that emerged years after Hardy wrote the novel as an attempt to portray a slice of life as he perceived it in the closing years of the nineteenth century. To do this we first need to have a brief survey of Foucault's concept of individuality to see how it helps us to come to a new understanding of the character of Sue in *Jude the Obscure*. This is explored through analysis of the novel's main body, and the extracts cited in each part serve mainly to contextualize and support such type of manifestation. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly speculating on the reasons for the above phenomenon, giving readers a chance to learn how to "ultimately develop their creative and critical faculties and ... create enough confidence in them to become autonomous" (Mishra 2011, p. 57) readers and critics of literature and literary texts.

FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUALITY

In Foucault's view, one essentially important role of power is that it creates individuals who are actually subjects. There are at least three different implications for this idea. First, in the grammatical sense, power produces subjects who act and are not simply objects upon whom others act. The distinction is between an active agent rather than a passive victim. Second, as an echo of the sovereign-subject relationship, power produces subjects who are tied to others by modifiable bonds of obligation or control. And third, power creates subjects as a philosophical term for a self: a person (or group) with an identity and self-understanding. In Foucault's more pejorative formulation, a subject is "tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault 1982, p. 212). Thus, who we are, how we relate to ourselves, even our very identities and actions are all products of power – products of our interactions in human relationships (Piomelli 2004, p. 437).

For Foucault, individuals and groups are "neither preformed before they engage in power relations, nor unchanged by those relations" (Piomelli 2004, 437); this implies that our participation in power relations literally makes us who we are. For Foucault, it is the push and pull of human relationships that shape us as individuals and groups – as others seek to manage us, we succumb to or resist those efforts, and in turn we seek to steer the conduct of others, as well as to mould ourselves. As Foucault (1980) states in a lecture:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike... in fact it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals (98).

Hence, an individual to Foucault is dynamic and capable of change. One is not the absolute slave of the conditions he or she lives in; but there is enough space to act and perform one's own ethics. The individual that Foucault has in mind is a free subject who can either succumb to the norms of society or act in one's own way. Since according to Foucault power is dynamic and productive, and resistance is inherent to it, the individual has the space for acting in the power relation in a way that s/he can be far from the docile body who simply acts as normalized society demands. The Foucauldian individual is one who can be both the slave of normalization and the free subject who acts according to his/her own ethics, and this is while s/he still lives within the much normalized society.

Foucault urges his readers to refuse or resist being governed in the ways we currently are, to reject the identity and subjectivity – “the manner in which we behave and in which we become conscious of ourselves” (Foucault 1992, p.129) – that is presented to and imposed on us. He encourages us, by applying techniques of the self, to practice our liberty to invent new forms of subjectivity; that is, he urges us to think, act and relate to ourselves differently than in the ways we are programmed or managed. As he writes “we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of... [the] kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (Foucault 1982, p. 216). In his words “liberty is a practice ... Liberty is what must be exercised” (Foucault 2002, p. 354). Thus, Foucault believes that one cannot get rid of the normalization process and the normalized society unless s/he makes a self, an identity that is independent, purely self-made and conscious of the condition surrounding and affecting him/her. Accordingly, it can be inferred that he suggests “care of the self” as a way to overcome the normalized self that is imposed on individuals through power relations.

As it is suggested in Foucault’s argument, “care of the self” is a series of technologies and activities by which one gains self-knowledge and skills in order to improve oneself. In order to practise “care of the self” in the way that Foucault recommends, we need to intensify our relations with ourselves and with others. Foucault’s “care of the self” is a social practice: self creation is neither possible nor practised in isolation but it happens by being in dialogue with other people around. As Foucault elaborates on the subject “[care of the self] constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice ... The care of the self – or the attention that he advocates to the care that others should take of themselves – appears then as an intensification of social relations” (Foucault 1986, p.51). As Infinito (2003) summarizes Foucault’s argument in his *What is Enlightenment?* there are three decisive elements which have key roles in ethical self formation:

Firstly, an environment that encourages experimentation with the self is needed. Ethical self-formation requires a type of safe, experimental environment where individuals can participate in the ongoing production of themselves. It needs a space within which subjects can try out alternative modes of being a self in front of others and where they can both witness and generate for the experiments of other selves. (14)

Secondly, an awareness of one’s current conditions as defined by the given culture and historical moment is required (Infinito 2003, p. 14). We understand our present condition and how our identity has been shaped by investigating the historical epoch into which we are born and scrutinizing its associated discourses. Foucault supports the idea that by observing the world we are living in and our identity as a product of accidental, arbitrary and man-made games of truth, we can gain a more useful understanding of our past and present situation. Such an understanding prevents us from glorifying the present by giving it a universal significance or abandoning it in search of something better. We know that we always remain in the world, but we should not give in to it and miss our chances for bringing change. In this way, though we criticise our condition, we do not despair and through obtaining a good understanding of our past and present we can gain the motivation and have the reason for bringing a change to the world we live in. As Foucault maintains:

That criticism is no longer going to be practised in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as

subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying, ... And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think. (Foucault 1984, p. 47)

What he means by this is that to create a possibility for change, it is necessary to build an understanding of present reality through genealogical inquiry.

Thirdly, the subject should have an attitude or disposition to critique (Infinito 2003, p. 14). According to Foucault, critical attitude is the willingness to hold at the same time, both the reality of the present and ourselves and the idea of ourselves as an object of purposeful elaboration. This means that we should accept to see ourselves in a sphere where the substance of acceptance and substance of change coexist.

Relying on Foucault's notion of individuality and trying to read Hardy's novel in the light of his theories, we believe that Hardy knows an individual as one who can be both a slave of normalization and the free subject acting according to his/her own ethics while still living within the much normalized society. What we do here in this paper is significant in itself because it can take us to a new interpretation of Hardy's novel, and give the readers a chance to see what ideas Hardy has had about power, power relations, individuality and identity, and how he has presented them in his novel.

SUE: A FAILURE AS A FOUCAULDIAN SUBJECT

In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue seems to be a different woman, a woman who has not succumbed to the conventions and arbitrary norms of her society. She may seem to have already gone through a successful process of self-formation. Observing her throughout the story, one, like Jude, gets surprised by her liberal ideas, and cannot help it but to believe that she is "a striking model of advanced womanhood, aligning herself with Mill and striving to attain a high and beautiful level of existence" (Hyde 1965, p. 156). It surprises us to find her describing herself this way:

My life has been entirely shaped by what people call a peculiarity in me. I have no fear of men, as such, nor of their books. I have mixed with them – one or two of them particularly – almost as one of their own sex. I mean I have not felt about them as most women are taught to feel – to be on their guard against attacks on their virtue; for no average men – no man short of a sensual savage – will molest a woman by day or night, at home or abroad, unless she invites him. [...] However, what I was going to say is that when I was eighteen I formed a friendly intimacy with an undergraduate at Christminster, and he taught me a great deal, and lent me books which I should never get hold of otherwise. (Hardy 1998, p. 72)

As it is evident from this quotation, Sue has been brought up in an environment that has allowed her to practise other alternatives in spite of the immediate expectations of her class. She was brought up by her father in town – her mother has died so soon to have any effect on her conduct. Christminster is a big city that offers plenty of opportunities to people desiring to practise new realms. Sue has been free from a rigid discipline, and it seems that because of her father's carelessness toward her conduct she has been able to move among men so freely. She

has received plenty of education that has helped her to shape her mind quite different from other women. This quality of her personality, as she herself confesses, is due to her graduate friend:

I have no respect for Christminster whatever, except, in a qualified degree, on its intellectual side, [...] My friend I spoke of took that out of me. He was the most irreligious man I ever knew, and the most moral. And intellect at Christminster is new wine in old bottles. The medievalism of Christminster must go, be sloughed off, or Christminster itself will have to go. (Hardy 1998, 137)

This means that she has not acquired this view of the world by her own searching and contemplation on life, but by imitating her graduate friend whose novel ideas and conduct has apparently fascinated Sue in a surprising way. Hence, Sue has not been able to take advantage of her encouraging environment effectively. She has only touched the surface and has not been able to go to the depth of realities, and this reminds us of her marriage when, as she says, she thought she “was old enough ... very experienced” to rush on doing what she has done (Hardy 1998, p. 199). She has a critical view which is not truly her own but a sort of illusion, a surprising “cock-sureness of the fool” (Hardy 1998, p. 199). She criticises the conventions and norms of society but whenever it comes to act seriously, she fails to perform her own views. A good example of this is when she fails to express her love for Jude since loving a cousin is not normal.

Sue assumes that she is liberal both in thinking and action but deep inside she seems to be a well normalised woman who cannot actively and effectively resist norms of society; that is why against her heart, she marries Phillotson to act according to the norms of morality and middle class marriage. In fact, Sue has been familiar with new revolutionary ideas and has been fascinated with them without being prepared actually to practise them. This is the reason that while Jude persists in getting close to her, Sue cries “I don't know what to do! ... Don't come near me, Jude, because you mustn't. Don't—don't!” (Hardy 1998, p. 197). She has never been able to effectively use the three elements necessary for “care of the self” which Foucault believes one needs to consider if he or she wants to create a new self capable of resisting the norms within the much normalized system. Just as the aforementioned example shows, Sue desires Jude but cannot free her real self from the burden that the normalized system imposes on her. Thus, although she is familiar with critical thinking and has a good knowledge of her time, she is not well aware of the condition she lives in, the consequence of her decisions, and above all her own identity as a normalized individual.

When she fails to act as she thinks she relates her failure either to the normalized society or to her own gender as a woman. Hence, being a woman and considered as an inferior being in the society she is living in, she seems not to have enough courage to exercise her unconventional ideas. Her distress and accompanied disappointment in herself get disclosed in what she says about herself:

...before I married him I had never thought out fully what marriage meant, even though I knew. It was idiotic of me – there is no excuse. 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! I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one had done so ignorantly! I daresay it happens to lots of women, only they submit, and 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! (Hardy 1998, p. 199)

In this scene she associates her failure to two causes, first her own ignorance at the time of marriage, and then the norms of society that do not allow subjects to undo things once they commit a mistake out of ignorance or lack of experience. However, Sue relates her failure at marriage to her own sex when explaining her feeling to Phillotson: “But I was a coward – as so many women are – and my theoretic unconventionality broke down” (Hardy, 205). This way she accepts her own fault as well as society’s severe norms that force individuals to act against their will. In fact, Sue’s marriage breaks down since she has no true understanding of her own sexual needs and desires except for what society demands her or what her so-called liberal thinking, which is only a fake mask, expects her; it is the society that shapes her mind to believe that she is a “coward-as so many women are” (Hardy 1998, p. 205).

It is an unfortunate fact that Sue never tries to overcome her weakness and keeps standing against norms by means of her fragile new self which is more an illusion than a real new self. This makes her act timidly and she is proved to be always in need of Jude to help her keep her alternative pose. This is what Jude, himself, pronounces in a night talk to Sue when he says that “I’ll never care about my doctrines or my religion anymore! Let them go! Let me help you, even if I do love you ...” (Hardy 1998, p. 198). After leaving her husband which actually needs a great courage on her part, she cannot face the world without Jude. Even to find courage to leave her husband she needs her husband’s consent so that she can leave him with the least twinge of conscience because she is not truly sure that she has the right to leave her legal husband on the ground that she does not love him:

Wouldn’t the woman, for example, be very bad-natured if she didn’t like to live with her husband; merely [...] because she had a personal feeling against it – a physical objection – a fastidiousness, or whatever it may be called – although she might respect and be grateful to him? (Hardy 1998, p. 194)

Sue’s next step in trying to practise her own ethics and test her so-called new self is her insistence on not marrying Jude even when they are both divorced from their ex-spouses and need to marry for their sake of their adopted son; Arabella’s son. By saying that “But I think I would much rather go on living always as lovers, as we are living now, and only meeting by day,” (Hardy 1998, p. 234) she resists marrying Jude though she claims that she loves him best. Her reason for not submitting to marriage is her questionable belief that marriage would spoil their true love. She criticizes marriage institution severely and rejects it with a firm determination making it clear that if women accept to marry it is due to the “dignity it is assumed to confer, and the social advantages it gains them sometimes—a dignity and an advantage that I am quite willing to do without.” (Hardy 1998, p. 235). The problem that we find in this character’s way of thought is that she is naïve to the extent that she considers marriage institution as an entity that would bring disastrous outcomes to her love. She fails to see the actual reason behind failures in marriage and married life. She cannot think that marriage, in itself, may not be responsible for the unsatisfactory condition of married couples and is also incapable of thinking that couples’ absolute acceptance of the norms of marriage without giving them a careful thought and scrutiny (or without criticizing them and choosing the appropriate alternatives other than the immediate norms of marriage) are to be blamed and corrected.

Accordingly, Sue’s strong rejection of marriage and married life takes place without giving it a careful and critical observation. She devalues marriage because she thinks it has been responsible for the tragic downfall she and Jude have both experienced and suffered; that is why she introduces herself as “a wretch—broken by my distractions” (Hardy 1998, p. 318). This is

while we can see the basis of the problem in her own character; it cannot be denied that she is a deeply normalized subject of the society that whenever accepts an institution's rules and responsibility she cannot help it but to sheepishly obey all its demands and codes. She is not strong enough to shed off the norms away and choose her own way according to her own ethics. Her statement that "Another was made for me there, and ratified eternally in the church at Melchester" is an unconscious confession that she firmly believes in the established norms of society which are always imposed on individuals by institutions like the church (Hardy 1998, p. 319). In fact, despite her apparently modern appearance, Sue is much more normalized than Jude. She knows they are wrong but she has been so deeply accustomed to the norms that she cannot leave them behind and does shy away from acting according to her liberal ideas.

Therefore, we may claim that though Sue has acquired a new self, she had not been involved in creating it. Her actual self is evidently bending and fragile since it is only an illusion, a shadow of a true new self made by her efforts through a process of self-formation. Sue has never truly used the three decisive elements that we borrowed from Foucault and previously discussed in this paper; the elements that Foucault knows them necessary for creating a new self. While her environment seems to be sufficiently encouraging, instead of carefully and critically viewing the world and the reality of her time, she has imitated the intellectual pose of her graduate friend and just in a parrot-fashion repeats his views and the quotations of liberal thinkers such as Mills. She has never truly understood the meaning of what she claims to believe. Hence, whenever a test of her ethics appears she simply prefers to leave the situation instead of staying and finding some alternative within the very situation. Foucault believes that resistance is not outside power relation but it occurs in the very system that forces individual to act normally. But Sue prefers to leave the situation because she knows that her new self is not strong enough to stand against the normalization effect; hence, she leaves her job and then the training school due to her own inherent weakness. With a self that is still normalized under the guise of a sort of modern mask, Sue cannot resist power relation surrounding her, and the only thing that she is capable of doing is to leave the situation for a safer one. That is why she bitterly fears to enter another marriage relation. She is incapable of directly facing the situations and coping with them accordingly.

Ironically, she knows to what extent her 'self' is vulnerable and hence avoids it being tested. However, she cannot keep to this strategy of escape for a long time. When her children are killed by Arabella's son, she ultimately breaks down and reveals her true self; the normalized one which is an absolute servant of norms. This self is so docile that makes Jude's disgust of the church that, as he thinks, is responsible for its creation. However, in contrast to Jude's judgment this self is not resulted solely from the force of church, but it is the product of the normalization effect of the society in which the church stands as a great pushing force. In such society, a subject is born to be brought up by the existing norms and standards, and Sue is such a subject who has never been able to forge a new self. She sees this clearly when she confesses to Jude that "Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours! Who were we, to think we could act as pioneers!" (Hardy 1998, p. 320).

Sue's tragedy is that she knows too well that she is the product of the arbitrary conventions of her society; that her identity is not a genuine one, that she seems "so bad and worthless that [she] deserves the utmost rigour of lecturing!" (Hardy 1998, p. 235) yet, she is not strong enough to go through the process of self-creation because society does not let her to do so. Hence, she remains a self-contradictory character who is supposed to be in an unbalanced and fragile position for the rest of her miserable life in which she considers herself "such a vile creature—too worthless to mix with ordinary human beings" (Hardy 1998, p. 318). As such, she

would seem a subject of the society who has to live with the dilemma that whether to permanently remain a normalized subject or try to be free through experimenting with a new mode of being. And this is the dilemma that would torture her until she comes to her last days. It is the most unfortunate that she, herself, knows of her being a normalized individual who should not be as docile as she is, and it is also unfortunate that she does not dare to do anything against the norms that finally determine her debilitating defeat. Her knowledge of her normalized subjectivity is her hell.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion we had here, in spite of her apparent unconventionality, Sue is deeply normalized and cannot act differently from what norms impose in an overwhelming way. She behaves as if she is against the norms of society or at least she does not really care about them as Jude does. However, deep in her nature she is a normal woman with a pack of borrowed imitated liberal ideas that makes her seem abnormal whereas in the most critical situations, she fails to transgress the norms. As we demonstrated by our discussion, it seems, on the surface, that Sue has already acquired a new self; she has been lucky enough to enjoy all three necessary elements for creating a new self other than the normalized self made by power relation. However, this new self is only a shadow and a fading illusion. Her bitter defeat at the end is the proof of her illusive self. She has gone through the process of self-formation without enough knowledge and strength to take off her normalized self. She, only temporarily, pretends to be a liberal thinker but she can never act as she thinks since her apparent liberal ideas are not her own but imitated from her graduate friends without truly understanding them. She looks like a normalized woman and all her major acts prove it; her final return to Phillotson is the last and most significant evidence of her still normalized self that has been masked under the figure of a new self.

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