

Existentialist Themes in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

Ying Peng

School of Foreign Languages, Beihang University, Beijing, 100191, China

Keywords: Hardy; Absurdity; Free Choice; Death

Abstract: *Jude the Obscure*, one of Hardy's famous novels of character and environment, is traditionally recognized as a naturalistic novel overwhelmed by pessimism and determinism. Yet, in the light of existentialist philosophy, human existence delineated in the novel is consistent with existentialist attitude towards human life. This essay, employing relevant theories of existentialism, attempts to give an adequate account of existentialist themes manifested in the novel, including the absurdity of the world, free choice and death, to prove that Thomas Hardy moves greatly towards modernism in the age of naturalism.

Introduction

Jude the Obscure, one of Hardy's major novels of character and environment, is traditionally recognized as a reflection of his "pessimistic and deterministic view of the world" [1]. Peter Widdowson believes that gloom and pessimism in the novel derive from Hardy's bitterly deterministic view that individuals are "ideologically and socially determined, 'circumstanced' by the subject-positions they occupy"[2]. However, as a masterpiece created during the transitional period between realism and modernism, the novel, as John Rabbetts asserts, has made "an early modernistic attempt to transcend the naturalistic mode"[3]153. As early as 1977, John Alcorn pointed out that Hardy may be a "proto-existentialist"[4], but he did not show any evidence. Existentialism is not so much a philosophical system as a hard-to-define point of view and style of thinking of human existence in the world that stresses its concreteness and its problematic character of the human situation through which man is continually confronted with diverse possibilities or alternatives. It is not a consistent philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. It is as much a literary as a philosophical movement. Existentialists do not always agree with each other. It would be difficult to identify any doctrines that are common to all existentialists. However, there are some basic tenets and themes shared by most existentialists, especially in literature. Existentialists regard human beings as nothingness in an indifferent universe, so one constant theme in existentialist works is absurdity of the world. However, though existentialism focus on the negative aspects of existence as the essential features of human reality, it is not trying to plunge man into despair. Existentialists believe in human freedom to choose among alternatives or to act in certain situations independently of natural, social, or divine restraints to make their existence meaningful. Then, even if all human efforts and free choices culminate in failure, there is still one unconditioned choice and victory: death. To existentialists, death is not a punishment but the ultimate goal of life to end in fulfillment when God and purpose are absent. All these themes can find their expressions in *Jude the Obscure*.

1. Absurdity

Existentialists use the term "absurdity" to express the disparity between man's intention and the reality he encounters and the manner in which reality repeatedly checkmates the individual. *Jude the Obscure* is the best expression of the existentialist thought on human pain and absurd universe. Gary Adelman asserts that *Jude the Obscure* delineates "a world in which individuals are the playthings of malevolent or indifferent forces that destroy their happiness, beating them down, and making a mockery of their lives" [5]. It is a world where man lives a futile life and is the "sport" of malevolent, or at least indifferent, forces which finally destroy their happiness, defeat their

aspirations, and make a mockery of their life.

From the existentialist point of view, the fact that human life is absurd does not mean that human beings do not have aims in their life but that their aims are always frustrated in this hostile universe. Man comes from nothing and inevitably must return to nothing. Plunged into a sea of brute facts, man can only live an empty and meaningless life, for their purposes are doomed to failure. Jude is determined to make achievements in academic field, but his dream is like a bubble that is soon broken into pieces by reality. Gradually, Jude comes to realize the absurdity of the world. He says: "However it is my poverty and not my will that consents to be beaten. It takes two or three generation to do what I try to do in one" [6] 272. Just because Jude is poor, he is deprived of the opportunity to receive higher education. On the other hand, Jude is also frustrated by Sue, his ideal, intellectual woman, as he is by Oxford, his equally shining ideal of the intellectual life. So more than once Jude feels that "his existence is an undemanded one" [6] 9. Wishes like Jude's, in their ideality and hankering for sublime, entire satisfaction, cannot be fulfilled because these goals exist only as phantasms generated in the self, out of the pressure of that inexorable incompleteness which is the true condition of being-in-the-world. In the beginning, both Sue and the university seem objects of infinitely mysterious romance; both, in the end, land Jude in disillusion. Both promise fulfillment; both frustrate him. All Jude's intellectual passion earns him nothing more than the title "Tutor of St. Slums", while all his patience and devotion to Sue loses him his job, his children, and finally even his title of husband. Frustration is the permanent condition of his life, and disillusionment is everywhere a threat to the text, a threat of silence or dissolution.

Hardy once writes: "If all hearts were open and all desires known—as they would be if people showed their souls—how many gapings, sighings, clenched fists, knotted brows, broad grins, and red eyes should we see in the marketplace"[3]30. Jude just lives in such a world where the absurdity of the universe lies in its oppression of man's desires and its opposition to man's will. In this absurd universe, man cannot achieve anything and his fate is always against him, and thus man lives in an abyss of agony.

2. Free Choice

According to existentialists, although the universe is absurd and man is painful and lonely, men should not be subject to determinism by obscure forces. "A man", says Karl Jaspers, "is the sum of his choices"[7]. Unlike a tree or a stone which need not fight for being what it is, he has to make his own existence by making free choice at every single moment. Man is not a detached observer of the world. He exists in a special sense in which stones and trees do not, and he is open to the world and to objects in it. This means that he is open to a future which he determines by his choices and actions; he is free. In this sense, man makes himself what he is by his choices of ways of life or of particular actions. In the fictional world of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy, similar to existentialists, also emphasizes free choice and action. Jude, the hero of the novel, stands apart from his peers and chooses an individual and meaningful, although dangerous and difficult, life.

Jude's longing for a life of academic and clerical distinction and his devotion to Sue are both his free choices. In spite of what happens to him, Jude appears to be the master of his own destiny; he acts as he thinks. Jude's early "dreams...are gigantic," says Hardy, "the fancied place he has likened to the New Jerusalem...acquires...a permanence, a hold on his life"[6]13. What Jude perceives are, as he himself concedes, "fancies" and "phantoms", unreal, but without them there will be only silence, emptiness, a physical world without meaning, as he declares in a loud voice to the listening throng generally: "I tried to do latter, and I failed. But I don't admit that my failure proved my view to be a wrong one"[6]271. Jude has realized the significance of free choice, though all his efforts culminate in vain. Like an existentialist, he refuses to collaborate with the chaos and chooses to be fully responsible for himself and for everything alive, for his choice implies an earnest and ceaseless struggle to become a real person; that is, the kind of significant being which is worthy of making a choice which will influence the future of mankind. The fact the poor young man like Jude can go to university today proves this point.

Consciousness of the existence of a super-power is shown at certain moments in Jude's life. But

the consciousness of the existence of such a power does not in practice stop him from doing what he chooses to do. The preponderance of chance or coincidence in the plot of the novel cannot lead us to the conclusion that the protagonist does not behave freely or that he has no choice or freedom in his conduct. Instead, he chooses to break the hell where he lives a futile and painful life. He knows his choices are hard to realize, for they are in opposition to his environment and reality. However, his choices enable his existence to be meaningful, for in this absurd world, the only way out is to revolt, which is a signifier of man's existence. It is his choice and action that enables him to become a real man in the existential sense.

3. Death

Death is usually related to misfortune and pessimism. However, to existentialists, when man decides to escape from the banality of anonymous existence, his understanding of this nothingness leads him to choose the only unconditioned and insurmountable possibility that belongs to him: death. To commit oneself to life in the phenomenal world when its meaninglessness should invoke a suicidal despair is, for Camus, a mode of "revolt", something that occurs when one has "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany"[8]119. Sartre praises Camus for possessing positive qualities: "You unites the joy of life to the sense of death.... You are of the opinion that all negation contains within it a flowering of yes, and you want to find consent in the heart of refusal"[8]70. Death is vested with joy because the possibility of death is a certain possibility which continuously weighs upon existence. To understand this possibility means to decide for it and to live for death. death is a spur and a promise to the survivors.

Jude the Obscure is regarded as pessimistic partly because of the death of the protagonist at the end of the novel. Death seems to be the punishment of Jude for his struggle against his fate, but in fact, to Hardy, death is a friend instead of an enemy, for it can help man to deliverance from his suffering and can make man's spirit and virtue glow forever. This is indicated by Hardy's attitude towards his own death. When Hardy is dying, "there is an unbelievable dignity and ripeness: he is waiting so tranquilly for death and yet he entertains so many illusions, and hopes for the world... They used to call this man a pessimist while really he is full of fancy expectation" [9]. Hardy also endows his protagonist with his eagerness and readiness for death. Jude regards death as the ultimate means for him to escape from his suffering, so he is eager to die and is conscious of the delight of death. The point can be clearly seen in a scene leading up to the death of Jude, in which he and Arabella walk the streets of Christminster on his return from his final meeting with Sue, the journey in the rain that kills him. In Jude we perceive a completeness to which he has originally aspired in his longings for Sue. There is a kind of static beauty in the description of his death. When Jude dies, he "is lying on the bedstead at his lodging covered with a sheet, and straight as an arrow. Through the partly opened window the joyous throb of a waltz enters from the ball-room at Cardinal"[6]345. Jude's death is not a sad event but a proof of his existence and a realization of his dream, so "the joyous throb of waltz" celebrates for Jude. From the reality point of view, Jude's life comes to nothing, but that nothing itself exists as a plenitude, the fulfillment which is positive disinheritance, moving, whispered, poetic, strangely beautiful. In the death of Jude ending is endlessness and conclusion a point of growth. Jude's spirit will never be wiped out so long as a single copy of *Jude*, and a single reader, remain.

Death, in *Jude*, as the only journey to end in fulfillment in a universe shaped by death, is not a natural state of man but a price that Jude has paid for his choice, so it is an achievement. Only the man who consummates his life dies victoriously, surrounded by those who hope and promise, so Jude chooses to die happily, fighting and squander a great soul.

4. Conclusion

Jude the Obscure is not a novel of existentialism, but it makes an exploration of human situation in this indifferent world. There are elements in this exploration which look forward to twentieth-century novels written in the climate of existentialist thought popularized by Sartre and

Camus. The meaning of an author's work lives after him. Though Hardy is not an existentialist in the sense that Sartre is an existentialist, that is, an existentialist who illustrates his existentialist philosophy in his works, his understanding of human existence is consistent with existentialist attitude towards human life. Hardy's own words can explain his existential outlook which is far advanced in his time: "What are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in -logy and -ism, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries" [10]. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy has created, not a host of twentieth-century imitators and disciples, but an individual awareness of and thoughtful response to the human predicament that defines his spiritual successors. Although this cannot show that Hardy is the originator of existentialism, it does prove that Hardy has moved greatly towards modernism in the age of naturalism.

Works Cited

- [1] Giridhari Prasad Guru. Thomas Hardy, the Artist and the Thinker: A Study of His Novels. Sambalpur: Pradip, 1998: 34.
 - [2] Peter Widdowson. Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology. London: Routledge, 1989: 213.
 - [3] Albert J. Guerard, ed. Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays. London: Prentice, 1986.
 - [4] John Alcorn. The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence. London: Macmillan, 1990: 1.
 - [5] Gary Adelman. Jude the Obscure: A Paradise of Despair. New York: Twayne, 1992: 11.
 - [6] Thomas Hardy. Jude the Obscure. Xi'an: World, 2000.
 - [7] Davis Dunbar McElroy. Existentialism and Modern Literature. New York: Philosophical Library, 1963: 41.
 - [8] L. S. Dembo. Detotalized Totalities: Synthesis and Disintegration in Naturalist, Existential, and Socialist Fiction. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
 - [9] F. E. Halliday. Thomas Hardy: His Life and Work. London: Granada, 1978: 225.
 - [10] Thomas Hardy. Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1994: 129.
-