

**THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMAN DESIRE AND SOCIAL REALITY IN HARDY'S  
FICTION****Tanima Kochhar**

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**Abstract**

Thomas Hardy is one of the most important Victorian novelists who always play with the conflict between character's choices and the restrictions of social circumstances. His characters struggle against a rigid social hierarchy, social norms, gender norms and fate as they seek out love, happiness, class mobility and personal freedom. The present paper looks at the clash between social reality and human desire in Hardy's fiction with a primary emphasis on the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). The study aims to show the influence of society on individuals' ambition and emotional fulfillment in these novels by analysing them. The paper states that Hardy's tragic vision is the result of the conflict between man's aspirations and the social world of Victorian England. Hardy reveals the pain that social norms and institutional barriers inflict, criticizing Victorian morality and emphasizing the vulnerability of people who are fighting against forces that they cannot control.

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy is exploring the human desire and the social reality of Victorian society, which is a tragedy. Tragedy: Thomas Hardy's exploration of human desire and social reality in Victorian society.

**Introduction**

Thomas Hardy was a novelist of a unique, a man who was realistic and at the same time extremely tragic. Hardy's style of writing in the late Victorian era captured the rural landscape, and also looked at larger issues that affected people living in a fast-changing society. The struggle between desire and reality is one of the most frequent motifs of his fiction. His characters are frequently driven by their own personal desires and aspirations, which are thwarted by social conventions, class barriers, religious beliefs, and cultural expectations.

Victorian society was marked by moral standards, division of roles according to gender and strict class divisions. People were supposed to conform to social norms in spite of what they wanted. Hardy saw the harmful effects of such limitations and he depicted the impediments that society

often places on people's fulfillment in his novels. Consequently, many of his characters suffer, are disappointed and die (Jewusiak, 2018).

In this paper, I will explore the dichotomy of man's wish vs. social reality in Hardy's works. The study examines the presentation of the conflict between individual goals and social restraints in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The paper contends that through Hardy's works, the tragedy of society's focus on conventionality over individual happiness can be discerned.

### **Victorian Society and Hardy's Social Vision.**

In order to appreciate the way in which Hardy handled the human desire, one must take into account the social background in which he wrote. Victorian England was a society with high moral standards which was focused on respectability, duty, and conformity. Marriage, religion, class hierarchy were important determinants of one's behavior.

These institutions were greatly criticized by Hardy. He was not a rebel but he revealed how society sometimes did not treat people rightfully as far as it concerned him. His novels often portray people who are seeking happiness but being confined in structures which deny their freedom (KWALA LARISSA NJUH, 2023).

Contemporary advances in science and philosophy, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, shaped Hardy's worldview. These factors led him to the conclusion that people are just as vulnerable to the forces acting on them as are all other things. Thus, the opposition of desire and reality is a major theme within his fiction, not only in socio politics, but also in existential struggle.

### **Human Desire and Social Constraint in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles***

Perhaps *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is Hardy's most serious treatment of the struggle between personal aspiration and social reality. Tess desires love, dignity, and a meaningful life. But her societal judgments hinder her ability to attain these goals again and again (Fatima Ahmad & Hassaan Bin Zubair, 2024).

After meeting Alec d'Urberville, Tess is a victim of circumstances that are far beyond her control. Instead of sympathy, she is condemned, and this condemnation is from a society that places greater importance on female purity than on justice. Victorian ideals hold Tess accountable for her behavior, and they excuse what men do. This double standard is an example of the way social reality is oppressive to the happiness of individuals.

Another example of this struggle is Tess's relationship with Angel Clare. It looks like Angel is progressive and idealistic, but he is unable to transcend his internalized values of the society. Angel refuses Tess' advances even though he professes to love her, because of her past. He reacts this way because he is aware of the conventions of society, and he values them more than he values his feelings.

The novel is largely one of Tess's hopes for acceptance and happiness being continually denied her by society. Hardy portrays her tragedy not as a result of personal failure but as the consequence of social injustice. The novel is a criticism of a moral system that comes at the price of women, and at the benefit of the patriarchy (Fatima Ahmad & Hassaan Bin Zubair, 2024).

Further, Hardy contrasts human desire with social reality through the use of nature. Nature may be forgiving and accepting but society is judgmental and unforgiving. This is a contrast that strengthens Hardy's condemnation of Victorian attitudes and highlights the disastrous effects of social oppression.

### **The pursuit of Knowledge and Love in *Jude the Obscure***

*Jude the Obscure* is a study of the nature of conflict between personal ambition and social institutions. Jude Fawley desires to go to University and to find intellectual fulfillment. But, his dreams are constantly thwarted by schooling/class snobbery.

Jude's thirst for information is typical of every human being's need to improve himself. But Victorian society is limiting access to education for privileged social classes. Although Jude is smart and hard-working, he is rejected due to his humble origins. Through the experiences, inequalities in social structures are evident (Mohammed & Suliman, 2020).

The conflict is even more important in the relationship between Jude and Sue Bridehead. Both characters want something outside of the old model of marriage; something more emotional and intellectual. But their unconventional decisions are not accepted by society. Religious and legal institutions put expectations on people that are contrary to their personal values.

At the end of the novel, the tragedy of the story is a warning of the destructive power of society. External pressures begin to suppress Jude and Sue's hopes and dreams and their suffering and despair gradually mounts. Hardy sees their tragedy as a proof of a society that does NOT accept individual freedom.

*Jude the Obscure* has often been seen as the direct assault by Hardy on the Victorian institutions. Hardy questions the conventional wisdom about marriage, education, and morality, via Jude and Sue. Their shortcomings demonstrate how hard it is to act on personal desires in an oppressive society.

### **Desire, Independence, and Social Expectations in *Far from the Madding Crowd***

*Far from the Madding Crowd* is a less bleak look at the interplay of desire and social reality than Hardy's later novels. However, the war is a constant theme throughout the story.

Bathsheba Everdene is a strong, independent woman, who in a society that expects women to adhere to traditional gender roles, is a woman who strives to be independent. Her need for independence defies Victorian expectations of women's behavior (Andrzej Diniejko, 2020).

Bathsheba's relationship with Gabriel Oak, with Sergeant Troy, and with William Boldwood shows us the different sides of the struggle between personal desire and social reality. Her love for Troy stems from her feeling of affection and emotion, and her social duty pushes for a more rational selection. The resulting complications are examples of the hazards of the pursuit of desire without taking social implications into consideration.

Desire when it's at odds with reality is a destructive force, as Boldwood's obsessive love shows. He finds himself unable to balance his emotions with his surroundings, so that is a tragic result.

Despite the brighter ending of the novel than Hardy's later oeuvre, it highlights the difficulties that each person experiences when trying to reconcile personal ambition with societal pressure. The eventual marriage of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak may imply some degree of harmony between desire and reality, and only after much struggle and development.

### **Desire and Society, Gender**

The way that Hardy represents human desire is very important and is linked to gender. There are inequalities between female and male characters, such as more restrictions on the female character because of a patriarchal social structure.

Tess, Sue Bridehead and Bathsheba Everdene are all searching for different levels of freedom and autonomy. Society, however, places restrictions according to gender. Women are expected to be

pure, subservient and homemaking while men are more than expected to have social freedoms (Mohammed & Suliman, 2020).

Hardy reveals the inequities of these double-standards. Tess is being judged poorly by society for failing to meet its unrealistic moral expectations. Sue is a problem because her intellectual autonomy calls into question the idea of the feminine. Bathsheba is criticized for exercising authority and autonomy.

In these characters, Hardy shows the differential impact of the social order on women. The experiences they have show the lack of equality in power between men and women in Victorian society and how the desires of women are not met.

### **The author explores the concepts of Fate, Determinism and Social Reality.**

Yet another crucial element of Hardy's writing is the interplay of social forces and destiny. Hardy's deterministic attitude has been remarked by many critics who find his attitude that people have little control over their destiny.

Social institutions are frequently used as instruments of fate in Hardy's novels. The characters can make decisions on their own but the decisions are limited by situations they do not control. Tess finds herself without the luxury of escaping from society's judgment; Jude isn't able to get past class barriers; Sue cannot avoid the repercussions of society condemning her (Realism & Bodily Affect, 2026).

This kind of determinism adds to the tension between wanting what you do not have and having what you want. People want to be happy and fulfilled, but external factors continually get in their way. From this awareness of human fragility comes Hardy's tragic vision.

But Hardy can't make individuals completely helpless. His characters kept on going to get what they wanted even though they faced great difficulties. Their persistence, an index of the indomitable human spirit despite the obvious failings.

The book was called Hardy's Critique of Victorian Society. It was Hardy's Critique of Victorian Society.

Desire versus social reality is a theme of Hardy's social criticism. His novels reveal the shortcomings of institutions which foster conformity over well-being.

Marriage, religion, education and class often serve to oppress instead of support. Hardy questions whether these institutions are in favor of justice or happiness. Rather he shows how they so frequently bring suffering (Kumar, 2023).

It was an unpopular critique in his lifetime. In particular, *Jude the Obscure* caused a jittery response due to its diatribe against marriage and religion. But Hardy's willingness to challenge accepted norms helped to make him a lasting novelist (Kumar, 2023).

### **The Human Desire as a Motive in Hardy's Fiction**

In Hardy's novels, human desire is used as a powerful motivator. His characters are motivated by emotional, intellectual, social and personal aspirations, which are universal human needs. Hardy depicts these desires sympathetically and highlights their legality and significance (le désir dans, 2026).

Love and emotional fulfillment is one of the most prevalent themes of Hardy's fiction. Significant relationships are usually what characters want to find to make them happy and to keep them company. However, it can get tough when it involves desires in love versus anticipated social standards and moral views.

Although the characters of Hardy are sympathetic, they are not typically happy for long since society restricts their choices.

Another constant hunger is to seek their personal and social improvement. Hardy's characters try to transcend their social class or level of education. They are looking for chances to learn and to grow as a person as part of a general Victorian interest in social mobility. However, the fact remains that the fixed axes of social classes stand in the way of them achieving these aims (le désir dans, 2026). His characters have a lack of fit with expectations and norms of society and desire to be autonomous in their lives. It is particularly a wish of female characters that will have to fight with the systems of patriarchy that restricts their independence. Hardy opposes the injustices present in Victorian society in these conflicts.

Themes of desire versus social morality are introduced in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is one of Hardy's most intriguing discussions about the conflict of human passion and social reality. Tess is innocent, dignified and wanting happiness, but her hopes are continually crushed by moral hypocrisy and social conventions (Fatima Ahmad & Hassaan Bin Zubair, 2024).

Tess wants to live a life simple and full of love, respect and personal dignity. Her bond with Angel Clare is one of promise and promise fulfillment of emotional fulfillment and social stability. She's hoping marriage can help her break the cycle of poverty and create a valuable future. But social reality intrudes in the form of stifling Victorian notions of female sexuality.

When Tess is victim to Alec d'Urberville's abuse, the community deems her morally compromised, when she did nothing to cause it. Victorian double standards are acceptable for men and not for women.

It is more evident when Tess is told about her history and refuses to accept Angel Clare. Tess has been in a conduct that Victorian morality might even condemn, but it's one that it can never forgive and it has had a profound impact on Angel due to the society's expectations for a woman.

In this reaction you will see how social values can affect relationships and the true compassion of human beings (Fatima Ahmad & Hassaan Bin Zubair, 2024).

The tragedy of Tess ultimately stems from the lack of social consciousness of the realities of human nature, which are not defined by moral labels. Unfortunately, she has been rejected by social prejudices and faces suffering and destruction because of her desire for love and acceptance. In *Tess*, Hardy condemns the Victorian sense of right and wrong—its moral hypocrisy—and exposes the devastating effects of social judgment.

### **Jude the Obscure: A Sneak Peek at Intellectual aspiration and Social constraints**

Love and feeling are the concerns of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, while the thoughts of *Jude the Obscure* are intellectual and self-exploring. There is a clash between class inequalities/exclusion and emphasis on education and social mobility (Kara, 2024).

Jude has been dreaming about Christminster, a fictional Oxford, that he hopes to attend college. He believes in learning that will ensure experiences for growth and learning. His dreams are the. At times, however, talented people are thwarted by social reality, as Hardy shows us in this work. However, his intelligence and commitment can not gain him entrance into Educational Institutions. The social system is powerful and privileges the “privileged” class, while providing less opportunity for those born into lower social classes. Jude's many failures show the difference between personal dreams and real life (Kara, 2024).

Personal choice versus social norm is also exposed in Jude's connection to Sue Bridehead, and the barriers in the education system. Jude and Sue want a marriage that isn't like the one they have envisioned, a marriage with intellectual companionship and emotional parity. As unconventional thinkers, they challenge Victorian concepts of family, religion and sexuality.

There is a negative, critical reaction from society. Due to their relationship not adhering to social norms, Jude and Sue are socially isolated, emotionally suffering and experiencing economic hardship. Their experiences illustrate the unhelpfulness of social institutions with regard to alternative life and thought. Hardy requires conformability rather than happiness to be more of a concern than enjoyment of society (Realism & Bodily Affect, 2026).

In the unhappy conclusion of *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's depiction of social reality harshly criticizes the culture that is losing away. The end of *Jude the Obscure* is sad; and the world Hardy portrays in it is a bleak, condemnatory vision of social reality. There Jude's expectations turn to failure and his hope fails to be fulfilled. In this story, Hardy condemns closed systems which restrict personal and intellectual growth.

**Return of the Native: Individual Passion against Social Environment**

Throughout *The Return of the Native*, Hardy considers the conflict between man and environment and the society in which man lives. The novel is set against people with one desire or dream in conflict with the limitations of their habitat (Tripathi et al., 2024).

Eustacia Vye is one of Hardy's most intriguing characters of unfulfilled passion. She misses adventure, romance and escape from the seclusion of Egdon Heath. She has dreams that are bigger than the ones afforded by her rural community. She wishes to have a glamorous and satisfying life. But the obstacles of society and geography do not allow Eustacia to achieve her dreams. Egdon Heath embodies the strong forces limiting the individual. No matter how hard she tries, Eustacia gets caught up in things she can't change.

She also has a relation with Clym Yeobright, this being another example of the opposition between desire and reality. Eustacia hopes to gain a new life after getting married, while Clym sees an educational and community service-oriented existence as a path to a simpler life.

Their conflicting expectations lead to frustration and disillusionment. None of the two characters succeeds in achieving what they want in the future (NASRULLAH MAMBROL, 2019).

Hardy is sympathetic towards Eustacia, yet recognises the impossibility of some of her aspirations. The tragedy is not because of sin but because what individuals want does not match what is actually out there.

### **Nor the Battle of the Downe Street Boys: Desire and Social Expectations**

In the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy, unlike in many of his later novels, gives a more optimistic view to the relationship between human desire and social reality. However, there is still a major theme of 'conflict' (*Jude the Obscure*, 2020).

Bathsheba Everdene wants to be independent and self-determined. Being a female landowner means defying the norms of gender and wanting to take control of herself. Her independence is an important break from the Victorian notions of womanhood.

But Bathsheba's desires often clash with the expectations of society and personal relationships. Her relationship with Sergeant Troy, William Boldwood, and Gabriel Oak brings out the dilemmas of personal freedom and social responsibility. Bathsheba has a problem in her beginning to differentiate between true love and fleeting attraction, which causes some emotional challenges.

The novel is less optimistic than Hardy's later works, but Bathsheba's journey makes clear that the desires of the individual are sometimes subject to social forces. Hardy believes that fulfillment is achievable but it's going to take compromise, maturity, and self-awareness.

The book is Hardy's Critique of Victorian Society. The book is called Hardy's Critique of Victorian Society.

The continued struggle between human wishes and social realities allows Hardy to condemn in a number of ways Victorian society. One of his main concerns is the lack of flexibility of social institutions. Marriage, religion, education and class are often seen as limiting people's freedom instead of improving their health and well-being.

Hardy's fiction also gives a great deal of attention to class divisions. Jude-type characters face obstacles to social mobility, despite their abilities and aspirations. Hardy asks questions about the fairness of an inherited privilege based society.

In addition, Hardy's themes of tradition and modernity are examined. Numerous characters are looking for other ways of doing things than the norm, and conservative social forces are opposing them. This conflict is part of a greater culture shift during the late 1800s.

In addition to critiquing society, Hardy explores the nature of desire and reality, which is related to his philosophical interest in fate and destiny. His characters are frequently faced with events that seem to be beyond their control, such as randomness, nature, and society.

Hardy's worldview is that people don't have much control over their destiny. Often times, despite the best intentions of characters, something goes wrong. This way of thinking helps explain the pathetically sad nature of his fiction (Mohammed & Suliman, 2020).

But Hardy doesn't rule out human agency entirely. In spite of all obstacles, his characters keep going for happiness, love and self-realization. They have a dignity and meaning in their failure, as well as in their success. Therefore, Hardy's novels focus on the weaknesses and strength of human beings.

### **Conclusion**

One of the central themes of Thomas Hardy's fiction is the struggle between desire and reality in society. Hardy writes novels, like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* on the plight of people who want to find love, knowledge, independence and fulfillment in a society which is narrow-minded.

His characters are often faced with barriers imposed by class, gender, religion and morality. They cannot realize their dreams in this society, and sometimes go through tragic experiences. The portrayal of this conflict in Hardy's work is critical of Victorian society and an expression of his concern for those who are overconstrained in their ways of life. His novels remind the reader that the conflict between personal desire and the social reality remains a fact of human experience, and his fiction is a timeless examination of the struggle of the individual and the injustice of society.

Thomas Hardy's fiction is full of conflict between human desire and social reality; one of the most important themes of his work. In novels such as *Jude the obscure*, *The Return of the native* and *Far from the madding crowd*, Hardy provides characters that are restricted by class distinctions, social conventions, moral condemnations and material constraints in their attempts to find happiness, fulfillment through love, freedom, and education.

Hardy's characters aren't only living down to their own expectations, they are battling the forces he/she sees that deprive humanity of potential. The novel's chaos of conflicts highlights the discrepancies and imbalance of Victorian society and it simultaneously questions greater issues of destiny, free will and suffering. Because he is empathetic to showing a person in the middle of

what would seem to be a difficult social circumstance, he resonates with individuals who would find themselves in an equivalent scenario in life, a conflict between the individual and the outside world.

Lastly, Hardy's fiction reveals that all men and women have a natural desire to be happy, fulfilled and to be their best; but society and events make it hard, if not impossible, to follow those desires. It enhances the emotional charge of his novels, and guarantees his continuing status as one of the most perceptive critics of Victorian society and humanity.

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