

Sue Bridehead: Hardy's Feminist Figure or a Fallen Temptress

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ABSTRACT

Among Thomas Hardy's female characters, Sue Bridehead (the female protagonist in *Jude the Obscure* 1895) seems very powerful and many readers may consider her as Hardy's feminist female character, who stands against all the existing forces of her time and wants to defend her status quo. Reading this article clarifies that, although Sue wants to say something new in women's case, she is not supported through the story and rather her portrayal shows that a woman, in the Victorian society, is the weaker sex and even if she wants to change or break the rules she cannot simply because she is a woman. Therefore, portrayal of Sue supports this idea that, while Hardy highlights women's problems and inequalities it is merely to emphasise the existing social and religious situations of the Victorian era. In this light, Hardy's portrayal of Sue does not follow the basic tenets of Christian feminism. This article, considering the main images of sin, salvation and Eve (a temptress), illustrates that Hardy's portrayal of Sue is not in accordance with Christian feminism; therefore, Sue cannot be considered as Hardy's feminist figure.

Keywords: Christian feminism, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Sue Bridehead, Thomas Hardy

INTRODUCTION

Among Thomas Hardy's female characters, Sue Bridehead starts differently and it seems she has something new to say. Sue is independent and works in a shop. Later, when she marries Richard Phillotson, she falls in love with Jude. As she cannot tolerate her ordinary life and wants to break the existing norms of her time, at the beginning it seems she wants to emerge

the image of New Woman, who is not weak, inferior, dependant and superstitious. That is why she leaves her husband to follow her heart and starts a new life with Jude (her lover). Through the story she fails and feels as an ill-fated and sinful person who needs salvation. As it is explained in *The Norton*

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Anthology of English Literature (1987), the Victorians had an ideal of womanhood which was a concept that they called the 'angel in the house' or the 'relative creature' who maintained the home as a heaven. This ideal of womanhood is clear from the novels, manuals and even government reports of that time. The definition of women during the 1830s and 1840s was primarily related to home and family. Also in the nineteenth century feminism was a dominant and much discussed issue, because at that time there was a great number of women writers and novelists who focused on women's issues in their writings (Abrams et al., 1987). Despite all the efforts of the writers in the Victorian era to produce works in apparent support of the plight of women of the time, it cannot be said that all these writers were feminist just because they wrote about the prevailing social and religious attitudes towards women. The related social and religious matters of the era, justify the use of Christian feminism viewpoint in studying Sue. Therefore, this article takes a critical look at Hardy's (1994), *Jude the Obscure* to introduce a new critical perspective in his description of Sue Bridehead. Considering the framework of the study, the question is: Is Hardy's portrayal of Sue in accordance with feminists' portrayal, since he focuses on Sue's weakness and finishes her story in remorse and need of salvation? In order to solve this problem, this article examines the portrayal of Sue through Christian feminism by considering the main clues of 'sin', 'salvation' and the image of 'Eve' as a temptress.

METHODS

In *Feminism and Christianity: an Essential Guide*, Japinga (1999) asserts that feminist theology begins with the assumption that women are fully human, made in God's image, loved and valued by God. There are three main tasks in feminist theology; first, feminist theology provides a critique of the tradition, pointing out the ways the Christian tradition has been limiting or destructive for women. Second, it tries to recover women's stories from the past and the present in order to express the gifts and insights of women throughout history. Third, feminist theology revises and reshapes traditional Christian doctrines and practices in order to help the tradition and the church to be more responsive to the needs and experiences of all its members (21). Christian feminism is a branch of feminism that focuses its frames on theology, following the same routes as feminism but narrowing on the theological frames. Feminism recognizes the importance of women's stories and the need to find examples of strength and courage in both the past and the present. Thus all the feminists look for equal rights for women, but their final goal is a social direction in which women and men of all races and classes can live together in justice and harmony (12). In Japinga's view most of the Christian feminists' goal is:

To empower and encourage women by helping them to find inner strength, a clear sense of identity, and freedom from stereotypes. Feminism recognizes the importance of women's stories

and the need to find examples of strength and courage in both the past and the present (13).

In the nineteenth century some people believed that women who used their brains for education and scholarship drew energy from the uterus and made themselves sterile. According to them, man was created first to exercise headship over the woman, and woman was designed to be man's helpmate, to cook his food, wash his clothes, and bear his children and this is her purpose in life. She does not need an education because she will not have a public role, and she cannot exercise authority over men. As long as the woman accepted the man's headship, she was perfectly happy. When she did not, sin entered the world (76). According to Evans (2001) in *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, the main ideals of a good woman were brought to the Victorian era through evangelicals, which defined women with recognizable characteristics, which were being modest, unassuming, unaffected and rational, and being 'Rational' meant not to be 'sentimental' or have violent feelings. To evangelicals, it was clear that man was the wiser partner and could guide woman into the appropriate area (11). In *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, More (1809) declares that while men could introduce women to new ideas, women were considered as private property, who had their main household duties (23).

Now that the framework of study is explained, it is good to consider the definition of sin, salvation and the image

of Eve (the temptress). As sin is considered to be rebellion against God through pride, self-seeking, and haughtiness, then salvation requires a breaking of the self. Therefore, sinful people must distinguish their weakness and failure, and try to admit their inability to save themselves or their world and finally confess their need for God (Japinga 107). According to Christian feminists, human relationships have been blemished by sin, but the sexism, racism, and classism present in our world are not God's will (13). Christian feminists argue that as the Christians believe salvation sets individuals free from the outcomes of sin and allows their souls to enter heaven when they die, while the unsaved person is separated from God, the saved person has a relationship with God that offers happiness and security. The definitions of salvation and sin are closely connected. Sin is a broken relationship between God and an individual and the evident key for their reunion is the individual's salvation. Salvation takes place by the individual's regret, change, 'getting right with God', and developing a personal relationship with Christ. Salvation comes when the self is broken and gives up its own desires, then the saved people need to be self-sacrificing and unselfish in a way that they do not demand their own way (110).

RESULTS

Keeping in mind the qualities of Christian feminism, in approaching Sue, first and foremost it is important to take note that portrayal of Sue is closely related to Christian attitudes of Hardy himself and

then *Jude the Obscure* has some qualities of Christian feminism within itself. With a close reading of the text, a reader may discover that Hardy's Christian beliefs are deeply effective on Sue's portrayal. Although Christian feminism is a modern theory, reading *Jude the Obscure* and studying the way Hardy portrays Sue, provide much evidence of Christian feminist tracks. *Jude the Obscure* is closely related to women and the inequalities they face in a patriarchal society at a time when strict Victorian Christianity was established through the existing notions of evangelicalism. In this context, the use of Christian feminism proves to be the appropriate theoretical framework to approach Sue.

DISCUSSION

Considering Sue's portrayal, proves that she is a changing and unstable character, who is neither rational nor stable. She is not powerful and conveys the image of a temptress. Through the discussion it becomes clear that, unlike many readers' conceptions, Sue cannot convey the image of a modern woman who is familiar with her right and that is why she surrenders her life to Richard Phillotson (her husband) and goes to him despite her feelings towards Jude. From a close reading of *Jude the Obscure*, the reader discovers that Hardy's Christian beliefs influence his female portrayal and make them dependant. Hardy portrays the male characters as people who have religious jobs or studies, while the females (Sue and Arabella) are portrayed as temptresses. As an example, Jude is a

religious and studious man, who is very ambitious and wants to go to Christminster to study and learn as much as possible. Jude wishes to become a scholar next to be a Christian divine (p. 36). Through the story the presence of the two mentioned women, ruin all his dreams and future. When Jude first sees Arabella (Jude's wife) and talks to her, he gradually forgets all about his dreams and says to himself that it is not bad to have fun for a while (p. 46). The role of a woman as a temptress in Hardy's *Jude* seems to be the best way to explain and justify a man's failure or instability in achieving his future goals, and it is the woman who stands accused. This part highlights Japinga's view point that as men historically and religiously were considered as the main cause of creation, in all patriarch religions, they always consider women as the persons who need to be accused. This is because in patriarch religions men consider women as the origin of sin and know them as temptresses (p. 12).

In *Women in Christianity* (Miller et al. 2009), on one hand, Bible is considered as the only literature in the world, up to our century, that looks at women as human beings, no better and no worse than men; however, it cannot be said that the society of Old Testament times were consistently favourable to women. There is a male bias and priority in both the private and public life of women (p. 34). On the other hand, according to Japinga, one image that is very significant in patriarch religions is the image of woman as one of men's possessions. As men consider women as

one of their possessions, they always feel superior to them and they think women's life and destiny should be in their control (p. 13). As a woman, Sue completely feels this inferiority and although she does not like this, she has to accept it. As it is custom and convention in Christianity, when a couple is getting married, a male (who is father of the bride or one of her close relations) should give her away to the bridegroom. Sue asks Jude in a letter to give her away on her wedding day. Sue mocks this custom and thinks it makes her inferior to have to be 'given away', much as one gives away an animal. However, she ultimately agrees to follow the custom because she has to do it (p. 203).

In many parts of the story (as on p.230) when Jude is alone, he returns to study for priesthood. Hardy, as a writer, casts the female characters as being responsible for distracting the male characters from their personal goals and their relationship with God. Whether directly or indirectly, Hardy portrays Sue in the image of Eve. A case in point is on page (p. 260) when Jude kisses Sue and confesses his feelings for her, then he goes to the yard and brings out all his ethical books and burns them. As if symbolically he ends his ambition to study for priesthood. It is significant that whenever Jude is with a woman, he forgets all about his ambitions and religious beliefs. Sue is portrayed as an irritating and distracting figure, who is a barrier in Jude's way to his success and career.

When Jude falls in love with Sue, she goes to him and says that she has to marry

Richard (p. 159). The very arguable matter here is that, although Sue seems to be Hardy's only female character who wants to break the marital rules and live a life that she likes, her personality and life are completely under the direct or indirect control of the males. Most of the parts throughout the story, Hardy tries to show his inner feelings about men and women indirectly, but with a close attention the reader can see the many parts in this novel that support the claim of his female portrayal not being in accordance with Christian feminism tenets. On one part, when Sue and Jude are talking about the books that they have read, Jude asks her how she has read this much and she says:

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 man – no man short of a sensual savage – will molest a woman by day or night, at home or abroad, unless she invites him. Until she says by a look 'Come on' he is always afraid to, and if you never say it, or look it, he never comes. [...] When I was eighteen I formed a friendly intimacy with an undergraduate at Christminster, [...] He left me a little money – because I broke his heart, I suppose. That's how men are – so much better than women! (p. 177).

The last sentence can be considered as the pick of the above paragraph, which shows how Hardy tries to describe a man through his female character. Sue's sentences introduce men as harmless characters who do not get close to women unless the women let them. In one sentence, Hardy brings a conclusion to all his portrayals and descriptions and says: "men are – so much better than women". With this definition he affirms the matter that it is the women who always attract and tempt men and cause many problems both for themselves and men. The main image of Sue continues to be the image of a temptress who causes males to lose sight of their religious attitudes and abandon their future goals. As in the following quotation, Jude says:

"I am awfully ignorant on general matters, although I have worked so hard," he said, to turn the subject. "I am absorbed in Theology, you know. And what do you think I should be doing just about now, if you weren't here? I should be saying my evening prayers. I suppose you wouldn't like" (p. 179).

Obviously, Jude is supposed to have religious attitude and on the contrary Sue is the main reason for his religious ignorance. This image becomes a cliché in this novel. The other matter which is very considerable and dominant about Sue is that, Hardy portrays her character as an unsure, unstable and changing woman. Sue does not know what is right and what is wrong. She always commits irremediable mistakes.

Sue's instability is very troublesome for the two male characters in her life. Both Jude and Richard face many problems because of her unstable, changing and unsure character.

The image of 'salvation', based on Japinga's theory, is another patriarch belief that claims – as men consider women the origin of sin in this case – women should suffer more than men in order to obtain salvation, but even after their salvation church fathers, historically, questioned this matter that, 'can women be saved?' (p. 110). In this case according to Miller, gender neither privileges nor curtails a believer's gifting or calling to any ministry in the church or home. It does not imply that women and men are identical, but it just affirms that God designed men and women to complement and benefit one another (p. 19). Although Jude and Sue are both married and have illicit relationship, significantly, the image of salvation is stronger for Sue than Jude and that is why she suffers more. When Jude's son kills their children and himself, Sue's sadness is compounded by the memory of her last child was born prematurely and a stillbirth (p. 408). Sue's loss of her children is therefore total and it makes her feel depressed and sinful. Finally, she says:

"We must conform!" she said mournfully. "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. We must. It is no use fighting against God!" (p. 409)

[...] "No, no, Jude!" she said quickly. "Don't reproach yourself with being what you are not. If anybody is to blame it is I." (p. 410)

Sue feels really sinful here. She feels as Eve, a temptress who has tempted Jude to agree to all her decisions and now she feels guilty. She abandons all her ideals and beliefs, because she feels they are against God. Sue is a woman who seeks salvation because she thinks she has done something against God's wish. As Japinga argues, the Christians are taught to believe that whatever is written in the Bible is God's word so it must be followed (p. 62). They see such a belief as patriarchal ideas for patriarchal reasons but for Hardy, it is just a matter of presenting well-known and well-accepted patriarchal images of the time. Sue considers the loss of all their children as her punishment and subsequently changes her attitude. She even tells Jude that she belongs to Richard not to him. This is because firstly, she is still married to Richard and religiously she is his not Jude's (p. 415). Jude is shocked and Sue tells him that, they should not stay together any longer because she is planning to return to her husband and it is better for Jude to stay with his wife, Arabella. After all, Jude and Arabella were formally and properly married. Sue wishes for salvation and for this she does whatever she can. Sue completely follows the process of salvation through forgetting her feelings, breaking the self and confession for the need of God. She wants to set herself free from the outcomes of her sins in order to save herself. Reading

these lines, gives the reader the impression that Hardy's patriarch beliefs are still alive and with him. He is clear in his message that readers should be warned not to be fooled by women who are temptresses that bring misfortune to men and in the process, lead them away from God. The patriarch notions are so strong that they even affect Sue's decisions and thoughts. She consequently forgets about all her dreams, because she comes to believe that whatever she did was wrong. So, she wants to change her ways and do anything that makes her closer than ever to God and that is why she completely ignores Jude's feelings. On the other hand, Jude, in listening to her and doing what she wished, has forsaken his old conventions and beliefs. It is significant to note Hardy portrays Sue seizing the time and opportunity to seek salvation, while Jude drifts even further away from church and God. As later Sue says:

[...] I see marriage differently now. My babies have been taken from me to show me this! Arabella's child killing mine was a judgment – the right slaying the wrong. What, what shall I do! I am such a vile creature – too worthless to mix with ordinary human beings! (p. 419)

For obtaining salvation, Sue does whatever she can. She thinks as she did not follow the so-called conventions she sinned and acted against God. This is just because the patriarch notions are so strong that even Sue feels sinful in not following them, thus

she finds herself duty bound to make up for all her religious misdoings to save herself. When Sue goes to Richard she says:

My children – are dead – and it is right that they should be! I am glad – almost. They were sin-be-gotten. They were sacrificed to teach me how to live! – their death was the first stage of my purification. That’s why they have not died in vain! . . . You will take me back? (p. 435)

Sue considers herself as the most sinful person who has broken her relationship with God through following her own way and breaking marital rules. As it was mentioned earlier, according to Christians, sinful people must distinguish their weakness and failure in order to admit their need for God and that is why Sue ignores her feelings towards Jude and goes back to Richard. Through Hardy’s characterization, it is proven that in all ways Sue is ignorant, once with forgetting about the religious rituals and another time by ignoring Richard, Jude and finally her own feelings. Sue is unable to moderate her attitudes and feelings and acts in extremes. Interestingly, when she tries to be closer to God her behaviour completely becomes in agreement with evangelicals’ notions of a good woman. That is she becomes unassuming, modest, unaffected and rational which is non sentimental. Contrary to the unstable and unkind female characters in this story, Hardy portrays both Jude and Richard as calm, logical and kind characters. They do just as their wife or lover wish. As an example, when Richard’s

friend asks him why he let Sue to go with her lover, he tells his friend that he did it because of humanity, although it is not in accordance with religion or the routine doctrines (p. 275) – as if religion and its doctrines are not in a way in accordance with humanity. He continues that, in reality he should kill her lover and lock her up, but according to him, it is not right so he lets her go. He lets Sue free to go and experience the wrong way and later to return as an ignorant and wrong child to her father. The repetition of kind and merciful male characters contrasted against unstable and unreliable female characters in Hardy’s *Jude*, are very non-feminist and rather patriarchal. Sue is rather selfish and jealous who seeks freedom just for herself. When she leaves Richard and goes to Jude, she cannot tolerate Arabella coming to see Jude (p. 315). She goes to Richard and sees him but applies a different standard on Jude, forcing him to do as she wishes. Eventually, Jude tells her that she is not his wife and therefore cannot expect him to follow her wishes. In this case Sue is forced to tell him that she will marry him (p. 318). When Sue loses all her children, she becomes rather changeable and forces Jude to do just as she says (p. 423). Sue again acts in a wrong, selfish way and Hardy shows how her changing character in a way ruins Jude’s life. Sue does not pay attention to Jude’s feelings and she does whatever she wants. Even now that she wants to behave religiously, she behaves immorally. Finally, when she wants to go to Richard, she says: “I don’t love him – I must, must, own it, in deepest remorse! But I shall try to learn to love

him by obeying him" (p. 432). Indirectly, Hardy shows the non-feminist features of his female portrayal; that is, Sue is a changeable character who does not know what is right and what is wrong. This is because of her selfishness as when she forces Jude to accept her decisions.

CONCLUSION

In analysing Sue's character through theoretical framework of Christian feminism it is significant that, while Hardy highlights the woes of Sue, he also portrays her as a rebellious woman who rebels against the social and religious norms of her time that eventually fails and cannot break the so-called social clichés and religious norms. In portraying the miserable situation of Sue, Hardy arouses the readers' pity in order to relieve himself of the burden of his personal reactions towards the society of his time. In no way; however, does Hardy show personal support for women or stand up for their rights. Instead, his stand appears to be that woman is the weaker sex and even if she wants to change and break the rules she cannot, simply because she is a woman. Hardy just highlights the many ways in which Sue is mistaken and sins in a patriarchal dominant and overly-strict society influenced by Christian evangelicalism, and he just shows her suffering as a consequence. Although Hardy pretends not to accept the existing religious values of his time and wants to react towards them, in the case of women he in fact subscribes to all the existing notions of his time without trying to change

the unfortunate position of the female characters. That is why Sue cannot save herself by following her way and forgetting about marital rules and the only way for her survival is seeking salvation. This reminds Japinga's viewpoint that the fathers were not sure that women could be completely free from the effects of their sin. According to them Eve's sin in eating the forbidden fruit meant that women could not be trusted in leadership. Thus women were considered dangerous temptresses who needed to be controlled and be subordinate to men (p. 12).

As Elvy (2007) asserts in *Sexing Hardy*, Hardy's narrator puts much of the blame of the tragedy on Sue (p. 144). She is the most changing personality, sometimes she is a New Woman and acts as a liberated thinker and sometimes she is strongly superstitious about religion and marriage (p. 147). In *A Companion to Hardy*, Taylor (p. 2013) declares the same idea about Sue; according to her, at first Sue is liberal despite she works in a shop that Jude describes it ritualistic. But later in the novel, she undergoes a sudden 180 degree turn and reverse to a religious person after her children death (p. 348). Sue cannot find her inner sense of identity and cannot become independent. Her personality and life remain under the control of the patriarch society of her time and she cannot flourish. Not only Sue is unsuccessful in her own way, but also she fails in a very bad way. Sue is portrayed based on the inevitable Victorian viewpoint that a woman should not behave the way Sue behaves and challenges the existing social and religious norms of the day. The result

is that if she rebels against the conventions of her time, she will suffer for it. In Elvy's opinion: "The tragedy of Sue and Jude is that there is no social or cultural space in which their special, two-in-one spiritual love can exist, let alone flourish" (p. 143). Sue's story becomes a lesson to all the other women in order to never break the conventions or even think of it. Initially, Sue may appear to be a strong and brave female character who wants to be independent and different, but her firm personality changes through the story and she ends up tragically. Her sheer role is the temptress who ends as a weak woman that needs a man's supervision, control and guidance to live her life. What is significant is that, it is Sue who seeks salvation more than any other characters in the story, and the problem is she thinks she deserves it.

Unlike Christian's reasoning, Christian feminists believe that God wants men and women to be people of truthfulness, wisdom, passion, and compassion. God wants human beings to use the gifts God has given them to make a difference in the world, in a way that they respect and know how to behave and value each other. God provides the beauty to help people turn from restricted, burdened, limited lives to discover the freedom that God provides for them. Finally, according to Christian feminists, God's salvation helps people to stand up straight, break free of the rules and expectations that fasten them and live freely, responsibly, and joyfully in the world God has created. This can be achieved if people try to understand their equalities in the

view point of God, religion and the whole world (Japinga 177). Hardy is seen to act away from these tenets, keeping Sue in her place by repeating old and cliché patterns in her portrayal. In a way, the reader feels that Hardy really wants to repeat the idea that it was 'Eve' as a woman who tempted Adam, so women deserve the punishment more - an idea which is rejected by Christian feminists. Hardy does not try to introduce a good and new image of woman. Overall, therefore, this analysis confirms that Hardy's portrayal of Sue, does not follow the basic tenets of Christian feminism. The manner in which he portrays the males as superior and better and also his use of old, non-feminist clichés, all go to support his non-feminist portrayal. Hardy does not try to set Sue free from the existing inequalities and miseries. Rather, with his hidden religious outlook and beliefs, he directly or indirectly keeps Sue in her place and does not promote her situation; therefore, she cannot flourish and defend her status quo. She just ends up as an example to all women who read her tragic story. In other words, all struggles by Sue for equality with males seem to be forbidden and futile in Hardy's *Jude*.

Sue is described as the origin of sin in *Jude the Obscure*, and that is why she tries to go against herself and her feelings, because she believes that, she lost her children and her life for she followed her own feelings and ideas instead of the word of God. The truth is that, Sue does not mean to go against God. From the very beginning she just tries to be a different woman, who wants to break the existing

marital rules which constrain women and make them feel inferior. According to Elvy "For Sue, marriage is a horrible and sordid undertaking" (p. 142) and it seems the most irritating issue about marriage for her is that marriage legitimizes the man's desire for sex and the wife must always be available to him (p. 145). That is why Sue just wanted to find her own way to live a life without having to conform to the strict religious and ceremonial codes of the society of her time, but it ends in her failure. On the whole as a conclusion, this article proves that Sue fails in emerging the image of New Woman and retreats to recompense her mistakes and sins by following the stereotype image of a woman as 'the angel in the house'. Sue starts as a rebel and eventually ends as a timid and superstitious woman who can be considered as a fallen rebel not as Hardy's feminist figure.

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