

Two Iconoclast Characters One from Fiction and Another from Nonfiction: Jude the Obscure by Thomas Hardy and King Henry VIII



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RESUME: The relationship between reality and literature was and still is debated in intellectual circles. A literary text is not a historical text. In the latter case, authentic facts and real people are reported who can be localized in time and space, whereas in the literary text everything is in the imagination, in the author's creative faculty. He has the latitude, for example, to take real facts and to scramble the tracks. This is to say that, in the literary text, one can find in the final analysis, an analogy, a connection with reality. This is the whole object of this article which is interested in a literary character Jude Obscure of the eponymous novel by Joseph Conrad and on one of the most famous kings of the United Kingdom Henry VIII especially in relation to their behavior compared to the norms social and Christian religion.

KEYWORDS: religion, société, normes, conventions, mariage

INTRODUCTION

The road between fiction and nonfiction, literature and society, writing and author is most of the time too short and the lines are often blurred or even erased so as to acknowledge them as one to a certain extent. A lot of theories or concepts put forward are means for readers to interpret texts, find out meanings, compare what is inside the text and outside the texts. Every text has a context and a paratext (Gerard Genette 1987). We can quote some theories and notions such as *The New Criticism*¹, *the Death of the Author*², *Autobiography*, *Social novel*³ are among other examples.

And as such our attention is drawn by the striking similarities between the English King Henry VIII (1491-1547) and Thomas Hardy's well-known main character in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) in terms of their religious viewpoints and their social stances towards social conventions and their lives. The two of them are born Christian instead of their taking unbelievable and outlandish decisions that go against the current religious or social conventions. They grew up in societies which mirror a full dependency to the Church in Rome. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to examine side by side a real person, Henry VIII and a fictitious character, Jude Fawley as far as their reactions to the *establishment order* are concerned.

THE CONTEXTS

Leaders, artists, politicians, thinkers, kings and writers from all walks of life have been known in the course of the history of the English people. In the fields of kingdomship, religion or literature two outstanding figures draw our attention in this article: Henry VIII who was the king of the United Kingdom from 1509 to his death in 1547 and Jude Fawley, a fictitious and main character in the novel of Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* first published in 1895. After reading the latter and knowing the way of life of Henry

¹New Criticism is a 20th century literary theory that puts forward the idea that meaning is found inside the text and not outside the text. In another words meanings have nothing to do with the social context, the time or the author. It was coined by John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* in 1941.

² The death of the author is concept which means according to Roland Barthes that we must read and understand a text without taking into account its author. The life, the biography or the psychology of the author is not important for a reader but the language itself, " c'est le langage qui parle, ce n'est l'auteur"

³ Social novel or social problem is well known during the Victorian era and can be understood as a "work of fiction" that focuses on the problems of the society at a certain time. And in the 19th century works the questions of gender, justice, class, race are dealt with.

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VIII one can't help acknowledging the close relationship between fiction and real life. A novel is not only the production of our imagination but it also stems from our daily lives, our environment and people we are acquainted with.

King Henry in his early life was about to have a church career after his studies in theology, in music, languages and poetry. He even wrote a song entitled "Pastime with Good Company", which backed the idea that he was not prepared for the throne due to the fact that he has an older brother named Arthur. And at that time until *The Crown Act 2013*⁴, the elder male child will be the monarch or if there is no male heir the eldest female child will come to throne. Arthur died of a sudden illness, which altered everything and Henry VIII's life took another turning point. He then took the throne of the United Kingdom at the age of seventeen and ruled until his death in 1547. In his early reign, Henry was somehow a stickler for the principles of the Roman Catholic Church owing to his education in theology. And as a reward to his attitude to people such as Martin Luther⁵ who criticized the churchmen in Rome, Henry was called "*the Defender of the Faith*":

In fact, his strong and public disdain of heresy led Pope Leo X to declare Henry VIII "Defender of the Faith" in 1521 and it was a title which he had proudly embraced. It was common for Henry VIII to order the arrest and later exile or execution of English heretics. Prior to the Henrican Reformation, the pope had the same level of jurisdiction in England over religious matters as Henry VIII had in all other aspects. (Benson, 2017:2)

The aforesaid quotation shows clearly that the type of relationship Henry VIII has at the beginning with Catholicism. The religion is based on immutable laws, dogmas that everybody have to abide by no matter who you may be. They are not human laws that we can interpret, be against or for or even change. Since the laws are noted by any assembly no one can change them. There is where lies the problem with Henry VIII and with those who called him the "Defender of the Faith".

Actually after being in wedlock with Catherine of Aragon for many years they had three sons and three daughters and all but one of whom died in childhood. Since times passes and he feels the necessity for male child to take over the throne after his death gnaws at him. As a matter of fact, he lays the blame on his wife and feels restless and dissatisfied with her. He sues for divorce. And the only possibility is to have the Pope of Rome on his side so as to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry again another woman. Yet, as said above the religious laws can't be changed for the sake of anyone. This time can be viewed as the first *Brexit*⁶ in terms of religion. England breaks the link with Europe religiously speaking. The attitude of Henry VIII leads us to draw similarities with Jude the Obscure in the novel of Thomas Hardy.

Besides, Jude's life history is so common and interesting that many see it as an autobiography of the author. His wife, Florence draws our attention to the fact that:

Some of the incidents were real in so far as that he had heard of them, or come in contact with them when they were occurring to people he knew; but no more. It is interesting to mention that on his way to school he did once meet with a youth like Jude who drove the bread-cart of a widow, a baker, like Mrs Fawley, and carried on his studies at the same time, to the serious risk of other drivers in the lanes; which youth asked him to lend him his Latin grammar. (Pinion, 1986: 148)

The fictional county of Wessex where Hardy takes as the setting of his novels is nowhere but the south of England. It covers the Dorset where he himself lives, grows up and knows well. Therefore, the stories, the landscape and the people he knows are depicted in his novels to a certain extent. It is worth noticing that centuries separated Henry VIII and Thomas Hardy though the psychology, the behaviour and the social environment of the two, give food for thought for a lot of readers.

Jude Fawley is a young, orphan and innocent man. Arabella tricked him into marrying her. He was flabbergasted because he was not ready for marriage and since he didn't want to feel guilty he accepted. But like Henry he realized that he was not satisfied within this marriage. In the long run, they both take decisions which are totally against social and religious beliefs.

DECISIONS AGAINST RELIGION AND SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

Once marriage to somebody, it ought to be so until death comes. Such must be the case in a Christian society. There is no possibility to marry again. In another words neither divorce nor polygamy is acceptable. Therefore, Christian society refers to such laws, norms, conventions or to be more specific dogmas. And Rome has been the capital city or "*the home of the Catholic Church*" for years and before Henry nobody has broken and drawn the attention as he did. Before him very few free-thinkers started questioning the churchmen and one of the most outstanding leader, Martin Luther, comes from Germany: "*On 31 October, 1517,*

⁴ The Parliament of the United Kingdom changed the laws of succession to the British Crown. From that day onwards, the eldest child, regardless of the sex will succeed to the throne.

⁵ Martin Luther (1483-1546) is a German theologian known as one of the first religious reformer.

⁶ "Brexit" or "British exit" means the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

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Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the Castle Church doors in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching a series of religious reforms and the emergence of heretics who disagreed with the inner workings of the Catholic Church.”. (Benson, 2017: 2)

Even before the *Act of Supremacy*, Henry VIII took some decisions without taking into account the Catholic Church of Rome. Though he was married with Catherine of Aragon he had mistresses for instance Anne Boleyn and her sister Mary before she became her wife after his divorce with Catherine of Aragon. He is also thought to have an extra-marital marriage with one of Catherine’s ladies-in-waiting and had an out of wedlock child with her. Besides, his marriage with Catherine the wife of his late brother is seen as against “*divine law*”. In a nutshell, all this reveal that Henry is a breaker of the religious laws as far as marriage is concerned.

As for Jude Fawley, despite being married with Arabella Donn, he falls in love with another girl Sue who is actually his mistress in the eyes of the church and the Victorian society. Actually Arabella traps Jude into marrying her. She sets a trap for Jude by telling her parents: “*Nothing. Only I want the house to myself. He is shy; and I can’t get un to come in when you are here. I shall let him slip through my fingers if I don’t mind, much as I care for’n!*” (Hardy, 1993: 44)

From now on Jude puts an end to his dream to go university and become a great scholar. He stops delving into his books. But after making her dream come true Arabella warns him, “*Don’t take on, dear. What’s done can’t be undone.*” (Conrad, 1993:50). This sounds like a sentence voicing the judgment of both the Victorian society and religion. Yet, Jude *...knew well, too well, in the secret centre of his brain, that Arabella was not was not worth a great deal as a specimen of womankind. Yet, such being the custom of the rural districts among honourable young men who had drifted so far into intimacy with a woman as he unfortunately had done, he was ready to abide by what he had said, and take the consequences. For his own soothing he kept up a factitious belief in her.* (Henry, 1993:46)

Jude as well as Henry VIII are in a dilemma. The cause of their dilemma is brought about by first marriage. Neither of them feels any longer happy. They think that to be happy they must get rid of their wives and marry again. But society and religion are against taking such decisions. Jude has to face not only religion but also society. And the society’s reaction is about to be harder as a response to his behaviour. Henry VIII, as far as he is concerned, has no real problem at all with society since he is their king. His main concern is the Roman Catholic Church which refuses to grant him an annulment on his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The following figures give an idea between Henry VIII and Jude Fawley to a certain extent:

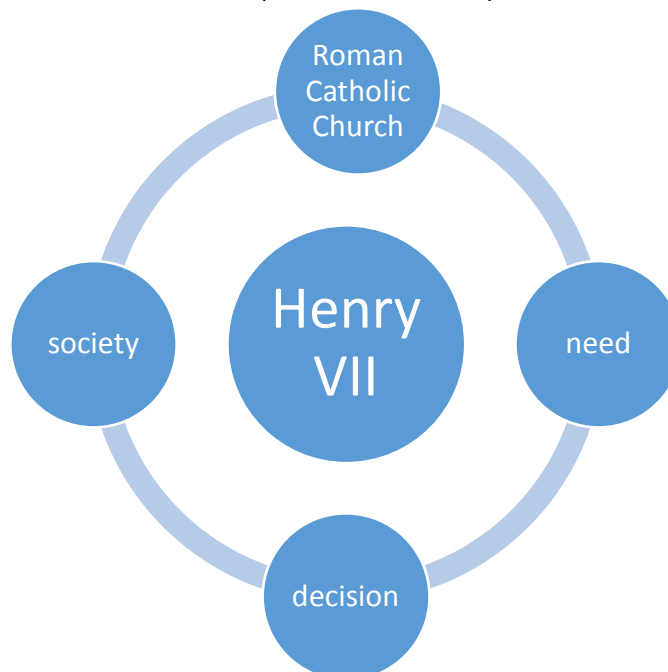


Figure1: The British society during Henry VIII’s reign

As shown in the above figure before the Act of Supremacy in 1534, the king was under the Roman Catholic Church. In another words, he took into account the point of views of the Pope in his decisions as far as religion is concerned in England. Not only had the Pope an impact on the king but also on the society in terms of their daily activities namely on their marriages. Therefore, the king’s needs and decisions should be acceptable in the eyes of the Pope. Everything was alright until the king’s need or desire went against the moral principles of the Roman Catholic. But Henry VIII comes to the point of making a choice or a decision between his need to divorce with Catherine of Aragon so as to have a male child according to him and his staying with the Roman

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Church. He accused his first wife of not being able to give him a male child. The better solution, to his mind, is therefore to seek the annulment of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon who has only one surviving child, Mary I, from the Roman Church. And since the Pope turned his proposal down, he chose to break with them. Breaking with the Roman Church is a turning point in the British history as developed below.

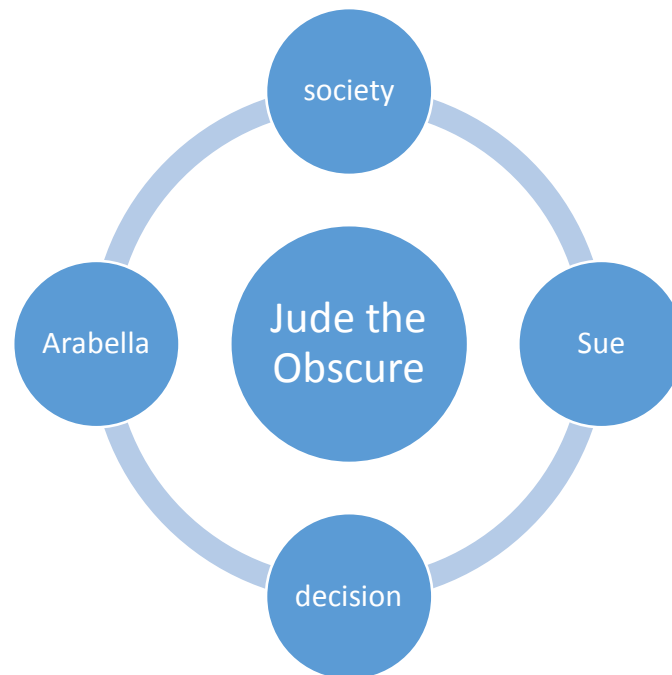


Figure 2: Jude and his society

As for Jude the social conventions, norms or conventions hamper him from living freely in terms of education and marriage. The social beliefs are based on Christian religion that's to say the society is in keeping with religious rules. That's the reason why Arabella warns Jude by reminding him of the churchman's words "the Church don't recognize divorce in her dogma, strictly speaking" (Conrad 1993:338-39). Actually Jude and Arabella are husband and wife in the eyes of the Church and the society even though they both find other partners. Arabella marries another man whereas Jude and Sue live as husband and wife and have children out of wedlock. Therefore, they are all seen as transgressors and rejected by the society. Jude and his lawful wife, Arabella, and unlawful partner, Sue, suffer from their decisions until the end of the novel. As shown by the above figure Jude is torn between staying with Arabella whom he married mistakenly but the society demands him to be with her on the hand, and following his real lover who is Sue on the other hand. What makes the situation harder to solve is that Sue also happens to marry another man.

There is a striking similarity between their stressful love affair and what is termed in the popular English and Scottish oral literature as ballads. A ballad is according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "Short narrative verse usually anonymous in origin, impersonal in tone, simply in structure, and highly concentrated in content. Most commonly, a ballad is orally transmitted and sung, Accounting for the use of heavily accented stanzas, incremental repetition, and recurrent refrains."

In general, the love stories told in the English and Scottish ballads follow a geometrical shape known as equilateral triangle. In another words it is just like three persons A, B, and C: A loves B who falls in love with C and the latter to A. Therefore, the end is bound to be unhappy. The unrequired love story gives the ballads as well as Jude's life and Henry VIII's attitude a tragic dimension in a way or another.

In the ballad *The Twa Sisters* (Child 2003: 118), for instance, we have a lot of versions in England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales. But they all unfolds around two sisters and a Knight as follows:

*There was twa sisters in a howr
Edinburgh, Rdingburgh
There was twa sisters in a bow,
Stirling for ay
There was twa sisters in a bow,
There came a knight to be their wooer.
Bonny Saint Johnston stands upon Tay...
He courted the eldest wi brotch an knife,*

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But lov'd the youngest as his life.

Child 2003: 127)

The knight woos the younger sister. But the elder sister takes her to the sea and kills her out of jealousy. Thus the knight marries the elder. As a conclusion, the triangle love in the above ballad as in many other stories in the oral English and Scottish literature is in line with Jude's relationship with Arabella and with Sue. It sounds also like the story of Henry VIII and his six wives. There is, in any case, the melodramatic question of love between three persons and as such one is bound to disappear physically or geographically, so to speak, in order to allow the two to be together. The English monarch accuses repeatedly his wives one after another. Anne Boleyn (1501-1536), for instance, was accused of treason and adultery and beheaded. Then the King took another wife, Jane Seymour days after the execution of Anne Boleyn. Arabella goes away from Jude and marry another man. And that's why Jude and Sue carry on being together as husband and wife against the social and religious conventions and dogmas, which the consequences deserve to draw our attention.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF JUDE'S AND HENRY VIII'S BEHAVIOURS

A society is based on conventions, beliefs that its people should abide by. A person is judged good or bad according to his attitudes to these conventions and beliefs. The less you stick to them the less respected you might be. History has taught us that people who follow a way different from the mainstream of society are bound in a way or another to go through a sorry plight whether physically or psychologically. A very few make it and become conspicuously heroes in the eyes of many people.

Thomas Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*, is published and set in period that England went through a turning point socially, economically and religious speaking. Due to industrialization the gap between classes widens, the question of women's place and role in the society is raised. As a matter of fact, he witnessed the religious, social and political changes and also the contradictions of the Victorian era. It is an era with a hierarchically organized society and its writers are concerned by the issues of gender and class. It is in this period that the theory of evolution is put forward by thinkers namely by the most famous, Charles Darwin (1809-1882).

Being aware of what is taking place in his environment, Thomas Hardy in his novels tries to give pictures of the Victorian society. In his novels he uses his characters to voice his frustrations and disagreements about the principles of the Victorian society in terms of religious, education, job, sex and so on. Both Thomas Hardy, himself and his characters have the impression of being misunderstood and rejected by their societies. He gave up writing novels after the publications of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and turned to poetry after the criticism levelled against him. The way he tackles the question of love, sex, religious and class touched deeply his readers. Hardy is as misunderstood as Jude is. Jude's dreams, hopes and yearnings are dashed in the end. His first and main dream was "to go Christminster" and "learn Latin and Greek". Both society and fate seem to be against Jude's real nature. His love with Sue and his dreams to go university are rejected by society and his son with Arabella committed suicide after killing the children with his father and Sue. Finally, Jude falls ill and dies very young at the age thirty.

But what is worth admitting is that Jude, in spite of his willpower, fails to fulfil his dreams due to his social class. And unlike Jude, Henry VIII is at the top of the social hierarchy as a king. As a result, he manages to marry six women. The purpose of breaking away with the Roman Church and his different marriages is actually to have a lineal heir to the throne before dying. His yearning for a child turns out to be a nightmare. He has no surviving male child with none of his six wives in spite of his iconoclast behaviour by bringing about the Reformation, breaking the rules of Christianity in terms of divorce, accusing some of his wives of adultery or incest and even beheading the second, Anne Boleyn.

CONCLUSION

This article raises the question of the relationship between fiction and reality, author and his society. Some striking similarities can somehow exist between characters and real persons in different ways. The authors may use different ways by changing the name, the place so to speak the setting or even the period. Some literary critics such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980) advocate "the death of the author" so as to allow each reader to find his own meaning of the text. As a result, it is possible to find as many meanings as readers we have. This article aims at showing the possible similarities between a novel character, Jude, in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and one of the most famous English king, Henry VIII to a certain extent.

Their behaviours are iconoclastic. They both attack the established orders, principles of their societies so as to satisfy their needs. It is clear that Jude is not Henry VIII but what strikes and urges us to draw a parallel between one fictional and another nonfictional characters is their remarkable psychological similitudes even though their periods differ.

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