



# Kavya Setu

Impact Factor: 6.4

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal  
ISSN No: 3049-4176

## “Themes of Tragedy, Fate and Social Constraints in the Novels of Thomas Hardy”

**Dr. Anju Rajan**

Associate Professor of English, Vaish College, Bhiwani

### **Abstract**

This research paper examines the themes of tragedy, fate and social constraints in the novels of Thomas Hardy, with special reference to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy redefines the concept of tragedy by shifting its focus from individual flaws to external forces such as rigid social structures, class inequality, gender discrimination and institutional oppression. Through the characters of Tess and Jude, Hardy presents a world in which human aspirations are consistently undermined by circumstances beyond individual control. Tess becomes a victim of patriarchal morality and moral hypocrisy, while Jude's intellectual ambitions are crushed by the exclusivity of education and class barriers. The study also explores Hardy's concept of fate, which operates not as a supernatural force but as a product of coincidence, environment and social conditions. Furthermore, the paper highlights Hardy's deterministic vision, where human agency is limited and often ineffective against structural inequalities. His critique of Victorian institutions such as marriage, religion and education reveals their oppressive nature and their role in perpetuating suffering. Ultimately, Hardy's novels present tragedy as an inevitable outcome of the conflict between individual desire and societal constraints, making his work deeply relevant to both historical and contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Fate, Social Constraints, Victorian Society, Class Conflict, Gender Inequality, Determinism, Social Injustice, Moral Hypocrisy, Institutional Oppression

### **Introduction**

Thomas Hardy is one of the most significant novelists in English literature whose works present a deeply realistic and often pessimistic vision of human life. His novels move beyond the traditional structure of storytelling and focus on the complex relationship between individual desire and external forces such as fate, society and environment. Among his major works, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* stand out as powerful representations of tragedy shaped not by personal flaws but by social constraints and uncontrollable circumstances. Through the lives of Tess Durbeyfield and Jude Fawley, Hardy constructs a literary world where human beings struggle against forces that are invisible, indifferent and often destructive (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 75).

In both novels, Hardy redefines the concept of tragedy. Unlike classical tragedy, where the downfall of the protagonist is caused by a tragic flaw or divine intervention, Hardy presents tragedy as a gradual and inevitable process rooted in the realities of everyday life. His characters are not inherently flawed or morally weak. Instead, they are sensitive, hopeful



# Kavva Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

individuals who are unable to survive within a rigid and unforgiving social structure. Tess, for instance, is portrayed as a symbol of innocence and natural purity, yet her life is shaped by circumstances that lead to her suffering. Similarly, Jude is depicted as an intelligent and ambitious young man whose dreams are systematically crushed by class barriers and institutional limitations. In both cases, tragedy arises from the conflict between individual aspiration and external restriction (*Jude the Obscure*, 116).

One of the central themes that connects *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* is the concept of fate. Hardy does not present fate as a supernatural or divine force. Instead, it operates through coincidence, timing and social conditions. In Tess's life, the discovery of her noble ancestry appears to offer an opportunity for improvement, but it ultimately becomes the cause of her downfall. Her journey to the d'Urberville estate leads her to Alec d'Urberville, whose actions destroy her social identity and subject her to lifelong suffering. Similarly, Jude's dream of reaching Christminster, a symbol of education and intellectual growth, becomes the source of his disappointment. Despite his dedication and effort, he is denied access to education because of his lower social status. Thus, fate in Hardy's novels is not predetermined by divine will but is constructed through the interaction of social forces and personal circumstances.

Another significant aspect of Hardy's work is his critique of social constraints. Both novels highlight the oppressive nature of Victorian society, which imposes strict moral codes and limits individual freedom. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess becomes a victim of gender inequality and moral hypocrisy. After her encounter with Alec, she is labeled as a fallen woman, even though she is a victim rather than a participant. Society judges her harshly while ignoring the actions of Alec, revealing a clear double standard. This gender-based injustice is further emphasized through the character of Angel Clare, who, despite his progressive outlook, fails to accept Tess's past. His rejection demonstrates how deeply ingrained social values influence individual behavior (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 95).

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy expands his critique to include institutions such as education, marriage and religion. Jude's aspiration to become a scholar is repeatedly obstructed by the rigid class system. His inability to gain admission to Christminster reflects the exclusivity of educational institutions, which are accessible only to the privileged. At the same time, Hardy presents marriage as a restrictive and often oppressive institution. Jude's relationship with Arabella is based on deception, while Sue Bridehead's marriage to Phillotson is driven by social obligation rather than personal choice. Sue herself represents a challenge to traditional norms, as she questions the institution of marriage and seeks intellectual and emotional freedom. However, her resistance ultimately leads to suffering, as society refuses to accept her unconventional beliefs (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 170).

The characters of Tess and Jude are central to Hardy's exploration of human suffering. Tess is a deeply emotional and resilient character who endures a series of hardships with dignity and strength. Her connection with nature highlights her purity and authenticity, yet it also



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

emphasizes her vulnerability in a world that does not value such qualities. Jude, on the other hand, represents intellectual ambition and the desire for self-improvement. His struggle is not against a single antagonist but against a system that denies him opportunity. Both characters share a common fate: they are destroyed not because of their weaknesses but because of the limitations imposed upon them by society. Nature plays an important role in both novels, serving as a backdrop that reflects the emotional state of the characters. Hardy's depiction of the rural landscape is rich and detailed, creating a sense of beauty and harmony (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 220). However, nature is not presented as a protective force. It remains indifferent to human suffering, offering temporary comfort but no lasting solution. This indifference reinforces Hardy's tragic vision, where individuals are left to confront their struggles alone.

Another key element in Hardy's novels is his portrayal of determinism. He suggests that human life is shaped by forces beyond individual control, including social structures, environment and chance events. This deterministic outlook creates a sense of inevitability, where the characters' efforts to change their circumstances ultimately fail. Tess's attempt to rebuild her life after her initial tragedy is repeatedly undermined by societal judgment and personal misfortune. Similarly, Jude's persistent efforts to achieve education and happiness are met with continuous rejection and disappointment (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 320). Their struggles highlight the limitations of human agency in a world governed by external forces.

Hardy's narrative technique further enhances the impact of his themes. His use of detailed descriptions, symbolic imagery and psychological insight allows readers to engage deeply with the characters' experiences. He often employs irony to highlight the contrast between expectation and reality, emphasizing the unpredictability of life. The gradual unfolding of events creates a sense of tension and inevitability, drawing the reader into the tragic journey of the characters (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 70).

From the very beginning, Tess's life is shaped by forces beyond her control. Her father's accidental discovery of their noble ancestry sets into motion a chain of events that leads Tess to the d'Urberville estate. This seemingly insignificant moment becomes the starting point of her tragic destiny. Hardy emphasizes the idea of fate as an impersonal and indifferent force. Tess does not actively choose her path. Instead, she is pushed into situations that gradually lead to her downfall. Her journey to the d'Urberville mansion results in her encounter with Alec, a man whose power and privilege place him in a dominant position over her. A key moment reflecting Tess's helplessness is seen when Hardy describes her as:

“A mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience” (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 75)

This highlights her innocence and vulnerability. She is not prepared for the harsh realities of the world, making her an easy victim of circumstance. Fate in Hardy's novel is not supernatural but deeply embedded in social conditions, coincidence and timing. Alec d'Urberville represents the destructive force of patriarchal power. His manipulation and exploitation of Tess mark the turning point of her life. The event in the forest is one of the most debated moments in literature,



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

often interpreted as sexual violence that destroys Tess's innocence (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 90).

Hardy deliberately avoids moral judgment of Tess. Instead, he criticizes the society that blames her for an act she did not willingly choose. After this incident, Tess returns home not as a fallen woman by her own actions, but as a victim of social and gender injustice. Hardy writes:

“Why was it that upon this beautiful feminine tissue...

there should have been traced such a coarse pattern

as it was doomed to receive?” (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 88)

This line clearly shows Hardy's sympathy for Tess and his critique of the moral standards that condemn her. One of the most significant themes in the novel is the rigid social structure that defines a woman's value based on purity. Tess is judged not by her character but by her past. Victorian society imposes a double standard where men like Alec are forgiven, while women like Tess are condemned. When Tess later confesses her past to Angel Clare, she hopes for understanding. However, Angel's reaction reveals the hypocrisy of social morality. Despite his own moral failings, he cannot accept Tess. He states:

“You were one person; now you are another” (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 192)

This moment is crucial because it shows that Tess's tragedy is not just caused by Alec but also by society's inability to forgive. Angel Clare initially appears as a symbol of hope and love in Tess's life. However, his rejection becomes another layer of her tragedy. He represents the intellectual yet morally rigid aspect of society (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 195).

Angel's failure lies in his inability to reconcile idealism with reality. He loves Tess as an ideal figure but cannot accept her as a human being with a past. His hypocrisy exposes the flaws in societal values. Tess's silent suffering after his rejection reflects her strength and dignity. She does not blame Angel but accepts her fate, showing her resilience. Hardy's use of nature plays a significant role in shaping the novel's tragic tone. The natural world in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is beautiful but indifferent. It does not intervene in human suffering.

Tess often finds temporary peace in nature, especially while working in the fields. However, nature cannot protect her from the forces that destroy her life. This reinforces Hardy's idea that the universe itself is indifferent to human pain. The climax of the novel occurs when Tess, driven by desperation, kills Alec. This act is not presented as revenge but as a final attempt to reclaim control over her life. However, it ultimately leads to her execution. Her death symbolizes the complete failure of society. Tess is punished not for her crime alone but for challenging the norms imposed upon her. Hardy concludes her story with a sense of tragic inevitability:

“Justice was done and the President of the Immortals...

had ended his sport with Tess” (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 385)

This line reflects Hardy's pessimistic view of life, where human beings are powerless against larger forces. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* presents a deeply moving portrayal of tragedy shaped



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

by fate and social constraints. Tess's life is a continuous struggle against forces she cannot control. Through her story, Hardy critiques the rigid moral values and gender inequality of Victorian society (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 385).

Tess is not a tragic heroine because of her flaws but because of the world she inhabits. Her suffering represents the broader human condition, making Hardy's work timeless and universally relevant. Jude begins as a young boy with a strong desire to study at Christminster, a symbolic center of knowledge. His ambition represents hope and aspiration. However, his dreams are gradually crushed by the reality of class barriers. Hardy shows that education is not accessible to everyone. Jude is denied entry not because of lack of ability but because of his social status. He reflects:

“It takes two or three generations to do what  
I tried to do in one” (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 116)

This line highlights the rigid class system that prevents social mobility. Sue Bridehead is one of Hardy's most complex characters. She challenges traditional norms of marriage and religion. Her relationship with Jude represents a desire for freedom and individuality.

However, society does not accept their unconventional relationship. Sue is forced to conform, leading to emotional conflict and suffering. Her internal struggle reflects the pressure imposed by social expectations. Hardy presents marriage as a restrictive institution rather than a source of happiness. Both Jude and Sue suffer because of their relationships (Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 210).

Jude's marriage to Arabella is based on deception, while Sue's marriage to Phillotson is based on social obligation. These relationships highlight the lack of freedom in personal choices. The most devastating moment in the novel is the death of Jude's children. This event symbolizes the destruction of hope and future. The note left by the child reads:

“Done because we are too menny” (*Jude the Obscure*, 266)

This seemingly simple yet deeply powerful line encapsulates the harsh and unforgiving reality of poverty, suffering and social neglect that defines the world of *Jude the Obscure*. It is not merely a reflection of an individual moment of despair but a broader commentary on the structural inequalities that govern human life. Hardy uses such moments to reveal how poverty is not just an economic condition but a psychological and emotional burden that shapes human consciousness. In Jude's case, suffering is not accidental or temporary. It is continuous, cumulative and deeply embedded in his existence. The deprivation he experiences gradually erodes his hope, dignity and sense of purpose, making suffering an inevitable part of his identity (*Jude the Obscure*, 265).

Hardy's portrayal of fate in the novel is particularly significant because it moves away from traditional notions of destiny as a divine or supernatural force. Instead, fate operates through a complex network of social forces, environmental conditions and institutional barriers. Jude's life is not controlled by a single catastrophic event but by a series of interconnected



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

circumstances that consistently work against him. His humble background, lack of financial resources and absence of social connections place him at a disadvantage from the very beginning. These conditions shape the opportunities available to him and ultimately determine the limits of his aspirations (*Jude the Obscure*, 110).

Jude's repeated failures are not the result of a lack of intelligence, effort, or ambition. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a deeply thoughtful and determined individual who is willing to work hard to achieve his dreams. His desire to study at Christminster symbolizes not only intellectual ambition but also a longing for social mobility and self-fulfillment. However, each attempt he makes to improve his condition is met with rejection, reinforcing the idea that success is not solely dependent on individual merit but is heavily influenced by social structure. The denial of his educational aspirations reflects the exclusivity of institutions that are designed to maintain class divisions rather than eliminate them. Furthermore, Hardy emphasizes the psychological impact of continuous failure on Jude's character. Each disappointment contributes to a growing sense of helplessness and resignation. Over time, Jude begins to internalize his failures, perceiving them not just as external obstacles but as inherent limitations. This transformation highlights the destructive power of social constraints, which not only restrict opportunities but also shape an individual's self-perception. His struggles are therefore both external and internal, making his tragedy more profound and complex (*Jude the Obscure*, 200).

The concept of determinism is central to Hardy's philosophical outlook in the novel. He suggests that human beings are largely controlled by forces beyond their understanding or control. These forces include social norms, economic conditions and cultural expectations, all of which limit individual freedom. In Jude's case, his efforts to overcome these limitations ultimately prove futile, reinforcing the idea that personal will is often insufficient in the face of structural inequality. This deterministic perspective creates a sense of inevitability, where the outcome of Jude's life appears predetermined by the circumstances into which he is born. At the same time, Hardy does not completely deny the presence of human agency. Jude continues to strive for a better life despite repeated setbacks, which reflects the resilience of the human spirit. However, this resilience is ultimately overshadowed by the overwhelming power of external forces. His persistence does not lead to success but rather intensifies his suffering, as each new failure deepens his sense of despair. This contrast between effort and outcome further reinforces Hardy's critique of a society that denies individuals the opportunity to realize their potential (*Jude the Obscure*, 230).

In this way, the line becomes a powerful representation of Hardy's broader vision of life, where suffering is not an exception but a fundamental condition of existence. Through Jude's experiences, Hardy exposes the limitations of human freedom in a world governed by rigid social structures and indifferent circumstances. The novel ultimately suggests that tragedy arises not from individual weakness but from the conflict between human aspiration and the



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

constraints imposed by society. *Jude the Obscure* presents a bleak vision of life where ambition, love and hope are ultimately destroyed by society. Hardy's critique of class, marriage and education makes the novel a powerful commentary on human suffering. Jude's tragedy lies not in his failure but in the system that denies him opportunity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* stand as profound explorations of tragedy shaped by fate and social constraints. Through the lives of Tess and Jude, Thomas Hardy presents a powerful critique of Victorian society, exposing its rigid moral codes, class divisions and institutional limitations. His characters are not destroyed by personal weakness but by the overwhelming pressure of external forces that deny them dignity, freedom and fulfillment. Hardy's redefinition of tragedy marks a significant departure from classical traditions, as he locates the source of suffering within the structure of society rather than within the individual. His portrayal of fate as a product of social and environmental conditions reinforces the idea that human life is shaped by forces beyond personal control. At the same time, his depiction of determinism highlights the limitations of human agency in the face of systemic inequality. Moreover, Hardy's critique of institutions such as marriage, education and religion reveals their role in sustaining social injustice. Tess's suffering reflects the harsh realities of gender inequality and moral hypocrisy, while Jude's failure underscores the exclusivity of social and educational systems. Both characters embody the struggle between aspiration and restriction, making their tragedies deeply human and universally relevant. Ultimately, Hardy's novels offer a timeless reflection on the human condition. They remind us that suffering is often not the result of individual failure but of a society that resists change and perpetuates inequality.

## References:

1. Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
2. Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. Penguin Classics, 2000.
3. Millgate, Michael. *Thomas Hardy: A Biography*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
4. Gatrell, Simon. *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*. University of Virginia Press, 1993.
5. Kramer, Dale, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
6. Harvey, Geoffrey. *The Complete Critical Guide to Thomas Hardy*. Routledge, 2003.
7. Gregor, Ian. *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy's Major Fiction*. Faber and Faber, 1974.
8. Daleski, H. M. *Thomas Hardy and Paradoxes of Love*. University of Missouri Press, 1997.
9. Widdowson, Peter. *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology*. Routledge, 1989.