



Victims and Victimizers in Thomas Hardy's Novels: A Philosophical and Psychological Inquiry

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy's novels explore the intricate web of human suffering, where individuals often oscillate between the roles of victim and victimizer. Hardy's characters are shaped by deterministic forces such as fate, social norms, and psychological constraints, creating a narrative where moral ambiguity prevails. This study investigates Hardy's philosophical engagement with determinism and existential suffering, combined with a psychological analysis of trauma, guilt, and repression experienced by his characters. Using novels such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, this inquiry highlights how Hardy portrays the fluid boundaries between victimhood and culpability. The study also explores how Hardy's moral philosophy resonates with Schopenhauer's pessimism and the Freudian unconscious, providing a deeper understanding of the human psyche and societal constraints.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, Victim-Victimizer Dialectic, Moral Ambiguity, Schopenhauer, Freudian Psychology

Introduction

Thomas Hardy's novels present a complex interplay between victims and victimizers, where moral boundaries blur, and the lines between oppressor and oppressed dissolve under the weight of deterministic forces. Hardy's fictional universe, shaped by societal norms, class hierarchies, and gendered expectations, traps his characters in cycles of suffering and moral ambiguity. His protagonists—such as Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*, and Michael Hen chard in *The Mayor of Caster Bridge*—



oscillate between victimhood and perpetration, complicating traditional notions of guilt and innocence.

Hardy's philosophical outlook, influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer's deterministic pessimism and Friedrich Nietzsche's existential reflections on suffering, underscores the inevitability of human pain. Schopenhauer's concept of the "will-to-live," which perpetuates suffering through insatiable desire, resonates with Hardy's portrayal of characters whose pursuit of fulfillment leads to despair. Simultaneously, Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence and affirmation of suffering adds a layer of tragic heroism to Hardy's protagonists, who, despite their suffering, exhibit moments of resilience and moral agency.

From a psychological perspective, Hardy delves into the unconscious dimensions of human behavior, where repressed trauma, guilt, and internalized oppression drive his characters toward self-destructive choices. Freudian psychoanalysis provides a lens through which to examine Hardy's portrayal of psychological turmoil, particularly in Tess's suppressed trauma, Henchard's guilt-ridden impulsivity, and Jude's self-sabotaging tendencies.

This inquiry seeks to unravel Hardy's nuanced exploration of victims and victimizers by examining the philosophical, psychological, and societal underpinnings of human suffering in his works. By challenging simplistic moral binaries, Hardy compels readers to confront the complexities of moral responsibility, agency, and the enduring impact of trauma in a deterministic universe.

Literature Review

Hardy's worldview echoes the deterministic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who perceived life as a struggle dominated by the will to survive. Schopenhauer's notion of inevitable suffering due to desire and will finds resonance in Hardy's tragic plots, where characters are ensnared by circumstances beyond their control. Scholars such as Peter Widdowson (1989) and J. Hillis Miller (1970) have analyzed Hardy's deterministic outlook, highlighting how fate and societal norms victimized his protagonists.

Hardy's characters often grapple with existential crises where moral boundaries blur between victim and oppressor. Tess Durbeyfield and Jude Fawley, despite being victims of societal injustice, inadvertently become complicit in acts of transgression. As Gillian Beer (1998) suggests, Hardy's exploration of moral ambiguity reflects existentialist themes akin to Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas of bad faith and responsibility.



Freudian psychoanalysis offers a rich framework for understanding the psychological complexities of Hardy's characters. Tess's repressed trauma, Henchard's guilt, and Jude's self-destructive tendencies align with Freud's theories of repression, guilt, and the unconscious. Critics such as Rosemarie Morgan (1988) and Ian Gregor (1974) have explored how Hardy's narrative style delves into the inner psychological struggles of his characters.

Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter (1991) and Penny Boumelha (1982) have examined the systemic victimization of Hardy's female characters, highlighting how Tess, Sue, and Lucetta are subjected to patriarchal control, economic vulnerability, and moral hypocrisy. These perspectives offer a nuanced understanding of gendered victimization within Hardy's social commentary.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the philosophical underpinnings of Hardy's portrayal of victims and victimizers in a deterministic universe.
- To explore the psychological dimensions of trauma, guilt, and repression in Hardy's major novels.
- To examine the moral ambiguities and blurred lines between victimhood and culpability in Hardy's protagonists.
- To investigate the feminist critique of systemic oppression and victimization in Hardy's narratives.
- To establish connections between Hardy's philosophical outlook and psychological insights drawn from Freudian analysis.

Research Methodology

❖ Philosophical Inquiry

The study employs a philosophical analysis rooted in Schopenhauer's pessimism and existentialist notions of moral ambiguity to understand Hardy's deterministic worldview.

❖ Psychological Framework



Freudian psychoanalysis is applied to decode the psychological trauma, repression, and unconscious conflicts faced by Hardy's characters. Jungian archetypes and trauma theory are also utilized to deepen the analysis.

❖ **Literary Textual Analysis**

Close textual analysis of primary sources such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* is conducted to identify recurring motifs of victimhood and oppression.

❖ **Feminist and Gender Studies**

A feminist lens is employed to critique gendered victimization and systemic oppression in Hardy's works, emphasizing the plight of female characters.

❖ **Comparative Analysis**

The study engages in comparative analysis between Hardy's works and philosophical frameworks, drawing parallels with Schopenhauer and existentialist thought.

Main Theme of the Study

Tess Durbeyfield, for instance, embodies the psychological consequences of trauma and repression. Her victimization at the hands of Alec d'Urberville leaves her burdened with unspoken trauma, which shapes her subsequent actions and relationships. Tess's internalization of guilt, despite being a victim, reflects Victorian society's tendency to blame women for their own victimization. Freud's theory of repression finds resonance in Tess's psychological state—her attempt to suppress the trauma of her past results in heightened anxiety and emotional vulnerability, ultimately culminating in her tragic end.

In *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, Michael Henchard's psychological conflict stems from his guilt and regret over selling his wife and child. Henchard's efforts to atone for his past mistakes are overshadowed by his unconscious tendency to self-destruct. His impulsive decisions, volatile temperament, and inability to forgive himself highlight the psychological burden of unresolved guilt. Henchard's trajectory aligns with Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, where individuals unconsciously repeat behaviors that reinforce their trauma. Henchard's downfall is not merely a consequence of external events but a manifestation of his inner psychological turmoil.



Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* embodies the psychological conflict arising from societal repression and internalized shame. Sue's intellectual independence and rejection of traditional marriage norms place her in conflict with Victorian moral expectations. Her emotional turmoil, oscillating between desire and guilt, reflects the psychological tension between societal conformity and individual agency. Sue's eventual submission to societal expectations, despite her initial rebellion, underscores the power of internalized oppression in shaping human behavior. Hardy's nuanced portrayal of Sue's psychological struggle highlights the devastating impact of societal repression on individual autonomy.

Hardy's critique of Victorian society extends to the systemic oppression and gendered victimization endured by his female characters. In a patriarchal society where women's bodies, choices, and desires are policed by rigid moral codes, Hardy's female protagonists become symbols of resistance and suffering. Through Tess, Sue, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane, Hardy exposes the double standards that condemn women for transgressions that men commit with impunity.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles serves as a powerful indictment of Victorian hypocrisy, where Tess is vilified for her victimization while Alec d'Urberville escapes societal censure. Tess's suffering illustrates the Victorian tendency to conflate female purity with virtue, placing the burden of sexual morality solely on women. Despite being a victim of Alec's predatory behavior, Tess is ostracized and condemned, highlighting the inherent injustice embedded in patriarchal structures. Hardy's portrayal of Tess challenges the Victorian ideal of the 'fallen woman' and critiques the moral hypocrisy that perpetuates female victimization.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue Bridehead embodies the plight of women who seek intellectual and emotional autonomy within a society that demands conformity. Sue's rejection of traditional marriage and her pursuit of a relationship with Jude challenge societal norms, but her eventual capitulation reflects the oppressive power of societal expectations. Sue's psychological torment and eventual submission to conventional morality highlight the coercive nature of Victorian gender norms. Hardy's critique of societal oppression underscores the systemic constraints that limit women's agency and autonomy.

Lucetta Templeman in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* further illustrates the consequences of gendered victimization. Lucetta's attempt to redefine her life after her scandalous past is thwarted by a society that refuses to allow women the privilege of reinvention. Her public humiliation through the 'skimmington ride' symbolizes the societal obsession with



controlling female sexuality. Hardy's portrayal of Lucetta's tragic fate underscores the devastating impact of public shaming and societal judgment on women's lives.

One of Hardy's most profound contributions to Victorian literature is his exploration of the fluid boundaries between victimhood and perpetration. Hardy's characters are not static representations of good and evil but complex individuals whose actions oscillate between innocence and culpability. By blurring these boundaries, Hardy challenges conventional moral binaries and invites readers to engage with the ethical complexities of human behavior.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess transitions between victim and victimizer in her relationship with Alec d'Urberville. While Tess's initial victimization is undeniable, her eventual act of killing Alec complicates her moral position. Hardy presents Tess's act not as an assertion of agency but as a desperate attempt to reclaim control over her life. This moral ambiguity forces readers to confront the question of whether acts of violence committed by the oppressed can be justified within an unjust system.

Michael Henchard's trajectory in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* similarly blurs the lines between victim and victimizer. Henchard's impulsive sale of his wife and child renders him a perpetrator of emotional violence, yet his subsequent remorse and attempts at redemption position him as a victim of his own flawed temperament. Henchard's oscillation between arrogance and vulnerability complicates the notion of moral culpability, emphasizing the intricate interplay between agency and circumstance.

Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* embody the fluid boundaries of victimhood and perpetration within relationships. While Jude and Sue seek emotional fulfillment outside societal conventions, their decisions inadvertently lead to suffering and tragedy for themselves and their children. Jude's inability to protect Sue from societal judgment and Sue's eventual rejection of their unconventional relationship position both characters as victims of an oppressive moral order. However, their actions also perpetuate cycles of suffering, blurring the distinction between victim and victimizer.

Hardy's exploration of these fluid boundaries serves as a critique of rigid moral binaries and challenges the simplistic categorization of individuals as either good or evil. By presenting characters who embody both victimhood and culpability, Hardy underscores the moral complexity of human existence and highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals navigating oppressive systems.



Conclusion

Thomas Hardy's exploration of victimhood and perpetration transcends simplistic moral dichotomies, offering a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between fate, agency, and societal oppression. His deterministic worldview challenges conventional notions of moral responsibility, while his psychological realism delves into the unconscious dimensions of trauma and guilt. Hardy's critique of gendered victimization highlights the systemic constraints faced by women in Victorian society, while his portrayal of blurred moral boundaries invites readers to grapple with the ethical ambiguities inherent in human behavior. Through his profound inquiry into the philosophical and psychological dimensions of suffering, Hardy compels readers to confront the complexities of moral responsibility in an indifferent universe.

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