



WOMEN AND ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THOMAS HARDY'S *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

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SO WHAT IS THIS PRESENTATION ABOUT?

- I argue that Hardy uses animal imagery for his female characters that emphasizes their crushing realities within their social and cultural milieus.
 - I consult an expert, Alexander Fischler.
 - I examine bird imagery briefly in *Desperate Remedies* and Hardy's personal correspondence.
 - I consider Arabella Donn as a predatory animal.
 - I consider Sue Bridehead as an animal of prey.
 - I also consider how Jude's *treatment of them as animals* plays into all this.
 - I throw in a seemingly random quote from Joseph Conrad.
 - We bring everything together and chat about it.

WHAT DOES THE EXPERT SAY?

- Fischler posits that Hardy uses lots – and lots – of bird imagery in his novels to symbolize “the harshness and vulnerability of living creatures” (252).
- According to Fischler, the use of bird imagery in *Jude the Obscure* boils down to idea of this “simplistic argument: kindness does not pay” (261).
- Jude shows sympathy to birds and suffers – both physically and emotionally – for his kindness. He then extends that same sympathy to both of the bird-like women in his life, and comes out on the losing end with both of them. “Kindness does not pay” (Fischler 261).

HARDY HAS A HABIT OF COMPARING WOMEN TO BIRDS

- Cytherea Gray possess a sense of perfect balance and is a “terrified,...panting and fluttering... Little bird” (Hardy “Desperate Remedies” 383).
- Hardy wrote in his personal correspondence that women should be “penned and fattened for a month to round out their beauty” (quoted from Fischler 253).

ARABELLA DONN

- “She was a complete and substantial female animal – no more, no less...” (64-65).
- Arabella immediately becomes connected to the image of the pig. Her throwing of the pig genitals and later butchery of a pig cause Jude to feel emasculated: “Jude felt dissatisfied with himself as a man at what he had done” (121).
- She has the “rich complexion of a Cochin hen’s egg” (64)
- Arabella states: “I am part egg-shell” (98). She carries around a live cochin egg within a pig bladder around her neck (98).
- “...Asked Arabella with a jealous, tigerish indrawing of breath” (95).
- Sue claims that Arabella wants to meet with Jude in order to “entrap” him, as she has done in the past (496).
- Her detached hair is intentionally referred to as a “tail” (505).
- “There’s nothing like bondage and a stone deaf taskmaster for taming...women” (601).
- She tells Jude that he has “dirt[ied his] own nest” (600).
- Arabella wears a necklace made of the “distillation of the juices of doves’ hearts” (557), which she uses in an “enticing” (771) manner to trap a future husband (Vilbert): “Weak women must be provided for” (769).
- Joseph Beach: “the whole setting of her home, the scene of wooing, is sordid in the extreme, a type of the purely animal love” (222).

Based on the evidence, I suggest that Arabella is portrayed as a predatory animal

SUE BRIDEHEAD

- Sue states: “I haven’t been able to sleep at all, and then I heard the rabbit, and couldn’t help thinking of what it suffered, till I felt I must come down and kill it! But I am so glad you got there first... They ought not to be allowed to set these steel traps, ought they!” (399). Immediately after discussing the rabbit, Sue and Jude begin to discuss her marriage, which is repeatedly referred to as a cage throughout the novel.
- The rabbit utters a “shrill squeal” (398); “the agonies of the rabbit from its lacerated leg” (398)
- Sue’s pigeons are referred to as “her dears” (579). After hearing that they will be auctioned for “a nice pie” (579) she impulsively frees them, later complaining “O why should Nature’s law be mutual butchery!” (580).
- “tears resounding through the house like a screech-owl” (693) on the eve of her remarriage to Phillotson
- “rustle[d] up Jude’s dark stairs” (263).
- Jude to Sue: “I can see you through your feathers, my poor little bird!” (392)
- Upon Jude and Sue having sex, Arabella claims: “The little bird is caught at last!” and Jude responds that Sue is not caught, but only nested (503).
- “flexible and light as a bird” (549); makes a “nest” in Phillotson’s house (412); takes flight out of his window (458).
- Jude: Have breakfast with me now you are here, my bird... There will be plenty of time to get back and prepare the children’s meal before they wake” (632)
- Gillingham reminds Phillotson that he had always objected to “opening the cage-door and letting the bird go in such an obviously suicidal way” (695).
- Upon the death of her children, Sue wishes to “prick myself all over with pins and bleed out the badness that’s in me” beseeching that “something would take the evil right out of me, and all my monstrous errors, and all my sinful ways!” (652) – just like the butchered pig.

Based on the evidence, I submit that Sue is portrayed as an animal of prey

BUT... WHAT ABOUT POOR JUDE??

- Jude thinks of these women in an animal way, and has a "code of honour" toward them in a similar pattern that he does with animals. This causes him a lot of grief.
- Phillotson comments: "Be a good boy, remember; and be kind to animals and birds, and read all you can." (10). A critical foreshadowing on his relationships and "extraordinary sympathy" (430) that causes Jude little but hardship and grief.
- Jude rushes to help Arabella because "she's a woman... an erring, careless, unreflecting fellow-creature" (498).
- "I'd marry the W--- of Babylon rather than do anything dishonourable! ... I have never behaved dishonourably to a woman or to any living thing!" (727).

A THOUGHT BY JOSEPH CONRAD

- “What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins” (70).

SO WHAT HAVE WE COVERED, AND WHAT IS THE BOTTOM LINE?

- We have established that Hardy had a habit of using animal imagery to describe women in his novels and personal correspondence.
- We have used specific passages from *Jude the Obscure* to establish that this pattern of animal imagery continues in the novel. Specifically for this novel, we have established that:
 - Arabella is characterized as a predatory animal (she wants what she wants!)
 - Sue is characterized as an animal of prey (like a rabbit in a trap or a bird for the pie, Sue becomes a victim of “mutual butchery” (580) and the “flaw in the terrestrial scheme” (21).
- We have also established that Jude thinks of these women in an animal way, and has a “code of honour” toward them in a similar pattern that he does with animals. This causes him a lot of grief.
- Using the Joseph Conrad quote, I submit that we take a Derrida approach and subvert the binary: perhaps Arabella and Sue are not predator/prey animals at all, but have simply realized the way they have become pawns in their crushing social and cultural milieus. I submit that after Arabella realizes she is considered a “female animal” within her society and by Jude, Arabella simply acts upon that instinct and is – pragmatically – looking out for #1.
- Likewise Sue realizes that her fate is like that of the butchered pig or the trapped rabbit, and, due to the crushing pressure, her “tragedy begins” (Conrad 70).
- Fischler states: “...The world of *Jude the Obscure* is inhabited by men and women who, although they are vaguely aware of being caught in the net of fate, plot their way through life either by setting traps for others or by figuring out ways for getting out of the trap in which they find themselves” (264).

Bottom line: Hardy, Jude, and 19th century England see these women as being predatory or preyed upon animals. I submit that Arabella and Sue live out the animal roles that the author/narrator and their culture has assigned them, but that (Arabella particularly) subverts these animalistic expectations and uses them to “get things done” and create the life she wants. Sue, unfortunately, succumbs to the woman-as-prey vision of the author and the crushing expectations of her culture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are some ways that the women of the novel use animalistic qualities or imagery to create agency? In what ways is this agency considered negative or positive by the narrator / the author?
- How can we synthesize the “New Woman” vision of Sue with the tortured rabbit / trapped bird / butchered pig that she is associated with in the novel? Are the two mutually exclusive, or is the outcome inevitable?

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