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## A Structuralist Reading of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

*Abstract: Structuralism as a scientific method is applied to all fields, including literature, in order to find the deep and underlying structure common to variegated forms and shapes. When applied to literature and fiction, structuralism focuses in particular on two aspects of the work, genre and narrative. Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure can be analyzed in terms of structuralism thus enriching one's understanding and perception of the novel. In this paper the genre of the work is decided on by recourse to Frye's theory of genre, and the article aims to demonstrate how the genre is projected onto the narrative by dissecting the text according to A.J. Greimas' theory of narrative.*

Key words: *structuralism; genre; narrative; union.*

### **Introduction**

From times unknown, man has been obsessed with the idea of harmony in life, that is in order to have a more meaningful as well as a more comfortable life, he has tried to understand and get meaning from everything which he faces. Accordingly everything to him is a challenge out of which he tries to make a meaningful whole. Thus all his efforts end in unification and organization, which in turn result in a structure. In this way it is easy to see how structure permeates all human activities, from the physical to the artistic.

It can be easily seen how the existence of structure and the science of structuralism is essential in human life. Structuralism has been defined "as a human science whose efforts is to understand, in a systematic way, the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and, therefore, all human behavior and production" (Tyson 210). It can be thus concluded that structuralism is a method of systematizing human experience that is used in many variegated fields of study, such as linguistics, psychology and literary studies.

Structuralism is fundamentally a way of thinking about the world which is predominantly concerned with the prescription, description and perception of structures. As a developing concern of modern thinkers, it is the result of a momentous historic shift in the nature of perception which finally crystallized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the field of

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physical sciences, but with a momentum that has carried through to most other fields. Concerning this Hawkes says that: “The new perception involved the realization that despite appearances to the contrary the world does not consist of independently existing objects, whose concrete features can be perceived clearly and individually, and whose nature can be classified accordingly” (17).

This new concept that the world is made up of relationships rather than things constitutes the first principle of that way of thinking which can be properly called ‘structuralist’. At its simplest it claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all the other elements involved in that situation. In short, the full significance of any entity or experience cannot be perceived unless it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part. As to such integrity in terms of structure and the task of structuralist activity to decipher such an organism, Barthes says that:

The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an “object” in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning of this object. Structure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a direct, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible or, if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object (cited in Culler 26).

The focus here is on literary structuralism and how the principles of structuralism work in the domain of literature. On the essence of structuralism in literature Abrams has it that “almost all literary theorists since Aristotle have emphasized the importance of structure, conceived in diverse ways, in analyzing a work of literature” (300). When applied to literature, structuralism mainly focuses on the narrative dimension of the text, because narrative is the basic part of every literary structure which unifies all the other elements. As to the essence of the structuralist study of narrative, or narratology Chatman has it that: “Among the many pressing needs of literary theory, is a reasoned account of the structure of narrative, the elements of story-telling, their combination and articulation. The task is delineated by Aristotle, but delineated only; the *Poetics* more questions than it answers” (cited in Culler 42). The range includes, in addition to the novel, poetry as well as drama, because underlying every literary work is a story or myth. So narratology, as a branch of structuralism, aims to see the way narrative discourse fashions a story into the organized and meaningful structure of a literary plot (Tyson 173).

The important point not to be overlooked is that theories of narrative are directly derived from the principles of structural linguistics, and as to their relationship Greimas says that:

There must inevitably be a close relationship between structural linguistics and poetics. Not only the identity of the object being described, which is linguistic in both cases, but also the fact that both have the same way of looking at the form of existence of this object, regarded as a system of relationship - i.e., as a complex structure- justify us in thinking that we can use the same basic methodology for analyzing linguistic and poetic objects, and that the descriptive procedures used in poetics-at least in the first phase - are merely an application and extension of procedures worked out in linguistics (Culler 293).

Another structuralist activity, in the domain of literature, prior to the study of narrative, is the theory of genre, mainly developed by Northrop Frye. Frye’s theory seeks the

structural principles underlying Western literary tradition. It mainly deals with genres or types of literature that conform with the major phases of the seasonal cycle. *Mythoi* (plural of *mythos*) is a term Frye uses to refer to the four narrative patterns that, he argues, structure myth. These *mythoi*, he claims, reveal the structural principles underlying literary genres: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony (Tyson 221). And as mentioned in another source, "with brilliant audacity Frye identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a structural organizing principle of literary form", and that an archetype is essentially an "element of one's literary experience" (Guerin 191).

We can note that the essence of each literary work lies in two components, one is genre and the other is narrative. And the important point about narratives is the distinction between story and discourse and their relationship. As to this Jonathan Culler says that:

The analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics. We still do not appreciate as fully as we ought the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our lives. Analysis of narrative depends, as I have argued on the distinction between story and discourse, and this distinction always involves a relation of dependency, either the discourse is seen as a representation of events which must be thought of as independent of that particular representation, or else the so-called events are thought of as the postulates or products of a discourse (Culler 175).

In the field of literature the type which very cogently leads itself to an inclusive and comprehensive structuralist analysis is novel. Due to its length and magnitude it is more challenging to a structuralist analysis than other genres, such as poetry and drama, also because its narrative element is more conspicuous. Also, the more traditional the novel, the more suitable is it for a structuralist study, because with the sway of modernism and postmodernism, and the penetration of other new approaches, such as psychoanalysis, into the domain of literature and literary criticism, structural concepts were undermined.

Among the various novels in different periods, *Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) seems to be the one best lending itself to the theories of narrative as well as genre. The main reason for this has to do with the mentality of its writer, who was a traditionalist in essence. Hardy's mind was nourished from his childhood by the stories and fairytales of his grandfather, and we can see the impact of these early tales on Hardy's own later works, which are bound by a structure and union most typical of the ancient stories. As to the structure governing the text of *Jude*, Harvey believes that the structuralist idea of binary oppositions, in the case of *Jude*, that of the ideal life and the squalid real life, is the recurrent tension which structures Jude's experience and organizes the text (89).

*Jude the Obscure* is an account of the doomed existence of the protagonist named in the title, from the moment he is first inspired by a rural schoolmaster to think of a university education as the highest possible attainment, to his dying alone, while hearing celebratory shouts and organ notes in the distance from Remembrance Day at Christminster University, a place which has not given the slightest heed to his ambitions, "Yes Christminster shall be my Alma Mater; and I will be her beloved son, in whom she shall be well-pleased!" (Hardy 44). Between these two moments are twenty years of self-directed study, and defeats in sex and love inflicted on him by two women, one sensual and pragmatic, the other intellectual and intensely seeking.

All throughout the narrative of the novel one can see an organic structure, following a logical chain of cause and effect, every incident well-embedded within the overall structure of the novel, the novel beginning at a definite point, and after a series of events of mutual dependency and interrelationship, coming to an end as a result of what has gone before. What instantly comes to mind is Carroll's famous statement in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that "Begin at the beginning," the king said, gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end, then stop' " (qtd in Chatman 42).

Structuralist analyses of narrative examine in minute detail the inner workings of literary texts in order to discover the fundamental structural units (such as narrative progression), or functions (such as character functions) that govern text's narrative function. There are many theorists in the domain of narratology and each sets out to discover and show the underlying structure of narrative in general from his own perspective, J. Greimas is one of these narratologists, whose theories are quite telling and demystifying on the structure and the working of narrative. He is primarily interested in semiotics, and his structuralist approach to the matter of meaning has produced influential books. In essence, his work attempts to describe narrative structure in terms of an established linguistic model derived from the Saussurean notion of an underlying *langue* or competence which generates a specific *parole* or performance (Hawkes 87-88).

The aim behind this paper is first to decide the genre of the novel, *Jude the Obscure*, by recourse to the Frye's theory of genres, and then dissect and analyze the narrative of the work with the help of Greimas' theory of narrative, and then to consider the relationship of genre and narrative, that is how genre is articulated within the discourse of the narrative, and how through this interaction the writer gets his ideas across.

### **How genre works in *Jude the Obscure***

When we turn our attention directly to literature, it is clear that a concern with form must rank as one of the central structuralist preoccupations, so that a school of literary criticism or a literary theory which claims to focus attention pre-eminently upon form must be consequently of some interest. And when discussing literature and the novel in particular, it is the genre of the work which mainly forms the material of the novel into a well-shaped structure.

As explained earlier according to Frye's theory of myths we have four basic genres: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony. And according to Frye there is a gradual process of transition from one to the other (cited in Tyson 222), on the ground of the essentially structuralist idea of binary oppositions, ideality and reality, and the passage from one genre to the other involves a movement from ideality to reality or vice versa. Frye himself counts the basic components of each as follows:

The four mythoi that we are dealing with, comedy, romance, tragedy and irony may now be seen as four aspects of a central unifying myth. *Agon* or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvelous adventures. *Pathos* or catastrophe, whether in triumph or defeat, is the archetypal theme of tragedy.

*Sparagmos*, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world, is the archetypal theme of irony or satire. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride, is the archetypal theme of comedy (Frye 192).

We will begin our discussion of *Jude's* genre by thinking of it first as a romance and trying to elicit its romantic elements. At the beginning of the novel we see Jude as a potentially romantic hero, full of ambition and aspiring to high ideals of progression and transcendence through education. All his illusions and ideals focus on the nearby but unattainable city of Christminster. So here conflict as the basis of romance is at work, first and foremost between the trammled town of Marygreen, in which Jude feels his roots in chains, and the city of knowledge and romance of Christminster. This constitutes only part of the conflict, on the other hand we have the internal tensions of Jude himself; on this Alvarez says that:

Jude's tragedy, like every true tragedy, comes from inner tensions which shape the action, not from haphazard and indifferent force of circumstance. Jude is frustrated by Sue, his ideal, intellectual woman, as he is by Oxford, his equally shining ideal of intellectual life. (cited in Guerard 114)

So we see how conflict, as the essence of romance, or in other words the structuralist idea of binary oppositions is at work.

Up to now we have all the requirements of a romance, it just remains for Jude to fulfill it through his triumphs over the various obstacles, but Davis summarizes all the illusory romance of Jude as follows:

Hardy creates Jude as a romantic idealist. But both objects of Jude's idealization (Christminster, and his cousin and lover, Sue) disappoint him in their failure to live up to his unrealistic expectations. So the novel could be read as a negative Bildungsroman, in which Jude learns that his romanticism is quite mistaken, and that he is better off dead than trying to live in world so opposed to his ideals. (2)

This is the tragic phase of the narrative, a part in which Jude's romanticism is shattered to obscene reality due to his own tragic flaws. This is the tragic movement of Jude by which he falls down from the ideal world to the real world, from innocence to experience. Harvey thinks of Jude as just an "impractical dreamer", whose ideas do not go beyond the limit of words and stop at actions (90). On the other hand the character of Sue is also full of contradiction and internal tension, which in its own way gives rise to the tragic downfall of both herself and Jude. Harvey also explains the character of Sue and says that: "Sue possesses a deeply contradictory personality. A determined individualist who fears marriage as a degrading form of social prostitution, she is deeply narcissistic and neurotically insecure, which results in a farcical vacillation" (97). Also in Frye's terms here we have a catastrophe: Jude's failure in both his marriage and education, as the basis of tragedy, which results in the protagonist's downfall into the world of irony.

From now on we have irony as the dominant genre of the work, suffusing the life and world of the protagonist. Irony is the real world seen through a tragic lens, a world in which

protagonists are defeated by the puzzling complexities of life. They may try to be heroic, but they never attain it.

Jude's world of irony, failure and disappointment can be seen and clearly delineated in the framework of Hardy's own naturalism. The basic component of naturalism, which sees man as essentially flesh and animal, is determinism crystallized in heredity and environmental factor, but Hardy, as Abrams explains, has his own naturalism:

Aspects of the naturalistic selection and management of subject matter and its austere or harsh manner of rendering its materials are apparent in many modern novels, such as Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, 1895, although Hardy largely substituted a cosmic determinism for biological and environmental determinism. (262)

Now a model of generic pattern can be traced in the narrative of *Jude the Obscure*, starting with romance, going through tragedy and ending in irony, in which we see Jude in a struggle with death. Each generic phase is based on a pair of binary oppositions. First in the romantic world of Jude there is that ever-present conflict in most of Hardy's novels, that of illusion and reality, then there is his tragedy by teetering between intellectuality and sensuality, and then being defeated by his sensuality and passion, falls down to his ironic world.

Now it is time to come to the narrative of the work, and to see how the generic pattern discussed in the previous section is crystallized in the overall structure of the narrative.

### **Narrative as the embodiment of genre**

In order to understand and see the underlying structure of Jude's narrative we will resort to A.J. Greimas' narrative theory. Greimas' work is based on several levels, Jude's narrative is explained according to each level, and also it is shown that the narrative embodies the dominant genre, which is irony.

First of all basic to Greimas' theory is the idea of opposition, that human beings make meaning in terms of opposed pairs. He believes that this idea of binary oppositions shapes our language, experience as well as the narratives through which we articulate our experience.

Basic to Greimas' theory is also the idea of binary oppositions embodied in the narrative structure in the plot formulas, such as conflict and resolution, struggle and reconciliation, and separation and union. In Jude's narrative the formula is based on that of separation and union. All the separations and unions just add to the irony of the narrative, no harmony or calm is achieved in union. This pattern of separation and union is seen on three levels. First we have the separation of Jude and Arabella, then that of Phillotson and Sue, and at last Jude and Sue. In each case, except that of Jude and Sue, a union follows, but a union imposed on the characters by the squalid conditions of life, a union which includes death in life.

Of course, to Greimas the forwarding of the plot involves the transfer of some entity (a quality or an object) from one actant to another (Tyson 225). In the novel we have this

entity, identified with Sue, transferred from Phillotson to Jude and vice versa. This give-and-take process forms the main part of the novel, and paves the tragic path of Jude towards his fate. Sue is an indispensable property to both Jude and Phillotson whose loss leaves a gap in their mind and heart, and that is this loss which motivates most of their actions.

Greimas has also accounted for the possible types of plots. He summarizes all plots into three categories as follows:

Actants Plot Types

Subject-object Stories of Quest/Desire

Sender-Receiver Stories of Communication

Helper-Opponent Sub-plots of Stories of Quest/Desire

(Greimas 1967: 297)

Taking into account Jude's narrative it can be seen that it is essentially a plot of Quest/Desire. In this kind we have mainly two actants, one is the subject, which can be everyman, and an object which can be identified with a person, thing or state of being. Throughout the novel Jude is a subject on quest in search of different objects, and in each case his search is doomed to fail.

First his desire is education and progress in life, a quest which is to fail due to his unrealistic visions. Then his quest involves a love affair with Arabella, which is again to fail due to the youth and impatience of both characters. Then his object of love shifts to his cousin, who again fails him, because she was a strange type of female and had her own specific views. Talking about the characterization of Sue D.H. Lawrence says that:

One of the supremest products of our civilization is Sue, and a product that well frightens us.

It is quite natural that, with all her mental alertness, she married Phillotson without ever considering the physical quality of marriage. Deep instinct made her avoid the consideration. And the duality of her nature made her extremely liable to self-destruction.

The suppressed, atrophied female in her, like a potent fury, was always there, suggesting to her to make the fatal mistake. She contained always the rarest, most deadly anarchy in her own being (cited in Guerard 71-72).

It is clear how unattainable an object Sue is, for such a subject as Jude, simple-minded and gullible. So Jude fails in quest after quest until he comes to his final destruction and the world of irony in Frye's terms.

## Conclusion

*Jude the Obscure* focuses on the life of a country stonemason, Jude, and his love for his cousin Sue, a schoolteacher. Hardy has created a masterpiece in which diverse themes and subjects are elaborated via variegated elements, all well-embedded and interrelated in

shaping such a unified work. On these grounds it can best be seen in structuralist terms, where wholeness and union are central to meaning.

In the novel all components and elements are aligned to give the work its due shape, and the missing of one would put the work at risk of shortcomings and deficiencies. Most conspicuous than all we can see how the genre is elaborated and projected onto the narrative.

Genre and narrative are the main and most important components of every work of fiction, and as a structuralist rule there must be a certain unification among the components, and also a certain wholeness which comes out of such an interrelationship. By recourse to the theories of two structural theoreticians, Frye on genre, and Greimas on narrative, and applying them to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, one can see how this unification works in the novel and note that we have the basically structural idea of binary oppositions at work both in the genre of the work as well as in the movement of the narrative.

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