Hardyan Existentialism: Meaning, Suffering and Authenticity in Jude the Obscure and The Mayor of Casterbridge

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Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) was born on June 2nd, 1840, in the rural village of Stinsford in the south of England. He would grow up to live a long and productive literary life reaching the old age of 87. During these years, Hardy proved phenomenally prolific in terms of his literary achievements. From 1871 onwards, he published as much as fourteen novels, three volumes of short stories and an astonishing 947 poems. Partly because of his extensive oeuvre, Hardy's works have been analysed from many different literary and philosophical perspectives. While many have often associated him with the movement of naturalism (Burton 57; Plotz 35), others have asserted his literature as "participating in the pan-European debate about Realism" (Widdowson 74); some have even gone as far to say that "there is no question in any one's mind" that "Hardy was a pessimist" (Sheridan 23). Hardy himself always objected to such a latter categorisation, however (Bailey 569). In accordance with Hardy's own protest, this thesis will show that Hardy indeed was much more than a pessimist. Namely, this thesis will place Hardy and his works within the context of existentialism.

To do so, I will perform an existentialist reading of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (henceforth *The Mayor*). Specifically, I will study the characters' attempts at self-creating a meaningful existence in the face of various forms of suffering by instantiating their own autonomy as individuals. I will therefore examine to what extent Hardy must *also* be regarded as an existentialist, and – by extension – whether *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor* must *also* be interpreted as existentialist novels. To determine this, I will equally study the extent to which Hardy challenges existentialism by including and discussing, in his novels, its potential oversights and limitations.

This thesis does not suggest that existentialist depictions in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor* are Hardy's conscious or deliberate existentialist expressions, since the term for existentialism and its movement was only coined by Gabriel Marcel in 1943 (Daigle 5). This

thesis *does* assert, however, that Hardy's narratives are underpinned by existentialist thinking. Therefore, even though Hardy might not have considered his work as specifically existentialist or as containing existentialist thought, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor* nevertheless explore the ideas, beliefs and convictions that would later form the popular philosophy of existentialism.

To philosophically ground these existentialist analyses of *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor*, chapter one of this thesis will establish a clear theoretical framework. This body will subsequently provide context and philosophical support for the later discussions of Hardy's novels. Due to scope related reasons, this thesis will focus on three existentialist works by three different existentialist philosophers for its theoretical grounding: Søren Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) *Fear and Trembling*, Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) "European Nihilism" chapter from *The Will to Power* and Viktor Frankl's (1905–1997) *Man's Search for Meaning*. This chapter will also identify some limitations of existentialism, as these will prove essential to understanding the forces that challenge and undermine existentialism, in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor*.

Chapter two will perform an existentialist analysis of *Jude the Obscure* drawing from the ideas discussed in chapter one. Specifically, chapter two will focus on the characters' attempts at instantiating their individual autonomy in the face of suffering caused by social convention and societal expectation. Particularly, this chapter accentuates the characters' pursuits of a meaningful existence by striving to transcend their societal positions.

The third and final chapter, analysing *The Mayor*, will move the focus from transcending social conventions towards a single character and his interaction with other individuals. This chapter will especially concentrate on the protagonist's failed attempts at establishing meaningful relationships as a consequence of his own inauthentic personality.

To competently examine Hardy through an existentialist lens, it is first essential to establish a clear understanding of its origins, its ideas and main premises and, not least, its limitations. It is the purpose of the following chapter to do so.

Chapter One:

Existentialism Explained

Introduction to Existentialism

As the 1970s came to an end, so too did the cultural movement of existentialism meet its conclusion. Particularly following the death of one its leading figures, Jean-Paul Sartre, in 1980, the ideas surrounding this 'movement' also gradually disappeared from academic discourse. However, though the movement – which saw "its height in the 1940s and 1950s" (Boulé and Tidd 3) – declined in public consideration, it is by no means a given that existentialism as a whole has been rendered irrelevant.

A reason for the survival of the philosophical relevance of existentialism can be found precisely in the idea that existentialism is not necessarily a philosophy. As Cooper explains, it has even "been denied ... that there ever was a distinctive philosophical perspective or tendency shared by those thinkers who have been labeled 'existentialists'" (27). Lewis therefore elucidates that existentialism constitutes a "movement *within* the discourse of philosophy" (84) instead of an independent set of convictions. In other words, existentialism does not seek to provide a set philosophical framework with which to interpret the world; rather it offers "a current of constructive critical thought" (84) that concretely challenges existing frameworks. In so doing, existentialism "attempted to formulate a serious critique of modern society and culture" (Levin 85); existentialism thus, above all, constitutes an inquiry.

It is the purpose of this chapter to establish what this existential inquiry entails. However, to attempt to cover all aspects of existentialism would be a futile undertaking given the scope of this thesis. Not only would there simply be too many subjects to address but it would also prove an impossible endeavour to discuss all the philosophers and authors who have contributed to the discourse of existentialism. The twentieth century alone would require

the incorporation of the likes of Jaspers, Heidegger, Binswanger, Marcel, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset, Berdyayev, and Abbgnano, to name but a few. For this reason, this thesis will be limited in scope and centre around only three figures of existentialism for its theoretical framework: Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Viktor Frankl.

This chapter will first explore some of the fundamental ideas which the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard – holding the reputation of the "father of existentialism" (Cooper 27) – sets out in his book *Fear and Trembling*. A reading of this philosophical examination will establish Kierkegaard's views on role of the individual and the importance of living authentically with God. Secondly, an analysis of the chapter 'European Nihilism' in *the Will to Power* by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche will provide ample context for the implications of meaninglessness and nihilism. Lastly, I will discuss the Austrian psychiatrist, neurologist and philosopher Viktor E. Frankl (1905-1997) through his book *Man's Search for Meaning* – a personal account of the Nazi concentration camps, offering reflections on meaningful suffering and the importance of living a subjectively meaningful life.

It is first necessary, however, briefly to outline the more general notions of existentialism. For, in addition to the issues referred to so far, existentialist thought is rooted in a wider acknowledgement of certain objective circumstances inherent to existence. To 'set the stage' as it were, and to ascertain on which fundamental notions of reality the existentialists agree, the following paragraphs will offer a brief clarification of these issues.

Existentialism in a Nutshell

The cast of existentialist thinkers ranges far and wide; From theologians to hardened atheists, from capitalists to Marxists, from mid-nineteenth century Russia to late twentieth-century

France, existentialism is arguably one of the most diverse philosophies in terms of its supporters. Why, then, that this disjointed group of people, despite their differing characteristics, can all loosely be regarded as existentialists is no trivial coincidence. In fact, it is precisely because existentialist thought allows for such diversity that its proponents derive from at times contradictory backgrounds. An existentialist, for example, might stand "in the most ferocious opposition to the Enlightenment faith in a self-grounding, self-evident Reason" whilst, on the other hand, would passionately advocate "the Enlightenment vision of an emancipated humanity" (Levin 81). In other words, existentialist thought is not bound by any form of adherence; it is a relentless inquiry into the betterment of individual life. Subsequently, why existentialists are concerned with such betterment reveals a foundational component of their world view.

Fundamentally, existentialism holds that one is born without any intrinsic meaning. That is, the world as such constitutes no more than "an absurd universe devoid of meaning and value" (Rose 14). Though this undeniably introduces a bleak and gloomy prospect for existence, it is nonetheless one that all existentialists agree on. The sense of existential dread that might flow from such a fundamental interpretation of the world is perhaps most poignantly expressed by Kierkegaard in his 1843 book *Either/Or*:

> How empty life is and without meaning. – We bury a man, we follow him to the grave, we throw three spades of earth on him … Why not stay out there and step down into the grave with him, and draw lots for who should have the misfortune to be the last alive to throw the last three spades of earth on the last of the dead? (48–49).

According to Kierkegaard, life is marked by a kind of universal reality of suffering and survival. For, despite the daunting realisation that, indeed, "existentialism declares human existence to be meaningless – in the sense of having no essentialist foundation" (Thompson

126), one still needs to live in this world regardless. Hence, the existentialist does not stop at this point of the existential contemplation.

In essence, where a nihilist would have remained at the junction where life is declared meaningless – constituting a "a passive and inflexible approach" (McHoskey et al. 445) – the existentialist proposes a radically and surprisingly hopeful prospect. Namely, even though life might provide no intrinsic value or meaning to an individual's existence, individuals as autonomous decision-makers can precisely create that meaning for themselves. It is to this predicament that French existentialist Maurice Merleau-Ponty referred when he wrote: "Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning" (Preface xxii). In other words, it is *because* one exists that one is bound to create that meaning for oneself that the world does not offer intrinsically. Consequently, the premise that one must create meaning in order to live illuminates another core premise of existentialism.

To state that one is condemned to meaning asserts that life without meaning is not an option. It is, for this reason, important to understand what is so particularly repellent about a meaningless existence. The fallacy with regard to meaninglessness, according to existentialists, lies in the view that meaninglessness is merely a state of passivity or neutrality; that one is simply experiencing meaninglessness as a kind of indifference to the past, present and future. However, this must be critically reinterpreted. For, the feelings of existential anxiety, depression, or despair at the thought of life's intrinsic meaninglessness are not separated from the meaninglessness of that particular life. As Strassberg explains: "anxiety is not *caused* by one's insignificance, but *is* in itself an absence of meaning. There is not primarily a cognition of meaninglessness which leads to anxiety, but real … anxiety is the manifestation of insignificance itself" (70). Suffering is thus not a mere result of meaninglessness, but rather it is one and the same; meaninglessness *is* the anxiety, dread,

depression, despair and all the suffering that those entail. Precisely for this reason, according to the existentialists, suffering is an inevitable aspect of existence.

Having expanded on the more fundamental assumptions of existentialism, I will now turn to the elements of existentialism that will directly relate to a later analysis of *Jude the Obscure* and *the Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Kierkegaard's Existentialism: The Individual Self, the Leap of Faith and Authenticity

On November 11th, 1855, the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard died of a horrible spinal disease. His book *Attack upon Christendom* written earlier that year – translated and published in 1968 by Walter Lowrie – proved to be the last of his works. Though a devout Christian, this final 'attack' on the Church of Denmark served as a fitting conclusion to Kierkegaard's life; *Attack upon Christendom* represented one final effort to redirect Christianity to what Kierkegaard saw as its authentic purpose – to re-establish the proper relationship between the individual and God.

This does not mean, however, that his arguments can only be seen through a religious lens. As I will argue in later chapters, his ideas on ethics and the individual are perfectly suitable for an analysis of a wide range of existential matters – even those with less or no religious implications.

In the mid-nineteenth century, in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard was fixated on a problem within contemporary European societies concerning the social adherence to universal ethics. In *Fear and Trembling* – written under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio – Kierkegaard explains: "the ethical as such is the universal" and that "[the ethical] rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* (end, purpose) but is itself the *telos* for everything outside, and when that is taken up into it, it has no further to go" (83). Here, Kierkegaard states that the ethical – or the societally dominant notions of right and wrong – is

that which is universally accepted in terms of the societal norms of virtuous and desirable behaviour. To divert from the universal means therefore inherently to undertake an unvirtuous endeavour: “as soon as the single individual wants to assert himself in his particularity, in direct opposition to the universal, he sins, and only by recognising this can he again reconcile himself with the universal” (83). According to Kierkegaard’s interpretation of mid-nineteenth century philosophy, to live an ethical and meaningful life, one had to immovably align oneself with the ethics of the universal. In this assertion, Kierkegaard identified a crucial problem.

To Kierkegaard, the problem was that the ethically universal dismissed the possibility of a meaningful pursuit or decision that contradicted the universal. He rejected that the sole manner in which one is to act is “to abrogate [one’s] particularity so as to become the universal” (83) and found that the adherence to ethical universalism inherently disregarded the single individual as a private conscience. Kierkegaard, instead, believed that the pursuit of the ethical is found in the direct relationship between the individual and God. More specifically, this relation Kierkegaard deemed essential since he held “that the adoption of a faith-based religious ethic can lead the individual to transform his self-understanding and way of being so that he exists authentically” (Rae 76). Rather than conforming to the universal, the individual ought to seek a personal relationship with God.

Kierkegaard acknowledges, however, that to make ethical decisions outside of social norms cannot necessarily always be rationally justified. In that case, one is urged to take the so-called ‘leap of faith’. Rae explains that “[r]ather than grounding theological belief in rational, reasoned, and logical arguments such as those of the ontological, teleological, cosmological, and moral arguments, Kierkegaard states that belief in God is and can only ever be based on pure subjective faith” (89). The taker of this ‘leap of faith’ – meaning the decision to belief and trust utterly that what God wills is the ethical – Kierkegaard calls a

"knight of faith" (75). These terms and ideas are perhaps best explained by means of an example.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard analyses the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. In this narrative, Abraham is urged by God to kill his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Even though he is reluctant at first, Abraham ultimately decides to comply with God's demand. However, the moment Abraham prepares to plunge the knife into his son's heart, he is stopped by a messenger from God. When Abraham subsequently looks at the altar, he sees a slaughtered ram instead of his murdered son; Isaac lives and Abraham is, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, the ultimate knight of faith. What one must subsequently take from this narrative is not so much the divine legitimacy of murder, but rather that "[o]n Kierkegaard's view, one can only change worlds by being totally involved in one, deepening one's commitment, taking all the risks involved, until it breaks down and becomes impossible, and a new world appears by a discontinuous leap" (Dreyfus 107). This absolute faith in God – in which the individual is ethically justified to act outside the social norm *because* of his trust in God – Kierkegaard calls the "the teleological suspension of the ethical" (Rae 85).

This teleological suspension of the ethical then provides a striking development of the individual's relation to the universal. Kierkegaard explains that because of his faith, "the single individual as particular is higher than the universal … though … be it noted, that it is the single individual who, having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now by means of the universal becomes the individual who, as the particular, stands in absolute relation to the absolute (84-85). In other words, while first the individual was subordinate to the universal, by a person's faith and personal relationship to God, that same person now finds himself ethically superior by its relation to another universal: the absoluteness of God.

This Kierkegaardian notion produces a paradox. For, "[o]n the one hand, Kierkegaard maintains that individual authenticity requires the individual to step outside of the norms of

his community to decide for himself how he is to act; but, on the other hand, Kierkegaard holds that the individual only becomes authentic by giving himself over to God" (Rae 86). This concept of authenticity is thus a vital part to Kierkegaard's philosophy. For, it is not that one offers himself to God as an act of self-expulsion; on the contrary, the *act* of *deciding* to relate with God instead of social convention is precisely an authentic decision, as it seeks not to conform but rather to assert one's own freedom of choice. More specifically, it is precisely Kierkegaard's contention that authenticity necessitates one to have faith in God and "use this faith as the means through which to develop the courage to transgress the universal ethical norms of his social community" (77). According to Kierkegaard, authenticity therefore refers to the individual's ability to decide not based on what one *ought* to do in terms of a universal adherence to social expectations, but rather on something that the individual regards as one's own choice – even with the looming possibility of social sanction or disproval.

Furthermore, as has also become clear, Kierkegaard's ideas discussed in this chapter are deeply embedded in a Christian frame of reference. However, the further aim of this thesis is not to focus on Kierkegaard's existentialism solely from a religious perspective. His ideas and assertions have relevance beyond the religious sphere. For example, Kierkegaard's ideas on the suspension of societally approved ethics will feature heavily in reference to the discussion, later in this thesis, of Hardy's novels – particularly *Jude the Obscure*. In this novel, the main characters' fundamental preoccupations are with an attempt to transcend social convention by trusting in their *own* autonomy as individuals. For this reason, Kierkegaard's existentialism will not merely be discussed in relation to a religious frame of reference but more strongly in social, political, existential and romantic contexts.

These past paragraphs have outlined some of the core premises of Kierkegaard's philosophy as they relate to existentialism. At the centre of this stands the individual in direct opposition to the mass, to the universal. This contrast represents Kierkegaard's existentialism

most decisively, as from the idea of individual autonomy comes forth the developed existentialist notion of an individual free to instantiate one's own existence in a world that bears no intrinsic meaning (the oversights of this idea of free self-instantiation will be addressed later in this chapter). This meaning then must be created by the individual. This contradiction – the individual set to create meaning in a meaningless world – will be the focus of the next discussion, in which Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism and the collapse of belief systems will take centre stage.

Nietzsche's Existentialism: God is Dead and Active vs Passive Nihilism

It has been 140 years since Friedrich Nietzsche, in 1882, declared the death of God. He proclaimed that "[G]od is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (181). This proclamation has since become one of the philosopher's most iconic expressions. Though his reputation as "the most audacious of God-assassins" (Cybulska 11) might suggest otherwise, this announcement did not signify a celebratory event. Instead, Nietzsche perceived that the collapse of the Christian belief system could carry dire consequences: not only for the loss of existential meaning but more specifically for the consequential emergence of nihilism.

Nietzsche understood that the collapse of the Christian faith would present a problem of a significance unprecedented in the Western world. His fierce criticism did not obscure his perception that Christianity provided a deep wellspring of armour against the unavoidability of suffering in life. As Hatab remarks, he might have been a fierce critic of institutionalised religion but "no one has taken God more seriously than Nietzsche" (94). He realised that the Christian Faith offered something to the individual.

For one, Nietzsche discerned that Christianity had the power to offer a level of protection – a kind of existential armour – against the inevitable reality of suffering in life. In *the Will to Power*, he explains that "evil appeared full of meaning" (10). In other words,

moments of great suffering caused by morally reprehensible acts were endurable precisely because these too were attributable to God's will. Were the direct source of this divine justification then to disappear, as a consequence, the suffering that once had been bearable *because* of its meaningful endurance, had now been rendered meaningless.

According to Nietzsche, the crucial element of the Christian faith therefore resided in its readiness to allocate meaning to an otherwise arbitrary existence. He explains that religion "granted man an absolute value" (9); meaning that God offered a certain counter-experience – a kind of all-encompassing framework of purpose – with which to brace for the fatality of existence; it served as a reason to undergo existence "in spite of suffering and evil" (10). Essentially, Christianity provided the individual with a sense of existential integration.

The collapse of such a fundamental precondition of a meaningful existence then unequivocally raised a problem. To Nietzsche, it was clear what precisely this problem was: "Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?" (7). As a kind of transitional phase between the collapse of meaning and the potentiality of the future, Nietzsche defines nihilism as such: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer" (9). Here, nihilism, above all, constitutes an attitude towards existence centred around values. By the death of such an absolute system of values – Christianity, that is – "everything attached to [the values] also loses its value" (Guiyan 306). According to Nietzsche, however, this was not doomed to occur. Instead, he made a clear distinction between two forms of nihilism: active and passive.

It is the latter that predicts the most fatal outcome. Nietzsche defines passive nihilism as a "decline and recession of the power of the spirit" (17) – or a "decline in mental power" (309) as Guiyan states. As a result, the nihilistic mental state reduces the individual's ability to combat the nihilism that cloaks him; the individual is consumed by his nihilism. Guiyan clarifies this by stating that passive nihilism "has no aim and gives no answer … Faced with

the sense of meaninglessness caused by the collapse of traditional values, the weak passive nihilist lives in a pessimistic and evasive way" (309). The passive nihilist thus lives a sedated existence in which the individual will is anesthetised by the unwillingness to engage *with* existence.

Active nihilism, on the other hand, is wholly desirable. Where the passive nihilist submits to a kind of existential paralysis, its counterpart seeks to gain something from it. Active nihilism is therefore characterised by "a sign of increased power of the spirit" (17). In this case, the individual is strengthened by the devaluation and collapse of the foundational framework of values (Doomen 112). Instead of abandoning any pursuits – or even any belief – of a meaningful existence, the active nihilist is impelled to create his own values *for* himself. Indeed, the individual "*faces* the reality of the collapse of faith" which, in turn, "makes way for the creation of new values" (Guiyan 308). It is precisely this notion – the individual who seeks to create for himself despite the valuelessness of existence – that is particularly relevant to the analyses of the following chapters.

Whether one can truly create one's own values, however, must briefly be addressed. For, it is in this proposition that Nietzsche presents an arguably unrealisable goal. To create one's own values is equivalent to saying that one freely and voluntarily determines one's moral code. Morality, however, is a deeply engrained concept within an individual which is not subject to personal authority or sheer choice of will. This is perfectly represented in the predicament of the main character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov, a disillusioned and embittered ex-student, considers himself to be able to transcend his moral conscience by murdering two innocent women. His conscience, however, tortures him relentlessly afterwards and as a consequence he suffers unbearably; Raskolnikov "realizes that he is not the man who is able to create his own moral code, that the premise upon which his life had been based, was a false one" (Strem 17). Whether one can truly create value, instead

of being merely a slave to conscience, must be deeply questioned. Nevertheless, though this self-creation might not necessarily be personal values; it certainly *can* be meaning. This form of active nihilism, therefore, is a fundamental component of existentialism in that it centres the individual in a world in which he ought to resist meaninglessness in order not to suffer precisely by creating meaning for himself.

Before these elements of existentialism can be explored in Hardy's works, there remains one more area which must be examined. The following discussion, in which Viktor Frankl will be the focus, will combine the previously discussed notions of Kierkegaard's single individual and authenticity and Nietzsche's concept of active nihilism and expand on the importance of a meaningful existence in the face of unspeakable suffering.

Frankl's Existentialism: Concentration Camps and Meaningful Suffering

By the end of the Second World War, Jewish Austrian psychiatrist, neurologist and philosopher Viktor E. Frankl had survived four Nazi concentration camps during a time span of three years. With odds of only one in forty to survive in Auschwitz, the chances of survival were desperately slim. Still, Frankl outlived the duration of the war and upon his return home in Vienna started writing his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: a personal account of his experiences in the concentration camps. The book captures the unbearable conditions and the relentless suffering the prisoners faced. These hardships, nevertheless, allowed Frankl to reflect deeply on the nature of suffering and its relation to meaning. More specifically, he realised that "[t]he prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed" (82) – meaning that those with no reason to live *for* anything or anyone were bound to perish sooner than those who had.

Through his reflections, Frankl managed to find meaning even in the greatest periods of suffering. *Man's Search for Meaning* is, for this reason, an extremely hopeful account

precisely because his ideas on the importance of a meaningful existence are tested under arguably the cruellest conditions in recent human history. Moreover, Längle and Sykes explain that "a strong sense of meaning and purpose was not only vital in life but in extreme situations it was crucial for survival." (40). To find meaning in Auschwitz, however, specifically at times when all purpose seemed to have disappeared from existence, was by no means a self-evident undertaking.

Hence, it is important briefly to elucidate a potential misconception. Frankl indeed stresses that meaning is necessary to combat suffering, but by no means does he assert the alternative is a requisite too. He explains: "let me make it perfectly clear that in no way is suffering necessary to find meaning. I only insist that meaning is possible even in spite of suffering" (117). Suffering is thus no precondition for meaning; Frankl merely states that even in the death camps, where suffering is ever-present, meaning is still to be found.

According to Frankl, there were three ways to find meaning in the camps: through work, love or suffering itself. Two of the things that maintained Frankl's will to survive, for example, were the deep desire to write anew the stolen manuscript that contained his life's work and the "strength of [his] love … and the image of [his] beloved" (5). Similarly, Frankl recounts the intentions of two fellow inmates to commit suicide, since "both had nothing more to expect from life" (87). Both, however, did not. A reason for this, Frankl recalls, was the realisation "that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them" (87). Namely, for one of the men, a son was still waiting for his return, whilst for the other, it was a series of scientific books that still needed to be finished. Their respective purposes withheld them from prematurely escaping their suffering, and in the process, their suffering gained an entirely new dimension.

In essence, when the individual has something to live for, the suffering endured to experience that meaning becomes meaningful on its own. For, that which constitutes 'the

meaningful' – be it the hope of reunion with a loved one or a material purpose – would be sufficiently meaningful to undergo the suffering. In other words, the meaning transcends the suffering, and thus Frankl states that "[i]n some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (117). Considering this, it is entirely unsurprising that throughout *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl multiply echoes Nietzsche's famous words: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how" (109). The meaning in this case *justifies* the suffering, and it is precisely this observation that places Frankl most prominently in the framework of this thesis.

Allport, in his introduction to *Man's Search for Meaning*, even draws a specific connection between Frankl and existentialism. He writes:

> It is here that we encounter the central theme of existentialism: to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and in dying. But no man can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for himself, and must accept the responsibility that his answer prescribes (9).

Echoing Kierkegaard's 'single individual' and Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, Frankl too places the individual as the prime authority in the pursuit of a meaningful existence.

Limitations of Existentialism

To write about existentialism means also to acknowledge certain legitimate limitations. For, though its relevance has not vanished, the reality of its "virtual disappearance" (Kohn 388) from academic discourse does raise the question as to what lead to its reduction in popular consideration. In addition, acquiring a clear understanding of the oversights of existentialism

is paramount to a later analysis of Hardy, as his contemporary awareness of the forces undermining existentialist assertions will feature heavily in the two following chapters.

One of existentialism's main limitations relevant to this thesis is its insufficient acknowledgement of the extent to which societal and social conventions and systems challenge, undermine or outrightly obstruct an individual's self-creation or self-instantiation. Kierkegaard's assertions about the freedom and responsibility of an individual to find meaning in transcending such conventions discussed earlier in this chapter is particularly noteworthy; though it is not only Kierkegaard who asserts this, of course; Crowell places this in a wider context of existentialist thought: "typically, existentialists assert the *uniqueness* of the human situation in the world ... This situation is characterized by ambiguity and estrangement, but *also* by a sense of freedom and responsibility for meaning" (15). Subsequently, the decisive focus on freedom and responsibility cause Kierkegaard and also Nietzsche to insufficiently address the impact of conventions on precisely these notions.

More so, the idea of the individual as the source from which meaning springs is also contested by more contemporary thinkers. French philosopher Foucault (1926–1984), for example, adopts a perspective that claims "the subject is not a ground but an effect or function of codes, norms and relationships within a system" (12). The individual is therefore not so much shaped by his own determination to create meaning, but rather is himself a result of the underlying forces that govern social and societal relations, and are therefore outside the sphere of influence of the individual. Hence, it was precisely Foucault's aim "to undermine the idea, found in both Sartre and Heidegger, that the human being is the locus of the constitution of meaning" (12). Thinkers like Foucault, and also Derrida, in response to existentialism, therefore assume a view of society more in line with the cultural theory of structuralism.

By extension, existentialism's focus on personal freedom can also be problematised in relation to gender. American philosopher Judith Butler (1956–present) presents such a critique in her stance "against the idea that there is a fundamental female-identity" (14). Butler also, "like Foucault, insists that the rigid distinction between male and female rests on the operation of contingent social codes and regimes of power, and that one's gender identity is thus a construct" (14). Butler clearly builds on the assertion made by Foucault with respect to social systems: the individual is a construct of its environment rather than vice versa. According to these critics, individuals are therefore not wholly at liberty to self-instantiate, since the social arena in which individuals attempt to do so is underpinned by structures that fundamentally undermine their autonomy. Such critiques proved appealing even to long-standing existentialist like Sartre, demonstrated by his later interests in Marxism.

These counterarguments notwithstanding, the existentialist assertion remains that one can transcend these social systems by instantiating oneself authentically. To the existentialists, to oppose societal or cultural convention is therefore equivalent to a genuine manifestation of individual sovereignty. Yet, the irony in this assertion reveals itself in the realisation that the societal norms one attempts to transcend in this act of agency remain nonetheless central to the instantiation of individuality itself. In other words, the declaration of self-sovereignty constitutes an action *in response* to precisely that particular societally induced suffering that one might experience.

Such is, for example, clearly represented in Frankl's determination to survive the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl's suffering in Auschwitz arguably represents the cruellest manifestation of societal oppression in human history. His subsequent determination to live and to survive the camps undeniably displays a level of remarkable willpower and endurance; in that, one can see the authenticity of character beyond a doubt. However, had this cultural oppression – the concentration camps, that is – not been manifested, Frankl would never have

needed to persevere. This simple observation reveals that the act of authentic self-instantiation is nonetheless tainted *by* the presence of the societal oppression that required the act of authenticity in the first place. Again, the act of individual sovereignty is *in response to* the oppression or convention or system that required the individual to instantiate that sovereignty. These nuances to existentialist thought will be of importance in discussing Hardy's particular existentialism, for he was himself keenly aware of the interplay between individuality and social structures.

Chapter Two:

Self-instantiation and Social Convention in *Jude the Obscure*

Jude the Obscure: An Introduction

In November 1894, New York's Harper's Magazine started the monthly serialisation of what was to become Thomas Hardy's final novel. First issued under the name *The Simpletons* and later as *Heart Insurgent*, the independent chapters were ultimately published as one novel titled *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 (Schwartz 794). As Hardy writes in his preface to this publication, the magazine version of *Jude the Obscure* had been "for various reasons abridged and modified in some degree" (3). Unbeknownst to Hardy at the time, these editorial modifications foreboded the hostile reception his novel would receive. Rabikowska even explains that *Jude the Obscure* "was received as pathology, and it was banned in all cultural circles in England" – this pathology referring to the novel's depiction of "illicit desire" and "suggestive pictures of female sexuality", which were considered to be "a reflection of Hardy's immoral nature" (848). It is thus no coincidence that *Jude the Obscure* became Hardy's last novel; the public outrage received from this supposedly controversial novel, in fact, permanently moved him from the art of novel writing.

Considering the plot of the book, a hostile reception might have been anticipated. *Jude the Obscure* follows Jude Fawley, a working-class orphan who dreams of becoming a scholar in the neighbouring town of Christminster. His dreams are soon obstructed, however, as he finds himself trapped in a loveless marriage to the seductive Arabella Donn. After Arabella confesses faking her pregnancy and flees to Australia with her parents, Jude recommits to his goals of becoming a scholar and moves to Christminster. Here, he meets his cousin and soon to be love Sue Bridehead. Sue reluctantly marries Jude's role model and old schoolmaster. Both haunted by their pasts, the novel continues to follow Jude and Sue on their

tumultuous journeys to escape the consequences of their unconventional choices. By the end of the novel, both characters have managed to legally divorce their spouses, and soon they have children of their own, all the while postponing their own matrimony. Nevertheless, freed from the entrapments of their previous marriages, the couple still finds no happiness, since the scandal of their divorces continues to haunt the lives of both Jude and Sue and their children, ultimately leading to a tragic ending.

It is hence the purpose of this chapter to perform an analytical reading of *Jude the Obscure* grounded in existentialism. More specifically, this analysis will, by means of close readings, examine the main characters' attempts at self-instantiating their individual autonomy by transcending social conventions. Additionally, it will question these efforts in light of the limitations of existentialism discussed in the previous chapter. This existentialist approach to *Jude the Obscure* therefore provides an opportunity to examine whether an individual's authentic self-instantiation is, in fact, realistically viable *in spite of* the cultural and social structures that consistently challenge and undermine the pursuit of such an endeavour. Fundamentally, this analysis will also consider whether Hardy, as an existentialist author, might offer a kind of reconciliation between existentialism and its main limitations.

A brief note on structure is needed before literary analysis can commence. *Jude the Obscure* is divided into six parts. Each part takes place in a different location and covers a different period. The subchapters in this chapter are divided into three pairs each covering two parts of the novel. The analysis will cover the events in the novel chronologically. Naturally, some events will therefore be emphasised and focused on more extensively while others be omitted entirely due to scope related considerations. Regarding *Jude the Obscure* specifically, the chronological analysis will provide the appropriate analytical circumstances to observe the characters' emotional development or decline as they experience their respective hardships and examine what impact these events have on their ability to authentically self-instantiate.

At Marygreen and Christminster

Jude the Obscure begins in the rural town of Marygreen, with Jude, still only a boy, expressing sadness over the departure of his role model, Richard Phillotson, who is leaving for the neighbouring town of Christminster. Living with his great-aunt, Drusilla, Jude's predicament becomes clear from the start. Upon returning home from Mr. Phillotson's departure, Jude overhears his aunt tell her guests of his mother and father's recent deaths. She then turns her attention to Jude: "[i]t would ha' been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi' thy mother and father, poor useless boy!" (13). Later, at work in the crop-fields as a bird-scarer, Jude finds that "a magic thread of fellow-feeling united his own life with [the birds]" in that though "puny and sorry their lives were, they much resembled his own" (15). Though Jude indeed feels a kind of unity with the birds – signalling a sense of situational recognition – it is in their state of existential sorrow and puniness that Jude finds this fellow-feeling. By Jude's own acknowledgement of kinship with the birds in relation to their mutual existential insignificance, Hardy makes explicit from the very beginning little Jude's nihilistic attitude towards his life.

However, also in the first chapter, Hardy introduces Jude's hopes and desires for the future. Reproached by Drusilla for failing to ask to "go off with that schoolmaster of thine to Christminster or somewhere" (18), Jude, full of desire to visit Christminster, hopefully asks if he could still leave for "this beautiful city" (18). He is scorned and told: "we've never had anything to do with folk in Christminster, nor folk in Christminster with me" (18). His aunt's comment – marking the social divide between the sophisticated people of Christminster and the peasants of Marygreen – foreshadows the persistent rejections and dismissals Jude will receive on the basis of his social background during his time in Christminster.

In the Kierkegaardian sense, Jude's attraction to Christminster signals the potentiality of him becoming a knight of faith. As explained in chapter one, such a knight refers to an

individual's trust in the idea that God's will is ultimately ethical, and therefore ethically justified to break social convention. Of course, Kierkegaard's reasoning is strictly religious. However, in *Jude the Obscure*, being a 'knight' equally refers to Jude's persistence to transcend social convention in consequence of full belief in his *own* decision-making.

Such is particularly the case when Jude outrightly disobeys his aunt's order not to seek the way to Christminster. After asking a wanderer for directions, the path that leads Jude to the proper course is ominously described: "Here the ploughed land ended and all before him was a bleak open down" (19). That which Jude desires is thus described as a kind of no man's land; the path to defiance – both of his aunt's will as well as his own position in the social structure – indicates Jude's willingness to venture to places where convention might need to be contravened if suffering is to be overcome. Kramer subsequently argues that "[*Jude the Obscure*] gets … close to Hardy's raw rage at the rigidity of British social expectations and religious conventionalities" precisely because "the more vibrantly felt and articulated enmity to individuals [in the novel] ... is from social and religious conventions (168, 176). Therefore, echoing Hardy's own societal frustration, it is Jude's potential willingness to subvert social norms specifically by treading the path of unconventionality that determines the further trajectory of the novel.

Consequently, existentialism finds its thematic grounding even more in Jude's continual visits to the Brown House to view Christminster from its rooftop. Walking home from one such occasion, Jude's obsession with the city as a place where he might find meaning becomes explicitly clear:

> Jude continued his walk homeward alone, pondering so deeply that he forgot to feel timid. He suddenly grew older. It had been the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to; for some place which he could call admirable; should he find that place in this city if he could get there? Would it be a spot in which, without fear of

> farmers, or hindrance, or ridicule, he could watch and wait and set himself to some mighty undertaking like the men of old of whom he had heard? As the halo had been to his eyes when gazing at it a quarter of an hour earlier, so was the spot mentally to him as he pursued his dark way.
>
> 'It is a city of light,' he said to himself.
>
> 'The tree of knowledge grows there,' he added a few steps further on.
>
> 'It is a place that teachers of men spring from, and go to.' 'It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion.'
>
> After this figure he was silent a long while, till he added,
>
> 'It would just suit me.' (25–26)

As will become clear in this chapter, it is indeed "[t]his dream of a kind of heavenly Jerusalem" that represents "the first of many fantasies accepted by Jude as alternatives to natural life" (Hassett 433). Jude's imagination which capitalises on Christminster's grandeur serves therefore to substitute his unwanted existential situation for a view that explicates the future as place where his suffering might be dissipated. Jude's imagination, as Hassett continues, ergo "is clearly a defense against reality and its conditions, for the university is described as a 'castle, manned by scholarship and religion'" (433). Jude's ultimate dream is not only represented in his mere desire to visit Christminster because of its career opportunities, but also more fundamentally in its symbolisation as a goal – a meaning – on and to which Jude can "anchor" and "cling" (250) – a sentiment wholly expressed in his view of Christminster as "a city of light" (25). Though at this point in the novel Jude's future goal is certainly made explicit, his attempts at realising this goal are firmly challenged, however. For, some significant years later, Jude is confronted with a situation that disturbs his chosen course, as his unexpected relationship with Arabella places demands on him that require him to abdicate his personal desires.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude's hopes of instantiating his own autonomy by moving to Christminster are directly challenged by the narrative's introduction of social conventions. These conventions are particularly observable through Arabella's impatient desire to marry Jude soon after they meet for the first time. Doubtful about whether he had promised to see Arabella that day, Jude relinquishes his studies of the Greek Testament and decides to meet her, specifically emphasising that "[a]fter today he would never probably see her again … it would be impossible, considering what his plans were" (44). However, the next day, Jude overhears Arabella telling her friends: "I want him to have me – to marry me!" (50). Rather than stemming from passionate affection for Jude, Arabella's desire to wed so soon provides a clear example of the social expectations to which she tries to conform. For, as Phegley explains in her work *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, in the nineteenth century, "marriage was still largely an economic decision" (13). She explains that the "decrease in work opportunities for some working and all middle-class women made marriage an economic necessity, or, at least, the best means of improving their status" (15). Therefore, as a result of these "economic realities and social expectations, most women chose to marry" (15), according to Phegley. Since Jude and Arabella had already engaged in premarital sex, remaining unmarried would only prove to worsen Arabella's predicament as an unmarried and disgraced woman.

Arabella's subsequent lies and deception regarding her pregnancy are therefore desperate attempts to show adherence to a certain societal standard. For, as Arabella expected, upon hearing of her pregnancy, Jude instantaneously deserts all his Christminster plans and commits to marrying her:

> 'I am going away,' he said to her. 'I think I ought to go. I think it will be better both for you and for me. I wish some things had never begun! I was much to blame, I know. But it is never too late to mend.'

> Arabella began to cry. ‘How do you know it is not too late?’ she said. ‘That’s all very well to say! I haven’t told you yet!’ and she looked into his face with streaming eyes.
>
> ‘What?’ he asked, turning pale. ‘Not . . . ?’
>
> ‘Yes! And what shall I do if you desert me?’ ‘O Arabella—how can you say that, my dear! You know I wouldn’t desert you!’
>
> ‘Well then——’
>
> ‘I have next to no wages as yet, you know; or perhaps I should have thought of this before. . . . But, of course, if that’s the case, we must marry! What other thing do you think I could dream of doing?’
>
> ‘I thought—I thought, deary, perhaps you would go away all the more for that, and leave me to face it alone!’
>
> ‘You knew better! Of course I never dreamt six months ago, or even three, of marrying. It is a complete smashing up of my plans – I mean my plans before I knew you, my dear. But what are they, after all! Dreams about books, and degrees, and impossible fellowships, and all that. Certainly we’ll marry: we must!’ (57)

In this scene, Jude’s unconventionality is directly challenged by Arabella’s conformity to a conventional social structure that requires her to lie in order to retain her social respectability. Remarkably, upon being confronted with his unconventionality – in the form of Arabella’s fear of desertion – Jude immediately defaults to a servile state of conventional adherence made explicit not because he wants to, but because “we must!” (57). Hence, Jude’s first attempt to a kind of authentic self-instantiation is immediately undermined by the existence of marital conventions. These marital conventions, however, soon lose their moral force after Arabella reveals to Jude that her pregnancy was a sham and that she will be moving to Australia with her parents. This finally allows Jude to move to Christminster. However, even

in the “city of light” (25) social convention still proves to obstruct his pursuits at a meaningful existence.

More so, the exclusionary reality of Christminster’s socially elitist culture directly prevents Jude from transcending social convention. Such becomes especially clear from professor Tetuphenay’s response to one of Jude’s letters requesting acceptance into his college:

> ‘Sir: I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do.
>
> Yours T. Tetuphenay.’ (117)

Indeed, Christminster, as earlier described by Jude himself, proves to be a kind of castle, walling off those who do not qualify as those “teachers of men” (25) Jude had earlier venerated so decisively. Also, as Hassett mentioned earlier, Jude is confronted with the fantasies he employs to substitute the painful reality of his unwanted predicament. In so doing, Jude merely manages to avoid “disillusionment and loss of spiritual freedom” but fails to find proper “engagement in real life” (Hassett 435). As a consequence, the narrative leaves no doubt that Jude’s fantasies have been shattered after Tetuphenay’s rejection. For, shortly after, robbed from his sense of purpose, Jude resorts to drowning his hardships in excessive alcohol consumption.

Nevertheless, the final events of part two in *Jude the Obscure* present a characteristically existentialist solution to Jude’s suffering. Drunk and despondent, Jude visits his cousin Sue, whom he has lately fallen in love with and who currently presents one of Jude’s only reasons for continuing his existence. In a moment of great suffering, he cries:

> O, I am – I couldn't help coming, Sue!' said he, sinking down upon the doorstep. 'I am so wicked, Sue – my heart is nearly broken, and I could not bear my life as it was! So I have been drinking, and blaspheming, or next door to it, and saying holy things in disreputable quarters – repeating in idle bravado words which ought never to be uttered but reverently. O, do anything with me, Sue – kill me – I don't care! Only don't hate me and despise me like all the rest of the world!'

Jude effectively capitulates to the crushing reality of societal inequality by forgoing the personal responsibility of self-instantiation and surrendering entirely to his suffering, seeking refuge with the only instinctive emotion he can find to combat his pain – his love for Sue. Jude's desperate expressions of nihilism are hence the product of a kind of dissonance with Jude and the world in which he lives – or as Schwartz explains: "Jude asks for meaning and purpose from a world that denies him both" (801). To some extent, Jude's suffering is therefore self-inflicted since it is his own decision to attempt to transcend a social position he conventionally ought not to transcend. However, Schwartz also keenly remarks that Jude places himself in these situations of suffering only "because he is unable to reconcile himself to a life far less satisfying than the one to which his being and freedom aspire" (801). In other words, Jude's fundamental need for a kind of existential meaning justifies the suffering that he is bound to endure in the pursuit of such meaning – a sentiment clearly echoing Frankl's reflections on meaningful suffering.

As a kind of existentialistically sound progression from this Franklian idea, the final scene of part two depicts Jude forgoing passive nihilism and recreating his own meaning after his initial pursuits have collapsed. Tetuphenay's earlier rejection of Jude therefore effectively represents a kind of Nietzschean collapse in which Jude's primary source of meaning disintegrates, leaving him with two options: to remain existentially paralysed by meaninglessness or to combat nihilism by creating new, personal meaning.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude chooses the latter. Having returned to Marygreen to escape his shame in Christminster and to visit his dying great-aunt Drusilla, Jude meets a clergyman named Mr. Highridge, who offers him the opportunity to enter the church as a licentiate on the condition that he "avoid strong drink" (125). Remarkably, Jude's response then captures one of the fundamental concepts of existentialism. Without hesitation he answers: "I could avoid that easily enough, if I had any kind of hope to support me!" (125). Jude decides to take on Mr. Highridge's offer, and in so doing chooses to attempt to overcome his suffering by adopting a new meaningful pursuit. Just like Jude left for Christminster to escape his suffering, so too does he leave Christminster to find existential significance in Melchester.

At Melchester and Shaston

The events taking place at Marygreen and Christminster differ remarkably from those at Melchester and Shaston. While the analysis of part one and two have focused almost exclusively on the character of Jude and his personal aspirations and development, part three and four discuss the evolving love relation between Jude and his cousin Sue. From this second part of the chapter onwards, the analysis will therefore focus specifically on Jude and Sue's ability to self-instantiate their autonomy in the face of the suffering they endure as a direct consequence of their unconventional relationship.

The specific influence of social convention on Jude and Sue's relationship is first explicitly introduced in the scene during which Jude angrily visits Sue for not replying to his letters. Sue tells him that she has been officially expelled from her teaching school as a consequence of the school's suspicions that she and Jude are having an affair. To quench further speculation, the school urges Sue "to marry [Jude] as soon as possible, for the sake of [her] reputation!" (157). This social expectation serves to propel Sue into marrying Mr. Phillotson sooner than planned, for it seems the only way that allows her to retain her

respectability. Sue's later request of Jude to give her away at her wedding – him "being the only married relation I have here" (170) – only serves to solidify this projected respectability of her character. This ironic manifestation of Sue's internal struggle – in which she asks Jude to perform a deeply intimate act as a means to establish a clear public display of their platonic and unromantic relationship and, consequently, to ensure her social respectability – showcases that Sue's "thinking is based on a radical opposition between social forms and a private self" (Goetz 196). In essence, the threat of social disapproval impels Sue to conform to societal expectations; in the Kierkegaardian sense, Sue fails to be a knight of faith.

Sue's potential for becoming a knight is nonetheless later foreshadowed in her attitude towards her marriage with Mr. Phillotson. After some harsh words from her aunt, who calls her a "simpleton" (190) for marrying him and exclaims: "Phillotson the schoolmaster, of all men! What made 'ee marry him?" (190), Sue breaks down. She confesses: "[p]erhap I ought not to have married!" (191). Though this acknowledgement does not immediately signify a kind of radical change in her behaviour, it does initiate the trajectory of Sue's active reclaiming of agency; the mere act of expressing unhappiness as a result of her adherence to social convention constitutes an act of defiance in and of itself. In other words, by instantiating her authentic perspective in the form of a genuine expression of sorrow, Sue shows the potential willingness to disregard the social expectation at the root of her suffering.

Such defiance is represented even more explicitly in the moment when Sue asks Mr. Phillotson to live separately. In this scene, Mr. Phillotson discovers Sue sleeping in the closet to avoid having to sleep with him. She furiously expresses that she is not wholly to blame for such a "monstrous" (221) act but rather "things in general, because they are so horrid and cruel!" (221). Therefore, as Kramer rightly argues, "[t]he novel's characterizing tone is bitterness, seemingly unmediated because the narrator shares the characters' sense of outrage that society censures both their unconventional sexual relations and their idealism" (164).

Despite Phillotson's anger, Sue ultimately asks: "would you mind my living away from you?" (221). In so doing, not only does Sue challenge – by sleeping separately – a marital convention that demands a kind of surrendering of female sexuality, but she also proclaims an entirely new realm of personal liberty by wanting to be physically as well as emotionally separate from her husband. In other words, "Sue represents a conflict with society and convention on multiple levels", both in terms of "sexuality" and "personal freedom" (Nagamori 257). This conflict places Sue in a precarious position which forces her to either revert to conventionality or to fully instantiate her own autonomy. Though she chooses the latter at first, the consequences of this decision will prove her downfall and ultimately force her to retrogress to the former.

Still in Shaston, however, Mr. Phillotson also encounters the consequences of disregarding social convention. Having earlier granted "his tortured wife her liberty" (247), Mr. Phillotson is called upon by the chairman of the School Committee:

> 'Well; it is as you said,' observed Phillotson, flinging himself down wearily in a chair. 'They have requested me to send in my resignation on account of my scandalous conduct in giving my tortured wife her liberty—or, as they call it, condoning her adultery. But I shan't resign.'
>
> 'I think I would.'
>
> 'I won't. It is no business of theirs. It doesn't affect me in my public capacity at all. They may expel me if they like.'
>
> 'If you make a fuss it will get into the papers, and you'll never get appointed to another school. You see, they have to consider what you did as done by a teacher of youth—and its effects as such upon the morals of the town; and, to ordinary opinion, your position is indefensible. You must let me say that.'
>
> To this good advice, however, Phillotson would not listen. (247)

Interestingly, Sue's previous reclaiming of agency by subverting social expectations has effectively placed her legal husband in a predicament that requires him to do the same. At first, Phillotson indeed subverts these expectations by reaffirming his belief that "by all natural, straightforward humanity, I have acted rightly" (247). However, ultimately, "[t]he weakness and ineffectiveness of Phillotson's sacrificial acts is underlined by his shift in attitude toward the end of the novel when he invites Sue to return to him" (Horne 564). Clearly, the pressure of social convention eventually moves him to retract his unconventional statements, thereby regaining "the social and professional advantages that might accrue from remarriage" (564). The repercussions of subversion thus represent a kind of ripple effect, challenging the notion that postulates an individual's autonomous self-instantiation as merely and solely pertaining to the self.

At Aldbrickham and Back at Christminster

It is in these last two parts of *Jude the Obscure* that Jude and Sue's attempts at self-instantiation are tested to their existential limits. More specifically, the strain put on both characters by the socially exclusionary effects of their unconventional lives, together with the tragic climax of the narrative, sees both Jude and Sue succumb to the unbearable degree of their suffering.

The last part of this chapter will therefore question the realistic viability of an individual's self-instantiation in the face of social conventions. By extension, it will also analyse and determine the extent to which Hardy challenges the existentialist ideas so pervasively present in the novel. To do so competently, however, the analysis of the last two parts of *Jude the Obscure* must be condensed significantly. Not only is this required because the climactic event of the novel demands a more detailed analysis than previously analysed scenes, but also since it is subsequently necessary to linger briefly on the subject of authentic

self-instantiation. In the following paragraphs, the events at Aldbrickham are thus of less significance but still require some description for the plot to remain coherent.

In part five of *Jude the Obscure,* both Jude and Arabella and Sue and Mr. Phillotson have officially divorced. Jude expresses his desire to marry Sue after a "decent interval" (259). Sue, on the other hand, expresses her discontent with the requirement of a "Government stamp" (259) to seal their love. One day, Jude and Sue receive a letter from Arabella explaining that she gave birth to a child – nicknamed Little Father Time – in Australia some time ago; the father, Arabella claims, is Jude. Expressing her inability to care for him, Arabella asks Jude and Sue to adopt, which they agree to do. Some two and a half years later, Jude and Sue's family has expanded with two children of their own. Still unmarried and hence "disliked by the public because of their odd style of life" (Yu-Hua, 652), the family decides to return to Christminster in the hopes of a better life. However, Jude and Sue soon come to realise that Christminster's conventional culture rejects their unconventional family composition.

Hardy even gives this social rejection a literal narrative dimension by emphasising Sue's unsuccessful search for family lodgings. While Jude roams the streets of Christminster for work, it falls to Sue to find lodgings. It becomes immediately clear, however, that her search is persistently plagued by suspicious questions doubting whether she is "really a married woman" (330). Her attempts to explain that "in her own sense of the words she was a married woman" (331) prove futile. For, time and again, landladies inform Sue that they cannot allow her and her family to stay – one specifically adding that she cannot because her "husband objects" (331). Ironically, it is this seemingly negligible detail that, like in the discussion of Phillotson's encounter with the School Committee, emphasises the multidimensional extent to which conventions are embedded within the social fabric. For, the landlady who rejects Sue and her children is not merely acting out of a personal adherence to

such societal protocol, but rather the landlady, in turn, is equally obeying the social norm in the form of silent compliance to her husband's will. Sue ultimately finds lodgings for her and the children only, and it is in this room that the climactic tragedy of the novel takes place – the one which will determine the outcome of the story as a whole.

More specifically, the murder-suicide of Little Father Time symbolises the failure of Jude and Sue's authentic self-instantiation. Distressed and despondent, Sue expresses to Little Father Time that "[a]ll is trouble, adversity and suffering!" (333), thereby signalling her surrender to a kind of passive nihilism. In this moment, the love she bears Jude and her children is momentarily insufficient to combat the suffering she experiences as a consequence of social exclusion. Witnessing her distress, Father Time is moved to attribute her suffering to himself – he "persists in considering himself a burden" (33), as Edwards observes. Pages later, Sue finds Little Father Time and his little brother and sister hanging from a nail on the back of the door with each a box-cord round their necks. On the ground she finds a note saying: "[d]one because we are too menny" (336). Tragically – and unintentionally – Jude and Sue's persistent defiance has thus resulted in a level of social exclusion that has led to the death of their three children. As Edwards explains, Father Time therefore "represents the long-term ill effects of blind adherence to social convention" (37). In other words, despite Jude and Sue's unconventional past, they nonetheless tried desperately to reintegrate their unconventional family into the conventional world. More specifically, it is precisely when "Little Father Time arrives that the relationship [of Jude and Sue] is forced to adapt … to [that of] the conventional marital type" (37). In effect, Jude and Sue's unconventional past has scarred them to such an extent that a return to the conventional proves impossible.

This realisation offers an ironic perspective on the reasons for Jude and Sue's instantiations of personal autonomy. The suffering and hardship they endured as a direct result of their unconventional choices have only resulted in more suffering and an

unconscious restoring of the previous social conditions that they attempted to escape in the first place. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, both Jude and Sue have failed to become knights of faith. Though they both mustered the will to break free from social convention, their actions have always remained influenced *by* these societal expectations. The death of Father Time therefore serves as "a dismal reminder of social conventions Sue and Jude cannot escape", be it either "from without, in the form of public opinion" or "from within in Sue's inability to feel secure in her nonconformity" (Edwards 37). With such tragedy seemingly unendurable, this moment in the novel initiates a kind of devolution of the characters' ability to combat their suffering through the adoption of purpose or meaning.

Jude and Sue's inability to escape social convention is subsequently concretised in their submission to the conventionality that had once initiated their attempted self-instantiation. After the death of their children, Sue is utterly and existentially destroyed:

> 'We must conform!' she said mournfully. 'All the ancient wrath of the Power above us has been vented upon us, His poor creatures, and we must submit. There is no choice. We must. It is no use fighting against God!'
>
> 'It is only against man and senseless circumstance,' said Jude.
>
> 'True!' she murmured. 'What have I been thinking of! I am getting as superstitious as a savage! . . . But whoever or whatever our foe may be, I am cowed into submission. I have no more fighting strength left; no more enterprize. I am beaten, beaten! . . . "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men!" I am always saying that now.' (342)

Sue's literal expression of submission serves not only to demonstrate her capitulation to her present suffering, but also to foreshadow a radical change in her future attitude towards life. As Camden remarks, it is indeed the case that "Sue interprets her children's death as a sign of divine punishment for her wickedness" (117). Such she also expresses to Jude: "I have

thought that we have been selfish … you and I. Our life has been a vain attempt at self-delight" (344). Her submission therefore not merely constitutes a rejection of her previously pursued unconventionality, but it also impels her to re-instantiate herself as an individual bound by convention in order to do penance for her unconventional transgressions – made especially explicit by her fierce convictions that "we must conform! … we must submit" (342). Sue's renouncing of meaning as a combating force against suffering is thus made pitifully explicit, as her once autonomous self-instantiation is now the basis for her self-humiliation and self-loathing. To do her penance, Sue leaves Jude for her old conventional life with Phillotson and delves into a religious life of contrition.

Jude's ending is also characterised by a submission to conventional life. Though at first still adamant on continuing his relationship with Sue – even scolding her for her insufficient expressions of love: "[y]ou have never loved me as I love you – never – never!" (353) – Jude allows himself to be tricked into remarrying Arabella. However, instead of actively inflicting self-punishment – like Sue – Jude falls into a deep and inescapable passive nihilism. Having returned from visiting Sue in the rain as a kind of final goodbye, Jude, like Sue had done earlier, surrenders and submits to the tragedy of his existence: "I have seen her for the last time … Put an end to a feverish life which ought never have been begun" (391). Jude's ending therefore effectively constitutes a suicide, when "already dangerously ill, he endures driving rain and bitter cold for one last meeting with Sue" (Edwards 35). Soon after, Jude dies of a fever.

It is thus here that one must make a fundamental observation on the nature and sustainability of Jude and Sue's self-instantiation. Indeed, it has become evident that the characters in *Jude the Obscure*, despite seemingly endless suffering caused by social and cultural factors, were successful in temporarily instantiating themselves as autonomous individuals. However, even during their time together as sovereign individuals outside of

convention, their lives were made intolerable by the constant assault on their unconventionality by the ever-existent presence of societal expectations. Also, all major decisions made by either Jude or Sue have been *in response to* a predicament or situation that they desired to escape. Therefore, the authenticity of their decision-making is fundamentally compromised, since their acts of self-instantiation are a direct product of the effects of social convention that required them to self-instantiate in the first place. In other words, in *Jude the Obscure*, the characters' 'authentic' ideas about what they ought or ought not to do find their origin specifically in a kind of antipathy towards the social conventions that they seek to escape. For this reason, their actions cannot be wholly authentic in the sense that they represent a fundamentally uncontaminated, individualistic perspective.

Conclusion

Woven into the very fabric of its narrative, Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* contains many fundamental notions of existentialism. Nevertheless, that these elements are present in his novel does not mean that Hardy accepts all the premises they represent.

On the contrary, the characters in *Jude the Obscure* specifically fail to adopt many of the ideas discussed in chapter one. Instead, Hardy manages to present a personalised kind of existentialism grounded in the social and cultural realities that existentialists such Kierkegaard or Nietzsche do not explicitly address.

Hardy acknowledges that the role of social convention exercises a truly foundational influence on the autonomy of an individual and even inherently underlines an individual's decision-making. This social awareness subsequently allows Hardy to challenge existentialism by placing his characters in situations in which their pursuits of meaning and autonomy are consistently undermined by social conventions. In *Jude the Obscure*, therefore, the main characters indeed instantiate themselves autonomously; however, *because* of the

inescapable impact of social conventions, their self-instantiation proves unsustainable, causing them ultimately to revert to the social position they tried to escape in the first place.

The aim of this analysis has focused specifically on the characters' relation to society; the following chapter will adopt a slightly different perspective, as it is now time to explore what position existentialism holds in Hardy's novels when focusing on the interaction between the individual and other individuals. Hence, it is here that *Jude the Obscure* returns to its shelf, allowing *the Mayor of Casterbridge* to be opened.

Chapter Three:

Suffering and Inauthenticity in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

The Mayor of Casterbridge: An Introduction

Almost a decade prior to the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, in January 1886, Thomas Hardy published his tenth novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Though his previous novels had already mustered serious readership, it was this publication that truly established Hardy as a lucrative author, marking "the beginning of what was to be the richest period in Thomas Hardy's twenty-five-year career as a novelist" (Wilson introduction xxi). Though such wealth undoubtedly proved beneficial for Hardy himself, the financial circumstances of the novel's characters by no means reflect such a fortune change of events.

On the contrary, *The Mayor* follows Michael Henchard, a poverty-stricken hay trusser who one night, in a drunken fit of despair, sells his wife Susan and baby-daughter Elizabeth-Jane to a sailor named Newson in a pub at a county fair. The next morning, Henchard wakes from his stupor and sets out to find them, but his efforts prove too late. Overcome with a sense of panic, Henchard vows to abstain from alcohol for the next twenty-one years. The narrative then jumps eighteen years into the future, where the novel follows his wife Susan and what the reader assumes is their now eighteen-year-old daughter Elizabeth-Jane in their search for Henchard. In actuality, however, Henchard's daughter died three weeks after the night at the county fair. The Elizabeth-Jane now travelling with Susan is her and Newson's daughter merely going by the same name. Henchard, meanwhile, lived up to his promise and has become a successful corn-dealer and mayor of the town of Casterbridge.

It is with the subsequent reunion between Henchard and Susan that the story truly begins. For the novel, from thereon, continues to follow Henchard as he ventures to establish a life for himself in the shadows of his past mistakes. Specifically, he attempts to find

meaning in forming loving relationships with other characters. These efforts, however, are constantly undermined and obstructed by his own spiteful and deceptive behaviour. By the end of the novel, Henchard finds himself utterly alone and abandoned by all the people he loves, in full realisation that he is the sole cause of his own downfall.

It is the subsequent claim of this chapter that Henchard's ruin is caused by his *inauthentic* behaviour. More specifically, I will argue that Henchard's failed attempts at a meaningful existence are a direct consequence of his inauthenticity. To do so, I will assert that Henchard's inauthenticity originates from a kind of enslavement to his own destructive impulses. For, as explained in chapter one, the existentialist notion of authenticity is fundamentally defined by the idea that the individual decides for himself how he is to act. Henchard, on the contrary, continuously fails to *decide*, and acts instead instinctively out of a kind of deluded sense of self-preservation. As in chapter two, this chapter will perform an analysis of *The Mayor* through an existentialist lens. In terms of structure and overarching focus, however, this analysis will differ from the previous chapter.

While the analysis of *Jude the Obscure* centred around the characters' search for meaning in the face of social convention and social structures, this chapter will primarily – though not wholly – emphasise Henchard's interactions with other individuals. For, even though *The Mayor* is indeed concerned with the impact of social convention on individual autonomy, the existentialist core of the novel resides in Henchard's inner struggle and the consequences of his individual behaviour. This is reflected in Hardy's own original preface to *The Mayor*, in which he explains that "[t]he story is more particularly a study of one man's deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my Exhibition of Wessex life" (379).

This existentialist analysis will therefore be conducted in the form of a character analysis of Henchard. In so doing, the first part of this chapter will aim to establish a clear

characterisation of one his fundamental personality traits, as this will later inform the discussion on his inauthenticity. The second part will nonetheless briefly address the depiction of social convention and structures in the novel in order to highlight the pervasiveness of social systems, even when these do not play as fundamental a role as in *Jude the Obscure*. The final part of this chapter will then delve into close readings of Henchard's interpersonal interactions and explore the impact of his inauthentic behaviour on his attempts at establishing meaningful relationships.

Henchard's Way: Selfishness and Absolution

From the beginning of the novel, Henchard is portrayed as a self-centred and selfish individual, one whose preoccupations stop decisively at the boundaries of his own perspective. The opening scene, which shows Henchard's inability to understand "why men who have got wives, and don't want 'em, shouldn't get rid of 'em as these gypsy fellows do their old horses" (9), particularly sets the tone in this regard. Particularly considering the severity of Henchard's deeds, it might be expected that the selling of his wife and daughter would constitute the novel's pinnacle in terms of its depiction of egregious selfishness. However, Henchard's response to his crime challenges such a reading.

Namely, upon waking from his drunken stupor, Henchard is not so much concerned with the well-being of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane, but rather with a fear of being recognised by the towns people: "[d]id I tell my name to anybody last night, or didn't I tell my name?" (17). More so, Henchard even proceeds to direct the blame at his wife: "why didn't she know better than bring me into this disgrace! … 'Tis like Susan to show such an idiotic simplicity" (17). Not only does this response showcase Henchard's dangerously self-centred attitude towards the hardship of others, but it also reflects his extreme lack of self-reflection. Referring to Henchard's drunkenness and maltreatment of Susan, Thomas remarks that therefore it is also

Henchard's "pride" that displays "one of his most distinctive attributes – one on which his very identity is predicated and one from which he cannot 'free' himself" (203). For this reason, Henchard's subsequent vow to abstain from alcohol constitutes an effort to avoid the potentialities that might cause *him* suffering in the future, rather than a genuine expression of regret or remorse. Nevertheless, though indeed Henchard *acts* egocentrically and selfishly, upon further exploration of his behaviour, it becomes clear that his selfishness hides a sentiment Henchard is unable to explicitly express.

Henchard's selfishness demonstrates his inability to take responsibility for his actions. More specifically, his self-centred attitude not only serves to absolve himself from blame but also to redirect it towards the people around him. As Kiely explains, echoing Thomas, Henchard's more serious flaw "is a pride which prevents him from admitting his own imperfections and forces him to attempt severing them from himself and then to conceal what he cannot expel" (190). This is especially observable in the reunion between Henchard and Susan after their eighteen years of separation. Specifically essential to this interaction is the moment when Henchard asks Susan for forgiveness:

> 'No, no. Don't run any risk!' said his wife anxiously. 'I can find my way back – it is not late. Please let me go alone.'
>
> 'Right,' said Henchard. 'But just one word. Do you forgive me, Susan?'
>
> She murmured something; but seemed to find it difficult to frame her answer.
>
> 'Never mind – all in good time,' said he. 'Judge me by my future works – goodbye!'
>
> He retreated, and stood at the upper side of the Amphitheatre while his wife passed out through the lower way, and descended under the trees to the town. (73–74)

Indeed, on the one hand, this 'request' showcases a level of guilt recognition – since according to Henchard there apparently *is* something to forgive. However, on the other hand, by requesting forgiveness, Henchard places himself at the centre of this interaction as a kind

of innocent bystander awaiting absolution. Upon reflection, this is reinforced by Henchard's earlier justifications to Susan in which he attempts to convince her of his good intentions:

> 'I don't drink' he said in a low, halting, apologetic voice. 'You hear, Susan? – I don't drink now – I haven't since that night.' Those were his first words …
>
> 'If I had known you were living, Susan! But there was every reason to suppose you and the child were dead and gone. I took every possible step to find you – travelled – advertised. My opinion at last was that you had started for some colony with that man, and had been drowned on your voyage out. Why did you keep silent like this?' (70)

Henchard's unwillingness to confront and take responsibility for his past actions is emphasised by his fervent attempts to convince Susan of his well-meant intentions. Rather than apologising, which would have signalled a sense of responsibility, Henchard's explanations ultimately engender the opposite effect, since they, in fact, require Susan to respond to *his* efforts at finding her, instead of vice versa. Furthermore, by asking her: "why did you keep silent like this?" (70), Henchard not only implies her impertinence in doing so, but also demands of her a justification for her behaviour, rather than directing such a demand at himself. As Kiely rightly suggest, it is indeed this kind of "rigidity" of character that makes it "nearly impossible for [Henchard] to adjust his perspective to the changes which life forces upon him" (194). While an admission of guilt in the form of an apology would have been the selfless response to their reunion, Henchard instead appears to see himself as a victim by seeking absolution in the form of a request for forgiveness.

However, according to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his work *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, it is precisely such an explicit utterance of a request for forgiveness that would render subsequent forgiveness impure. Since, when asked, forgiveness becomes "conditional" (34): it becomes a kind of "economic transaction" in which the

individual receives a remission of guilt upon explicitly uttering a request for forgiveness. Derrida, therefore, contests "this conditional logic of the exchange … according to which forgiveness can only be considered on the condition that it be asked" (34). Taking this into account, Henchard's selfishness is expressed in his request for forgiveness, since it directly implies that Henchard views his crime as something to be forgiven without requiring a genuine admission of guilt. Moreover, by specifically asking for forgiveness, Henchard lays the responsibility of granting forgiveness at Susan's feet, thereby not only positioning himself as the receiver of absolution, but also imposing on her the task of issuing a moral pardon. In other words, Henchard's appeal for exoneration becomes problematic and indicative of his characteristic egocentricity precisely because it obscures and disregards Susan's suffering, while it at the same time acquits him as the source of her hardship.

In this scene, clearly what dictates the outcome of their reunion is Henchard's inner struggle with his own personality. Nevertheless, this scene can also be regarded from a different – more overarching – perspective. For, though it is not the focus of this chapter, at this point of the analysis it is fitting to point out the way in which social convention also impacts the narrative, since it is equally in the reunion scene between Henchard and Susan that this comes to the fore most prominently.

Social Convention in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

In *The Mayor*, Hardy offers a less dominant depiction of the interaction between individuals and social convention than the ever-present tension in *Jude the Obscure*. Nonetheless, he endeavours to challenge social convention, though be it on a smaller scale. Whereas, in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy ventured to challenge the very foundation of societal expectations by empowering his characters to break free from their place in the social hierarchy, in *The Mayor*, Hardy produces an unconventional depiction of gender hierarchy on a more small-

scale, interpersonal level. As in the previous chapter, it is Henchard and Susan's reunion that provides the setting for this portrayal.

Particularly, Hardy's undermining of social convention is most prominently portrayed in Henchard's asking for forgiveness as a husband to his wife, or even more fundamentally as a man to a woman. In other Victorian literature, this request for absolution is usually reversed, as it is normally depicted as the woman asking the man for forgiveness in a display of supplication. Van Dijkhuizen, in reference to Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, provides such an example. In his *A Literary History of Reconciliation*, he draws specific attention to the scene which some commentators noted as "fundamentally unjust" (103), in which Florence, the daughter of the novel's central patriarch Dombey, asks her father for forgiveness for running away after he, in fact, struck her. Van Dijkhuizen points out that "by acknowledging Dombey's patriarchal right to withhold or grant forgiveness, [Florence] enables him to recognize that he has wronged her and is therefore in need of forgiveness too" (25). Furthermore, he writes that Florence "understands – and accepts – that Dombey's forgiveness as a patriarch will be conditional upon repentance and supplication" (107). So, even though it is Florence who is struck by her father, Dickens' depiction of this moment still suggest that it is the woman who is required to supplicate and ask for forgiveness, and that it is only the act of *her* supplication that allows "Dombey to recognise his *own* culpability" (105). As van Dijkhuizen remarks in reference to Gibson, this particular representation of forgiveness indeed "serves not so much to create a 'new ethical reality' but rather to restore patriarchal gender relations" (105). In *The Mayor*, by contrast, Hardy attempts to partially subvert such patriarchal relations.

For, not only does Henchard ask Susan instead of vice versa, but his request is practically ignored. Specifically, her response consists of no more than a murmur, as she "seemed to find it difficult to frame her answer" (74). Moreover, the chapter ends on an even

more unconventional tone when Henchard surrenders his attempts to convince Susan of his innocence by saying: “Never mind – all in good time … Judge me by my future works” (74). In so doing, Hardy undermines conventional attitudes, like those of Florence’s supplication in *Dombey and Son*, not merely by leaving the male request for forgiveness unanswered, but also by impelling Henchard to adopt a consistent change in future behaviour. The challenging of convention is therefore not enforced by Henchard, but rather by Susan, who remarkably manages to express her personal agency by remaining silent. Scenes such as these particularly elucidate the idea that “Hardy shaped his characters and plots to show his sympathy with women and his awareness of the disadvantages society laid upon them” (Rogers 249). Nevertheless, though this awareness is certainly observable in *the Mayor*, nuance is warranted when further discussing Hardy’s subversion of social convention.

For, ironically, while Susan’s silence constitutes a kind of agency, her verbal utterances on the other hand are characterised by submission and self-abasement. Such is evident in her response to Henchard’s surprise about why she had not returned to him sooner:

> Oh, Michael, because of [Newson] – what other reason could there be? I thought I owed him faithfulness to the end of one our lives – foolishly I believed there was something solemn and binding in the bargain; I thought that even in honour I dared not desert him when he had paid so much for me in good faith. I meet you now only as his widow – I consider myself that, and that I have no claim upon you. Had he not died, I should never have come – never. Of that you may be sure. (72)

This extensive answer to Henchard’s question is made particularly problematic when considering that the previous dialogue of this chapter consists only of Henchard’s scolding of Susan: “How could you be so simple?” and his aggressive attempts to persuade Susan to live with him, once again only to save his own reputation:

> These things, as well as the dread of the girl discovering our disgrace makes it necessary to act with extreme caution. So that I don't see how you two can return openly to my house as the wife and daughter I once treated badly, and banished from me; and there's the rub o't. (72)

To these insults and persuasions, Susan manages only to answer "meekly" (73) in short remarks of compliance and comments such as: "I am quite in your hands, Michael" (73). Therefore, this odd conjunction between Susan's silent agency and her verbal submissiveness speaks to "our understanding … of Hardy's often ambivalent and ambiguous narrative treatment of his female protagonists" and also "of the contradictions within Victorian gender ideologies" (Green 340), as it shows Hardy's willingness and partial capability to address social inequality between the genders, while it at the same time reveals his incapability to depict a narrative in which these inequalities are wholly transcended. It is for this reason that Rogers equally provides nuance by saying that these stereotypical characterisations of women provide "evidence that [Hardy] could not altogether *overcome* the sexual stereotypes of his culture" (249). Nevertheless, it is evident that even in *The Mayor* – a novel that does not centralise on issues of overarching societal systems and conventions – these subjects of social hierarchy remain embedded within the narrative.

The importance of highlighting these social realities notwithstanding, it is necessary now to return to Henchard specifically. For it is *his* inner tussle that truly marks the existentialist core of the novel. That is to say, in his subsequent ventures to live meaningfully – overshadowed by his past – Henchard is confronted with his enslavement to his own destructive impulses to the extent that these obstruct and destroy all the potentialities of meaningful relationships; in other words, his own spiteful, deceptive, selfish behaviour will prove to cause his own downfall.

Henchard's Way: Inauthenticity, Meaning and Meaningless Suffering

It is at this point of the analysis that the concept of authenticity occupies a central role. For, above all, Henchard's personal struggle with his own inauthentic behaviour determines the trajectory of the narrative. His inauthenticity, expressed in deception and spiteful acts of jealousy, is hence at the root of Henchard's undoing. It is the purpose of this part of the chapter to lay bare and analyse this inauthentic behaviour and examine how precisely its manifestation leads to the novel's tragic ending. To do so, however, it is required briefly to elucidate what specifically is meant by 'inauthentic' in this context.

As discussed in chapter one, Kierkegaard's idea of authenticity is related to an individual's personal relationship with God. Kierkegaard therefore provides a strictly religious understanding of this concept. However, his ideas on authenticity can nevertheless also be discussed in the more secular context of Henchard's struggle. For, as Rae explains, Kierkegaard above all "maintains that individual authenticity requires the individual to step outside the norms of his community to decide for himself how he is to act" (86). For this reason, authenticity is specifically characterised by the idea that the individual, in fact, *makes* a conscious *decision*. It is Henchard's inability to do so that fundamentally makes him inauthentic; his *acts* are not initiated by deliberate contemplation, but instead constitute a form of enslavement to his own destructive impulses.

It must equally be explained however, that authenticity in *The Mayor* does differ from Kierkegaard's conceptualisation so aptly recognisable in *Jude the Obscure*. For, unlike in *Jude the Obscure*, authenticity in *The Mayor* does not so much refer to breaking free from social convention, but rather to Henchard's attempts to decide for himself how he is to act in the face of his own suffering, rather than the suffering inflicted by social structures. As will become evident, in *The Mayor*, Henchard becomes inauthentic the moment he acts in *automatic* reaction to his suffering; he essentially loses his agency – his authenticity – as a

direct consequence of his impulsive reactions against feelings of suffering. This inauthenticity becomes most problematic in his attempts to establish relationships with other individuals, for it is precisely in these relationships that Henchard seeks a kind of existential meaning and which, in turn, are contaminated *by* his inauthenticity.

The first example of such a tainted relationship is Henchard's failed friendship with Donald Farfrae. Though at first the two characters become friends and colleagues – Henchard even treating Farfrae "as if [he] were a younger brother" (87) – they ultimately end up bitter rivals. This bitterness, however, is fully initiated by Henchard. His resentment first starts to boil up when his party-guests all abandon him to attend Farfrae's party instead. At this party, Henchard sees Farfrae dancing with Elizabeth-Jane – who he at this point still considers to be his legitimate daughter. Subsequently, Henchard's own perceived loneliness causes him to become spiteful:

> 'He'll be top-sawyer soon of you two, and carry all afore him,' added jocular Mr. Tubber.
>
> 'No,' said Henchard gloomily. 'He won't be that, because he's shortly going to leave me.' He looked towards Donald, who had come near. 'Mr. Farfrae's time as my manager is drawing to a close—isn't it, Farfrae?'
>
> The young man, who could now read the lines and folds of Henchard's strongly-traced face as if they were clear verbal inscriptions, quietly assented; and when people deplored the fact, and asked why it was, he simply replied that Mr. Henchard no longer required his help. Henchard went home, apparently satisfied. But in the morning, when his jealous temper had passed away, his heart sank within him at what he had said and done. He was the more disturbed when he found that this time Farfrae was determined to take him at his word. (106–07)

This scene is particularly striking not only because it provides a clear example of Henchard's jealous temperament by threatening to fire Farfrae as manager of his corn business, but also because it reinforces the conceptualisation of Henchard's behaviour as inauthentic. For, though briefly satisfied with his spiteful remark, Henchard immediately regrets his utterances. The authentic approach therefore would have been to forgo his envy and maintain his meaningful friendship with Farfrae, since those are the feelings that reappear as soon as his "jealous temper had passed away" (106). Henchard is unable to do so and instead acts inauthentically as a response to these feelings of loneliness, abandonment and jealousy. Moreover, not only does Henchard later regret his inauthenticity, but he himself remains alien to the source of his behaviour; Henchard becomes inauthentic precisely because he *acts out of* – or *in response to* – his suffering, without knowing the reason for doing so. Such occurs again sometime later in a jealous letter from Henchard addressed to Farfrae:

> Sir, – I make request that henceforth you and my stepdaughter be as strangers to each other. She on her part has promised to welcome no more addresses from you; and I trust, therefore, you will not attempt to force them upon her. M. Henchard. (111)

Here, Henchard again acts inauthentic precisely because he writes this letter not out of genuine concerns for Elizabeth-Jane's well-being, but rather out of fear that she might marry Farfrae. Such a marriage would subsequently come to the detriment of Henchard, considering that Elizabeth-Jane – with Susan dying – poses the only remaining person with whom Henchard might form a meaningful relationship.

Naturally, it is Henchard's relationship with Elizabeth-Jane that is subsequently tainted and destroyed by his inauthenticity. Throughout the novel, their relationship fluctuates, as the truth of their illegitimate familial relationship is gradually revealed to each character respectively. For Henchard, the disappointment of learning that Elizabeth-Jane is not his real daughter cloaks him in a profound state of gloom: "[f]or the sufferings of that

night, engendered by his bitter disappointment, he might well have been pitied" (125). A sense of meaninglessness is also emphasised when Henchard expresses that giving Elizabeth-Jane a fatherly kiss on the cheek – something to which "he had prefigured for weeks with a thrill of pleasure" (126) – now only constituted "a miserable insipidity to him now that it had come" (126). Again, this suffering that Henchard endures finds its origin in Henchard's destructive impulsivity which is narratively expressed in Henchard's increasing coldness towards Elizabeth-Jane upon hearing of their illegitimate parental relation. Interestingly, it is precisely Henchard's impulsivity that Lothe also highlights:

> Acting impulsively and then regretting his actions, Henchard makes decisions the consequences of which he cannot possibly foresee, and which therefore become, especially on a second reading of the novel, subject to irony.
>
> [t]here is a marked contrast between the individual and his actions, wishes, and hopes on the one hand, and the workings of the unyielding power of fate or chance on the other" (122).

It is indeed this contrast between Henchard's individual wishes and the "unyielding power" of his impulsivity that characterises Henchard's struggle with his authenticity. With respect to his behaviour towards Elizabeth-Jane, it is also this impulsivity, rather than his authentic wishes – to maintain their relationship, that is – that dictates his subsequent act of distancing himself from her. Henchard is therefore unable to combat his suffering by continuing his relationship with Elizabeth-Jane and, instead, reverts automatically to a kind of passive nihilism. In other words, Henchard is unwilling – and perhaps truly incapable – to change his predicament by embracing his authentic wishes and transcending his destructive impulsivity. Ironically, Henchard's perceived meaninglessness is therefore unnecessary, since his *passive* nihilism is entirely his own doing.

Taking in consideration the aforementioned examples of Henchard's interpersonal conduct, a pattern emerges. This occurs in the form of Henchard's inherent tendency to fluctuate between states of meaningful engagement with a supposed loved one, followed by inauthentic conduct and ending in passive nihilism. This pattern has already been observed in Henchard's relationship with Elizabeth-Jane, but, strikingly, it returns once more in the final part of the novel.

Hence, before Henchard confronts his personal ruin, he first reconciles with Elizabeth-Jane and finds purpose in their renewed relationship. After the death of his long-lost love Lucetta – who, to add to Henchard's misery, had married Farfrae sometime earlier – Henchard is welcomed back again by Elizabeth-Jane. Still grieving the death of Lucetta, Henchard nevertheless is overcome with a feeling of new-found purpose:

> In truth, a great change had come over him with regard to [Elizabeth-Jane], and he was developing the dream of a future lit by her filial presence, as though that way alone could happiness lie. (286)

Here, the very essence of existentialist thought is made explicit by the announcement that a suffering Henchard potentially has found a purpose that serves to combat the hardships of his existence. Indeed, it is this moment that hints at a narrative return to "an existentialism … preoccupied with individual authenticity" but also one that "is incapable of recognizing its own insincerity; one in which guilt is universal but also, therefore, meaningless" (Malpas 309). It is also in expressions as the one above that one can truly distinguish Henchard's authentic attitude from his inauthenticity, for, in this moment, Henchard's authentic state evidently decreases his suffering, whereas his distress has consistently increased in moments of inauthenticity.

Nevertheless, it is inauthenticity and nihilism that prevail in *the Mayor.* For, Henchard's dream of renewed purpose is brutally disturbed by the arrival of Newson,

Elizabeth-Jane's biological father, who was presumed dead. Threatened by Newson's unexpected presence on his doorstep, Henchard defaults to inauthentic behaviour in the form of a heinous lie:

> 'I've never returned to this country till a month ago, and I found that, as I supposed, she went to you, and my daughter with her. They told me in Falmouth that Susan was dead. But my Elizabeth-Jane—where is she?'
>
> 'Dead likewise,' said Henchard doggedly. 'Surely you learnt that too?'
>
> The sailor started up, and took an enervated pace or two down the room. 'Dead!' he said, in a low voice. 'Then what's the use of my money to me?'
>
> Henchard, without answering, shook his head as if that were rather a question for Newson himself than for him.
>
> 'Where is she buried?' the traveller inquired.
>
> 'Beside her mother,' said Henchard, in the same stolid tones.
>
> 'When did she die?'
>
> 'A year ago and more,' replied the other without hesitation.
>
> The sailor continued standing. Henchard never looked up from the floor. At last Newson said: 'My journey hither has been for nothing! I may as well go as I came! It has served me right. I'll trouble you no longer.' (288–289)

Thus, faced with the destruction of his new-found meaning, Henchard lies about the death of his stepdaughter to her real father. Once again, Henchard lives his life in response to his suffering, or the potentiality thereof; and once again, his natural impulse to an inauthentic expression of his character serves only to enhance the suffering he so desperately tries to avoid. Therefore, Henchard's inauthenticity finds its essence in the fact that Henchard is fundamentally incapable of change precisely *because* his actions are not based on conscious decisions, but rather on a kind of enslavement to his own delusional impulses; his acts are a

form of instinctive – and destructive – self-preservation from which he cannot escape. Hayes is hence correct in referring to Hardy's characters as personalities with "a passionate disposition which, combined with a 'melancholic temperament' must inevitably lead to self-destructive tendencies" (50). After Newson's departure, Henchard falls once again into a state of nihilism and reflects on his predicament:

> His mood was no longer that of the rebellious, ironical, reckless misadventurer; but the leaden gloom of one who has lost all that can make life interesting, or even tolerable. There would remain nobody for him to be proud of, nobody to fortify him; for Elizabeth-Jane would soon be but as a stranger, and worse. Susan, Farfrae, Lucetta, Elizabeth – all had gone from him, one after one, either by his fault or by his misfortune. (291)

Gradually, Henchard begins to comprehend the consequences of his actions, perceiving himself increasingly as "a man unbalanced by his predicament and doubting his own worth, ultimately considering himself to be an encumbrance" (Hayes 50). More so, not only does Henchard here, for the first time in the novel, realise the destructiveness of his actions and general character, but he also, equally for the first time, acknowledges that he himself is to blame for his nihilistic situation, implying a kind of return to authenticity.

More specifically, Hardy brilliantly emphasises this authentic realisation by Henchard's subsequent undertaking. After this deep reflection in which he acknowledges his own part in his misfortunes, Henchard ventures to commit suicide; standing on the edge of a bridge, he looks down:

> While his eyes were bent on the water beneath there slowly became visible a something floating in the circular pool formed by the wash of centuries; the pool he was intending to make his death-bed … In the circular current imparted by the central flow the form was brought forward, till it passed under his eyes; and then he perceived

> with a sense of horror that it was *himself*. Not a man somewhat resembling him, but one in all respects his counterpart, his actual double. (292–293)

Remarkably, in this scene, Henchard's authentic self is given a literal dimension by a literal experience of self-reflection. Seeing himself in the water allows Henchard to perceive himself in a fundamentally authentic state, as it is his own reflection in the clarity of the water that symbolises a kind of undistorted encounter with himself. Indeed, at first, as Asquith rightly claims, "Henchard's character has changed very little" (55), for Henchard impulsively interprets his reflection as a superstitious sign that he ought to live – for this reason Asquith fittingly remarks in reference to Henchard: "If any crime has been committed at all, it is simply that of possessing his impulsive character" (55). However, after realising that the reflection in the water had merely been an effigy of himself used in a parade earlier in the novel – and in fear of encountering Newson – Henchard's authentic mindset resurfaces and is, subsequently, extended into an authentic *act*, for Henchard now realises what he must do: disappear.

It is also here that Henchard's inability to change is re-examined. For, on the one hand, Kiely is right in saying that "[a] ready and easy adjustment to change – in himself, in others, in natural events – is precisely what he cannot make", and that it is precisely *because* he cannot change that he "chooses to remove himself from the spectacle altogether" (200). On the other hand, however, it also precisely *by* this conscious decision to disappear that Henchard manages for the first time to demonstrate a sense of change in character. Therefore, the novel's subtitle: *the Life and Death of a Man of Character* is, in this respect, especially fitting.

Though tragic Henchard's self-removal may be, he nonetheless – as a kind of final act of autonomy – makes a conscious decision. In so doing, he ultimately forgoes his impulsively inauthentic character which has been the cause of so much suffering. By depicting the

foundational narrative loss of meaning – in the form of Henchard's inability to create meaningful relationships for himself – Hardy, like other existentialist authors, "presents that loss in terms of an antagonism that exits within and between persons, and as instantiated in the form of real human suffering" (Malpas 298). This sentiment is tragically echoed in Henchard's testament, in which he expresses his wish that "Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me", and "that no man remember me" (321). Instead of acting in response to his suffering, Henchard succumbs to it; paradoxically, by this ultimate *act* of nihilism, Henchard manifests a kind of authentic form of passive nihilism in which he refuses to combat his suffering, but nonetheless does so in the form of an autonomous decision.

It is here that the novel ends, with Henchard dead and Elizabeth-Jane left reaffirmed in the idea that "her youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (322). This final sentence of the novel echoes the tragic reality of the seemingly meaningless and senseless suffering endured and caused by Henchard, begging the question of what purpose it all served.

It is therefore appropriate, at this final point of the chapter, to identify Henchard's suffering as a kind of perverted version of Frankl's idea of meaningful suffering. For, as explained in chapter one, Frankl expresses the idea that suffering becomes meaningful at the moment the individual suffers *for* something – implying that "[i]n some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (117). Essentially, Henchard's suffering is characterised by the opposite definition. For, even though he has suffered significantly and consistently, his suffering proved all to no avail and served no purpose but to extend itself. Henchard's meaningless suffering therefore echoes Frankl's insistence that by no means "is suffering necessary to find meaning" (117). Though tragically ironic, it is *because* Henchard's search for meaning is constantly obstructed *by* his suffering that Henchard's suffering

becomes fundamentally and continuously meaningless; In the Nietzschean sense, Henchard has failed to find his *why*, leaving him merely with his *how*.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented an existentialist reading of Hardy's *the Mayor of Casterbridge* through a character analysis of its protagonist, Michael Henchard. Specifically, this examination has explored the relation between the protagonist's inauthenticity and his attempts at establishing meaningful relationships with other characters.

It has become clear that Henchard's inauthentic attitude and behaviour towards the other characters directly obstructs his attempts to find meaning in loving relationships. This finding gained its grounding in the first part of this chapter, in which Henchard's self-centred and selfish personality traits were found to stem from an attempt to avoid responsibility for his past mistakes. The second part offered a brief expansion in scope, as Henchard's interaction with other characters was viewed not only with respect to interpersonal interactions but also in relation to social structures of gender and hierarchy. Nevertheless, the final part of this chapter returned to focus specifically on Henchard's failed attempts to find meaning in interpersonal relations by concentrating on two key relationships in the novel, those with Donald Farfrae and with Elizabeth-Jane.

From these analyses, it must be concluded that the main reason for these failed attempts at meaning stem from Henchard's inability to overcome his suffering; or, in other words, Henchard is unable to change his fundamental adherence to his destructive impulses – the impulses which both constitute and prolong his suffering. This inability to change directly relates to his inauthenticity, since his inauthentic behaviour functions as an expression of underlying feelings of suffering. As a result, Henchard lives in response to his suffering, rather than transcending it. At the heart of the narrative therefore lies a deeply ironic realisation: Henchard is unable to transcend his suffering precisely *because* he suffers.

More so, Henchard's meaningful engagement with other characters is obstructed because his constant reversion to spiteful deceptive behaviour reinforces the suffering that he attempts to avoid. Therefore, what must be drawn from Hardy's depiction of inauthenticity and meaning in *the Mayor* specifically, resides in the consideration that authenticity might serve as a kind of prerequisite for establishing meaningful relationships. On a grander scale this idea translates to the idea that the *manner* in which one pursues meaning is of similar importance as the sole existence of a meaningful goal itself.

Hence, like *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor* provides an appropriate framework for an existentialist reading precisely because it challenges core ideas of existentialism. Rather than offering an unadulterated expression of characters who find meaning in interpersonal relationships, reading Hardy through an existentialist lens presents a kind of unity between the existentialism's main assertions and its realistic implementation. Though existentialism is embedded within the story, by no means does this suggest that Hardy's narrative posits existentialism as an answer to the woes of life. Instead, *The Mayor* allows for an existentialist reading in the sense that it emphasises the importance of existential meaning while at the same time asserting that meaning alone is not necessarily sufficient to combat suffering.

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* through an existentialist lens. The purpose of this thesis has been to determine whether these works constitute existentialist novels and, by extension, whether Hardy must be more widely regarded as an existentialist himself. In so doing, I have studied the narrative tension between the characters' search for existential meaning and the inescapable reality of individual suffering. Though this was the fundamental philosophical grounding of both analyses, this relation between meaning and suffering is depicted differently in each novel.

An analysis of *Jude the Obscure*, in chapter two, found that the novel, indeed, explores many fundamental notions of existentialism – from adopting a sense of existential meaning to combat life's suffering, the urge for autonomy and self-instantiation, to the undermining of social conventions. Nevertheless, above all, Hardy acknowledges the presence of social convention as an unavoidable obstacle to an individual's meaningful self-instantiation. In essence, in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy challenges existentialist philosophy by depicting a narrative in which its main existentialist premises are constantly undermined by social and societal realities.

The Mayor, on the other hand, features a different display of existentialism. In this novel, Hardy focuses more on the individual in interaction with other individuals, instead of with society. As a result, Hardy lays bare the tragic ironies of the relation between meaning and suffering, as, in *the Mayor*, the protagonist's inauthentic search for meaning is directly obstructed by his suffering. His suffering, subsequently, is what fuels the character's inauthenticity and vice versa.

Other fundamental aims of this thesis were to explore how Hardy's depictions of existentialist themes in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor* challenge fundamental ideas of existentialism, and the extent to which his depictions embrace the realities of social

convention as a force opposite to individual self-instantiation. It is from the findings of these analyses that this thesis draws its most relevant conclusion.

For, instead of outspoken existentialist thematic, there is constant tension in Hardy's novels between existentialism and its philosophical limitations. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the existentialist themes and notions extracted from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Frankl are indeed present in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor*; in that respect, one must admit that Hardy and his novels are undoubtedly existentialist in their thematic preoccupations. However, equally present in Hardy's novels are the social and societal realities that fundamentally undermine the core existentialist premises discussed in this thesis. An examination of Hardy's existentialism thus inevitably presents one with an ironic observation: Hardy is an existentialist precisely because he is not – precisely because his depictions of existentialism are placed within a narrative world in which its practice is realistically challenged and undermined.

More specifically, in Hardy's novels, existentialist ideas are discussed, but by no means expressly preferred; for, it remains the case that both novels end in tragedy despite the characters' existentialist pursuits. Hardy therefore need not be regarded as either a sole existentialist or as its sole adversary. Instead, his own personalised existentialism offers a realistic interaction – a marriage – between existentialism and its main limitations, since Hardy places existentialism in constant dialogue with the forces that undermine its practice. More so, Hardy's understanding of his existentialist themes is similar to much later critiques of existentialism, for example to those of Foucault and Butler, who both emphasised the degree to which the human subject is shaped by underlying social and ideological structures. As a consequence, as depicted in *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor*, Hardy has created his own kind of 'Hardyan' existentialism.

This claim, of course, is based on the analysis of two of Hardy's novels. Considering he wrote fourteen in total (not to mention many short stories and poems), future research on Hardy and existentialism would benefit from an enhancement in scope. Not only should future research include more of Hardy's novels, but also extend the scope of its philosophical framework. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* with its reflection on the pathology of inauthenticity is particularly recommended in this respect. Additionally, further examination could also include combined readings of Hardy's novels with other, more widely regarded existentialist novelists such as Dostoyevsky.

Nonetheless, since it is the case that, at the time of writing his novels, Hardy had no knowledge of existentialism, it is up to current research to analyse him as such. Where the likes of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky have all been publicly discussed within the framework of existentialist thought, so too must Hardy be found in this literary dialogue – as an existentialist thinker and a literary precursor to the existentialist movement – one whose existentialism is particularly Hardyan.

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