



# The Reasons Why the “New Woman” Failed: A Case Study of Sue Bridehead

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**Abstract:** In Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure*, the character Sue Bridehead represents the “new woman” of the late 19th century. However, despite her initial defiance, Sue ultimately succumbs to societal pressures and conforms to a more traditional path. This paper will explore the reasons behind Sue’s submission, the role of marriage and domesticity in the novel, and the lasting impact of Sue Bridehead on representations of women in literature.

**Keywords:** new woman; *Jude the Obscure*; autonomy

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## 1. Introduction

Hardy’s novels are set almost exclusively in Wessex and could be divided into three kinds: novels of character and environment, romances and fantasies, and novels of ingenuity. Among these, novels of character and environment are the biggest section[1]. *Jude the Obscure* is one of these novels, where Hardy demonstrates the advanced ideas of the times and challenges the old customs and systems of the Victorian era, molding some new women with modern ideas and distinctive personalities. The character Sue yearns for knowledge, freedom, and self-fulfillment. However, she is shaped by the social environment and the constraints of the time, and her dream is constantly thwarted by external forces and her own flawed decisions.

## 2. Introduction to Sue Bridehead’s character

In Western civilization, the suppression of women’s autonomy is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, which dictate rigid gender roles. Classical philosophers like Aristotle and Plato laid the groundwork for this idea, positing a “natural” hierarchy with men above women. Walby defines this society structure as “a system of social practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”[2]. Women were reduced to the role of “baby-making machines,” their identities stripped away, and their worth solely derived from their ability to fulfill men’s desires. However, in the 19th century, the critique of this societal structure gained traction with the emergence of first-wave feminism. Feminist pioneers such as Mary Wollstonecraft criticized these cultural norms that supported male dominance. Women became aware of their role in the family and society and were trying to change the world on their terms. The term “new woman” was popularized by British-American writer Henry James[3], who used it to describe the emerging image of independent, educated, and ambitious women who challenged traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

Sue Bridehead is such a new woman. As described by Hardy, she is a tall, dark-haired girl with a distinct appearance. Her physical attributes suggest a sense of individuality and a departure from conventional beauty standards. Moreover, her wanderlust nature is evident as she has traveled to various places, including Melchester, Shaston, and London. Also, she is well-educated and intellectually curious. Her interest in learning and her pursuit of knowledge set her apart from traditional Victorian ideals of femininity, which often emphasized a woman’s domestic and decorative roles. Jude praises her as Voltairean[4] which sums her characteristics up.

## 3. Analysis of Sue’s gradual submission to societal pressures

### 3.1 Societal background

Despite her initial defiance, Sue Bridehead ultimately succumbs to societal pressures. This submission can be attributed to the pervasive influence of societal expectations on her behavior.

The 19th century witnessed a tension between the traditional Victorian ideals of womanhood and the emerging concept of the “new woman”. As a woman seeking to challenge these norms, Sue becomes increasingly aware of the potential consequences of deviating from societal norms. She recognizes that this derivation could lead to social ostracism, stating that it brings agony to her mind when she passes through overcoming her sense of repulsion. Here, Sue reveals the internal conflict

she sees through, highlighting the emotional toll of suppressing her true nature to conform to societal norms. During this process, Sue began to seek security and stability. She expresses her inner turmoil and a wish to escape the complexities of her current life and gradually embraces traditional gender roles, even if they contradict her true nature.

Sue's gradual submission to societal pressures reveals the complex interplay between her desire for independence and the external forces that shape her behavior. Her story reflects the challenges faced by women striving to break free from the constraints of a patriarchal society.

### **3.2 The influence of Sue's marriage**

Among these societal pressures, marriage is a pivotal one, Sue has been married twice. She enters into marriage with a set of ideals and expectations, but the reality of marriage presents a stark contrast to her ideals. One of the key aspects of Sue's ideals revolves around her desire for independence and autonomy[5] She values her freedom and the pursuit of her own interests. This is evident in her initial reluctance to commit to a traditional marriage: "My bridegroom chooses me of his own will and pleasure; but I don't choose him." [4]. Here, Sue reveals her preference for a more platonic and emotionally detached relationship.

However, the reality of marriage to Phillotson falls short of Sue's ideals. With Phillotson, she finds herself in a marriage of convenience, driven by practical considerations rather than romantic love. Conversely, the real lovers, Sue and Jude, are criticized by society. Sue is confronted with the contrast between her expectations and the emotional reality of her situation.

### **3.3 The consequences of marital dissatisfaction**

Sue's marital dissatisfaction leads to a critical examination of traditional gender roles and expectations. Also, it is an exploration of the challenges faced by women within the confines of domestic life.

Firstly, her dissatisfaction with her marriages serves as a powerful critique of the traditional gender roles and expectations prevalent in 19th-century society. At that time, the English marriage system required wives to remain faithful to their husbands, while there were no constraints on men. Phillotson's words, "You are committing a sin in not liking me"[4], suggest that men can control women's behaviour by law, and empower themselves by marriage. Nevertheless, Sue still disregards marriage and fights against it strongly. She refused to submit to the secular rituals, and left Phillotson, ending their emotionless marriage.

Furthermore, Sue's struggles within her marriage underscores the limitations imposed on women by societal norms. Her experiences highlight the power dynamics between men and women, where men hold the authority and women are expected to conform to their husbands' wishes. By navigating the complexities of her relationships, Sue brings to light the constraints faced by women within the confines of marriage.

Despite her attempts to conform to societal expectations, she fails in the end, succumbing to the traditional domestic role. Sue agrees to the marriage with Phillotson, driven by practical considerations. At that time, she has already denied the essence of her own freedom[6]. Also, when she lives with Jude, she fulfills the expectations of a wife and mother. She gives birth to his children, reveling in the bliss of motherhood. Although Sue repeatedly rejects the traditional institution of marriage, she is unable to tolerate the social stigma and deny the deep-rooted religious culture.

## **4. Sue's influence on subsequent portrayals of women in literature**

Sue Bridehead, the compelling and unconventional female protagonist, has a profound influence on the portrayal of women in subsequent literature. Her character challenges traditional gender norms, presenting a complex and multi-dimensional woman who defies the stereotypes of her time. With her intellectual curiosity, independence, and rejection of societal expectations, Sue paves the way for a new wave of female characters who dare to question and transgress the boundaries set by patriarchal society.

One of the most significant ways is in the realm of female sexuality and agency. Sue embraces her sexual desires and refuses to be shamed by the strict Victorian ideals of female chastity. This bold portrayal inspires subsequent authors to explore female characters with sexual autonomy. Works such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* reflect this influence, as the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, similarly challenges societal expectations and explores her yearnings for personal freedom.

Also, her passion for learning and quest for knowledge inspires authors to create female characters who were intellectually curious. Virginia Woolf's iconic essay "A Room of One's Own" explores the societal constraints faced by women writers and the importance of intellectual freedom and space for women. This essay reflects the impact of characters like Sue Bridehead and the ongoing struggle for women's intellectual empowerment.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sue Bridehead emerges as a crucial character in *Jude the Obscure*, embodying the spirit of the “new woman”. Through her struggles, Sue challenges traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Her intellectual curiosity, sexual autonomy, and pursuit of independence inspire subsequent authors to create more multi-dimensional female characters.

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