

[Refereed Article]

The Contagious Disease :

From *Jude the Obscure* to *Sons and Lovers*

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Introduction

In December 2006, *The Times Literary Supplement* announced an amazing story about Thomas Hardy's private life under the title, "Corroded Life: Emma Lavinia Hardy, 1840–1912: A Retrospective Diagnosis of Syphilis." According to Doctor Alan Frizzell, the author of the article, the cause of death of Hardy's first wife, Emma, was not of "heart failure and impacted gallstones," as had previously been thought:

The cause of death was surely not gallstones, impacted or otherwise — it was much more likely to have been a ruptured aortic aneurysm, which in 1912 was again more likely than not to have been syphilitic in its aetiology. (12)

Furthermore, what is surprising is Frizzell suspected that Hardy "was well aware that Emma, whom he must have infected in his turn, had by far the worst of it" (13).

Dr. Frizzell, judging from Hardy's biography, supposes that it was in 1891—twenty years before her death—that Emma first had symptoms of syphilis, though she did not realize the nature of the disease and just thought it was influenza. Soon after she felt sick, she visited the doctor in London and was diagnosed as having syphilis. Around the time of visiting the doctor, she began keeping a notebook entitled "What I Think About My Husband," which was destroyed right after her death. Although Thomas Hardy never admitted that he was infected with syphilis, he left some poems about his wife who was getting sicker and sicker day by day. The poems included special vocabulary which would remind his readers of syphilis infection.¹⁾ Concerning such poem about his wife, Frizzell supposes that Hardy might have suspected that his disease would be disclosed by someone in the future. His poem, "Had You Wept," depicts Hardy accusing his wife of having the disease even though he knew that she had been infected by him:

When I bade me not absolve you on that evening or the morrow,
Why did you not make war on me with those who weep like rain?
You felt too much, so gained no balm for all your torrid sorrow,
And hence our deep division, and our dark undying pain. (12–16)

His accusation against her created a split between the couple and caused great remorse in Hardy after her death.

Judging from Emma's childish clothing, remarks and deeds, and her unreasonable delusions and aches throughout her body, Frizzell, from the medical point of view, diagnosed her as being in the terminal stage of syphilis. It generally takes five to twenty years to reach the terminal stage of this

disease, which fits the period of their marital relationship. Hardy lived as to be eighty-eight, and concerning the reason he could survive so long, Frizzell comments that “his own immune resistance to the spirochaete was of a different order from that of his wife, and in him the disease never progressed beyond the secondary stage” (12).

To this announcement of Frizzell's, some agree and others do not. As around a hundred years have passed since Emma's death, it is nearly impossible to verify the reason for her death; however, this announcement about her death is still meaningful. The disease of syphilis should be regarded as a major social problem which terrified people in the nineteenth century and at the same time, syphilis was a disease which was seen as reflecting badly on the morality of the affected person. If the matter of disease is recognized as a social and ethical problem, it is possible for us to read Hardy's novels with deeper understanding.

Focusing on the disease is also meaningful when reading the works of D. H. Lawrence, who was one of Hardy's admirers and wrote *Study of Thomas Hardy* in 1914, in which he focused on *Jude the Obscure*. Sue, in *Jude the Obscure*, does not face and accept life with joy and one of her children miserably kills himself. Pointing to her attitude of self-denial towards life, Lawrence depicts her as “pestilence.”

And then her [Sue's] loathed body, which had committed the crime of bearing dead children, which had come to life only spread nihilism like a pestilence, that too should be scourged out of existence. (*Study of Thomas Hardy* 21)

This paper examines two pairs of mother and child from *Jude the Obscure* and *Sons and Lovers* to go further from the image of disease that Lawrence senses in Sue in *Jude the Obscure*. In order to analyze what happens between the writing of the two novels from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, I would like to consider ideas such as eugenics, heredity, and thoughts on evolution and degeneration to make clear the differences between Hardy's and Lawrence's works.

I The Symptoms of Disease

In *Jude the Obscure*, the image of disease is reflected in a child named Little Father Time, who literally looks much older than his age. Although he is only around ten years old, his appearance is like a wrinkled man, which is often referred as a child whose parent is infected with syphilis. According to Claude Quétel, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, many children who looked like old men were hanging around in Paris.²⁾ Little Father Time's appearance resembles a child with congenital syphilis. Concerning his personality, he is so introverted for a child that it is difficult to deal with him. He sometimes falls into a stupor, which is often in those afflicted with syphilis. At the terminal stage of syphilis, their cranial nerve is damaged and they exhibit symptoms similar to dementia, which resemble the symptoms of Little Father Time. It seems to be absolutely insane that even though he is only a kid, Little Father Time, Little Father Time kills himself and two other children in the end. It might be thought that this incredible suicide is caused by the disease which ends in destroying the cranial nerve in the final phase. Hardy, who probably had syphilis and saw his wife getting worse because of syphilis, might have described the terror of the disease in creating

the character of Little Father Time.

On the other hand, in the era of Lawrence, the prevalence of syphilis declined owing to the development of the medicine, Salvarsan; however, the image of disease, syphilis itself, does not lurk in Lawrence's work. The disease in Lawrence's work, compared to Hardy's, is like a new virus destroying the mind, causing the degeneration of the human mind and preventing the development of civilization.

Also in *Sons and Lovers*, three pathological diseases are found: one is bronchitis, which Paul suffers from, another is erysipelas which William dies of, and the other is cancer which Mrs. Morel dies of. These three diseases are not contagious and are not diseases that can be blamed on the morality of the patient, like syphilis. The fatal diseases in *Sons and Lovers* do not incur public blame nor represent cultural corruption, while the disease in *Jude the Obscure* totally corrupts the world in the novel and is the cause of the tragedy. The disease in *Sons and Lovers* is caused by a "virus" which can be named the "possessive love" of Mrs. Morel, and it devours Paul's mind. His mother's love is so strong and possessive that Paul cannot love any woman besides his mother; a fact which Lawrence describes as "great tragedy."³⁾ The disease in *Jude the Obscure* devours physics, while in *Sons and Lovers*, mentality.

II Heredity

After Gregor Johann Mendel discovered the laws of heredity in 1857, concerning syphilis, people in the latter half of Victorian Era believed that syphilis was brought into the home by an immoral father and transmitted to his wife, then finally to their child. When especially feminists viewed syphilis as scientific evidence that "the sin of the fathers were visited upon the children," morality and disease were easily connected to heredity (Showalter 94).

The disease in *Jude the Obscure* and *Sons and Lovers* is also connected to the idea of heredity. For example, Little Father Time reflects the sins of his immoral mother, Arabella. It is no wonder that Arabella is infected with syphilis because she has many relationships with men before and after marrying Jude. Although the symptom of syphilis cannot be found in Arabella and Jude, Little Father Time, a miserable child, surely reflects the sin of his immoral mother and emphasizes the idea of heredity.

Although the disease in *Sons and Lovers* does not relate to immorality, disease and heredity are closely tied. It is clear that the excessively sensitive character of Paul hereditarily comes from his mother, Mrs. Morel. There are notable scenes that remind us of the transmission of disease. When Mr. Morel throws the drawer at Mrs. Morel in the quarrel, she gets injured and he sees:

a drop of blood fall from the averted wound into the baby's fragile, glistening hair. Fascinated, he watched the heavy dark drop hang in the glistening cloud, and pull down the gossamer. Another drop fell. It would soak through to the baby's scalp. He watched fascinated, feeling it soak in. (*Sons and Lovers* 54-55)

Whenever she suffers about her husband, "From her, the feeling was transmitted to the children. She never suffered alone any more: the children suffered with her" (85). Such descriptions with the word "blood" and "transmit" can remind us of blood infection by of the disease. The disease in *Sons*

and Lovers does not question morality which used to be a big concern in the late Victorian Era when it comes to heredity; however, Lawrence still seems to believe in “blood” and succeed to idea of traditional laws of heredity.

III Eugenics

The diseases in the novels of both Hardy and Lawrence should also be discussed from the eugenics point of view. Eugenics obviously features in *Jude the Obscure*. When Little Father Time kills himself and other children, he leaves a will saying “Done because we are too menny,” (sic) which clearly represents the idea of eugenics (336). The original idea behind eugenics was the improvement of the human species by excluding those with disabilities. At the end of the nineteenth century, the numbers of poor people, criminals, prostitutes, and sufferers from psychiatric disease were increasing. Such people were supposed to have bad genes and it was believed by many that they should be eliminated from society immediately. All of the characters that die in *Jude the Obscure* are not genetically good: Father Time is a child of an immoral mother, the children of Jude and Sue are not genetically strong, Sue is too stoic and over scrupulous, and has strong hatred toward sex. Jude’s father is a drunk and a domestic abuser, and his mother killed herself. Jude and Sue are intellectual but can be regarded as inferior species not suitable to exist in society. In *Jude the Obscure*, all the children of inferior parents, Arabella, Jude and Sue are completely eliminated.

Meanwhile, there seems to be no influence of eugenics in *Sons and Lovers*. Two characters, William and Mrs. Morel, die in the novel, but they are far from inferior species and can survive from the eugenics point of view; William grows to be a member of the elite working in London and Mrs. Morel has intelligence and higher education. If eugenics is at work in the novel, a drunken husband, Mr. Morel, should be eliminated; however, he survives.

Lawrence, from an early age, strongly agreed with the idea of eugenics and still in 1926, declared in his essay “Return to Bestwood” that “we must look after the quality of life, not the quantity. Hopeless life should be put to sleep, the idiots and the hopeless sick and the true criminal” (13-14). Judging from Lawrence’s remarks, Childs regards Lawrence, as well as Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, as extreme supporters of negative eugenics; however, he does not apply eugenics in *Sons and Lovers* (10). The question is how we deal with his contradiction. One reason for it might be Lawrence’s dilemma regarding eugenics. He agreed the inferior should be eliminated but might have wondered about the definition of “inferiority.” He might disagree with the idea of eugenics that elimination is justified if one person is physically or genetically inferior to another. Even though he clearly agrees with eugenics, sympathy and conscience cannot be persuaded by the cruel ideas of eugenics.

We can interpret that Lawrence applies eugenics in another way in the novel. According to Lawrence, William dies because he “gives his sex to a fribble, and his mother his soul. But the split kills him, because he doesn’t know where he is” (*Letters* 476). William is also a patient who suffers from a virus named “desire” of his mother who wants to possess her sons and have them do everything her way. William is mentally split; his mind is always in his mother’s, therefore he cannot love a woman as well as Paul in the end. Although Paul manages to survive, Paul and Mrs. Morel are

both patients who suffer from the virus named “desire.” Therefore, it can be concluded that Lawrence recognizes William and Mrs. Morel as inferior people, unfit for society. However, we have to be careful because the definition of inferior has definitely changed from the age of Hardy. At the end of the nineteenth century, inferiority referred to physical ability and intelligence which were strongly related to genes and heredity. Then, in the early twentieth century, inferiority implied weak and defective mentality, such as found in people who lack love or cannot truly love others. In Lawrence’s time, inferiority does not mean “heredity” directly, but the state in which people’s mind begins to be devoured without their noticing, even though they may be genetically good and strong.

IV Medicine

The development of medicine can be found between *Jude the Obscure* and *Sons and Lovers*. In *Jude the Obscure*, there are two descriptions of death: one is the death of children and the other is that of Jude. Jude dies of tuberculosis which comes to the city of Christminster. The death of the children is caused by Little Father Time, who probably suffers from congenital syphilis. In the *Jude the Obscure*, nobody who suffers from illness survives. The book was written before the development of streptomycin for tuberculosis and penicillin or Salvarsan for syphilis.⁴⁾

Sons and Lovers has two descriptions of death: one is the death of William and the other is that of Mrs. Morel. In observing the development of medicine, the death of Mrs. Morel should be noted, rather than that of William, who dies of erysipelas which can be easily treated by penicillin now. The cancer which Mrs. Morel dies of is one of the three major causes of death in the twentieth, while in the nineteenth century, the leading cause of death was infection and respiratory disease. As medicine develops, the diseases change, which is reflected in *Sons and Lovers*.

Also in *Sons and Lovers*, medication is focused on most at the death of Mrs. Morel. She cannot have the operation and only has to wait for death at the end of the novel. Paul and his sister, Annie give her morphine to relieve her pain. One day, however, they cannot stand to see her suffering from the pain and intentionally give her much more morphine than prescribed to let her die peacefully. They are free to keep her alive or euthanize her. On the contrary, in *Jude the Obscure*, medicine does not work. At the sight of her dead children, Sue, who is pregnant, has a still-born baby although a doctor takes care of her. Jude also cannot be helped by medicine when he is dying from tuberculosis after Sue leaves him. Compared to the time of *Jude the Obscure*, in which medicine is not developed so much, in *Sons and Lovers*, human life can be helped by medicine.

V The Cause of Illness

This paper explores the cause of “disease” in both *Jude the Obscure* and *Sons and Lovers*. Lawrence, in “Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays,” remarks:

In the long run, the State, the Community, the established form of life remained, remained intact and impregnable, the individual, trying to break forth from it, died of fear, of exhaustion, or of exposure to attacks from all sides, like men who have left the walled city to live outside in the precarious open. (21)

The characters who do not fit the framework of society cannot survive. Lawrence continues to explain Hardy's position as a writer. Hardy's "private sympathy is always with the individual, against the community," however, "He cannot help himself, but must stand with the average against exception, he must, in his ultimate judgment, represent the interests of humanity, or the community as a whole, and rule out the individual interest" (49).

Lawrence divides the characters of *Jude the Obscure* into several types: Jude is the "physical individualist" and "in the end an inferior thing which must fall before the community." Sue is also a "physical individualist and spiritual bourgeois or communist" and has an "ugly, undeveloped, non-distinguished or perverted physical instinct, and must fall physically" (49). Lawrence understands that Sue and Jude, in the end, are the types of people who are prone to fall apart in society and are supposed to be punished. His interpretation concords with Hardy's understanding that "Artistic effort always pays heavily for finding its tragedies in the forced adaption of human instincts to rusty and irksome moulds that do not fit them" ("Postscript" to *Jude the Obscure* 467-77).

On the surface, in *Jude the Obscure*, all the characters who do not fit society are punished; however, the tragedy in the novel seems to be brought by Hardy's misogyny. Observing that the terror of syphilis seems to be directly connected to that of woman, Shawalter points out that "In the late Victorian male fantasy fiction, feminist ideology comes under attack, and syphilophobic anxieties appear in the form of fear of female sexuality and intensified misogyny" (98). In Hardy's novel, women always seem to play the role of terrifying characters to be punished.

Jude is often involved in problems brought by women, and is tormented legally and sexually. Even though he is eager to marry Sue, he cannot do so because he has already been forced to marry Arabella. Regarding sex, Arabella repeatedly seduces Jude though he does not want her any more, while he cannot have sex with Sue though he really wants to. In Hardy's novel, the plot is already fixed that the woman is an offender and the man is a victim. Hardy's real life might explain why he wrote a novel of such misogyny.

It took about four years to finish *Jude the Obscure* from 1890, when his wife, Emma began to show symptoms of syphilis and there seemed to be a split between the couple. Seeing her body corrupted by the disease, Hardy must have worried and had fears for his own health because he was probably also infected and did not know what was going on. It was very unlucky for him to get syphilis because it was no wonder that everyone would have chance to get it even if he or she did not lead a loose life sexually. He was just unlucky, but he did not admit that he was infected because getting syphilis proved immorality and sin. Hardy probably felt a sense of guilt and shame for getting such a disease. I think that the same thing happens in the novel: the lives of Sue and Jude end in tragedy and it is nobody's fault. They are just victims of the age; their individuality and sexual desire is just too strong for the Victorian era. Hardy also understands that it is the surrounding and inexorable forces, including people around them and peer pressure, and even nature and the era that cruelly crush their destiny. However, Hardy seems to put the responsibility on women as well as the time when he blames his wife for the disease just because he is afraid of the disease and does not want to think it is from him. His terror of the disease and society is totally directed towards the women around him, which might be reflected in the novel. That is why the novel seems to represent a culture of misogyny, regarding women as the cause of all evil.

Lawrence remarks about the cause of all evil in *Jude the Obscure* and discusses the reason why only the lives of Jude and Sue end in misery although many couples live together without marrying and are never criticized for it:

Only because of their own uneasy sense of wrong, of sin, which they communicated to other people. And this wrong or sin was against the community, but against their won being, against life. Which is why there were, the pair of them, instinctively disliked. (“Study of Thomas Hardy” 118)

Lawrence’s interpretation is almost the same as Hardy’s. Lawrence thinks all who do not enjoy themselves in life deserve punishment, which is the interpretation that Lawrence asks for his readers. The difference between Hardy and Lawrence is it is not always only women who should take the responsibility for all evil and be punished in Lawrence’s work. Paul suffers from the excessively strong and possessive love of his mother, and is so sensitive that he cannot enjoy himself and the world. Besides Paul, Miriam, his first girlfriend, is also a girl with a sense of self-sacrifice and cannot enjoy the relationship with Paul. Paul and Miriam end their relationship and what is left for them is irritation, emptiness and a feeling of weakness. Whether men or women, Lawrence regards those who do not enjoy their lives as sinful and punishes them. In this point, Lawrence’s novel differs from Hardy’s at the end of a century when cultural misogyny was very common.

Conclusion

Shawalter maintains that “tuberculosis and cancer became the symbolic diseases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, syphilis was surely the symbolic disease of the fin de siècle” (88).⁵⁾ Based on the image of disease in the novels of Hardy and Lawrence, this paper has analyzed what disease symbolizes and implies, along with the development of medicine.

Syphilis was an incurable disease for as long as five hundred years after it was discovered in the fifteenth century. After the development of Salvarsan in 1913, and penicillin in 1943, the fear of disease has been declining and few novels describe its fear. Nowadays, STDs including HIV, for which no effective medicine has been developed yet, are terrifying the modern world. Disease and medicine are always playing a cat-and-mouse game.

As is shown before, in *Jude the Obscure*, medicine is not developed enough to save the life of Little Father Time, for instance, while in the twentieth century, the disease becomes more complex. In *Sons and Lovers*, medicine is much more developed than the age of *Jude the Obscure*, but there is another disease devouring the minds of the characters. A curious irony is hidden between the two novels: the development of medicine and the degeneration of the human mind. Instead of medical development, human beings forget how to love and enrich their lives. Modern people forget the liveliness and instincts that ancient people cherished, which is a major concern for Lawrence, and he thinks of it as a modern disease. Lawrence, describing Sue as pestilence in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* and finding the image of disease in *Jude the Obscure*, might think his novels also have such a disease, even if the cause of the disease is different from Hardy’s. The best way to clear infection of disease in Lawrence’s novels is to release oneself from consciousness. Beginning with the article by Dr. Frizell about Hardy’s syphilis, this paper finds the image of disease in two novels, *Jude the Obscure*

and *Sons and Lovers* and sees the differences in the features of disease and how it changed from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century with the development of medicine, which I hope could provide the readers of both Hardy and Lawrence with a new approach for reading.

Notes

This paper is a revised version of a verbal presentation given for the 42nd Annual Symposium of D. H. Lawrence Society of Japan on June 25, 2011, at Kobe University.

- 1) Frizzell analyzes Hardy's poetries including "And I Saw the Figure and Visage of Madness Seeking for a Home," "The Man with a Past," and "The Change."
- 2) See Quetel's *The History of Syphilis*. (Johns Hopkins UP, 1992).
- 3) It is from Lawrence's letter to Edward Garnett in 1912. See Lawrence, *D. H. The Letters of D. H. Lawrence Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 476-77.
- 4) Penicillin was developed in 1928, and actually used as medication in 1941, and Salvarsan in 1910. See Quetel's *The History of Syphilis*.
- 5) See also Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 58-59.

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