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**FAILED QUESTS FOR IDEAL LOVE:
JUDE THE OBSCURE AS A PARADIGM FOR THE
WILD PALMS**

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Within the decade from the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 to that of *The Wild Palms* in 1939, heroes from various traditions of the romantic period appeared in Faulkner's work: heroes of sensitivity who suffer tragic disillusionment because of high ideals; Byronic heroes who confront a society that neither understands nor approves of them, and which, in turn, does not meet their expectations; and then a combination of the two, a tragic romantic hero who does not conform his sensitive nature to society's mundane expectations—Harry Wilbourne of *The Wild Palms*. The paradigm for this character may be Thomas Hardy's Jude Fawley.¹ The parallels which can be noted between these two heroes and the people and events which lead them both to similar destruction support a statement made by James D. Wilson in his book on *The Romantic Heroic Ideal*: speaking of Hardy's hero Jude and his lover Sue, Wilson writes, "[w]hile an antiquated and repressive social structure aggravates their problem, the problem is one which transcends nineteenth-century England" (113). Indeed, the tragedy of *The Wild Palm's* Harry and Charlotte takes place in the American South in the twentieth century and is brought about in part by a repressive society.

Like Jude Fawley, Harry Wilbourne is an orphan who was left in the care of a relative. In spite of growing up fatherless, both young men follow in their fathers' footsteps: Jude into a bad marriage, and Harry into the medical profession. In the beginning of Faulkner's novel, the reader learns that Harry leads a "monastic life" (32) until his twenty-seventh birthday. Such celibacy is a result, like Jude's, from a lack of opportunity. Harry has been too busy striving to become a doctor. His "constant battle ...[to] balanc[e] his dwindling bank account against the turned pages of his text books" (32) leaves no time or energy for unrelated pursuits. In addition, routine, however much hard work it involves, is easier than commitment.² So, prior to the fateful birthday, women have not existed for Harry any more than they have for the inexperienced Jude, until some time after the latter's nineteenth year, when his myopic vision on studying in Christminster is temporarily distracted by his meeting of and shortly ensuing marriage to Arabella.

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Harry, too, suddenly finds himself with a new vision, to which he briefly seems to wish to aspire. On the aforementioned birthday, at the home of an artist, Harry is struck by the apparent leisure time and the obvious presence of money implied by his surroundings, the ideas of both being foreign to his experience:

Wilbourne stood before the paintings in complete absorption. It was not at what they portrayed, the method or the coloring; they meant nothing to him. It was in a bemusement without heat or envy at a condition which could supply a man with the obvious leisure and means to spend his days painting such as this and his evenings playing the piano and feeding liquor to people whom he ignored and (in one case, at least) whose names he did not even bother to catch. (38)

The appeal of this setting to the workworn Harry is similar to the appeal of Christminster, where there is “‘nothing but learning, except religion’ ” (23), to the young Jude who finds that the countryman’s hard life goes against his nature, particularly such farming duties as keeping birds from eating a crop, and the butchery of a pig raised by his own gentle hand. Jude had noted as a child that “[g]rowing up brought responsibilities;” and so he wished “he could...prevent himself [from] growing up” (15). He does not want to become the man the Marygreen populace expects him to be. This desire for perpetual youth is replaced by his slightly less unrealistic ambition to escape the strictly socially ordered world of Marygreen for the more highly ordered world of the Christminster university. This dream, he soon realizes, is almost as unattainable as eternal youth, but by this time Jude has manifested his ideal in his cousin Sue. Similarly, as he stands before the paintings in wonder, Harry is distracted from his sudden grasp of the benefits of a life of wealth and leisure by another kind of seemingly less toilsome and tedious life than the one he is presently living—a life with the exciting Charlotte Rittenmeyer.

Charlotte sees in Harry, too, an escape from her unsatisfactory existence with her husband and two children.³ In order to keep from cheapening her new love relationship, which she perceives has much more potential for being life-giving than her marriage, Charlotte perversely keeps her husband informed of every phase of her affair with Harry, including the arranging and failure of their first tryst and their plans to run away together. In this novel then, as in Hardy’s, one finds what Faulkner’s narrator refers to as “the paradoxical act of handing the

wife to the lover" (54). Such an act establishes Rittenmeyer's kinship with Sue's husband Phillotson.⁴ Both men appear resigned to their own powerlessness against an intimacy, though not yet consummated in either case, already stronger than anything they share with their wives. Their sense of defeat is evident in their (unaccepted) offerings of money to their spouses. They cannot fight something they do not understand. The result of such weak submission to their wives' requests to be set free is that the reader is sympathetic with the adulterous women's wish to escape their marriages. Phillotson and Rittenmeyer's monetary offerings, together with their admonishments to the lovers to take care not to hurt their wives, show their perception of a husband's duties: the protection of the wife's financial and physical well-being. Such a view of a marriage relationship reveals much to the reader as to why neither husband could ever have or even comprehend the kind of love to which he has been forced to be a witness, a love which is doomed by its opposition to all social conventions, as well as by its being conducive to much undesirable (in the husbands' opinions) emotional trauma.⁵

The uncompromising sense of their role as husband leads the reader to understand that both Phillotson and Rittenmeyer would take their wives back, with little or no hesitation. At the end of *Jude the Obscure*, Phillotson proves this notion to be so, though he does suggest that their marriage from that point on be a marriage in name only (possibly to defend himself against any further personal humiliation, as that which he suffered when Sue jumped out of the window to escape his embrace). Sue's presence in his home allows his life to get back on a socially productive track—and this is all he asks. Faulkner's Rittenmeyer does not answer Harry's amazed question, " 'You will take her back?' " since, as even Harry realizes, " 'That's more than any man can bear to answer,' " particularly if the answer is affirmative, which is suggested by his leaving Harry "a cashier's check for three hundred dollars, payable to the Pullman Company of America and indorsed in the corner in red ink: 'For one railroad ticket to New Orleans' " (57).

Sue and Charlotte are in pursuit of an idea of love, which they feel can be achieved through the men who have gone along with them against the limiting conventions of society. Consequently, Jude and Harry feel somewhat used as the means to an end. From Sue's unwillingness to live as husband and wife with Jude during the first year of their cohabitation, Jude infers that she is " 'incapable of real love' " (289). Conversely, yet ironically analogous to this conclusion,

Harry discerns from Charlotte's immediate and constant uninhibited sexual demands of him that "[t]here's a part of her that doesn't love anybody, anything" (82). Both Jude and Harry are right to a certain extent. Sue and Charlotte want nothing about their relationships to resemble marriage. In his discussion of romantic love, Cleanth Brooks explains that "[d]omesticity and everyday living threaten to dim the clear flame of romantic love" (*Toward* 215). In this light, Sue's desire to "go on living always as lovers...only meeting by day" (311) does not support the notion that she is frigid; rather, her reluctance towards a sexual relationship is explained: she does not want to risk losing the intensity of their relationship, intensity achieved by its never being completely satisfied. It should be noted that once their love is consummated and Jude discontinues pressuring Sue into marriage, theirs appears to be a satisfactory sex life—as made evident by their open affection at the fair (which will be discussed later) and, of course, by their three children.

Charlotte's demand for "all honeymoon, always" (83) is ironically based on essentially the same wishes for a superior love relationship. Although critics accuse her as often of nymphomania as critics accuse Sue of frigidity, Charlotte is not just after an exciting sex life in her relationship with Harry. She, too, desires a love which transcends social conventions—according to Brooks, a

kind of love [which] is purely a relationship between individuals...not social or communal. It regards marriage and all other social arrangements as inimical; yet far from being merely fleshly, it is intensely idealistic and spiritual. It stands at the opposite pole from the casual enjoyment of sex ("Tradition" 269).⁶

Once they grasp what their lovers are aspiring to, both men join the quest. The reader can infer Jude's commitment from Mary Jacobus's interpretation of the couple's "restless movement from place to place, in search of work and the right to live by a private code of morals." Jacobus says that "[t]hey recoil from the cynical forms of civilized marriage and the unthinking bourgeois ritual enacted in the name of religion" (317, emphasis added). This is the same religion that led Jude to settle in Christminster in order to study. Clearly, then, he has exchanged his dream for Sue's. Faulkner's lovers also move about restlessly. At first these moves are instigated by Charlotte, and Harry shows some reluctance. In the cabin between stints in Chicago, for example, he makes a calendar in order to keep track of time, thereby not

allowing himself to transcend time through love. And, whereas Charlotte is pleased that the neighbor can tell that they are not married, Harry is annoyed. Also during this first time in Chicago, Charlotte lashes out at Harry in disgust for worrying too much like a husband: “ ‘My God, I never in my life saw anybody try as hard to be a husband as you do’ ” (116). However, later in the novel, back in Chicago for a second stay, it is Harry who is disgusted by their behavior, which is conforming to meet society’s demand: “ ‘I used to have to watch myself each time so I would be sure to say “my wife” or “Mrs. Wilbourne,” then I discovered I had been watching myself for months to keep from saying it’ ” (132). His actions following this disclosure prove his allegiance to the quest. As summed up by Lynn Gartrell Levins, although

[i]t is Charlotte who initiates Harry into a life lived in accord with a romantic ideal,...under [her] tutelage...Harry gradually commits himself...His is the long diatribe against bourgeois respectability, his too the decision to leave Chicago, since in becoming a part of a routine of work, of being paid for work which leaves them no time for one another, they are becoming a part of that very system (135-36),

which they had risked so much to escape. They, too, then, pack up and leave, in spite of the threat of ending up penniless and hungry.⁷

This rebellious move to a mining job in Utah, which Harry feels will not be conducive to a routine existence of separate jobs and separate schedules, revives their goal of striving for absolute love. And once again they are unmistakably perceived as unmarried by those around them. The conversation between Mrs. Buckner and Charlotte, upon the lovers’ arrival in Utah, emphasizes the negative view of marriage in this novel:⁸

“You and him aint married, are you?...you can just tell somehow.”

“...I hope you don’t mind, since we’re going to live in the same house together.”

“Why should I? Me and Buck wasn’t married for a while either. But we are now all right...And I’ve got it [the marriage license] put away good too. Even Buck don’t know where....it don’t do a girl any harm to be safe....Make him marry you....It’s better that way” (179-80).

This conversation echoes a scene from Hardy's novel in which Arabella tells Sue,

“Life with a man is more business-like after it [marriage], and money matters work better. And...if you have rows, and he turns you out of doors, you can get the law to protect you...And if he bolts away from you...you'll have the sticks o' furniture, and won't be looked upon as a thief” (324).

Again, both novels portray marriage as a socio-economic contract rather than as a declaration of love and personal commitment. Consequently, both central couples are all the more driven to absolute dedication to the ideal and rejection of the mundane. Jude and Sue fail to go through with their plans to marry (plans made for appearance's sake because of the arrival of Jude's son to live with them). Harry and Charlotte consciously struggle against even *appearing* married; as a result, when they make their last stop in Mississippi, the doctor who has rented a cabin to the lovers comments to himself, “I dont think they are married. Oh, he says they are and I dont think he is lying about her and maybe he aint even lying about himself. The trouble is, they aint married to each other; she aint married to him. Because I can smell a husband” (8). Clearly the doctor's remarks support Sue's notion that marriage thwarts love. Again, too, his observation of the couple echoes Arabella's similar comments upon observing Jude and Sue together at the fair: “ ‘I fancy they are not married, or they wouldn't be so much to one another as that’ ” (352). The reader can infer from this remark that Jude and Sue have also taken no pains to conform their behavior in public in imitation of the behavior of the married couples of the area—even if they do, as do Harry and Charlotte, pose as “Mr. and Mrs.”

Both quests are unfortunately doomed to failure. As Jean Brooks points out in reference to *Jude the Obscure*, “[o]nly the animal and unambitious survive in an unimaginative world.” Citing examples like the scene just mentioned in which Arabella witnesses the unique closeness between Jude and Sue, Brooks notes the transitory nature of the lovers' goal: “The ideal vision appears only in flashes at temporary halting places.” Such ephemerality, Brooks believes, suggests a weakness which will inevitably allow “into prominence the forces that will crush individuality: Arabella (sex), Phillotson (convention) and Jude's son Little Father Time, whose name suggests the impersonal abstraction which assimilates human endeavor to general non-existence” (261). Put simply, the ideal cannot be attained in this world. An

additional weakness in the pursuit can be perceived in what Michael Hassett notes as the “problems inherent in a ‘Romantic’ approach to actual life...[for example,] that a consistent Romantic response to every day experience simply cannot be maintained” (432). This opinion can be supported with the ultimate consequences of the refusal of Hardy’s lovers to conform.⁹ Their unconventional living arrangement results in their being driven from one town to another to find work in order to feed their growing family. Just before the family is about to be turned out of yet another dwelling place, Father Time kills the other two children and then himself—“because we are too menny” (405).¹⁰ The shock causes Sue to lose the baby she is carrying as well. Consequently, the reader is left with a sense of the destructive nature of the quest, defined thus by Mary Jacobus: “The death of the children is the price Sue and Jude have to pay for their sexual fulfillment in the face of a hostile society” (318).¹¹

The conclusion of *The Wild Palms* confirms the universality of both the transient and the destructive nature of idealism in this world. It is only a matter of time for Harry and Charlotte, too, before they are forced to confront the natural consequences of their love—the conception of a child. Charlotte, however, refuses to do so, and asks Harry to end her pregnancy. Ironically, as Carl Galharn notes, Charlotte is thereby “repudiating...the only ultimate proof of love” (143). Charlotte tells Harry, “I can starve and you can starve but not it” (205) to justify the abortion,¹² never considering modifying their vision to include their child. Much of the critical response to Charlotte’s abortion views her motives as too selfish-centered and thereby testifies to the notion that such selfishness lessens the reader’s sympathy towards Charlotte’s thwarted desires. Panthea Reid Broughton interprets Charlotte’s desire to terminate her pregnancy as proving her ideal vision to be “as rigid and life denying as any traditional concept she rejects.” Broughton further judges that “[w]henver human life is sacrificed to an abstract ideal, man’s deference to concepts becomes indeed pernicious” (144). Doreen Fowler also remarks on “idealism’s anti-life quality” within this work: “So that their love should be free from any restriction or qualification, the lovers abrogate every attachment to their fellow man. Charlotte [has already] abandon[ed] her husband [and] children, and [now she] attempts to separate herself from her unborn child” (67).¹³ Although Dieter Meindl “do[es] not think that a condemnation of the lovers by the critic for the destruction of human life is a wholly adequate response,” noting for support “the plain fact that they cannot afford a child,” he does agree

that “[w]e may react in this manner to the remnant of Charlotte’s concept of romantic love which makes her rebel at the thought of someone coming in between her and her lover” (91).

Summing up the consequences of the romantic quest in *The Wild Palms*, Fowler writes, “The pursuit of an ideal leads finally to death, abortion, and imprisonment” (67). The parallels with *Jude the Obscure* are clear: in Hardy’s novel, first of all, innocent children are also sacrificed; secondly, Jude’s death, like Charlotte’s, results from the failure of the dream; and finally, Sue, too, is a virtual prisoner, albeit self-imposed. Her return to Phillotson’s home and bed is, in this light, comparable with Harry’s refusal to end his incarceration with the cyanide Charlotte’s husband offers him. Despite the identification here of Harry with Sue and Charlotte with Jude, both men are, in the end, still honoring the vision, whereas both women ultimately betray it. Jude dies as a result of making one last effort to convince Sue to continue their romantic pursuit. Such a confirmation of the worth of the goal would have meant that their children did not die in vain, and thereby purge their guilt somewhat. Sue’s refusal, then, is a denouncement of the vision. Like Jude, Harry mourns the failure of the ideal, calling it a “waste....It seemed so little, so little to want, to ask” (324). So he chooses to live, also acknowledging the value of the vision by his refusal to give it up to oblivion:

“when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be—Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief” (324).

The vision, he feels is worth all of the consequences; so he will gladly pay for his actions. Therefore, although the romantic quest for ideal love is initiated in each novel by the woman, it is the man who emerges as the romantic hero. Both Jude and Harry realize that it is not the vision which is flawed, but the secular realm in which they have pursued it. (After all, isn’t tainted idealism a contradiction?) Jude believes in the value of the love he shared with Sue. He feels that the failure was because “ ‘the time was not ripe for us! Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us. And so the resistance they met with brought reaction in her, and recklessness and ruin on me!’ ” (484). According to Faulkner, however, the twentieth century brought no society more receptive to such ideals, for in his hero Harry Wilbourne’s eyes, “There is no place for [Love] in the world today” (136).

NOTES

¹According to Joseph Blotner's catalogue of Faulkner's library, Faulkner did own a copy of *Jude the Obscure* (67). Of course, one cannot conclude from ownership that he actually read the novel. However, according to Blotner, there is one "reliable indication in the books themselves as to which of them William Faulkner used," and that is the inscription (8). And Faulkner did put his signature inside of his copy of *Jude*.

²Lynn Gartrell Levins believes that "[b]efore [Harry] meets Charlotte he chooses to repudiate love because he feels by doing so it will give him peace, leave him free to float" (138). David Minter also notes that "[w]hen [Harry] meets Charlotte Rittenmeyer he is still a virgin, whose clear intention is to make each day a replica of the one before" (172).

³David Minter apparently agrees that Charlotte's attraction to Harry comes out of her dissatisfaction with her husband:

As a girl she has read stories of romantic love....To [her] expectations, her marriage to an ordinary businessman is a mockery. What she wants, furthermore, is precisely what she sees the better part of Harry as wanting: deliverance from mundane existence through discovery of a grand, consuming love (172).

⁴In his recent book *From Hardy to Faulkner*, John Rabbetts comments on Hardy's passive rejected husband:

the decision of Jude and Sue to live together, and Phillotson's resolution not to oppose them, are brave actions which allow all three to attain new and radical flashes of insight into the flawed workings of society, but only at the cost of inexorable social exclusion and hostility (94).

He then notes briefly the parallel between the triangles in this novel and *The Wild Palms* (94).

⁵David Minter says that Rittenmeyer cannot understand the willingness to "sacrifice security, respectability, and money for love" (171). The same can be said of Phillotson. Subsequently, what Lenmart Bjork sums up as Hardy's objections to marriage, as they are revealed in *Jude the Obscure*, can be applied to both novels:

the sacrament of marriage is tainted by financial motives; it infringes on personal liberty; it distorts and corrupts both physical and spiritual love; it co-operates with inadequate socio-economic criteria, thus preventing the emergence of a more far-reaching and humane social morality (100).

⁶In another source of Cleanth Brooks's criticism on *The Wild Palms*, he defines "the romantic love that Charlotte holds"

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thus: "In romantic love...the lovers discover a transcendent element. Neither is interested in simply possessing the beloved one's body; nor is his or her desire fulfilled in the sexual act" (*Towards* 214). Also in support of this interpretation of Charlotte's desires, Levins notes "[h]ow much their relationship is elevated above the fleshly [which] is evidenced by the fact that they do not consummate their love in the dingy hotel room...Neither do they have sexual relations in the cabin in Utah" (135), a one room cabin which they share with another couple who do not curb their sexual activity in spite of the lack of privacy. Minter apparently concurs as well. He explains that although

Charlotte detests institutions...and has no interest in the marriage of mere minds, however noble...the lust that becomes the marvel of her life is finally true passion. She rages against all limitation, especially the twin enemies of love—society and time—just as she dreams of a union so perfect that desire is transcended, silencing all emotion and stilling all motion (173-74).

⁷Cleanth Brooks explains their giving up of financial security at length:

Charlotte and Harry are convinced that any compromise with bourgeois standards will smudge and tarnish their love....[They] are subsiding into the very horror that they had renounced...So, in their dedication and in their commitment to an ideal, [they] leave their life in Chicago to preserve their love unsullied from the world ("Tradition" 269).

Harry's insistence that they leave concurs with the second half of Cleanth Brooks's definition of romantic love: "the proof of the purity of one's devotion to her or him is the fact that the lover has no worldly end in view. For the sake of the beloved, the lover dares to defy all prohibitions" (*Toward* 215), Harry thereby illustrates his commitment to Charlotte's quest.

⁸Again the reader's sympathy for the characters is reinforced, this time by the reader's understanding of the naivité of their idealism and by this negative view of marriage. As Cleanth Brooks writes of *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner "expects us to acknowledge their folly. They are pursuing an impossible goal; they ask of human life a great deal more than it can provide. Yet Faulkner surely expects us to be sympathetic with their repudiation of a world that is not committed to anything" (*Toward* 219).

⁹Rabbetts again makes a brief comparison between the two couples: listing Faulkner's characters who "continue struggling against their social environment even though it eventually helps to destroy them," he includes the lovers of *The Wild Palms*, and then mentions Jude among Hardy's characters who do the same (102).

¹⁰A comparison can be made between the proprietors' worry about the reputation of their house after the tragedy and

the doctor's wife's similar concern. Upon realizing that Charlotte is dying of an abortion administered by Harry, she tells her husband not to call the police, but to get the culprits out of their cabin.

¹¹Therefore, according to Jacobus, the concern of the novel in the end turns from the conflict between the lovers and society to "the conflict between personal freedom and human commitment" (313).

¹²Jacobus discusses this closing vision in terms applicable to the message in Hardy's novel. She writes that "Hardy is not simply concerned to show the tragic defeat of exceptional individuals at the hands of society....Nature also conspires against them. Fulfilling natural laws, they have to face natural consequences" (317).

¹³Laurie Bernhardt sums up the flaw within Faulkner's lovers' romantic quest thus: "Charlotte's ideal of love, for all its passion and sacrifice, is in essence a sterile one, because it is an abstraction that can be only briefly embodied in the flesh of worthy lovers, and cannot, therefore endure" (359)—particularly if those lovers prove themselves "unworthy" by such selfishness.

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