

## Decadence and Destruction: A Comparative Analysis of ‘Suicide’ in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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### Abstract

This comparative study examines how unbridled ambition and personal despair propel the protagonists of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Jude the Obscure* to ultimately choose suicide as escape and redemption. Both Wilde and Hardy explore deep psychological struggles, paving the course of actions through ambition, personal crises, immorality, and societal pressures, and thereby shaping them. Dorian Gray's ambition to retain his eternal beauty leads him to metaphorically commit suicide by corrupting his soul and then stabbing the portrait, with his eventual physical death following. Similarly, Jude Fawley's failure to achieve his scholarly ambitions and his suffocating personal life lead to a figurative suicide, as his dreams and morality crumble, before the tragic deaths of his children and his own demise. Both authors depict how existential crises and nihilist inclinations lead the protagonists to view death as the only alternative to life. In these texts, suicide emerges not only as an individual act but as a response to broader social and existential dilemmas.

### Keywords:

*Burden, existential void, object, suicide, narcissism, guilt, immorality, suffocation.*

Death has always been everything Life is not, providing a scope of escape from whatever plagues individuals during their lifetimes. It is often said that Death is hard, but life, harder – particularly for those who are forced to endure without having a scope redemption – a weight that becomes the source of despair to a sensitive heart – a heart unaccustomed to surrender. Such is the case vividly portrayed by two prominent Victorian authors, Oscar Wilde and Thomas Hardy in their books, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Jude The Obscure* – how their ambitions clashed with their realities, creating an **existential void**, and how they had to choose death, **through suicide**, in order to escape and be unburdened. As Nietzsche articulates, as used by Paolo Stellino in a paper, suicide is looked upon “as a possible consequence of the meaninglessness of human existence.” (Stellino, Paolo, 2013) The characters of Dorian Gray and Jude Fawley started, by being innocent and unacquainted with the world, not knowing how it was

to traverse through it. Gray was an aristocratic young man with exceptional beauty was described as, *“All the candour of his youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world.”*<sup>2</sup> (Wilde, Oscar, 1890) Jude Fawley, an orphaned boy of humble means, was as innocent as Gray as was portrayed through the scene where he let the birds feed on the harvest, because he identified his own situation with theirs and felt sorry for them. Though his boss, the farmer, beat him, *“he was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything.”*<sup>3</sup> (Hardy, Thomas, 1895) However, Jude had felt the burden of „being a burden“ on his old aunt, while Dorian was much adored by high society and artists alike. Still, before Dorian was corrupted by Lord’s Henry’s cynical outlooks; or Jude, in the path to Christminster, they were both unprepared in the ways the world usually functioned.

As it can be seen, their initial exposures to the world were different, since Dorian was exposed to corrupting hedonism that turned into malice; while Jude faced rejection from his aunt, then from Christminster, and ultimately from the life he aspired to build. Dorian’s descent to immorality led him to commit crimes, burdened only at the end by the guilt; while Jude led an unfulfilled life filled with loveless and often grotesque incidents that went on being a burden throughout. But, the final consequence was „suicide“ – a „need“ to quit life that had turned irredeemable by then. Maturity struck Dorian the moment, he chose to take Lord Henry’s cynical opinions seriously, since he fell weeping on the idea that the „real he“ would age someday while the „painted he“ would remain young and beautiful. Going by Freud’s theory, it seems probable that Dorian had internalized this youthful portrait of his, as an **‘object’**\*. *“For a depressed person, the object is so important to them that it has become the same as themselves.”*<sup>4</sup> (Freud, Sigmund, 1914-16) As was said in the novel, *“There had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now”*... thereby, leading him to make a Faustian bargain of his soul in exchange of eternal youth – the suicide of his innocence. His descent to selfishness was understood through the way he treated Sybil Vane, simply because she had ceased to stir his curiosities, leading her to commit suicide. Soon after, he murdered Basil Hallward, the painter of his portrait, since he had asked him to pray for forgiveness since the portrait was starting to mirror the gruesomeness of Dorian’s soul – to whose response he killed him in cold blood before disposing his body off with the help of Alan Campbell who also later committed suicide because of this heinous activity. By this time, Dorian’s self-realization had set in and he had begun to acknowledge the grotesqueness of his crimes and his life altogether. His hopes, of finding his portrait as beautiful as it was, were dashed since it had turned into a loathsome monster. It was then he started feeling the guilt, represented through the lines, *“Did it mean that*

he was to confess? To give himself up, and be put to death? He laughed. He felt that the idea was monstrous. Besides, even if he did confess, who would believe him?" These conflicting thoughts, the vileness of his portrait, his irredeemable situation, amounting to the Lacanian "death drive", made him take up the knife and stab the canvas, since **"It would kill his monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace."**

Hardy's Jude the Obscure faced life in a way different than Dorian Gray. Unlike Dorian, Jude did not get to enjoy any hedonism since his ambitions got thwarted in the first place. In a preface of one forgotten edition, Hardy wrote, *"For a novel addressed by a man to men and women of full age; which attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity; to tell, without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit; and to point the tragedy of unfulfilled aims"* (Hardy, Thomas) These words prove Jude's struggle – unlike Dorian he was not able to make a Faustian bargain since he fell in love with Arabella Donn, distracted from his academics, then divorced her before getting into a relationship with Sue, which failed miserably due to the suicides of his own children due to extreme poverty, and then his own death. In one conversation with Sue, Little Father Time, Jude's son with Arabella, hypothesised the entire situation of youths stuck in the labyrinths of struggle (though he was speaking in the context of children being burdens on impoverished parents) by saying, **"It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?"** The haunting suicide of Little Father Time, along with his siblings, leaving the words, *"Done because we are too menny"* had reached the peak of their sufferings and unfortunate conditions – that propelled Sue to consider the suicides a punishment of God, therefore resorting to religion; while Jude resorted to Arabella and drinking, before his ultimate exposure to the harsh weather that led him to his death, when he muttered about, *"the servant is free from his master."* Dr. Dinejko writes, reflecting on the course of Jude's existential crises, *"In Jude the Obscure, Hardy continues in the form of a tragic Bildungsroman, his main existential concern with man's estrangement in the world."* (Dinejko, Andrzej)

In conclusion, Jacques Lacan's take on suicide, considering it higher than normal death, provides a framework for understanding the experiences of the two characters in analysis. This interpretation highlights the psychological and therefore existential crises of their lives, offering the reasons behind the drastic step called „suicide“. While normal death might be seen as a natural end for those who have lived fulfilling lives, it can be perceived as a misfortune for those who have lived harsh and unfulfilling lives. For Lacan, suicide represents the **"true death"** (Lacan, Jacques, 1991), caused by the *"death drive"*\*. This interpretation best

describes the experiences of both the characters, whose lives were marked by narcissism, guilt, immorality, suffocation, failure, and loss. For them, suicide might have been the „only“ means of tasting freedom and peace, as portrayed in the two texts discussed.

## References

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\*object (page 3) – According to Freud, an object is a person, idea, or thing in which a person invests emotional energy. In case of melancholia, the „object“ becomes internalized, leading the individual to obsess over it and harbor a distorted identity. \*death drive (page 5) – According to Lacan, the death drive is connected to the tension between individual/human desire and accepted language and societal norms. This is not a simple death wish but a force that propels an individual toward destruction, caused by undermining the attempts toward stability.