



A TALE OF SUFFERING: *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

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Introduction

Thomas Hardy a precious jewel in the history of English literature. Generally classified as pessimist, atheist and naturalist, he firmly believes that every human being more or less is a social entity which can't be isolated for a long time from society and nature. This isolation from his or her fellow being will ultimately result into the mental as well as physical trauma to the concerned individual or a group. Every human being in its given circumstances tries his or her best to develop healthy relations not only with other human being but also with the other natural entities as it is one of the most prerequisite of its peaceful and harmonious co-existence. It is only because of the social and cultural contacts the human beings help one and other to realise his or her dreams and aspirations. The mutual respect and give and take attitude helps the human beings in attaining a happy and prosperous life. But life is never as smooth as it is expected one. There are many acts which are responsible for making human life complex and difficult. Sometimes the unending lust for material things creates complications in the life of human beings. Every human being becomes quite impatient in the times of the adversary and he or she longs for the company of the near and near ones in this critical time as the intensity of grief and misery somewhat lessen when the aggrieved person receives love and compassion. So every individual needs somebody with whom she or he shares his fortune as well as tribulation. These human traits of compassion, support and affinity are mostly celebrated in most of the fictions of Thomas Hardy. This paper is an attempt to present the chain of miseries in the life of people presented by the novelist in this work.

Key words: Character, destiny, evil, folk, human, justice, nature & suffering etc.

Research paper

Thomas Hardy's works are classified under three categories, the chosen work *The Mayor of Casterbridge* comes under the category of character and environment. The novelist presents the diverse fictional characters with altogether different character traits. They are men and women to whom one can meet anytime at a certain point of time in their life. They are simple as well as the most complex one which are not easily predicted. Although most of his fictional world is crowded with the people from the rural areas, the urban characters also play crucial role in his works. Hardy's men and women belong to moderate as well as good social, political and financial background. But like the heroes of Shakespearean tragedy they are with some flaws which take them towards their downfall. Here besides the character, destiny also plays a pivotal role in taking them close to the decimation. His world is full of persons from various character traits; some are virtuous, simple, moral as well as immoral. It is the literary genius of the novelist that weaves the interesting fabric of his novels. Most of his fictional events take place in the serene unpolluted abode of nature. His people are innocent rural folks who are miles away from the machinations and complexities of urban and industrialised polluted world. Through the novels and its people the novelist succeeds in familiarising his readers with the aspects which are usually unknown and strange to the urban population. Thomas Hardy like most of the renowned literary artists presents the circumstances of his time in his almost all works but the major focus of his is the virgin life of the country men their woes as well as the moments of joy and merry making. He provides ample space to politically dominant personality like a man mayor of a city.

The mainstay of Thomas Hardy is the rural pristine unpolluted life of its people. He believes that the industrialised world is more complex and its inhabitants are the victims of its unending problems. In this case the rural folks are more gifted than their urban counterparts. While presenting the urban population he prefers the village folk for their simplicity and compassion. He believes that the urban population despite of its major flights in terms of materialism are inferior to the so called under developed rural population. Besides the innocence and honesty the people from Hardy's fictions are the victims of unpredictable destiny and fate. He states that the innocent and virtuous people cannot stay away from the inimical and evil forces. Sometimes the malleable elements succeed and the honest have to face bitter consequences. It is this cruel world where virtuous is punished and bad is rewarded that sometimes surprises the readers. As there is no poetic justice in his works, the readers smell some sort of atheist feelings in him. People hesitate to accept the demise of virtuous persons, but mere rewarding the virtuous and punishing the wicked elements do not stamp him an atheist as his works are filled with various references to the ecclesiastical events and characters.

The very names of his characters show that he has profound knowledge of Christian scriptures. Because of his persistent presentation of disillusionment and despair in his fiction he is stamped as a pessimist. Most of his novels end in the sad demise of the protagonist and other minor characters. We found huge dark clouds of uncertainty throughout his work. There is no place for perpetual happiness and merry making as every individual is found in the clutches of despair and anxiety. Besides presenting the sad end of human beings he often upholds the village life and criticizes the urban way of livelihood that gives more preference to monetary gain and materialism. He celebrates as well as reverses the life of a rural folk and his preference to rustic life is easily perceived while going through his novels. He prominently uses the language spoken by the people from countryside to give rural and authentic touch to his works. His characters express themselves in the rustic language in which the novelist feels pride. He makes every effort to depict the traits of rural life which are quite unfamiliar to the urban and metropolitan population of the Victorian world. He tries to cherish and preserve the culture which is largely on the verge of extinction and decay because of the metropolitan ignorance, dislike and prejudices. But Hardy's village folks do not provide uniformity; as different people from the countryside dominate his literary canvas. It is thronged by farmers, hay cutters, workmen, small artisans and business persons. It is because of them the works look genuine as they are life and blood of Hardy's novels. These people although belong to modest background; assist in familiarising us with the complexities that havoc human life. Not only the people from the countryside he also provides the rustic flavour by presenting customs, events and festivals when these people enjoy and dance. It is the purity of human experience which gets reflected in the people from the rural world. But fate never excuses the rural as well as the urban. It hits hard with equal brute force that it disintegrates the existence of human being.

The reversal of fortune of individuals is prevalent in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* which is the story of a person who sells his wife under the influence of liquor. It is the inhuman act of selling one's wife and a small girl child like a commodity shows the wickedness and perversity of a person who loses his sense of right and wrong under the influence of alcohol. Thomas Hardy in his 1895 "Preface" to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* states:

The incidents narrated arise mainly out of three events, which chanced to range themselves in the order and at or about the intervals of time here given, in the real history of the town called Casterbridge and the neighbouring country.

They were the sale of a wife by her husband, the uncertain harvests which immediately preceded the repeal of the Corn laws, and the visit of a Royal personage to the aforesaid part of England.

The protagonist of the novel Michael Henchard belongs to humble background that is a grass cutter, who commits an inhuman crime but soon realises his mistake and repents, but his act of repentance do not erase his vicious act although he resolves to distance himself from the liquor which caused the integration of his family. Thomas Hardy through Henchard's act of selling his wife and daughter shows light on the times where human beings have become mere commodities which can be sold and purchased. He not only criticizes the person who sells as he is under the toxic effects of liquor but also does not spare the person who buys it.

This work also presents the brutal part played by fate in deciding the human life. He states that the fortune of humans virtuous as well as virtuous is destined to doom and it is the destiny or divinity is responsible for all the woes and miseries, as the destiny contrives the future of an individual or group in such a way that the doom is sure. The destiny never makes any difference while decimating the righteous and wicked one. But sometimes the wicked people are rewarded whereas the innocents and righteous

persons are crucified; it is really ironic and pathetic. The central character Henchard who sells his wife to quench his appetite although repents his acts, moves ahead as if nothing has happened. the tragedy or the mishap in the lives of the woman and child who again becomes orphan and shelter less when they find out their owner that is Newson, a sailor who purchases them in the inhuman auction dies as his ship sinks while sailing for the commercial venture. It is really pathetic and heart breaking for a woman who becomes a captive of another man because of her husband and it is the destiny which forces her return to the same man where her and daughter's fortune is insecure. Now a Drunkard a hay trusser becomes quite affluent as there is major transformation in his fortune, he is now at the helm of political affairs of the municipality once where he committed the ignoble crime. It is the destiny sometimes takes the person to the immeasurable height and then plunge that person into the unimaginable depths from where there are few chances of return.

By showing the dramatic happenings in the life of a common man whose life starts disintegrating even after touching the zenith, becomes more pathetic and the novelist by depicting such downfall succeeds in arousing sympathy among the readers for the sufferers in his novels. The reunion of Susan and Henchard shows that the man does not forget his wife even after his riches and affluence. It shows the purity of the heart of the person who belongs to countryside. Who despite of the newly acquired and gained wealth is not a thorough materialistic. His heart has still warmth for his near and dear ones. He accepts his estranged wife even after a gap of twenty years. His paying the five guineas shows his honesty as he commits the act because of money and his returning it is the testimony of the man who is humble and kind-hearted from the bottom of his heart. When the separated couple meets Susan and he decide to erase the horrible past and start a new life henceforth. It is because of the fear of public and society they decide to remarry so that there will not be any apprehensions regarding there relations. As everything goes well here destiny plays a cruel role by provoking Henchard unveiling his past with the person who becomes his future competitor i.e. Donald Farfrae. Now the events which are moving in a right direction somehow take wrong turn. Although Henchard marries the woman and starts to live a happy life also becomes sceptic about the girl Elizabeth Jane, she now reaches the marriageable age and tries to develop relationships with his assistant Donald which he despises of. Even he is sceptic about her real father as he finds the colour of his daughter does not match with Elizabeth. His doubt becomes clear when he knows that Elizabeth is not his daughter but her father is the man to whom he sold Susan. The novelist present his agony in following way:

Henchard's wife was dissevered from him by death; his friend and helper Farfrae by estrangement; Elizabeth Jane by ignorance. It seemed to him that only one of them could possibly be recalled and that was the girl. (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 17)

She writes a letter and takes final breath this letter makes everything clear but it also brings complexities in the relations of Henchard, Donald and the beautiful girl Elizabeth as Henchard from the beginning dislike the gradual development of warmth in Donald and Elizabeth, it is this comfort on his part that develops a rift in their relations and finally result into the upsurge of Donald Farfrae's fortune and Henchard's downfall.

Conclusion

In this way destiny plays prominent role in frustrating the life of an individual who also becomes responsible for inviting chain of miseries in the life of innocent people like his daughter and wife. Here the character besides destiny is equally blamed for the miseries in the life of an individual as well as group.

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