

TRAGIC CLIMAX IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY

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Abstract

Hardy has been called the Shakespeare of the English novel and the four great Hardian tragedies *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and, *The Return of The Native* has been likened to the four great Shakespearean tragedies. But Hardy's conception of tragedy is radically different from that of Shakespeare.

In a Shakespearean tragedy, as Bradley has pointed out, the tragic hero is a man of high rank and position. He may belong to the royal family or he may be some great general and warrior indispensable for the state. He is not only exalted socially, but he has also some uncommon/ qualities of head and heart. He is, in short, a rare individual. When such a person falls from greatness and his high position is reversed the result is 'Kathartic.' His fall excites the tragic emotions of terror and pity and the readers are purged of these emotions.

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This was the traditional concept of Tragedy upto Hardy. But Hardy has his own concept; he is the innovator of a new form of tragedy. His tragic heroes and heroines are not exalted personages. They are neither kings nor queens. They belong to the lowest ranks of society. Tess, for example, is a humble dairymaid, Henchard is a hay-trusser and Giles is a poor wood-cutter and cidermaker. They may belong to the humblest rank of society, but they are all rare individuals. They have some exceptional qualities of head and heart which exalt them above the common run of mankind. Henchard, for example, is a man of character and Tess is a 'pure woman,' an almost 'standard woman.' She has that "touch of rarity which makes her interesting to all. Her 'Sensitivity of conscience', despite her early upbringing and lack of moral education, is surprising in the extreme.

When these humble heroes and heroines of Hardy suffer and fall from grace the effect is as 'Kathartic' as that of a Shakespearean tragedy. A Hardian tragedy is an apotheosis of the human spirit. It reveals to us the essential nobility and heroism of the human soul. Tess fights upto the end against heavy odds and by her courage and fortitude endears herself to the readers of Hardy. Her head is bloody, but it remains unbowed. She is ruined but she never murmurs. Humanity may be insect-like in its insignificance, but it has capacities like those of the gods.

Like a Shakespearean tragedy, a Hardian tragedy also creates the impression of tragic waste. Evil is eliminated in the long run, but always at the cost of much that is good and desirable. The real tragedy is this waste of good. Alec is killed in the end but it is no tragedy for the richly deserved punishment. Tess is hanged that, too, is not, the real tragedy, for man is mortal and he must die one day. The real tragedy is that the soul of Tess is

crushed in the end and she surrenders her body to Alec. It is this which is fearful, appalling and terrifying. Similarly, much good is wasted when Eustacia comes to a tragic end.

But a Hardian tragedy does not discourage, or cause despair. "It is elevating and stimulating. It does not shake our faith in life, all the more it strengthens us; it does not make us light hearted, but makes us wiser and better."

The Shakespearean hero has some fault of character, some strong tendency to act in a particular way, which is the cause of his undoing. Bradley has called this weakness of the hero as the "tragic flaw" of his character. This tragic flaw is responsible for the fall of the hero, it is the cause of the tragedy. Though at a later stage the course of action is complicated by other factors-chance, abnormal state of mind, some supernatural force, etc., yet primarily action issues out of character. Character is responsible for tragedy. "Character is destiny in Shakespeare." But this is not so in Hardy. His tragic heroes and heroines are free from any 'tragic flaw' in the Shakespearean sense. They do not have any obsession or a marked tendency to act in a particular way. Character is not the cause of tragedy. The tragedy of Tess begins with a crime and ends with a crime. But she is a 'pure woman.' She is more sinned against than sinning. She suffers for no fault of her, but owing to circumstances beyond her control.

"Character may be destiny," in Shakespeare, but in Hardy "Destiny is Character." Tess cannot escape her destiny in spite of her best efforts to do so. She cannot avoid it. She writhes under the attack of destiny. We feel that she suffers because, "It was to be." Fate or destiny expresses itself as chance. In all his novels, chance plays an important role. It is by chance that she falls asleep and that Prince is killed. It is by chance again that she meets the wrong man in the very beginning of her life and is thus ruined by him. It is again a chance that she should go to the dairy at Talbothays and Angel Clare should also have come there to learn dairy-farming. Her letter of confession never reaches him, but by chance slips beneath the carpet and remains hidden there. She goes to meet her in-laws at Emminster, and by chance meets the brother before she has met the parents. Thus malicious chance or destiny is against her from first, to last destiny, and not her character is responsible for tragedy of Tess.

In the *Return of the Native* and the *Mayor of the Casterbridge*, no doubt, character plays significant role in bringing about the tragedy. It is the Mayor's, "Buffy wrong-headedness," that is responsible for much of his suffering. Similarly, Eustacia's tragedy results from her excessive love of the glittering city life and from her extreme hunger for love. But in these novels also cruel Destiny in the form of chance is ever present. It is just a chance that Clym is asleep and Eustacia does not open the door to Mr. Yeobright, thinking that her husband would do so. It is also by chance that Clym comes to know from Jonny, the real facts about his mother's death. It is cruel destiny which places Eustacia in an environment which proves to be her ruin in the long run.

Indeed, Hardy denied freedom of action to the individual. With the German idealists he believed that we can do, "What we will, but we cannot will what we will." In his considered opinion, human freedom of action is an illusion. A man's character is determined by his ancestry, environment and the Immanent Will, the supreme moving force in Hardy's universe working from within and without. When working from without, the Immanent Will takes the form of destiny or chance. When working from within, it takes the form of an urge to act in a particular

way. Tess, for example, has taken an oath of celibacy. She does not want to love Clare and have anything to do with him. But some force working within her, irresistibly draws her towards Clare and she cannot help loving him. It results in catastrophe and tragedy. Thus in the tragedies even the actions of the hero and heroine are not voluntary or the result of free will. They are the results of compulsion from within. Even if he wants, the individual cannot act in any different manner. Hence he cannot be considered responsible for the tragedy that takes place.

Conclusion:

Such is Hardy's concept of tragedy. "Character is not destiny," in his tragedies. He is an innovator in more ways than one. He has democratised the conception of tragedy. Both character and destiny are responsible for tragedy. Society also plays an important role in bringing about the ruin of the hero. Sometimes, it is the intrusion of the urban element which causes tragedy. Lucetta and Farfrae, both people from the city, contribute to the downfall of Henchard, and Angel Clare causes the is played by Clym and Wildeva in the Return of the Native.

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