



Destiny Dominates: Landscape of Fate and Chance in Thomas Hardy's Major Novels

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy strikes as one of the most gifted and remarkable novelists of the Victorian period. Although there is a segment of critics who charges him with frivolous remarks that he was a novelist who was pessimistic to a great extent and did not offer any ray of hope for his central characters in most of his novels. However, the fact is he offered variety of contents for society to churn over. Hence this paper deals with his two epic novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of D'Urberville* and his treatment of the concept of fate with respect to Henchard and Tess, the principal characters of these novels respectively. He takes into his stride all possible situations to prove his point that fate governs every action of human being.

Keywords: Fate, chance, Will, Action, Downfall, Tragedy.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy was the novelist gifted with plethora of artistic skills and peculiarities which made him an artist second to none. It is fairly right to say that he is far different from his contemporaries for possessing a great and individual style, his power as a narrator, describing and interpreting inanimate nature and his power of characterization. He expresses a fatalistic view of life in his tragic novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of Durbervilles*. S.P. Prasad comments:

Hardy, who was greatly pained at the state of things, devoted his art to search for the cause of miseries but could not find any satisfactory panacea for people's happiness. In the world of his novels, the sky is full of dark gloomy clouds and even the momentary gleam of sunshine is not unaffected by them.(Prasad, 13)

In this way, in both of these novels Hardy depicts the actions of his characters subject to the control of an impersonal force-destiny or fate. The present paper studies how the actions of the Mayor and Tess are overruled by their fate and they lose control over their lives.

The Mayor of Casterbridge has been a highly respected novel of Hardy in which the uncertainty of life is portrayed which has been called fate, chance or coincidence by critics. Virginia Woolf holds that "life is not a series of gig lamps systematically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding up from the beginning of the consciousness to the end".(Wolf, 88). The main character, Henchard, presents the real life Henchard, life who convinces the reader deeply. The character role of characters is these in the novel. Hardy himself categories this novel as a book with several characters wrestling with the trajectory of their fates. William R. Rutland, on the other hand, goes to great length hold this work "*The Mayor of Casterbridge* exemplified a starkness to be found in none of previous books".(Ruthland, 198)

Obviously, Henchard's character plays greater role than the role played by Fate but his will is over ruled finally by the same Fate itself. The novel opens with an elaborated description of Henchard who has been depicted as an impoverished, having his head in the clouds and an ambitious man who loves to be inebriated most of the time in Casterbridge:

Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, focus, on nerve- knot of surrounding country life: differencing from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies set down like boulders on a plain, in a green world with which they have nothing in common. (*The Mayor*, 12)

Hardy paints a gloomy picture of Henchard who did not hesitate and went out of his way to sell his wife and child under the effect. Interestingly enough, a period of twenty years is passed and in the mean time he becomes a successful businessman. But destiny has something else to offer to his thriving life and it made Henchard took a turn for the worse when he encounter the firmity woman whose role has been described as a woman who caused his downfall. In the mean time he rises up to the Mayor of Casterbridge and takes his fertility from the wealth of crops.

The corn grown on the upland side of the borough was grown by farmers who lived in an eastern purlieu called Durnover. Here what ricks over hung the old Roman street, and thrust against the church tower. (*The Mayor*, 11)

So far as the Farfrae is concerned, he comes from outside to join them. He is for the agricultural community but not as a dissufter. “He holds a hope of renovation in his skill and intelligence, created perhaps out of Hardy’s truthful acknowledgement of local inadequacies. (Brown, 31). But Henchard, who was proud of his awfully affluent and glorious career, could not take it that Farfrae was trying to overtake him in terms of professional success and glory. Both of them wants to make their fortune They understand each other very well but there is no communication in terms of those qualities they do not share. Henchard, who does not accept the universe, cannot accept Farfrey’s bonhomie and easy going nature.

In this way, Henchard is inviting his own misfortune and downfall. A.J. Guerard says. “It is a very modern dramatization of an impulse to self destruction of what Hardy called Henchard’s self-alienation. (Guerard, VII).

Throughout the long movement of this novel, Hardy uses action and authorial comment to show that Henchard has strong will but there is another powerful force to resist his will which is called fate. For the most part, his passionate ambition loaded with the elements of fate and chances began to work for his crowning success. He himself feels that some intelligent power “bent on him” (*The Mayor*, 271) to fight with him. He does not like Farfray-Ealizabeth Jane courtship but later, when he recovers she is not her real daughter, he wants her to leave his house. Fate again comes to play when he starts missing her. Henchard traces to reconcile with her

on her wedding day but fate again kicks his will to do so. When Elizabeth-Jane comes to know the reality, it is too late then. “On that day-almost at that minute - he passed the ridge to prosperity and honour and began to descend rapidly on the other side” (The Mayor, 311). The caged goldfish, he brought as a token of love and Henchard, both are dead.

The Tess of D'urbervilles is another powerful tragedy by Hardy in which he presents fate as a strong force against Tess's will she suffers not for her own faults but her ancestors'.

Michael Millgate rightly observes and reflects that “*Tess of Durberville* is not a psychological novel in the sense understood and practiced by George Eliot & Henry James, it does differ, however, a continuous and remarkably precise record of Tess's mental conditions, and a sharp, it less developed, sense of the thoughts and feelings of other characters, at least at the momentum when their lives impinge most nearly upon Tess's own career.” (Millgate, 263). This novel might be taken as a manifestation of how the general will is carried out in the world of characters but overruled by all powerful fate. The novelist observes:

Why it was that upon the beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and a practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced with a course pattern as it was doomed to receive why so often the coarse appropriateness the finer thus the wrong man, the woman, the wrong woman the man many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order (*Tess*, 90).

It is worth to mention that the above passage transports the reader back to times of Greek plays in which the ultimate cause of suffering used to be come down to sins committed in previous birth. Hence the episode concerning John Durbeyfield's death followed by orders asking his family to evacuate the house they had been living in suggest that it was a stroke of luck which sparked off his downfall:

Thus, the Durbeyfields, once D'urbervilles, saw descending upon them the destiny which, no doubt, when they were among the Olympians of the county, they have caused to descend many a time and severely enough upon the heads of such landless ones as they themselves were now. So do flux and reflux - the rhythm of change-alternate and persist in everything under the sky. (*Tess*, 394).

There are quite a number of references suggesting indirectly that one of the most probable causes of Tess' sufferings rooted in the crimes committed by one of her ancestors and now it is her fate that she suffers. An investigative reading of the novel brings that there was a horse named Price owned by the Durbeyfield family who was killed in an accident. Later, the story reveals that Tess' father was profusely injured and he could not afford to leave the place. Therefore, Tess decided to offer herself for undertaking the same journey but she too met with an accident. This accident left catastrophic impacts because the family business started to go downhill after the death of the horse. On top of that, the events that followed were even disastrous because Alec overstepped the boundary line and wronged Tess. Hardy sadly expressed himself in this way, "What are my books but one plea against man's inhumanity to man - to woman - and to the lower animals? Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than need be"(Archer, 47)

As the story proceeds, a series of fateful events are played out and one could not contain oneself wondering that why Tess "was doomed to be seen and coveted of by the wrong man, instead of by "some other man, the right and designed one in all respects (82)". This textual reference is suggestive of the fact that Tess' was doomed to meet her tragic downfall not because she was innately constructed to colorizing male.

Apart from that her act of confession of her past and revealing the secret of her past life to Angel, her fiancé through a written piece of paper she slipped under the door of his room, dealt as a death blow because this piece of information did not reach to Angel on time. Hence, Tess could neither be blamed nor charged with any other similar allegation of keeping back her past life. Obviously, she invested all her efforts to let in her fiancé on her past life but all of them ended in fiasco. Hence fate has played a crucial part in this episode because Angel discovered about Tess' physical relationship with Alec after this wedding. Therefore, it is not surprising if his behavior for Tess changes and for the most part he kept to himself and became slightly toughened. It further goes without saying that Alec would have forgiven Tess if he had found out her written confession before the wedding. After separating from Tess, he laments saying that "Oh Tess, if you had told me sooner I would have forgiven you".(Tess, 130)

At the end of the story Tess is seen struggling for her survival. The closing of implacable past to submerge her personal identity occupies a significant place in development of the story. The part played by fate in the execution of Tess on charges of Alec's murder might also be worth mentioning because she was not a guilty of murdering him. In other terms, Tess has been artistically depicted as a victim of her own will in the back drop of large matrix of destiny. Hardy wanted to prove through this episode of execution that fate is all omnipotent. The cruelty of fate is that Tess' existence has been reduced to a menial creature both by Alec and Angel in obedience to sub human impulse of sex and anger to the super human power of the image that substitutes essence for existence. Linda M. Shrine comments:

“Tess, however, relies on a self-conscious setup of standard narrative conventions vast only for its aesthetic effects but also for its political and aesthetic effects which should not be divorced from its artistic form.” (Krammer, 147)).

Hardy outlines in this story of this novel that it was a fate worse than death for Tess because the Nature played its role which could be considered against convention and society. He puts it in the say that “Shameless Nature who respects not the social law” (*Tess*, 115). In the following lines, Hardy put across the miserable and distraught condition of Tess as “based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under the arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature” (*Tess*, 315).

In the final analysis, what comes to be asserted as conclusion is that both Henchard and Tess have been figured in the stories as two characters loaded with unbridled lust for ambitious life. Furthermore, the textual references taken up to support the argument also show that these characters also possessed certain amazing characteristics including a strong will to dig their heels in. Be that as it may, their aspirations and actions are overruled by the forceful trajectory of fate. They need to empathize for their atrocious downfall because they both have been deadset to carve out their own places, prestige and hold in the society but the powerful fate dismantled and ruined their live. They invigorate their general will to illuminate their world but the world is governed by their fate, not by their actions.

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