



TRAGIC VISION OF THOMAS HARDY IN HIS NOVEL, *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

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Abstract

At the end of the novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy says that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain. This last sentence indicates the tragic vision of Thomas Hardy. Hardy appears to be a pessimist, for he, unlike Robert Browning, believes that God is not in His heaven and all is wrong with the world. Thomas Hardy wrote tragic novels and tragic poems. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a tragic novel and expresses the sombre note of Hardy. This novel is a tale of Michael Henchard, it is the history of his rise and fall, it is a study of his deeds and character. It is the story of his habit of drinking, emotional vehemence, his impulsiveness, his gloominess, his faith in superstitions, his courage and endurance, his pride and his fitfulness. Michael Henchard is an epic hero by virtue of his grandeur and richness of personality and tragic trait. Michael Henchard is an elemental character, a man of character, basically he is a tragic figure, for in spite of all his efforts, he does not succeed in controlling his environment around him or breaking through the tentacles of Fate or Chance or Strange Coincidences.

Keywords: Tragedy, rise and fall, fate, strange coincidence, death.

Thomas Hardy was a great English novelist of 19th century who produced both major fiction and major poetry. His novels are remarkable for their poignancy of feeling and intensity of tragic situations. It is indeed something significant that almost all his novels are patently tragic in character and it is for this very reason that people speak of Hardy's tragic vision or his taste for tragic import. In his poems also we come across more or less a similar kind of phenomenon. It is so very easy to see that Hardy's poems deal with human pains and

sufferings. In his novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy says that, generally speaking, human life is only an extended drama of pain and that happiness is only an occasional episode in it. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Hardy says that human beings live on a blighted planet as it were, and in *Jude the Obscure* he cries out that we are to the Gods what flies are to the wanton boys and that they kill us for their sport. It is very natural for anyone to infer from these meaningful statements that Hardy looked upon fate or chance as an overriding factor in relation to

human existence. Hardy painted a very dark and grim picture of human life in his novels. His is a world abounding in thwarted desires, unsatisfied longings, undeserved sufferings, clash of duties, broken commandments, disappointments and disillusionments, high and noble aspirations ending in miserable failures. On 19th April, with the book he had only just finished in mind, Hardy wrote: 'the business of the poet and novelist is to show the sorriest underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things.' Hardy further wrote: 'A tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in catastrophe when carried out.'

Hardy's masterpiece, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was his tenth published novel. Hardy began writing this novel in early 1884; his diary informs us that he wrote the last page on 17th April 1885. The novel begins around about 1830; its main action takes place in late forties and early fifties. At the beginning of the action wife-sale was practiced; at the time of the main action harvest weather mattered a great deal; and a Royal Personage visited the West Country. Hardy's *Casterbridge* is a deliberate illusion, but bearing a close relation to a real place, Dorchester.

Michael Henchard is the protagonist or main character of the novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. He is a poor and unemployed young man of twenty who does not know how to maintain himself and his family. He moves from place to place in search of employment and is conscious all the time not only of his own miserable condition but also that of his wife and child. He comes to the village of Weydon-Priors in search of a job as a hay-trusser. He is accompanied by his wife Susan, and his little daughter Elizabeth Jane. A fair was held in the village and Henchard looked about for a suitable refreshment tent. They entered that tent and ordered the refreshment. Henchard was addicted to strong drinks and he requested the women of the tent for rum with furrity. His

wife Susan had noticed all this and Henchard persuaded the reluctant creature to have her furrity also laced with rum. Soon the rum began to work on Henchard and Susan seeing the mischief that additional doses might do, constantly kept reminding him, that they should seek longings for the night. But Henchard paid no heed to her and took cup after cup of laced furrity, each stronger than the previous one until the fourth cup left him fairly intoxicated. Now he bemoaned his foolishness at having ruined his life by such a hasty early marriage and wanted to be rid of his wife. As he took more of devilish mixture, his resentment against his wife increased, till he stood up and offered to sell her off, if anyone was willing to buy her. The people in the tent were all gypsy and thought it to be a good joke but Henchard was in earnest. His wife protested, but he paid no heed to her protest. When Henchard repeatedly made his offer, a man stood up to act as auctioneer, and the price of Susan went up to five guineas. At last, a sailor named Newson offered to buy her. Susan warned Henchard if he touched five guineas, she would no longer be his wife but Newson's. Henchard pocketed the money, and the helpless Susan, throwing the wedding ring of Henchard at his feet, went out with Newson. This behaviour of his wife made Henchard momentarily serious, but he seemed to take no note of it. He stretched his elbows on the table and fell asleep. When at the closing time the proprietress found that she could not awaken him, she left him to sleep where he was, and closed the shop for the night. Next morning when Henchard awoke, he had only a hazy idea of the proceedings of the previous evenings, but soon the presence of the sailor's money in his pocket, and his wife's wedding ring that was lying on the grassy floor, he revived his memory to the full. Being sober now, he took up his basket and cleared off the Fairfield. He was full of remorse for what he had done. He decided that before starting his search for his wife, he would take a solemn vow not to have drink. He betook himself to a church and vowed on the altar not to touch any intoxicating drinks for

twenty years to come. He then kissed the Bible and feeling a little relieved set out to make a search of his wife and daughter. But his search proved futile, for he did not disclose his real name and the circumstances in which he had lost them, but in spite of all his search he could not recover his wife or daughter for a number of years. It is in a state of sheer helplessness and agony that he moved on to an ancient place called Casterbridge where slowly but steadily Fate smiles upon him. He works there very hard, becomes popular in the course of time, and moves up to the position of a strong and prosperous grain merchant. He is also lucky enough to be elected the Mayor of Casterbridge. For some time at least it appears that Michael Henchard is indeed one of the favourite children of fate, for he enjoys prosperity and prestige in almost equal proportion. However, it is not before long that his life registers a decline, and we find him suffering intensely until his painful and pathetic death.

Michael Henchard employs Donald Farfrae who is an ambitious, personable young Scotsman, bright eyed and slight in build. He has come all the way from far off Scotland to Casterbridge not really for a stay there but to try his luck overseas. It is, however, by a peculiar quirk of fate that he has to stay on at Casterbridge itself. Farfrae is a corn expert; he is immensely gifted in his own field, and because his ingenious suggestion about how to make rotten grains edible clicks, Henchard employs him as the manager of his firm. Farfrae serves Henchard's interest most dutifully and with an exemplary kind of moral fervour, with the result that he becomes his employer's friend, companion and confidant. It is to him alone that Henchard makes a confession about his having an affair with a beautiful and tempting girl, Lucetta Le Sueur. Donald Farfrae is an accomplished singer too, and though his accent is a little awkward, the modulations of his tone are faultless. Not unexpectedly, Henchard's stepdaughter, Elizabeth Jane, feels intensely attracted towards Farfrae who is indeed an

eligible bachelor, and for sometime at least it appears that everything is going to end happily. Fate, however, interrupts very forcefully with the result that things get dislocated for quite sometime.

It is really disagreeable to see the relations between Henchard and Farfrae getting strained. Farfrae's popularity among the people of Casterbridge, the amiability of his disposition, his cool reasonableness, causes jealousy to his employer. Sensing this jealousy and accompanying bitterness, Farfrae parts company with Henchard and sets up his own independent business. He is, however, so ethical in his dealings as not to entertain any trade that might otherwise go to his former employer. In the meantime, as things go, because of his rashness Henchard suffers huge financial loss and becomes bankrupt, while Farfrae rips immense profits and soar into prosperity. In fact, Farfrae purchases Henchard's assets, including his house where only a few years ago Henchard had allowed him to stay as his guest. It is no wonder, then, that Farfrae emerges as the most distinguished person of Casterbridge, and in the course of time becomes its mayor in place of Henchard. Farfrae's position, by any standards, is enviable for he enjoys wealth and good image, happiness and peace in equal measure.

The only streak of darkness that mars his otherwise unblemished life is his marriage with Lucetta. In point of fact, Farfrae and Lucetta are not meant for each other, for while Farfrae is a man of honour and excellence, Lucetta is a frivolous, scandalous woman, given to easy morals and cheap indulgences in life. Their marriage, thus, may be looked upon as nothing but ironic. It is only in the fitness of things or as part of the novelist artistic strategy that Lucetta dies of a miscarriage and that Farfrae is left free to pursue his own fortune. Slowly but surely, in spite of several handicaps and obstacles, Farfrae moves closer and closer to Elizabeth Jane. They are indeed made for each other, and it is absolutely no surprise to us that finally they

become husband and wife. It is really a pleasure to see Farfrae settling down at that ancient place Casterbridge with grace, charm and dignity.

Farfrae's character offers a sharp and striking contrast to that of Henchard. Henchard's character is made of the stuff of tragedy, while Farfrae's character is resplendent with the genial and effusive smile of fortune. Farfrae is like Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: a good whole man always in control of his passions, emotional but capable of quiet, intelligent behaviour. Virile and energetic, he is not the stuff of tragedy because his character is almost flawless. It is only once in the novel that he seems to have lost his temper in relation to Henchard on the occasion of the visit of the Royal Personage to Casterbridge. The only disaster that he encounters in his life- the death of his wife in a miscarriage – is not the result of his own passion or folly but is imposed upon him by the gimmicks of destiny. As such, he can marry Elizabeth Jane with a clean conscience. In fact, his character consists of two strands, the commercial and the romantic, and they are so harmoniously unified in his personality as to make him a wholly acceptable person.

Like all other Hardy's novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* too abounds in strange coincidences. It is a strange coincidence that Donald Farfrae and Henchard's wife Susan arrive in Casterbridge at almost the same time. It is perhaps on account of this simultaneous arrival that later Donald develops a fancy for Henchard's stepdaughter, Elizabeth Jane. It is also a strange coincidence that Donald gets drawn to a lady named Lucetta with whom Michael Henchard had developed intimacy earlier after the departure of his wife Susan. It is an entirely different matter that Donald marries Lucetta or that Lucetta dies subsequently on account of a miscarriage. Since fate seems to be cruel to Michael Henchard, he buys a huge stock of grains apprehending food scarcity, but things so turn out that his bargain proves to be a meaningless and mad affair. The result is that while Henchard once again slips into miserable

poverty, his rival Donald shoots up into affluence. It is indeed a strange coincidence that at the trail of a criminal case over which Michael Henchard is presiding, the same woman comes to give evidence who had seen him selling away his wife several years ago in a drunken state. Michael Henchard, thus, loses not only his money but also his position and prestige. It is true that at least for some time he is happy to get back his long lost wife, but she too dies, leaving him all alone and depressed. For quite a long time he is not able to know that Elizabeth Jane is his stepdaughter, but when he comes to know of this, the relations between them naturally get cold and strained. Michael Henchard is betrayed even by his friends and his ex-manager Donald Farfrae. With the loss of everything, his wife, his wealth and his position he is a totally shattered and lonely person. We find Michael Henchard moving about all dejected and even though Donald Farfrae and Elizabeth Jane want to reclaim and nurse him, he dies in utter wilderness.

The Mayor of Casterbridge reads like a Greek tragedy where Fate or Chance reigns supreme. Perhaps, Hardy believed in a theory that speaks of a dispensation in which everything is determined or dictated by Fate or Chance. Man seems to be a mere toy in the hands of Destiny. The Mayor of Casterbridge may be looked upon as a tragic novel which grants no independence or autonomy to humanity as such. From the various experience of his life, Hardy encountered the problem of sufferings and hardships in the world. He was of opinion that man suffers because there is evil in the world. According to him, the evil is external as well as internal. Externally, our environment, that is nature and society, is responsible for our sufferings and sorrows. Internally, instincts, emotions and passions lead us to the tragic end. These emotions and instincts consist of sex impulse or biological necessity and ambition. These instincts and emotions are not formed by man but by the force that has created the environment. Michael

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