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MALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE AND JUDE THE OBSCURE*

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy is a great tragic artist and a creator of memorable characters. His characters – chiefly his women have always been the subject of several studies. The men in the novels, have comparatively received lesser attention except in individual case studies. The article entitled, "Male Protagonists in the Novels of Thomas Hardy : With special reference to The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure" is a modern attempt to examine Hardy's male characters in general and the central characters in The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure in particular. The purpose is to explore these two great tragic pieces with men as central protagonists. Hardy's view of these men, encompassed and developed by their tragic destinies, is the main focus of attention The article pays special attention to the towering figure of Michael Henchard and the men and women with whom he clashes. Also it studies, Jude Fawley, 'the poor puppet' - a plaything in the hands of fate and the people around him. The 'problems' raised in the novel are the subject of close scrutiny. The similarities and differences in the characters of Henchard and Jude are also examined.

KEY WORDS: Male protagonists, central characters, tragic destiny, poor puppet, towering figure.

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INTRODUCTION

Henchard and Jude stand as the male protagonists of the two novels, The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure. Henchard is a 'man of character'. Hardy himself states in his preface, 'The story is particularly of one man's deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my Wessex life'. Henchard is a colossal figure that bestrides the book eclipsing all the other people around him. With the grandeur of setting and scene, and the force of it's movement, The Mayor of Casterbridge deserves to be classed among the great 'epic' novels along with Tess and Jude the Obscure. In this novel the characters, though many, are subordinate to the central figure. Quite uniquely, the women play only a secondary role.

Jude is a protagonist in a quite different way. He is 'obscure' and is acted upon rather than acting himself. He is the 'puppet' with whom life and the

other characters play. This truth about Jude invoked Hardy's pity when he referred to him as, 'my poor puppet'. Jude's innate nobility, his kindness to everyone, his self-abnegation, his struggles for self-education and also his struggles for self-education elevate him in the reader's estimation. As in Tess, the conflict between the flesh and spirit is searing, and Jude is destroyed between the opposite pulls in his own composition. If Henchard is heroic in spite of his failures, Jude is an anti-hero despite his aims and ambitions. Both of them have several psychological traits in common – the self-destructive impulses driving them to different kinds of aberrations.

MICHAEL HENCHARD: HARDY'S MAN OF DESTINY

The sub-title of The Mayor of Casterbridge reads as 'a story of a man of character'. It is a book dominated by one man, and the centre from which the action derives is that man's highly individual personality, and his tendency to impose himself on others and on the world around him. It is a theme of universal interest; Henchard is all through colossal and grand, and the novel rises to epic proportions. J.I.M Stewart rightly says, ' The Mayor of Casterbridge presents something quite new: a figure of heroic proportions. Henchard, the mayor is the most powerful, as he is also the most original character in the novel'.

The title page defines the area of dramatic interest: while it is 'one man's deeds' and that of 'a man of character', it is also the story of the 'Mayor of Casterbridge'. A.J.Guerard says, ' it is Hardy's ability to find within Henchard a multidimensional perspective which prompts the word, 'epic' as an appropriate descriptive term'. Henchard is the hay-trusser, the Mayor, the centre of public interest, and at the same time the loneliest of men whose tragedy lies 'within' him; he is inscrutable even to himself.

Henchard is the most complex and subtly drawn of Hardy's male characters, a man at war with himself, who ignorant of his motives, works against himself and destroys himself. Modern psycho-analysis could probe into the self-destructive impulses deeply embedded in his unconscious, manifesting itself on the surface every now and then, when he deliberately does the wrong thing knowing the consequences. He has consequently been regarded by D,A.Dike as, ' a modern Oedipus', and Frederick Karl as a King Lear.

It is appropriate to examine Henchard's character against the background of the opening episode in the novel which is the pivot of the plot. The tragic complications in his life – external and internal – arise out of this initial fault, like King Lear's mistake. Hardly twenty one, and as such immature, he has already the burden of a family to support. Hardy describes him in the opening page thus: 'His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shamble of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference, personal to himself, showing its presence even in the regularly interchanging fustian folds, now in the left leg, now in the right, as he paced along'. The sale of Susan is almost dream-like in it's speed; it is over before Henchard can ponder over it, with both wife and child gone, as if forever. As in the case of any tragic hero, his faults are set forth in the opening scene: he is jealous, headstrong and impulsive, repeatedly – doing the wrong thing ruthlessly – and the pattern of his character is set. He is the same all through. Yet, his sense of guilt, his possessive love for his child – 'it's my child', he says, and his sincere amends are virtues which are weaknesses as well; these offset the picture already drawn. The inconsistencies in his behaviour here remain unaltered in the rest of the novel.

The gap of eighteen years becomes the dividing line between the scenes of crime and punishment. In the words of Michael Millgate it is, 'the gap of eighteen undocumented years in Henchard's career…..' The isolated Henchard painfully builds up a business alone in Casterbridge. Ernest A Baker says that the tragedy of Henchard begins with Susan's return, ' with fatal effects upon his fortunes, now that he is at the pinnacle of glory as the richest citizen and the mayor of casterbridge'. The tragedy builds up fast – Henchard conceives a strong friendship for the young Scot, Donald Farfrae and he takes him into the grain business as manager. Susan and Elizabeth-

Jane's reappearance into his life, Newson supposedly having been lost at sea, complicates his life. In a penitential mood to right the wrong he has done to Susan, he is forced to remarry her.

Henchard's dominating ways and careless business habits jeopardize his position. Business is always a competition where the more capable man alone survives. As John Holloway puts it, 'Farfrae prospers through skill which the new mode of life has impersonally taught him.; Henchard is able to struggle on, though defeated, not because of what he has learned but because of what he is'. John Holloway further adds, 'step by step, he comes to work for the man whom he once employed, and in the end he feels himself driven away to his death; while those who were once his labourers work the new, harder way, for a shilling a week less than they had from him'.

The episode where Henchard saves the life of Lucetta when attacked by a bull is suggestive of many truths. Firstly, Henchard is the only person who plays the saviour ironically to his adversary's wife Lucetta repeatedly through the novel. Further, Henchard is as strong as the bull which he is able to overpower. The bull itself, fierce though injured, symbolises the personality of Henchard who remains defiant till the last.

The ending of the novel is quiet, low-keyed with Henchard's will:

'Michael Henchard's will.

That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grave on account of me.

& that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground.

& that no Sexton be asked to toll the bell.

& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.

& that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.

& that no flours be planted on my grave.

& that no man remember me.

To this I put my name.

Michael Henchard'.

Henchard's will and testament, the last expression of his powerful will, expresses a desire for her self-effacement which, in terms of the rhythm of sacrifice, is pure altruism. The tragic end of Henchard produces a cathartic effect.

Hardy sees Henchard at various levels – as the puny mortal warring with the mighty supernatural forces, as the unlettered rustic battling with the modern man of science, as the old fashioned man fighting with the bright and brilliant energy of truth; all this is oneside of the picture. On the other is Henchard, rising like a colossal figure almost eclipsingFarfrae and everyone around, in spite of his own ruin. It is a multi-dimensional view.

Hardy himself quotes Novalis that' Character is Fate' in the novel. About Henchard's heretical song in the church when he forces the choir to sing the psalm intended to curse Farfrae:

" His seed shall orphans be, his wife

A widow plunged in grief;

His vagrant children beg their bread

Where none can give relief……

A swift destruction soon shall seize

On his unhappy race; And the next age his

Hated name shall utterly deface".

Julian Moynahan rightly observes, ' the verses instead of presenting terrible end for Farfrae, do in fact, describe Henchard's own fate. Henchard dies alone, and no child or other relative survives him. His line is at an end. The curse which he invoked against Farfrae comes to be enacted in his miserable end'. Henchard obviously loses his mental balance

due to his violent jealousy towards Farfrae. About the creation of this character, Evelyn Hardy wonders whether 'the writer saw some such red-and-grey volcanic man in one of the Dorchester inns or streets, who set him pondering on his life, character and fortunes'.

Hardy worked consciously and deliberately in the tradition of the great tragic artists. His idea of tragedy represents a combination of Greek, Shakespearean and Biblical tragedy. He had Jesus and Paul in mind when he created Clym Yeobright in The Return of the Native. He found much of the form of The Mayor of Casterbridge in the histories of Saul and David, and the tragedy of Jude is reminiscent of Job. Like George Eliot, Hardy was influenced by Sophocle's depiction of the great primitive emotions. He explored the depths of silent sorrow and suffering and the great tragedies are memorable. As RM Rehder beautifully puts it, 'for Shakespeare, tragedies end in death, comedies end in marriage. For Hardy some tragedies begin in marriage and every comedy contains a tragedy'. The Mayor of Casterbridge comes closer to the Shakespearean pattern. While in the other novels there is an inevitability about events, as it is here also, the tragic failure arises chiefly from character, as with Lear or Macbeth. Richard Carpenter says, 'The ending of The Mayor of Casterbridge is reminiscent also of the death of Lear, a parallelism which has been noticed'. Despite being a novel in prose, The Mayor of Casterbridge is almost as great as King Lear. Charles Lamb comments that the tragedy of King Lear was too intense for stage representation, because as 'we read the play we are Lear'. Quoting this W.H.Gadner says, ' that is exactly how many of us will feel about Henchard: we are Henchard'.

The tragedy of Henchard embodies, in Hardy's own words, 'the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things'; but it is not quite true that he has no curtain speech. His final soliloquy is his will, and it is the most powerful ending because Henchard means what he declares. In the words of Jeannette King, 'The novel represents Hardy's first successful attempt to create tragedy – with all the formal implications of the term in the novel'.

The ending of the novel is a fitting conclusion – as in a classical tragedy or in a typical Shakespearean play, the novel ends on a note of philosophic calm after the tempest. A quiet spirit of renunciation and stoic acceptance prevails – this note is struck by Elizabeth-Jane, the silent witness of Henchard's tragic destiny, in whose life happiness was indeed, ' the occasional episode in a general drama of pain'. The battle of this 'NOBLE' 'man of destiny', tortures and terrible, thus ends with the 'INEVITABLE'; his tragedy is not a fall but a triumph – it is indeed an assertion of human dignity.

JUDE: HARDY'S 'POOR PUPPET'

If the protagonist of The Mayor of Casterbridge is 'a man of character', Jude is 'the obscure' one, even according to the novel. The reader experiences difficulty in finding out what the novel is precisely about. The title, 'obscure', in a sense suggests something that is ambiguous and difficult to understand. It seems to about so many things says Ian Gregor,– ' a malevolent universe, an outworn system of education, the rigidity of the marriage laws', or as one of the recent critics has put it, 'the sheer difficulty of human beings living elbow to elbow and heart to heart; the difficulty of being unable to bear prolonged isolation or prolonged closeness'.

Further the word, 'obscure' is obviously a reference to Jude's poor and miserable background. An orphan, his parentage is almost unknown, his mother and father having quarrelled or separated. Besides, Jude is lonely throughout the novel, almost unsocial, and is little known to anybody. He is an obscure personality who rarely communicates with anybody. Consequently his character and outlook is full of contradictions. As Irving Howe puts it, 'He is like a battlefield with unresolved aims and desires'. He accomplishes nothing to his heart's content- his desires are only partially fulfilled. Jude is a study of failure rather than success.

One wonders what Hardy meant when he referred to Jude as 'my poor puppet'. The 'my' is obviously an epithet of endearment and the word 'poor' is suggestive of Hardy's pity for him. Hardy's characters are generally helpless puppets in the hands of destiny. Here in particular, Jude is a plaything not only of his ironical destiny, but also by the people around him – Sue, Phillotson and Arabella and even the physician Vilbert. Like a puppet he acts when impelled or driven by the people in his life.

Movement and exodus becomes the basic pattern of the plot. In every section Jude moves from place to another, always searching for something he wants. Every chapter title is the name of a new place – Marygreen, Aldbrickham, Christminster, Melchester, and like a 'grand chain' pattern, he returns to Marygreen where the tragic plot has it's end. Such a restless movement is suggestive of the insecurity of self-exile; it is the 'ache of modernism'.

The most illogical part of the novel is Jude's return to Arabella after the poignant situation of Sue's return to Phillotson. This is as mysterious as Tess's stay with Alec in Sandbourne. These are gaps which Hardy leaves to the reader to guess. In Jude's case, his stay with Arabella is very brief, with his interludes of his last meeting with Sue, and his chronic ill-health, ending with his premature death.

Hardy in his well- known letter to Edmond Gosse himself pointed out the main themes of the novel which are mainly two-fold: ' It is concerned first with the labours of a poor student to get a university degree, and secondly with the tragic issues of two bad marriages'. Emphasising the same point, Patricia Ingham asserts, 'the theme of unfulfilled academic aims is the core of Jude the Obscure'. William R.Rutland says, 'Jude is a treatise upon the misery of human life. Hardy wrote it in order to show human beings brought to agony, ruin and death by circumstances over which they have no control'. Hardy also stated very clearly in his preface to the first edition that it is the theme of the 'deadly war between flesh and spirit'. The ambiguity can be stated thus: the physical desire for Arabella leads Jude away from the things of the spirit and the spiritual side of Jude's relationship with Sue is threatened by her lack of sexual drive. Apart from this, Jude tells Sue that their war 'is only against man and senseless circumstance'. However, the issues in the novel are complex and they impinge to each other.

Jude as a scholar is not a total failure; he does keep his faith alive first by distant glimpses of the lights of Christminster, and later learns in spite of all vicissitudes, a good deal of Latin and Greek with arduous self-study under difficult circumstances. Jude talks of Christminster, questions the men on the road about it, dreaming about it all the time. He revisits the spot again and again; for after dark one can see in the sky the dim reflections of the yellow lamps of the place. Like a romantic idealist he soliloquises:

'It is a city of light', he said to himself.

'The tree of knowledge grows there', he added a few steps further on.

'It is a place that teachers of men spring from and go to'.

'It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion'.

Even while selling bread in a cart in Marygreen, he engages himself in reading the classics. Later as a mason in Aldbrickham and in Christminster he pursues his studies. Raymond Williams says that Hardy himself was 'an auto-didact', and there must be much of his own experience in that picture. All his heroic efforts in this direction are crushed and defeated by Christminster's rejection of him and his own betrayal of his dreams – all on account of his weakness of the flesh, which he cannot overcome.

The character of Jude has no parallel among Hardy's male figures. An idealist like Clym, a dreamer like Angel Clare, isolated and lonely like Henchard, he is still like none of them. Hardy even refutes his own concept of tragedy in the creation of this character – there is little that is heroic or great about him. The odd mixture of nobility and sensitiveness on one

hand and his weakness for wine and women on the other is peculiar and distinct. His inability to act positively contrasts oddly with his ambition and ideals. Yet this 'poor puppet' falls a prey to the physical charms of Arabella in the most tragic and ironic manner. He thinks of himself as an altogether different man what he used to be. For him, 'It was better to love a woman than to be a graduate'. Being an extremely simple man, he is unable to perceive the cunning devices of Arabella to trap him. One cannot help pitying the gullibility of Jude when he is ensnared by Arabella's falsity and lies. His marriage with her, Hardy comments, is a 'sordid contract' – 'a permanent contract based on temporary feeling'.

If the theme of Jude's scholastic ambition is one major theme, the 'marriage question' is a more important subject which runs through the novel with a number of nagging questions raised on the subject. A series of inexplicable events unfold the bewildering complexity of Sue's nature. For instance, it is difficult to guess why Sue marries Phillotson when there is not even any physical attraction as in the case of Jude's marriage. Her physical dislike for Phillotson and subsequent refusal to lead a normal sex life with Jude are symptoms of an abnormality. The social ostracism that Jude and Sue suffer is more tormenting than anything else. They are social outcasts – ship-wrecked, trapped and tortured by a perverse social environment which they cannot escape. This is modernity about Jude. Jude, with all his earnest love cannot restore her to her former rebellious and brave idealism. For Jude everything is lost when Sue is lost. And for Sue all is lost when he takes her irrevocable decision to submit to her husband. The psychological and nervous breakdown of Jude and Sue is the climax of the tragedy.

The portrayal of Jude is undoubtedly one of Hardy's great achievements in the creation of male characters. The novelist traces the development of Jude from the age of eleven onwards till he dies prematurely at the age of thirty, a development in which the reader finds no improbability and nothing far-fetched or strained. He is essentially sensitive, sentimental, with an ingrained kind-heartedness towards animals and birds, endowed with a love of knowledge and learning. Arabella refers to him as a 'tender-hearted fool!'. His sense of honour is evident from the circumstances in which he marries Arabella. He is equally and even more devoted to Sue. She apostrophises thus to Jude: 'you are Joseph the dreamer of dreams, dear Jude. And a tragic Don Quixote …. O my poor friend and comrade, you 'll suffer yet!'(P.222).

Jude's integrity can never be in doubt; he himself describes his own weakness: 'My two Arch enemies you know – my weakness for womankind and my impulse to strong liquor'. Like Tess, he blames only himself and never Sue. Hardy's comment about Tess that ' No one blamed her as she blamed herself' is true of Jude also. His remark, 'My God, how selfish I was! - Perhaps I spelt one of the highest and purest loves that ever existed between man and woman!' shows his self-abnegation. He continues to love Sue through all her peculiar vulgarities.

Jude the Obscure is thus a very different kind of novel. The tragedy is neither classical nor Shakespearean in pattern. Catharsis is absent and there is no note of tranquillity or composure at the end of the suffering. The final impact is shattering with Jude's last terrible words cursing the day of his birth: ' Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which was said. There is a man child conceived …. Why died I not from the womb? Why I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?....'(P.408).

Endings were always a difficult for Hardy says Ian Gregor, 'because they implied unity where he saw plurality, they expressed finality where he sought continuity'. Jude's death is a conventional ending and Sue's return predicts her inevitable tragedy. The last words about Sue are ironically quoted by Arabella: 'She 's never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she 's as he is now!' (P.413). The ending is still an open ending; the questions remain unanswered.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE CHARACTERS OF HENCHARD AND JUDE

In the course of the two novels, the reader can draw the similarities as well as differences in the two characters of Henchard and Jude. Henchard's aggressiveness drew from Hardy such epithets like 'tigerish affection' – 'wrong-headed like a buffalo', 'leonine', and so. The gentle Jude on the other hand is like the trapped rabbit, like the bird doomed and sold by Sue in the concluding section of the novel. Jude can never be overbearing or quarrelsome even when provoked to the extreme. He avoids bitterness with Farmer Trouth, Vilbert, Sue or even Phillotson in spite of his torture. His passive acquiescence becomes a fault so that he approximates to the picture of 'an unheroic hero'. The grandeur of Henchard is totally absent. In Jude, the tragic is invaded by the pathetic. A.J.Guerard comments, 'Jude does not resist the outward and inward destiny of his actual life as stubbornly as Henchard does; he drifts into disaster'. Henchard is an impressive figure despite his failure, while at the end Jude even loses the dignity of the earlier sections. A.J.Guerard rightly comments, 'The last chapter of Jude lack the moving quality of The Mayor of Casterbridge'.

Henchard's possessiveness is strikingly different from Jude's self-abnegation, though these trends are curiously mixed in both. In Jude's case, physical passion causes his tragedy, for Henchard the lack of such intensity results in his losing Susan and later Lucetta. A.J.Guerard comments about the passiveness of Hardy's men: 'His attitude to other forms of passiveness – toward sexual passiveness in particular – is ambiguous where it is not frankly critical'. This aspect of Henchard and Jude is handled with some amount of reticence.

Almost as coincidence, the two novels with the male protagonist at the centre, are located against the background of a particular place or city. The scenes shift, but main location is a town, caster bridge in The Mayor of Casterbridge, and Marygreen, Christminster, Shaston and Malchester in Jude the Obscure. In both the novels the characters drift from one location to another which symbolically suggests the theme of exile and self-alienation. They are rootless victims of their tragic circumstances.

The natures of Henchard and Jude with reference to love and sexual passion are entirely different. To Henchard, love is a hunger for affection. His attachment to Susan, even in his early life and later, has hardly a touch of passion. Even his intention to marry Lucetta arises from pity and consideration for a poor girl with whom he has unintentionally had a temporary affair. Yet he has an aggressive and possessive love for Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane, and for Lucetta in a lesser degree. Jude on the other hand, suffers from the temptations of the flesh which he can hardly resist. His relationship with Arabella throughout the novel remains sensual. Yet he is also capable of a finer love, which is witnessed in his relationship with Sue though even this is mixed with passion. Aggressiveness is alien to Jude's nature; his meekness is a fault as Henchard's impulsivenessis a weakness; yet both are passive in their suffering, though different. The stubborn resistance of Henchard is absent in Jude.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the dominating ways and careless business of Michael Henchard jeopardize his position and ultimately to tragic doom. The last expression of Henchard's powerful will, Henchard's heretical song in the church to curse Farfrae, the influence of Greek, Shakespearean and Biblical tragedy on Henchard are colourfully presented.

Besides, various issues in the life of Jude - his unfulfilled scholastic ambition, the question of marriage following despair and gloom in the life of Jude are quite interesting. In both novels, Henchard and Jude stand apart from other characters as male protagonists and enrich the grandeur of tragedy and excellence.

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