



SPECIAL CHARACTERISATION IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY: A STUDY

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Article Info:

Article Received: 09/09/2013

Revised on: 11/09/2013

Accepted on: 12/09/2013

ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy is a popular novelist who has attracted the attention of many readers and critics over a century. As in the case of any great writer, new perspectives have continually opened up, throwing fresh light on several hitherto unrecognised and unexplored aspects. The most important aspects of Hardy's novels are the tragic content and the portrayal of characterisation. This article discusses closely on Hardy's portrayal of characters in general and his intuitive insight into the feminine characters in particular. Besides, it emphasises the tragic richness in the major characters of Gabriel Oak, Henchard, Jude and Tess.

Besides, it studies Hardy's special categorization of men and women, his great admiration for the good people, his influence of classical drama and Shakespearean tragedy, the significance of the opening pages, the impact of love on men and women, the influence of Nature and the comparative study of the central characters of *The Mayor and Jude*.

Keywords: Characterisation, categorization, central characters, unexplored aspects, tragic content, new perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Hardy's men and women are remarkable creations, each distinct and sharply characterised. His special tenderness and his intuitive insight into the feminine hearts, resulted in the creation of unforgettable characters like Tess and Eustacia Vye. The novels of Thomas Hardy illustrate the Byronian dictum that love for man, is a thing apart; for women, it is their entire existence. They are more complex, more difficult to understand and more unpredictable in their natures. These aspects fascinated the writer even at a very early age. The Wessex country-side and the lives of people around him made an indelible impression on his mind.

Like his men, the women also belong to different classes and categories. The silent suffering of women like Marty South and Elizabeth-Jane, stands as contrast to the more volatile and

wayward types like Eustacia, Viviette, Tess and more particularly Sue, Lucetta and Mrs. Charmond are the lonely intruders in the rustic countryside causing misery to themselves and to everyone around them.

Hardy's women are pre-eminently sublime victims. Clarice Short remarks that, 'In his major novels Hardy ascribes much of the unhappiness of human life to the character of women, who are more than men are tools of the life force'. Rosalind Miles states that, '... A woman in Hardy's hands would be made to bear a weight of suffering whose infliction transcend the personal and move through human to sublime'.

It is also observed that Hardy's preference is for women who belong to the countryside. The finest qualities of women are developed and cultivated in rural surroundings. Tess, Elizabeth-Jane and Marty South are noble and gentle because they

have been reared in the rural surroundings. To Hardy, women of the city are sophisticated, cunning and hypocritical. Eustacia Vye, Grace Mulburry, Lucetta have been spoilt by their contact with the artificial and sophisticated life of the cities. This analysis, gives a rough picture of the large world of feminine characters created by the great master, who stands next to Shakespeare in his insights into feminine psychology.

Many of the more recent critics have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views of women's character and sphere of action, or else they have remarked on his particular interest in any sympathy with women. More recent feminist critics have suggested that the 'women' in the works of a male writer find their significance primarily as a means to the representation of maleness. For instance, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard, in selling his wife and daughter to the sailor Newson, repeats in a startlingly blatant form the definitive patriarchal act of exchange. The women of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are at once the instruments for the probing of the significance of patriarchal power of the male, and 'idealized and melancholy projections of a repressed male self'.

Taken as a whole, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess*, *Jude*, and *The Return of the Native* are expressive, irrefutable criticism of society's debilitating version of womanhood. He was consistently interested in women and became more compassionate towards them. Patricia Stubbs comments, "Women are almost always at the centre of Hardy's tragic, uncompromising vision, not merely of the universe, as in so often claimed, but of men and women in society". Hardy's women are almost always destructive dominant and his men are invariably passive, worked on by the whims and designs. Boldwood, Oak, Jude, Phillotson, Giles Winterborne-the overall picture of men suffering from the actions of selfish and unpredictable women is inescapable and barely modified by the occasional woman-victim-Fanny Robin, Tamsin, Tess and Grace Melbury. And of these Tess and Grace are central characters.. Hardy often underplays women as individuals and their personal psychology is lost in his habit of seeing them first as sexual agents of a destructive

destiny, and only second as people. In *Jude*, the two women Arabella and Sue, are defined almost entirely by their sexual responses, a split image of female sexuality which is neatly in-forced by class 'characteristics'.

Hardy's men are comparatively quiet, reserved and silent in their suffering. But Hardy did bestow as much or even more attention on his men. His Gabriel Oak, Dr.Fitzpiers, Clym Yeobright, Henchard and Jude are all unforgettable persons.

Hardy's men can be distinctly categorised under a few groups, though this does not mean that they can be branded as types. There is first, the class of the rustics who always appear in groups and are engaged in the activities of the countryside. Work keeps them together and they are occupied in bee-hiving, sheep shearing, timber-cutting, hay-trussing or farming and such other occupations. Besides, with their native wisdom and experience they are like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, commenting on the main characters and events in the novel. They have a queer sense of humour and with the exception of *Jude the Obscure* they provide some comedy which is not unrelated to Hardy's vision of life. Grandfer Cattle, Joseph Poorgrass, Timothy Fairways and Solomon Lonways all exemplify this.

Further, men like Gabriel Oak and Giles Winterborne are natives of the countryside and also central characters in the novels. Passive but strong, acquiescent but firm, resigned but heroic, they gave their support to the weak-minded women whom they love. For instance the very name Oak suggests that he is the centre of stability in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Each of these men has a distinct personality and role in the respective novels. A.J.Guerard is the first perceptive critic to observe their 'unaggressive' and passive natures as both faults and virtues. This is perhaps Hardy's own divided opinion about them. In the competition with the 'modern' men their defeat is inevitable. Hardy admires them even while he exposes them to gentle ridicule.

Clym Yeobright, Angel Clare and Jude are three instances of dreamers and idealists, who are forced to face harsh realities. While Clym is the 'native' who returns from his diamond-cutting business in Paris to become a school teacher and

later furze-cutter in Egdon Heath, Angel Clare is a voluntary with his dreams of the 'virginal woman' which Tess is not. Jude's dreams of becoming a scholar is both pitiable and ludicrous. In all these cases, illusions conflict with the realities of life and tragedy inevitably follows.

J.O. Bailey in his well known essay on Hardy's "Mephistophelian visitants" classifies Sergeant Troy, Dr. Fitzpiers, William Dare, Damon Wildeve, Alec D'Urberville and even Farfrae and Newson as men who appear mysteriously in the novels from somewhere and consciously or unconsciously bring other characters to doom. They are the intruders 'the aliens' whose role, it seems, is to do the harm. Sometimes, they appear like mechanical contrivances in the plot popping out only to bring about a reversal in the plot. It is however interesting to observe that Hardy does not class them as villains; he even sympathises and justifies them, giving them rewards which they do not deserve. Troy dies but Fitzpiers is rewarded, and Farfrae even wins the battle against Henchard.

Henchard and Jude stand apart from these people as the male protagonists of the two novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a grand tragedy, magnificent in its fullness of expression, Henchard is a 'man of character'. Henchard is a colossal figure that bestrides the book eclipsing all the other people around him. *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 the protagonist in a quite different way. He is the 'puppet' with whom life and the other characters play as a kitten does with a ball. This truth about Jude involved Hardy's pity when he referred to him as 'my poor puppet'. Jude's innate nobility, his kindness to everyone, his self-abnegation and also his struggles for self education elevate him in the reader's estimation. If Henchard is heroic in spite of his failures, Jude is an anti-hero despite his aims and ambitions.

One of the important features of Hardy's characterisation is that he presents good people with great admiration and gusto, and condemns

villains and sophisticated persons with a sneering contempt. Hardy's sympathy is always with good, noble and gentle hearted characters like Tess, Elizabeth-Jane, Gabriel oak and Venn, the Riddle man. He has a distinct dislike for shifty, cunning and hypocritical characters like Sergeant Troy, Dr. Fitzpiers and Wildeve.

Deeply influenced by classical drama and by Shakespearean tragedy, Hardy framed his own tragic pattern. Hardy himself states in his diary: '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 a catastrophe when carried out'. Tragedy according to him 'may be created by an opposing environment either of things inherent in the universe, or of human institutions'. Hardy thus classified his own view of tragedy in several of his personal writings. Jeannette King observes how, "the titles of his four great tragic novels define the central characters by such 'situations' – 'the Native', 'the Mayor', 'the obscure' and 'of the D'urbervilles'". Hardy also wrote that his art consisted in intensifying 'the expression of things'. Hardy himself defined tragedy thus: 'the best tragedy-highest tragedy Is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE'. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the obscure*, life appears stark and cruel with very little or no bright intervals of hope or joy. *Jude the Obscure* is the gloomiest of his novels- devoid of even the faintest trace of humour. Hardy once commented, "All tragedy is grotesque-if you allow yourself to see it as such".

Henchard, Tess and Jude, among others are examined in terms of modern depth psychology. But even at the external level Hardy's love of the abnormal, and morbid love of horror and sensation are evident in scenes like the pig-killing episode and the murder of the innocent children in *Jude*. Tess's murder of Alec with a knife with the blood dripping through the ceiling is another instance. Among the earlier novels in *Far From the Madding Crowd* Bathsheba's opening the coffin of Fanny Robin is almost new dramatic in a Dickensian or even Jacobean way. Hardy's short stories provide scores of examples of this love of the macabre.

Hardy's tragic novels are always an indictment, an exposure of injustices. Time after time, he was in revolt against a malicious divinity arbitrarily interfering with man's purposes. As Henry W. Nevinson says, "... the sorrows crown of sorrow remembering happier things, the sorrow of frustrated aims, the sorrow of the grave and the end of living of questioning to the universe and to God..." In the final paragraph of *Tess*, it is said to have been 'the president of the Immortals' who has had his sport with the novel's heroine. *Jude the Obscure* presents 'the unfulfilled aims', aims which are thwarted by two distinct agencies; first the old established social prejudices scorning a poor man's ambitions; and secondly the man's own weakness of character.

Hardy's novels have an atmosphere of gloom, sorrow and tears. Sufferance is the badge of the tribe of Hardy's men and women. In such an atmosphere one normally can't expect to find humour of any type. But Hardy has tried to relieve the gloom of his novels by introducing humorous talk and actions of his Wessex peasants who serve the purpose of 'choric characters'. The main characters could not admit of any humour. Henchard, Tess or Jude may suffer and die but the rustics go on forever.

The opening pages of Hardy's novels often depict a solitary figure moving over a landscape or submerged in it. R.M. Rehder says, "Most of the stories begin by watching an isolated figure or pair of figures moving in a landscape, often at twilight, as if hovering between sleeping and walking". The opening pages of *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles* and *The Woodlanders* exemplify this:

"A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight..."

(*The Return of the Native*)

"One evening of late summer, before the nineteenth century has reached one-third of its span..." (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*)

"On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward, from Shaston to the village of Marlott..."

(*Tess of the D'urbervilles*)

"The rambler who, for old fashioned sake, should trace the forsaken coach-road running almost a

meridional line from Bristol to the South shore of England..." (*The Woodlanders*)

In the words of Ian Gregor, "These opening sentences all catch the classic cadence of the story-teller, the isolating precision of place and time, going along with a generalised expansiveness". Hardy's prophetic openings in which every detail seems to foreshadow major themes, in conjunction with conclusions that confirm the openings, are responsible for the sense of inevitability. The openings take the reader into a world where man's aspirations are blunted, as external circumstances conceived with man's hidden flames. As Daniel R Schwartz remarks, "By fulfilling the promise of the beginnings, the endings imply that the world in which men live is closed and invulnerable to essential change". The title of Tess's last phase, 'fulfilment' Hardy means the inevitable bringing to fruition of the pattern that derives from the interaction of the central characters psyche with the world in which he is placed.

Most of Hardy's novels have markedly unhappy endings. This is a significant characteristic of their form. R.M. Rehder aptly says, "He is the first major author to write a number of novels that end unhappily, although the conclusions of his best novels can be called tragic".

Hardy's novels are all different but have much in common. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, he makes use of his knowledge of sheep-farming, in *The Return of the Native* of furze-cutting, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* of the corn business and in *Tess of the D'urbervilles* his agricultural background. It is as if Hardy consciously set out to vary the region and the local occupation of each of these novels so that eventually they became a kind of Wessex epic of the nineteenth century.

In all his major novels there is a tragic stress and conflict. This conflict may be of any type – social, emotional and personal. Besides these, the conflict between the rural and the urban, free will and predestination are also there. The tragic hero ultimately wins the reader's sympathy and admiration. The heroic dimension of Hardy's characters depends upon their self-realisation. All the epic novels begin and end with the protagonists. Towards the close of *The Mayor*,

Tess, and *Jude*, the main characters die. Their intense suffering has the basic principles of the tragedies of the sophoclean type.

Hardy creates accidents, coincidences, and other artificial things to snatch the cup of happiness from the mouths of his characters. For example, the urgent letter that Tess wrote to Angel, to come back to England, reaches him late. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Lucetta was expecting Henchard and in walks Farfrae who had come to see Elizabeth-Jane and who is at once charmed by Lucetta's beauty. Such instances scattered over the stories of Hardy – all so arranged that the characters should not become happy. That is why a critic has remarked that the greatest enemy of the characters of Hardy is not chance, not fate, not God, but Hardy himself.

Love is the dominating motive in Hardy's stories – love conceived as a blind, irresistible storm. The major novels of Thomas Hardy are all love stories – the men and women who suffer this passion in its extremity become representatives of the human race. Hardy's picture of love is in the lyrical manner. Exquisitely he sounds the different notes in its scale – the peaceful, idyllic love of Dick and Fancy; the faithful, enduring, hopeless love of Gabriel Oak and Marty; Eustacia's searing passion. To Hardy, love was woman's whole existence. He took the old fashioned view of women. He stressed their frailty, sweetness, submissiveness, coquetry and caprice. Even when they are fault, he presents them with a tender chivalry. Arabella in *Jude the Obscure* is the only hateful woman in Hardy's books. For the most part, Hardy treats women with sympathy: the sufferings of Tess, Elfride, Marty, Bathsheba are touched with a peculiar pathos. In Hardy's view, love at first sight does not very much help in making life happy. Marriages that are the result of love at first sight generally end in unhappiness. The problem of marriage and love is best illustrated in *Tess* and *Jude*. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy countenances the possibility of love based on affection and on mutual involvement in a joint enterprise. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard suffers disappointment in love, in business, in friendship and in the affection of his daughter.

Hardy's character in his attitude towards his art was on the one hand cavalier and on the other serious and dedicated. He says, "in a work of art it is the accident which charms, not the intention; that we only like and admire". And he makes his theory explicit in a comment which he made in August 1881, "Art is changing of the actual proportions and order of things, so as to bring out more forcibly than might otherwise be done that feature in them which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist". More than any other English novelist, he is addicted to placing his characters in doorways, reflecting them in mirrors and pools. R.A.Scott-James aptly remarks, "His real creative work shows a steady progression from perception of an individual to perception of the universal".

Hardy's novels have an atmosphere of brooding melancholy about them. They almost give an impression that life is a punishment inflicted by an indiscriminating hand. For instance, Henchard is foredoomed to death and disappointment in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Clym, Eustacia Vye, Tess, Jude, Sue and a host of other characters of Hardy met with an end that is tragic or miserable. For them happiness is an interlude in the general drama of pain. Hardy's heroes and heroines are star-crossed souls, struggling against the powerful cosmic forces.

Hardy's portrayal of the men and women in his novels poses this question: what is Hardy's view of his men and women, and how does he judge them? While human nature in general is as varied as everything in the world, Hardy's men have certain basic characteristics, but which are often ambivalent. Male egoism contrasts with the noblest self-renunciation; the aggressiveness of Henchard is at odds with his own needless reticence, apart from the contrasts with Jude's tender selflessness. There is opposition within Jude's nature rendering him almost ineffectual. The number and variety of characters created by Hardy is amazing. It is impossible to group characters into rigid types.

The rustics who form a group are all varied in their peculiarities- Oak, Giles Winterborne and Diggory Venn are distinct in their characters and roles. Dr.Fitzpiers is just himself unlike the other

prototypes- Wildev, Sergeant Troy or Alec. Positive virtues run counter to negative weaknesses – a strong Farfrae chooses his women rather too practically and even unwisely. The view of man is potentially noble, virtuous, patient and heroic, is often accompanied with weaknesses leading to failure, defeat and even self-destruction. A close scrutiny of the lives of Henchard and Jude provides sufficient evidence of Hardy's 'intuitive understanding' of man – he does not require the modern tools of psychological theories, when the problems of the unconscious are suggested. This is the hall mark of Hardy's success as a novelist in spite of the crudeness and ineptitude in his design and style.

The central figures in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure* are the products of Hardy's mellowed wisdom gained from his writing experience of twenty five years. They are the sum of all his knowledge of Man and his place in the Universe. Henchard, Tess and Jude- each is a tragic figure; they have all qualities in common but their chequered destinies are different. Some characteristics of Jude link him with Henchard in *The Mayor* for instance, A.J.Guerard remarks, 'the common sensitiveness to music, the imprudent early marriages, the addiction to drink, the need to punish and degrade the self publicly'. Henchard and Jude are both work men; they are both tragic figures of frustration and failure. Simple and earnest in their pursuits, they are given to fits of gloom and depression. Both are sensitive and basically kind and unselfish. They are victims of their own self-destructive impulses directing them to their individual doom. Commenting on the ending of the two novels in relation to the two characters, A.J.Guerard aptly remarks, 'Jude Fawley might have signed Henchard's will', and their desolate state at the end of the novels being almost similar.

In all the major novels of Thomas Hardy, there emerges a sort of theory of society into which the facts, as he sees them, fit, it widens into nothing less than a view of the universe. In *The Return of the Native*, there is a problem of a young man of bucolic origin moving too quickly to intellectual and sophisticated aims, reaching a condition of unbalance between the two elements in himself.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Lucetta the half-emancipated woman shrinks and withers to her death before the terrors of the skimmy – ride. In *The Woodlanders*, there are deficiencies of the divorce laws; in *Tess* too has the cruelty of public opinion towards those who have offended against its decrees; and in *Jude*, Jude with his more conventional laws finding his life ruined by marriage with the coarse and dissolute Arabella.

Nature is sometimes benevolent to his characters, sometimes hostile, and sometimes indifferent. In *Jude*, Nature is almost uniformly hostile, represented by stuck-pigs, worms, stoned birds, nettles and dying rabbits. In *Tess*, landscape and season follow the heroines fortunes from stony upland to stonehenge. In *The Woodlanders* Hardy presents with a world that is both fruitful and diseased, both friendly and harsh: it is harsh but familiar to Marty South, it entangles the town-bred Felice and the town-educated Grace, and it finally kills its old friend Giles Winterborne. Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, is nothing but a heath to Thomasin. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, in a tragic scene, Bathsheba runs from home to find herself in a poisonous swamp. Nature, in fact is likely to be a snare as a comfort. Although Hardy reinforced his picture of the harshness of nature with the alarming ideas of Darwin, his response to that was personal: as a child, he had seen a frozen bird, a starved man, and the images remained with him. In *The Woodlanders* owls catch mice as remarkably as rabbits eat winter-greens and even the snake that kills Mrs.Yeobright is beautiful. The dog that destroys Gabriel Oak's sheep is over-enthusiastic, not malicious.

Through the decades that have followed Hardy's writing career, he has attracted millions of readers with a variety of critical opinions, continually opening new perspectives. Hardy thus remains, and will continue to remain, the focus of critical interest. In a tribute to Hardy on his eighty-first birthday, over hundred years paid homage to this great master, Irving Howe reports thus: "In your novels and poems you have given us a tragic vision of life which is informed by your knowledge of character and relieved by the charity of your humour... We have learned from you that the

proud heart can subdue the hardest fate in submitting to it... In all that you have written you have shown the spirit of man, nourished by tradition and sustained by pride persisting through defeat”.

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