

Chance, accident and coincidence in the mayor of casterbridge essay sample

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Enthusiasts of Thomas Hardy's novels know him with his distinctive philosophy of life. That is, the indestructible unseen force, Fate, exists to alter the happiness of a human's life. Fate resides in nature and may appear as a natural force. Thus, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* falls under the category of novels of character and environment. Furthermore, Hardy believes that there are different manifestations of Fate. Apart from its guise as nature, it also appears in the apparition of Chance, Accident and Coincidence. Ramji Lall mentioned that there has been an excessive use of chance and coincidence in this novel's course of events.

Hardy has been blamed for this, and no doubt he does sometimes overdo it. But to condemn his use of chance altogether is to misunderstand his view of life. Therefore, this essay attempts to illustrate the usefulness of chance, accident and coincidence to the novel. Chance exists in love, a weather-forecast and the goldfinch in the novel. Michael Henchard, the main character whose life is deeply succumbed into the hands of Fate, seeks love through Elizabeth-Jane Newson. Love is a chance whether one will give the affections or sympathy to the other and it depends on the other to appreciate the chance given to lead a fulfilling life.

In *Casterbridge*, Elizabeth apparently gives her utmost devotion and care to Henchard when he discloses the transaction at Weydon-Fair to her and that she is her real daughter. This happens before the revelation of Susan's letter which holds the truth of Elizabeth's real father - which is Newson. Upon knowing the truth, Henchard begins to treat Elizabeth with hostility, while withholding the fact that she is not his real daughter. When Elizabeth knows

about the truth near the end of the novel, it is her who treats Henchard with indifference when he needs Elizabeth's love the most.

From this illustration, Hardy wants to show that love incarnates Fate. When he has a chance to love Elizabeth as his own daughter and she loves him back, he refuses to. Hence, he dies in dejection in the end. It is arguable that it is with his impulsivity and doggedness as his nature which brings to his downfall when he practices secrecy and deception towards his step-daughter. But, these secrecy and deception derive from his love towards Elizabeth. He cannot afford to lose his affection towards his child hence he "sent away with an account of death" when the captain comes to his cottage in search of his daughter.

In this case, Ramji Lall argues that man seeks happiness through love. But this hope is vain because love, so far from being benevolent spirit helping man in his struggle with the inhuman forces controlling human existence, is itself a manifestation of these forces. Love, as conceived by Hardy, is a blind, irresistible power, seizing on human beings whether they will or not, intoxicating in its inception but bringing ruin in its wake. All in all, in the matter of love, it is to choose either to love or not that determines the rise and fall of a character in Hardy's novel. In Henchard's case he has no chance to live with love.

The caged goldfinch in the story can be perceived as the symbol of Henchard's chance. It seems that Henchard's life is paralleled to the bird's. He lives in misery, desperately hopes for freedom from the misery and

affections from the others. As hopeful Henchard feels when he buys the bird as a present to Elizabeth, as hopeful do the readers of the novel feel when the bird is left abandoned outside Elizabeth's house. As if Fate plays a role in this incident, Henchard has decided to deposit the bird and the cage "under a bush outside", where other people will hardly find the bird, as "it was by no means easy to set about discovering Henchard".

Here again, we rely on anybody, especially Elizabeth, to stumble upon the goldfinch so that Elizabeth will change her mind and forgive Henchard. The bird represents Henchard's final hope of living before his death. It is apparent that Hardy uses this goldfinch to arouse hope and sympathy towards Henchard. However, this hope is crushed when Elizabeth found the bird, "about a month after the day" she dismisses him, but that time of discovery is too late for her to meet him. Henchard died just before Elizabeth found him; just like the death of the goldfinch, in a remorseful state, deprived of hope and love.

Another opinion is that the cage itself is Fate; shielding its captive from any outside prod (miracle) to keep it miserable. All in all, Hardy is very deterministic on Hardy's sorrowful end and practices an excessive use of chance to maintain it - the placing of the cage, the time of the cage's discovery and Henchard's death. Just to prove Hardy's vision of life, the inevitability of sorrow in one's life. Another idea of chance is implemented in the activity of weather-forecasting. Prediction or divination does not give a hundred-percent assurance as it cannot be calculated using the scientific law.

And yet Henchard who has a traditional mind chooses to approach this weather-prophet in an attempt to win in business against the modern (Farfrae). The chance of the weather to be “rain and tempest” or good is 50:50, which means only one will prevail in business, either Henchard or Farfrae. It is ridiculed that Henchard “might gamble upon the square green areas of fields as readily as upon those of a card-room.” The plan to succeed by depending on such forecast, uncertain and fallible is too risky for a man like Henchard, with an established company of his own, to invest a big sum of money to back on bad weather.

Arguably, the probability of a future occurrence can be calculated from past observations of previous similar occurrences or the observations of environment, such as “the sun, moon, and stars ... the smell of the herbs;” etc. Still, however, the outcome cannot be known because of our ignorance of the exact causes of a phenomenon, such as the weather. By all means, with Henchard playing a game of chance creates a sense of suspense or wonder to the amateur readers of Hardy’s novels, as to wonder what the weather will turn out to be.

For those who knows Hardy, the good weather which occurs after Henchard’s investment on bad weather just justifies their suspicions of Hardy’s motive – that is chance never sides with Henchard and that he will lose. To cap it all, the use of chance in love, discovery of the goldfinch and forecasting accentuates Hardy’s sense of fatalism towards one’s destiny. Furthermore, the features aforesaid are the agents of Fate and that no miracle (a violation

of laws of nature) could stop them. No matter what or how, Henchard suffers from the tampering with the probabilities.

Thus the novel builds the sense of hopelessness in the readers. Accident may be perceived in different ways; which can be seen through the events of the collisions of wagons, weather-forecast seeking and the 'skimmity-ride'. Readers may take accident literally, whereby a street accident near Bull Stake. That is, the collision of both Henchard and Farfrae companies' waggons. Surely the crash is purely unintentional, as one of the parties had wronged 'the strict rule of the road', but never expecting it. But this accident has led the two victims to a heated argument.

This therefore represents conflict between Henchard and Farfrae thus bringing in the concept of drama. In addition, Hardy incorporated this unexpected event so as to add the surprising effect of the novel, apart from firing up conflict between the characters of the novel; and thus fulfilling the novel's criterion as a drama. To take the meaning of this collision of waggons to another perspective is that it symbolizes the clash of rustic and industrialization. Henchard, on one hand, practices traditional methods in handling his hay and corn business whilst Farfrae uses modern technology in his.

Hardy has a knack for pairing two distinctive features in one novel, such as modernism and traditionalism itself, and he is well credited for it. By using dualism in this novel it creates the theme of the novel - the clash of two lifestyles and that the rustic life giving way to modernism. It highlights the

outlook of English evolution during the reign of Industrialism in the 1840s. All in all, "The Mayor of Casterbridge" is a wholesome book in my opinion because it merely not describing the scuffles in a hamlet, it presents us the bigger picture of a human's life.

Accident may also be considered as a misfortune; unfortunate for Henchard to meddle with such occult activity as weather-forecasting. The act of Henchard seeking 'Wide-oh' to get a glimpse of future, that is to know whether the weather will be fine or not, metaphorically means that he seeks his own misfortune for meddling with uncertainty and possibilities. He may be excused however, for he has a traditional mind in believing such divination. But when he plays with these, he himself is being played by Fate.

Fate uses uncertainties like the motion of "clouds, the winds, the trees, and grass, the candle-flame and swallows" and sinister or wretched like "the cats' eyes, the ravens, the leeches, the spiders, and the dungmixon" as its tools to torture Henchard. Hardy's choice of words above creates the intended effect to the readers, which is to feel uneasy of Henchard's decision to ask of his fortune. Evidently, when he has invested heavily for a bad weather, the opposite occurs. To Henchard, it is an irony for the weather to turn out unlike it is divined to, and it greatly harms his business.

It is an unexpected and undesired result to happen, for the readers, which it is called as an accident. The death of Lucetta is an unintentional effect of the procession of 'skimmity-ride'. The objective of this 'skimmington-ride' organized by the rustics such as Jopp, Longways, Madam Cuxsom and Charl,

is merely to bring shame of two high-positioned persons in Casterbridge, Lucetta Templemen and Michael Henchard. Accidentally, Lucetta falls ill and consequently dies, as the result of her vulnerability and that she 'cannot bear much'.

It could be said that the 'thick-skinned rustics' in this village have a role in bringing down those higher-positioned than them, or that the community has power over an individual. Although Hardy might not be a moralist, this accident holds a moral value that unity is powerful. In another point of view; a mere 'skimmity-ride' bringing the 'coquette' Lucetta to death, the accident itself, is humorous. The overreaction by her is just comical; whimpering over trivial things: 'even to the parasol'. This sentence, 'She stood motionless for one second - then fell heavily to the floor' in 'epileptic seizure' gives the idea of a melodrama.

Although Hardy and the readers find relief in the humours of the rustics, they are dark and grotesque. Even such comedy was usually the handmade of tragedy. These brings to a meaning that Hardy intends to highlight the power of a community, even the lowly ones, and that a humour can harm through the event of 'skimmity-ride'. All in all, the use of accident in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' brings the effect of alleviating its dramatic quality, its theme, and its sense of tragedy. Coincidence is defined as a state or fact of occupying the same relative position or area in space.

It can be found in this novel through the juxtaposition of Henchard and Farfrae, Mr. Grower's role as a witness and Hardy's control over the novel's

plot. The coexistence of Henchard and Farfrae in Casterbridge is remarkable. Both of the characters hold very distinctive forces in them and for these to live in one place means trouble for one person or the other. On one hand, Henchard is strongly-built, a man in his 40s, a repellant to woman (as he called himself as a 'woman-hater'), has a very conventional mind, speaks harshly and the world seems to be against him.

On the other hand, Farfrae is slim and slender, young, has a charm over females, having an innovative mind, speaks politely and he seems to have the Scottish luck. These two entities clash throughout the novel, fighting to outdo each other and it clear of what the final result will be and it is the latter. Hardy fits in the character of Farfrae, in opposition to Henchard, for the readers to see the helpless struggle by Henchard to survive. Apparently Farfrae is the apparition of fate itself to bring Henchard down, and as Hardy is very deterministic in Henchard's doom, with all his bad hands in luck, Henchard ultimately dies in vain.

Another perspective will say that the juxtaposition of these two characters symbolizes the transition of power. The story takes place during the Industrial era, where modern industry takes the place of traditional farming. As Henchard nearly reached his old age and unable to keep up with the rapid and full of youth's zest, he has to step back and give way to Farfrae who possess these qualities to give the village a lift in industry. Furthermore, Henchard losses nearly all of his possessions to Farfrae - his house, the mayoralty, hay and corn business, Lucetta and even Elizabeth-Jane.

Generally, readers are given the idea that the old has to step aside and give way to the new in order to move on. Mr. Grower is a creditor to Henchard and also a witness to Farfrae and Lucetta's wedding. It becomes a coincidence when Henchard, ignorant of the wedding, asks Lucetta to act as his intended wife, in front of Mr. Grower, to postpone Henchard's debt payment to him. It is also worth to note that the existence of Mr. Grower during the wedding itself is a coincidence. It is likely that Fate had placed Mr. Grower, 'happened to be at Port-Breedy', where the wedding takes place.

Fate does this in order to wreck Henchard's plan. How is it possible, the readers will think, for Mr. Grower to believe that Lucetta is Henchard's fiancée if he had witnessed the wedding of Lucetta and Farfrae? Therefore Henchard cannot postpone his payment to Mr. Grower. Henchard has acted too late and had to admit his defeat. Here it shows that this coincidence is unlucky for Henchard and it partners with Fate to work against him. All matters that is mentioned in this paragraph can be brought together as Hardy's brilliant manipulation of the plot and characters. Hardy maintains tight control over the overall action.

He moves the characters around like actors on stage. Apart from the instances that have been mentioned, the moment of entrance of Farfrae, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane to Casterbridge is another. The characters narrowly miss bumping to each other; with Susan and Elizabeth had gone for the Three Mariners just when 'Henchard emerges from the King's Arm'. The readers have probably been wondering when Henchard will meet his former family again, and how they will react to each other. From this the suspense

builds. Hardy wants to make his readers wait a little longer before they can see this confrontation.

Another instance is that the rooms for Farfrae and the woman and her daughter in the Three Mariners are allotted next to each other. Hardy makes his readers wait to find out more about the mysterious stranger Farfrae. As the novel progresses, all these characters intertwined, entangled and the readers are served with the struggles by each individual character trying to win or outdo the others. Readers are made to think and predict who will prevail. All in all, the role of coincidence in this novel is to show the battle between the odds, the disappointment in hope and to aggravate suspense.

They also emphasize Hardy's belief that man is not in control of his own destiny, but is ruled by Fate. To put it briefly, it is inevitable to think that chance, accident and coincidence in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' are merely the agents of Fate. Evidently, Henchard, the main character, is surrounded by an environment which seems to be against him - the weather, the people, and the situations. These invisible features are apparently indestructible no matter how hard Henchard tries. Hence, Hardy's excessive use of chance and coincidence does effectively make the story tragic, by means of the merciless damnation towards a character.