

Character is fate



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Thomas Hardy is one of the most widely read and prominent tragic novelists in English literature. Thus he is a quite influential figure. Most of his novels have his native place Dorset as their setting, which are categorized as his famous ' Wessex novels'. In these novels Hardy describes the tragic fate of the rural life in England in quite a morbid mood and expressed his pessimistic view on human life at large. His *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a most controversial novel reviled and revered. This thesis intends to make a comprehensive exploration of the tragic fate of the hero Henchard.

As the mayor of Casterbridge, Henchard never stopped the fight against his fate throughout his whole life, however, he never succeeded, and moreover, he was beat down by fate. His character determined his tragic fate. His impulse and crankiness caused him to sell his wife after he got drunk, which is the beginning of his tragic fate; He was unwilling to adjust himself to the custom of Casterbridge, so he lost his battle in the competition with Farfrae. He tried so hard to expiate his past, but he was frustrated by kinship, friendship and love; the deficiency in his character made him unfit to the changeable world, eventually, he was eliminated by history.

This thesis mainly shows the character of tragic hero Henchard by analyzing the text. Part one introduces the philosophical and world view of Hardy, focusing on the understanding of Hardy's Fatalism and Determinism. Part two will analyze the hard life of Henchard, with the view to find out the reason of his failure from his relationship with his wife and daughter and lover, and gets the conclusion that ' Character is fate'. Part three analyzes the rivalry between Henchard and Farfrae, and looks into the reason why

Henchard is eliminated by history, and it strengthens the conclusion that ‘Character is fate’.

Key words □ character , environment, fate, tragic Introduction

1. 1 Thomas Hardy and His Novels

Born June 2, 1840, in the village of Upper Bockhampton, about three miles from the town of Dorchester in southwestern England, Thomas Hardy lived well into the twentieth century, dying in 1928 at the age of 88. Hardy remained a Victorian to the end. This is particularly true of his career as a novelist. All of his major novels were written before the turn of the century. He was the last important novelist of the Victorian age. In his Wessex novels, he vividly and truthfully described the tragic lives of the peasants in the last decade of the 19th century.

As the child of a builder, Hardy was apprenticed to John Hicks, an architect who lived in the city of Dorchester, and Dorchester is the model of Hardy’s fictional Casterbridge. “ Although Hardy gives serious thought to attending university and entering the church, a struggle he would dramatize in his 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure*, his declining religious faith and lack of money encouraged him to pursue a career in writing instead”. Hardy spent nearly a dozen years on writing. In the end, he became a successful novelist and poet.

Far From the Madding Crowd was published in 1874, which is the turning point of Hardy’s literary life. The novel was an overwhelming success, and from then on, Hardy was able to support himself only by writing. From 1878

to 1895, Hardy achieved a lot as a novelist. During this period Hardy published *The Return of Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, with which He consciously experiments with the idea and form of tragedy. “ In these books, Hardy’s persevering pessimism—based on his conception of the ‘ Immanent Will’ –and his sense of the inevitable tragedy of human life are continually apparent”. When he stayed in familiar rural setting, used classic form, and focused on a concern with the drama of basic human passions, his novels took on a unique tragic power different from other English novelists.

Sometimes, by his use of disastrous coincidence, Hardy intentionally leaves the reader the impression of making his material in agreement with his outlook, for instance, the fate of Tess’s letter of confession to Angel Clare. Yet there is real tragic dignity in the story of Tess, as well as of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. “ The latter, with the gradual, cruel revelation of Henchard’s past, must means more than an unconscious recollection of Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, while the function of the villagers or Casterbridge townsfolk in these books is clearly to provide a commentary akin to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy”. But Hardy’s intimate knowledge of the Wessex countryside and of rural life prevents the novels from being regarded only as attempts to transplant Greek tragedy into the 19th century English countryside.

1. 2 Literature Review

As one of the “ *Novels of Character and Environment*”, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a most controversial novel reviled and revered. Since its

publication, this novel has met with both approval and disapproval from critics. In his letter to his friend Stevenson in 1886, Hardy writes, “ The Saturday has thrown cold water on it by but then the Saturday man into whose hands my books are put has always been saying that my stories are dull’. James Payne, the publisher’s reader, reports to Smith, Elder and Co. that “ The lack of gentry among the characters made it uninteresting.” Perhaps because of “ the cold water”, even Hardy himself lacks confidence in this novel. In his notebook, he says, “ I fear it (The Mayor of Casterbridge) will not be so good as I meant, but after all it is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter”.

“ Small dispraise” of the novel comes from an anonymous reviewer writing in the Saturday Review on 29th, May 1886. The reviewer makes a comparison between The Mayor and an earlier work Far From the Madding Crowd and comments that the former “ is not equal to the author’s great and most picturesque romance of rural life...” thus seeing The Mayor as a “ disappointment”. The writing goes on commenting that the novel is “ too improbable”, and asserts that the opening scene is impossible to believe. William Dean Howells proves this completely wrong and says: “ Henchard’s sale of his wife is not without possibility or even precedent”.

While denounced by critics, The Mayor of Casterbridge is appreciated by some western writers. In answer to Hardy’s letter, Stevenson replies, “ I have read The Mayor of Casterbridge with sincere admiration: Henchard is a great fellow, and Dorchester is touched in with the hand of a master”. Moreover, this novel is Virginia Woolf’s favorite. In her eyes, “ This novel is an impression, not an argument”, “ There is greatness in the contest, there is

pride and pleasure in it, and the death of the broken corn merchant in his cottage on Egdon Heath is comparable to the death of Ajax, Lord of Calamis". As far as the tragic fate of the mayor is concerned, critics quite disagree with one another. The first kind of view tends to be overwhelming. That is: Most critics emphasize that Henchard's tragedy is determined by his character.

These critics must, without exclusion, be influenced by the writer's title "The Story of a Man of Character," and Hardy's quotation "Character is fate". Karl believes that "the events that help nullify Henchard are those that develop from his own character: her literally makes the world that first envelops and then squeezes him to death". Dale Kramer even sums up "at least four crucial demonstrations of this flaw in action".

The second kind of view often uses the novel to demonstrate the similarities with Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. So Henchard, the wretched corn merchant, is always bearing the analogies with Oedipus, and Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear. In the article "The Mayor of Casterbridge and the Old Testament's First Book of Samuel: A study of Some Literary Relationships," Julian Moynalan probes into details of the relationship between the mayor and the story of Samuel.

He illustrates the close resemblance between Henchard and Saul and that between David and Farfrae in the similar downfall of the former two and the rise of the latter two alike. He then concludes that the theme of the Mayor is not "character is fate" or "man against himself" but rather it is "the conflict between generations." From this standpoint, Julian Moynalan sees Hardy as "

a melodist”— a title Hardy has endowed himself —that is, a belief that the world may be made better by human efforts.

The third kind of view regards this book as a novel about Darwinism and jungle law. Many critics hold that the two rivals, Henchard and Farfrae, are the representatives of the old world and the new world respectively. It is a life-and-death fight between them. “ It was, in some degree, Northern insight matched against Southern doggedness—the dirk against the cudgel.”

In terms of Darwinism, Henchard is doomed to be defeated by Farfrae, as the old world inevitably gives way to the new one. Many Chinese critics attempt to interpret Henchard’s tragedy in light of Darwinism and social evolution. For example, Nie Zhenzhao points out in his book, “ As Hardy depicts the course of Casterbridge’s ruin, the premise of his thoughts is Darwinism. In terms of social evolution, Hardy suggests the inevitability to replace the old by the new, explaining that the change of Casterbridge and the devastation of the city is an unavoidable aftermath of evolution”.

In spite of being a voracious reader of Darwinism, Hardy is very skeptical and hesitant to embrace it wholeheartedly and his view on the evolutionary process is a mixed one. In a notebook entry of 1876, Hardy copied the following from an article by Theodore Watts:“ Science tells us, in the struggle for life, the surviving organism is not necessarily that which is absolutely the best in an ideal sense, though it must be that which is most in harmony with surrounding conditions.” In this sense, Hu Baoping points out that “ despite his in-depth historic ideology in Hardy’s works, change of history to Hardy does not necessarily mean development and progress, but signifies loss and

pity. It goes without saying that to regard *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a novel about Darwinism and jungle law is too radical to be convincing.

It has been argued that Henchard's fate is based on the central assumption of Christian literature that the gods are just and that, in the long run, one actually gets what one deserves. Critics of this genre believe Henchard's tragic ending as a kind of retribution for his sin of wife-sale. Thus they consider Newson and the firmity woman as unsecured past and they believe that the callous and inhuman sin of wife-sale leads to a series of awful consequences and pursues him to death. John Paterson belongs to this genre and comments that Henchard's wife-sale offends morality and so he should be punished. Other critics who agree to the causality of this wife-sale and punishment may apply another completely different modern theory. Albert J. Guerard, for instance, points out that Henchard's sense of guilt originating from the sale of Susan is not suppressible and that there exists a subconscious self-destruction in Henchard, hence brings about his tragedy.

According to Herbert Spencer, however, nature is a history of the evolutionary movement of all life—caused by the persistence of force—from the simple to the complex, the unspecialized to the specialized, from the backward to the progressive. The town of Casterbridge is no exception. With time passing on, Casterbridge experiences slow yet gradual changes which bring Henchard the complete misfit to his bankruptcy and his political downfall. As Henchard's opposite, Donald Farfrae is shrewd and gentle, he's a man of thought, coolness, flexibility and prudence, and it is Donald Farfrae that the modern world rewards. Henchard, like all human beings, is just powerless puppet on the stage of life: No matter how hard he endeavors to

struggle, he will be unavoidably ensnared. To make things worse, Henchard is ambitious and proud, just like Greek heroes, therefore, his downfall is destined and inevitable.

This thesis attempts to explain the tragic hero Henchard, whose character determines his fate by analyzing the text, which mainly demonstrates man's useless effort to fight against the cruel and unintelligible fate and circumstances, and finally reaches the conclusion that Henchard is a man of noble spirit and deserves our great sympathy.

The Hard Life Journey of Henchard

Different readers have thought of Henchard as a Sophoclean tragic hero because he is doomed in the present because of what he has done in the past, or as an Aeschylean or Euripidean tragic hero because he is made to suffer more than his deeds would seem to require. However, in my mind, Henchard's behavior is that of an 'isolated' who constantly pours his affections towards people who, in a real sense, are different from him. He is at home nowhere, seldom able to make and never able to maintain normal relationship with other people. In April 1878 Hardy wrote: "A plot, or tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by the said passions, prejudices, and ambitions".

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard's character can not be easily classified as good or bad. He is a man larger than life; greater and worse than ordinary people. He has not only qualities such as honesty, fairness and

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courage which are so important to him that they sometimes make him too rigid and intolerant, but also notable flaws such as pride, ambition and impetuosity which distinguish him from ordinary, as well as lead him to decline. Having these qualities, his actions and motives are always excessive whether he is engaged in doing good thing or in being cruel. Throughout the novel, Michael Henchard is never for a moment out of our mind and his character lingers on every page like bass notes of impending doom. As Hardy himself put it in the Preface of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: “ the story is more particularly a study of one man’s deeds and character than, perhaps, any other of those included in my *Exhibition of Wessex life*.”

Henchard is a man of character. In the month of Hardy’s death , 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote: Henchard is pitied, not against another man, but against something outside himself which is opposed to men of his ambition and power. No human being wishes him ill. Even Farfrae and Newson and Elizabeth Jane whom he has wronged all come to pity him, and even to admire his strength of character. He is standing up to fate, and in backing the old Mayor whose ruin has been largely his own fault...The death of the broken corn merchant in his cottage on Egdon Heath is comparable to the death of Ajax lord of Salamis.

2. 1 Henchard’s Treatment of Susan

In the very beginning, Henchard is extraordinary because his ‘ measured springless walk’ is ‘ distinct from the desultory shambling of the general laborer’ and ‘ a dogged and cynical indifference, personal to himself. As he is young and ambitious, he is dissatisfied with his family. This dissatisfaction is

displayed after he gets drunk in his conversation with others about ‘ The ruin of good man by bad wives, and more particularly by frustration of many a promising youth’s high aims and hopes, and the extinction of his energies, by an early and imprudent marriage’. After he has sold his wife, ‘ The spectators had indeed taken the proceedings throughout as a piece of mirthful irony carried to extremes; and had assumed that, being out of work, he was a consequence out of temper with the world, and society, and his nearest kin’.

William Dean Howells believes that: ‘ Henchard sold his wife in the following all the consequences to his innocent and beneficent after-life, and to the good and guiltless lives of others. The wrong he has done can’t be repaired, because it can’t, to his mistaken thinking, be owned; and in the tragedy of its expiation your pity is more for him than for all the others. That wrong pursues him; it hunts him to death, with what natural reliefs and pauses the reader knows’.

As a young man, Henchard is headstrong, and passionate. Even before Henchard works himself into a fury in the furmity tent, Susan’s meek behavior as she walks along beside him(“ She keeps as close to his side as was possible without actual contact”) implies his volatile and potentially violent nature. The events that take place in the furmity tent at the fair demonstrate a cycle into which Henchard falls frequently throughout the novel. After finding himself in a shameful situation – this time, having sold his wife and child – he takes full responsibility for his mistakes and sets out to correct them. In fact, his desire to make amends is overpowering. He spends several months searching for his wife and child, proving that his

remorse is not half-hearted. This audacious spirit is a hallmark of Henchard's character, as he switches quickly from ungrateful misogyny to sincere penitence.

Although Henchard's search for his wife seems to be an example of honest contrition, his true motivation is more likely to be the concern over his personal honor. When Henchard wakes, his remorse stems more from a fear of being disdained than from any sense of moral irresponsibility. His interest in his good name plays a significant role in his sacrifice of personal satisfaction when he swears off alcohol and determines to find his wife. Before he begins to scour the English countryside for his wife and child, he reflects that it is not his own but rather his wife's 'idiotic simplicity' that has brought disgrace on him. As he stands outside the fairgrounds at Weydon-priors, anxiously wondering whether he revealed his name to anybody in the furmity tent, Henchard displays an obsession with public opinion concerning his character that greatly shapes his actions and personality. Henchard's initial irresponsibility suggests that the novel's subtitle may not be an accurate description of him. In a way, the subtitle foreshadows Henchard's transition to a man of character.

It is his response to his guilt that elevates him above ordinary people. Henchard, while admitting his guilt, struggles heroically against the fate that guilt has brought on him. Eighteen years later, meeting Susan again, he gives back Susan the sale money symbolically and remarries her to make amends. At that time, Henchard, at his highest position, could have ignored Susan and turned her away, but he is a man with conscience. He accepts

Susan and provides a comfortable home for her; it seems that he has wiped the slate clean, without foreseeing the disaster it will bring.

2. 2 Henchard's Relationship with Elizabeth-Jane

The only love in the novel that Henchard clearly regrets losing is for Elizabeth-Jane. It is non-sexual and that goes out from him. It seems that Henchard is unable to foster anything like a full relationship or communication. His attitude towards Elizabeth-Jane undergoes several steps, but his love to her is the most sincere and deep one he has ever experienced.

When Susan and Elizabeth-Jane arrive in Casterbridge, Henchard is happier in seeing the daughter than the mother and is ready to pour his paternal love upon her. Henchard's wife was dissevered from him by death; his friend and helper Farfrae by estrangement; Elizabeth-Jane by ignorance. It seemed to him that only one of them could possibly be recalled, and that was the girl . He was the kind of man to whom some human object for pouring out his heat upon were it emotive or were it choleric was almost necessity .

After Susan's death, Henchard's hot-blooded character makes it almost a necessity for him to pour out his passion upon someone, so after he has lost his friend Farfrae, he can no longer restrain his impulse and decides to reveal the secret to Elizabeth-Jane. He is ready to pour his paternal possessive feelings to the girl. However, he finds the letter written by Susan before her death with restriction ' Not to be opened till Elizabeth-Jane's wedding-day', yet he opens it, paying no attention to the restriction and so gets the most serious blow. It indicates that Henchard is an ego man, he never considers

other's feeling, he never respects Susan's decision. When he finds that she is not his daughter, he holds back his feelings and treats the girl in a constrained manner she has never seen before. The coldness in his attitude frustrates the poor girl, but she accepts it calmly although suspiciously.

When Henchard meets his complete downfall and becomes physically and emotionally weak, Elizabeth-Jane comes to take care of him. Her concern and care is the only comfort Henchard can seek: ' She seems to him as a pinpoint of light' . A great change has come over Henchard with regard to Elizabeth-Jane, and he is developing the dream of a future lit by her filial presence, as though that way alone can happiness lie. Then Newson appeared, for fearing of losing Elizabeth's love, he lies to Newson that his daughter is already dead when the latter comes to look for her. Henchard's selfish and deceitful means of dealing with Newson threatens to rob him of his last bit of self-respect.

Despite all this deception, pettiness, and his rabid temper, Henchard remains an essentially sympathetic character. Given his deep, newfound love for Elizabeth-Jane, and the desperateness of his desire to have that love returned, we understand Henchard's deceitful behavior. Like so many of Henchard's decisions, fooling Newson has nothing to do with calculation or manipulation. In this light, Henchard's treatment of Newson is the frantic act of a scared, lonely, and highly pitiable man.