

Hardy as a Social Reformer

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Abstract

The following research paper is an attempt to discuss Thomas Hardy, a novelist of the Victorian era, as a social reformer. Many critics and researchers of his novels, consider him a pessimist, who paints a darker picture of life. In this picture, man is portrayed as a tragic figure, clutched in the cruel grips of fate as well as society. The present paper gives arguments of critics, and interprets Hardy's novels in the way, so that we may present him as a social reformer. It throws light on two of the major novels of Hardy, 'TESS OF THE DURBERVILLES' and 'THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE'.

Index terms— Victorian era, social reformer, TESS OF THE DURBERVILLES.

I. Literature Review literary critics and scholars took their pen on Thomas Hardy, and wrote about him, according to their own perceptive. If we categorize these scholars according to their age, it would not go wrong to say that the critics of the Victorian age, under the yoke of social conventions, regarded Hardy as a pessimist. In their views Hardy himself suffered from tragic life, and his reading of Greek Tragedies, resulted in reflecting a gloomy picture of life in his works. With the passage of time, as modern age emerged with its multiplicity, almost in every field of life, broadened the intellectual vistas, and thus, interpretations of Hardy's works took new dimensions. One thing is confirmed that the broadened views opened the close windows of mind and let the fresh air come in the intellectual field. The result was that the modern critics spent their energies to show Hardy as a realist. This research paper steps forward to discuss Hardy as a social reformer. Society is a collective form of human beings, and Hardy takes his character as an individual, who can take his better part in improving this universe. He pinpoints the inner drawbacks of his characters and want them to be reformed. No doubt, impersonal forces come forward to hurdle in the way of his characters, but they must bring their inner capacities forward to face these hurdles. Such a person cannot be called a pessimist, rather he is a reformer and optimist, who waits for the silver lining to emerge, and it can be emerged, he says, if his characters face the opposing external and internal forces bravely, when the dark clouds are prevailing in their lives.

1 II. Introduction

Hardy (1840-1928), a well known novelist, opened his eye among the Wessex. The conditions of life prevailing in his surroundings were hard. Besides like his father, he was an emotional and secluded person. Among his school mates, he was not too much popular, and spent most of his time meditating. This meditation reflected in his novels, which depict life in terms of tragedy. However, the flame of love for humanity kept burning in his heart, and he thought that how they can bring improvements in their life.

2 III. Interpretation

Hardy in his novels, presents his characters in the way, suffering both at the hands of ironist God and conservative custom-holders of society. These forces influence their life so deeply that they get no way, but to see life caught badly is a blind alley. In STEWART(1976) words "Hardy is content with the single march of a protagonist to his doom - the great ineluctable fatality of things, announcing loudly by means of a series of sensational set pieces en route".

Hinting at the decisive forces in his characters tragic life M.H ABRAM (1987) points out that it is cruel destiny, circumstances or imposed cruelty on one another, which lead them to tragic ending. Such type of views,

make Hardy's readers think that he is a pessimist. Tracing the reasons of his pessimism, they consider certain formative influences, responsible for Hardy's pessimism i.e. his heredity, surroundings, emotional nature and his reading of the classical works. As F. ANNING (1912) says that tragedy is a nuclear around which Hardy's novels revolve and seeds of this tragedy lie in his deep emotional nature.

But his meditation on human tragedy led him to think that what is inside man, through which he can play his role and make this universe a happy place to live. It is right that he thinks fate as an indifferent force, and in the words of E. M. FOSTER (1927), fate in Hardy's novels works above his characters' not through them. To emphasize the point, he presents his characters caught in the web of coincidences, and these chances change the whole pattern of their life and leave them wailing. Hardy seems to be putting a question on his characters that what is the advantage of this weiling?

We suffer, because we are alive, and as alive persons we would come across chances and coincidences, but what forces are with us? What can we do with ourselves? What forces are going against us? The social conventions, especially those of the Victorian era, make his sensitive mind upset. He urges his characters not to be pressed under these norms. JOHN GOODE (1988) asserts that Hardy, instead of approving the social mores, interrogates that why these norms and even he rejects them. This rejection makes the respectable figures of society annoyed, and that is why, they regard Hardy as a pessimist. RICHARD TAUFKRICH with DIE ROMANKUNST VON (1912) says that although Hardy considers life, a womb of pains and sufferings, yet he is not a pessimist, and those who regard him thus, they do this because of their inner biases.

Let us take his novels and compare them with Greek tragedies, which presented human being, as a puppet in the grand hand of fate, and these tragedies ended, in leaving their characters, being suffered. Hardy does not do so. We can find element of hope in the ending of 'TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES' is not merely sport of the immortal forces, rather it is mainly because of her failure to overgrow social conventions. PATRICIA INGHAM (1989) says that tragedy of Tess is the result of her inner conflicts between individuality and conventionality. Hardy shows this conflict, when Tess after her rape says, "Perhaps, of all things, a lie on this thing would do the most good to me now; but I have honour enough left little as 'tis, not to tell that lie." (P.89). Throughout her life she cannot come out of this conflict and finally, she is hanged. SPIVEY throws light on this fact and according to him, tragedy in Hardy's novels emerged when a romantic hero fails in his life attempt to reach a higher spiritual state. On the other hand, development is shown in the character of Angel. Angel at one time leaves Tess by saying that forgiveness did not apply to all cases. At that time, he is typically a traditional person, but with the passage of time, he realizes his fault and comes back, although it is too late for Tess. Hardy presents Angel as a reformed person now, and in other words, gives him a second life with Lizzy. Hardy thinks that it is future, for which we should strive and struggle.

Then there is Henchard in "THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE", he feels himself helpless before his past because he cannot change it, but he tries his best to change his future, he declares: "Judge me by my future works" (HENCHARD CH.II). He feels repentance on his past deeds, and wants to reform him that he says, "Yes, it is, but it is not by what it is, in this life, but by what appears, that you are judged" (HENCHARD. CH.25). Tragic happenings linger in his novels but still there is hope, hope in the sense that he wants his characters to be reformed. Through their reformation, he wants them to share their part to make this universe, a happy place.

For the purpose of reformation, Hardy goes deep into psyche of his characters, and tries to locate where the drawbacks of their personality lie. BUTLER (1980) asserts that "Hardy wants always to go deeper and he is prepared to face anything". This going into inner psyche makes his fictions, especially "THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE", like Shakespearean tragedies. Whether it is Tess or Henchard, the failure of the both is of internal characteristics like that of the KING LEAR or MACBETH. However difference lies between Shakespearean tragedies and those of the Hardy. As REHDER (1977) says that "For Shakespeare, tragedies end in death, comedies end in marriage. For Hardy some tragedies begin in marriage and every comedy contains a tragedy."

3 IV. Conclusion

It is true that the overall concept presented in Hardy's novels, is tragic. But being tragic, they cannot be regarded as pessimistic. His novels depict life, prevailing in the Victorian age, and it is the life crushed under the burden of conventions. Hardy raises his finger to these norms and wants them to reform, but the followers of these conventions become upset and call him a pessimist. Indeed, an in-depth study of his novels and their characters reveal the fact that he presents a pessimistic life, which he found in his age and urges his characters to reform themselves.¹

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