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Realism and Pessimism in the novels of Thomas Hardy

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to highlight realistic and pessimistic approaches in the novels of Thomas Hardy. His pessimism is of a different kind, which is based on logical and realistic earthly facts. His writing career spans over two centuries in the history of English literature, and viewers find that pessimism in his novels is, of course, a kind of realism. In fact, 'life and death' and 'gain and loss' always execute mankind and take all human beings into the realm of suffering. He has devoted his thoughts, ideas, and philosophy to many problems such as religion, ethics, life, society, love, and marriage in his novels.

Keywords: Realism, pessimism, society, pain and gain, life and death, law, religion and faith, destiny and chance, etc.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy has made brilliant artistic achievements. Hardy's novels are usually inseparable from the small town in southwest England where he was born and raised. Hardy's novels have strong local characteristics and colour. The anti-social tendency, sense of alienation, and anxiety about human destiny are reflected in Hardy's tragic novels, and his novels have always been talked about by the world as full of philosophy of life and the world. He has long been regarded as a realist writer, his works have traces of modernism. However, a few people have systematically analysed the specific reflection of Existentialism in his novels. Hardy has devoted his thoughts, ideas, and philosophy to many problems such as religion, ethics, life, society, love, and marriage in his novels. Hardy believes that social evil cannot be eliminated, the situation of human beings is getting worse and worse, and pessimism and world-weariness are increasingly becoming a common mental state of all mankind.

In many of his novels, Hardy thinks that Christian civilisation is the birthplace of tragedy and the burial place of all good things, and gives relentless criticism and fierce attack on stale religious ideas which is quite meaningless to award happiness instead to miss convince. Hardy creates tragic conflicts and tragic endings to arouse readers' thoughts on the tragic fate of the hero, and realise that decadent religions and ethics are contrary to human nature and cannibalism. He intends to criticise old religions and moral concepts and purify people's hearts to lead a real life instead of a life based on faith. George Sampson remarks,

"It is not fanciful to find evidence of Hardy's architectural disposition in the careful planning of his books, and it is quite safe to find in his study of old parish churches the nourishment of his native interest in local associations." (Page 654)*4

W.H. Hudson also says that people in Wessex lead a simple life. He says,

"Though Hardy's mind was shaped to some extent by the theories of later German philosopher, he thought gratefully of the simple paganism lingering on in Wessex beneath the Christian veneer." (Page 269)*5

Hardy's early novels inherited and carried forward traditional English literature – and the novels in the middle and late incorporated modern consciousness and modern feelings. The

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antisocial elements of Hardy's tragic novels are mainly reflected in his devastating criticism of the traditional values on which society depends and practices. But his criticism of religious doctrine, legal provisions, and marriage morality is just similar to modern artists. He saw the trauma brought by modern civilisation and predicted that people's spiritual world would be indeed a wasteland. Hardy treats marriage as a social contract, though deeply disgusted with marriage morality. He thinks that marriage is not sacred, although believed that "marriage concluded by God". Most couples are not satisfied with marriage. Hardy also questioned the justice of the law by describing Tess's fate. He says that it is a ruthless and rigid legal provision. Playboy who plays with women has not been punished by law, but has become the spiritual mentor of mankind and warmly welcomed in society when the victim stood up against fate and the environment that caused her lifelong pain, the law awarded her a cruel hanging. This is the law to award pain instead justice. W.H. Hudson remarks,

"Hardy's novels and poems are, throughout, the work of a man painfully dissatisfied with the age in which he lived. He was homesick for the past – the past of England before the strong roots of English manhood and womanhood had been overlaid by what seemed to Hardy a thin soil of flinching niceness miscalled education and culture." (Page 269)*5

Thomas Hardy believes that man is a puppet at the hands of fate and chance or circumstances. He also shows that happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. Why God grants us pain to man. The Government of God is regarded as the Supreme Government – one can say it is the Supreme Power. The Supreme Power should think about all this. This Supreme Government should handle evil forces and not perform bad deeds which lead to suffering. Thomas Hardy was not in favour of God's entity, and blindly presents his ideas regarding love, life, destiny, world, and man and suffering which are scientific and logical not based on belief. W.R. Goodman says,

"Hardy and his followers went a long way in determining the behaviour and character of a man. They presented everything that was scientific and logical." (Page 431) *1

Thomas Hardy says that an unseen power forces man to do mistakes and thereafter to embrace suffering. Thomas Hardy is an excellent successor of British critical realism as well as a pioneer of modern literature. On the one hand, he inherited the great tradition of British critical realism and deeply presented the disadvantages of the Victorian Dynasty. On the other hand, he pioneered British modernism and painfully analysed the modernist dilemma of people in a modern capitalist society where moral values had disappeared. Hardy is one of the novelists who belong to the transition – between Victorianism and modernism. Hardy's novels are different from those of his predecessor Dickens and his successor Lawrence. So, he is a bridge creator between the two. Hardy distrusted modern civilisation. J.N. Mundra and C.L. Sahni remark on a comment made by George Stade. They write,

"In the Modern Age, Hardy shows in his novels that modernism has brought great pain to modern civilisation. His novels have a strong modernist literary colour and flavour. Hardy's tragic novels have the flavour of modern literature. The sense of anti-social tendency, alienation, and anxiety about human destiny reflected in modern literature in all genres are the main features of his tragic novels. His works inherit and further the traditional characteristics of the Victorian Age and give a new direction to the Modern Age in English literature. Thus, people can know and understand his thoughts and philosophy of life, love, and the world, etc. in the world. George Stade observes, "The most general common characteristics of the modernist writers, then, was an adversary or alienated relationship to their own cultures. The most general common characteristic of their work was the inverse relation between the rendered aesthetics order and the represented chaos." (Page 320) *3

W.H. Hudson also remarks the same,

"He distrusted modern civilisation because he suspected that in effect was frequently to de-civilize and weaken those to whom Nature and old custom had given stout hearts, clear heads and an enduring spirit." (Page 269) *5

Hardy experienced the important period of Britain's transition from a feudal society to modern times that was influenced by traditional culture and exposed to the developing industrial civilization. He saw the era when Britain was gradually furthering towards an industrial society under the capitalist system. So, his novels reveal the true picture of the disintegration of the English countryside in this period. It also shows the process of destruction of the archaic customs of the patriarchal clan system. Later on, because of all this, people become indifferent and alienated, and human beings feel unprecedented loneliness. Because of the two world wars, freedom, fraternity, and democracy have all been shattered. Tajindar Singh remarks,

"But almost all writers stood for the demolition of these artificial barriers and the recognition of the unalienable humanity of the undergoes. No writer worthy of not seems to be unaware of the process of rapid democratisation of the political system. The common man comes and stays as the hero of most works of literature." (Page 398)*6

During the Victoria era, the government was corrupt and the economy was sluggish. People at the bottom of society who lived in such an environment were in miserable conditions. Society was filled with a morbid sad atmosphere. Such a social environment produced themes for socially realistic tragic novels. His protagonists often did not integrate into society, and could not communicate their thoughts and feelings normally, eventually becoming victims under secular pressure as has been revealed in most of the novels. His novels have many similarities with Lawrence's. This is the time when Hardy is slowly moving towards modernism and he pays attention to self-expression in creating characters and refuses to use people directly to tell stories. W.H. Hudson writes,

“Victorian ideals were being challenged here and there, and in Hardy’s work there was from the beginning an implied disagreement with current conventions...” (Page 267)*5

His modernist approach uses symbolism, imagery, stream of consciousness, and black humour when expressing characters. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is one of the Wessex novels, which narrates the tragic fate of a rural girl. Tess, who is the heroine of the story, is a pure, beautiful, and hardworking rural girl, who has a good yearning for her future life, but her tragic fate awaits her to make irony as with everyone according to Hardy. She lived in a rural and poor area and had to work in a distant relative's home because of her livelihood, but she was tricked and raped by Alec. Naturally, she couldn't bear all this and went back home, only to find that she was pregnant and became a "degenerate" woman in the eyes of the manmade society of the world. No people in the village sympathize with her and regarded her as an immoral sinner, which was strongly criticised by society. Most modern writers often associate the fate of the hero with that of mankind, and they attribute the phenomena present in capitalist society to the universal phenomena over the world. They all revealed a profound and indescribable anxiety for survival, a sense of loneliness and hollowness that the foundation of survival was uprooted, and a kind of sorrow and fear that survival lost its purpose and significance. Hardy views the spiritual world of mankind will be a wasteland, which coincides with Eliot's wasteland. Hardy's exploration of human destiny is indeed not limited to the description of the scenery, but his psychological description of the hero shows the trauma brought by modern civilization. W.H. Hudson remarks,

“The last chapter of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* outraged the religious conscience of 1891: to-day it offends the aesthetic conscience by its violation of our critical sense of order and imaginative sensibility.” (Page 268)*5

Hardy’s state of mind was frequently unemotionally sad. Destiny predominately depicts in Hardy novels – both *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* contain the role of destiny in life. His works depict a sceptical view where destiny, or chance, is in power to ruin the character. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and so forth are Hardy's endeavours at discovering a few answers. Idealistic frames of mind are favoured and of enthusiastic thought. The connection between pessimism and scepticism is available. George Sampson remarks,

“A complete fatalist, from the first movements of his novels to the last workings of destiny in *The Dynasts*, Hardy saw man living, loving, labouring and perishing against a background of a remote, indifferent, implacable forces, themselves unconscious, and uncontrolled. He seemed drawn to the darker side of truth, appeared to turn the balance against hope, because his artistic veracity forbade him to propagate delusions about a happy issue out of human afflictions.” (Page 655)*4

Hardy himself said that “his pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not include the presumption that the world is set off to the hounds...my down-to-earth reasoning is unmistakably

Melioristic.” He indeed was the painter of the darker side of life as it was no big surprise if individuals charged him with "Pessimist". Both good and bad are in this unique circumstance in life. Indeed, there are a few factors that force man to believe him a pessimist. But it is also important to say that life leads to death or end or loss of life so his pessimism is closed to realism. His own life was unfortunate. The melancholy impact of his age assumes a main role in his compositions of such works. Disappointments, modern unrest, doubts, despair, mistrust, breaking down of old social and monetary structures all lead to his pessimism but all this is real. W.R. Goodman remarks,

“Hardy was not an unmitigated pessimist. If we note certain elements of pessimism in Hardy’s novels, it is pessimism of very different kind from the splendid kind preferred by diseases like Strindberg or Huyamans. For it is capable of tragedy; and tragedy is not.....something just sorrowful distressing. It is a unity of several elements and that which is grievous is but one of them. So his attitude of life is tragic rather than pessimistic, gloomy or fatalistic.” (Page 425)*1

Darwin's theory of evolution was one of the reasons for that age which lead him to pessimism. These elements are tested by the whole of mankind and aware of its solemn, melancholic, and unfortunate vision. His Pessimism is also the result of the impressions that he gets from the resident's life. There were a lot of catastrophes in the life of the destitution-stricken Wessex people. His way of thinking about the human condition is dictated by his common temper and aura. Hardy prohibits from his compositions the feeling of wonder and magnificence of human life. W.H. Hudson remarks,

“Wessex was still the old England. Its woods, its heaths, its barrows, its barns and byre – all these stood in memory of a noble antiquity making mute protest against invading aggressive modernity.” (Page 269-270)*5

Hardy revealed the current sentimental attitude to life, love, and religion. He presented the earthly facts which mankind witnessed, not which are only believed. George Sampson remarks,

“In prose and verse alike, Hardy abjured the current sentimental attitude to life, love and religion. His interpretation of existence is not a "reading of earth" in the mystical Meredithian sense, but it is an interpretation of earthly facts.” (Page 655)*4

Tess' life is complete without even a solitary snapshot of satisfaction. His origination of life is heartbreaking. He is one of the individuals who accept that life is nothing more than a blast. Hardy’s novels focus on human suffering and demonstrate that there will never be a way out for individuals. His mentality towards life is exceptionally melancholic and burdensome, but realistic. Life is a game executed by melancholy. Melancholy, disappointment, loss, and suffering execute us for their game. Hardy's universe is neither administered by God, the Dad, nor casual by the celestial soul. Men are helpless instruments of the extraordinary system of circumstances and logical results which make them. W.H. Hudson remarks,

“Hardy held that there is no active intelligence, no just and loving God, behind human destiny, but that Creation is swayed by an unconscious mechanical force, sightless, dumb, mindless and equally indifferent to either the or the joys of mankind.” (Page 270)*5

Hardy was indeed a realist like G.B. Shaw, not an idealist or optimistic. His pessimism is bracing and refreshing, unlike others. People remember their past and feel that Hardy's novels are a reminder of the past of their happy and satisfactory life without scriptures and modernity. W.R. Goodman writes,

“Hardy's pessimism has a bracing and refreshing effect. “After finishing one of Hardy's novels, one has all the delight of walking from an impressive but horrible dream and feeling through the dissolving vision the real friendliness of the good old earth.” (Page 427)*1

Hardy's demeanour toward his heroines is exceptionally mind-boggling. His most well-known heroines incorporate Bathsheba Everdene of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Tess of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and Sue Bridehead of *Jude the Obscure*. They reveal incredible quality, but on the other hand, are inclined to the extraordinary shortcoming. Sue Bridehead is likely the most perplexing character. *Jude the Obscure* was composed while Hardy's first wife Emma was alive. It isn't hard to see disappointment with marriage obvious in the book, which depicts his conjugal issues. Sue Bridehead can be regarded as a kind of sentimental dream, somebody Hardy wished he had married. Here the way that the link between Sue and Jude comes up short reflects Hardy's Pessimism, yet his reluctance to make a double-crossing relationship effective. No real infidelity on his part was ever revealed. Raghukul further says,

“His novels are questioning s about life. He constantly enquires about the why and whereof things and constantly attacks accepted beliefs. Man's predicament is the universe is the theme of Thomas Hardy's novels. He has no faith in the benevolent and omnipotent God of Christianity.” (Page 208)*2

Raghukul further says,

“Man suffers not owing to any fault of his but owing to the imperfections of the powers on high. Character is responsible for the tragedy only to a very limited extent.” (Page 208)*2

Hardy's novels show his distraction with a social class that proceeds through his works. He had associations with both the working and the high class, yet felt that he had a place with not one or the other, and it is real, too. This is revealed in the pessimism contained in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* toward the chances for Tess to rise in society. He has every sense of sincerity in portraying his characters and his view was always honest and admired by a lot of people of his time. George Sampson writes,

“Never overlooked, and increasingly recognised as a sincere writer with an unflinchingly honest view of life, Hardy was read and admired by a large following of thoughtful persons.” (Page 654)*4

Hardy extended his satiric assault in his next work, *Jude the Obscure* (1895). This work directly condemned the institution of marriage, the Church, and Britain's class framework. Hardy was again savaged by faultfinders who couldn't face his realistic rebelliousness. He was also assaulted in the press as a debauched, disgusting, and degenerate one. His wife was also annoyed and felt his work was hostile to religion and along these lines a hit to the devoutness she accepted she shared with her husband. Thus, Hardy was always troubled by such little-mindedness in all spheres of life. W.H. Hudson remarks,

“Jude the Obscure, the last novel is more fatally injured by ruthlessness. At no time are Sue and Jude permitted to escape the shadowing hand of malignant destiny. They are defeated and broken. Their lack of spiritual resilience, their crippling inability to do what many of Hardy's people do magnificently – stand erect and hit destiny fully in the face – prevent *Jude the Obscure* from being the greatest of Hardy's novels.” (Page 268)*2

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The Mayor of Casterbridge is a catastrophe – regardless of what the primary characters attempt to achieve, the destinies appear to act as a burden. It reveals to us that Henchard will bite the dust toward the end. This indeed is an epic of Thomas Hardy. It is a sort of cynical story of its hero Michel Henchard. He is the central figure who has moved toward becoming mankind of his very own luck however he is a laborious man, and he attempts to progress nicely and turns into a decent person yet wherever he gets disappointment, dissatisfaction, distance, and turmoil in his life. His entire part of life is a shocking one. His pivotal and reprehensible slip-up is selling his better half and girl being in an alcoholic state of mind. Readers have sympathy for Henchard because everything had progressed toward becoming unwittingly. Henchard attempted to do great constantly and he looked through his significant other and girl. He takes a vow not to drink even a drop of wine for quite a while. Later on, he got financial achievement and he came to the highest point of his capacity. He undoubtedly respected his past spouse and his supposed claim girl. He attempted his best to deal with his little girl, spouse, companions, and adherents. For his whole life, he life brought about an extremely pessimistic disposition. He trusted Farfrae as his correct hand yet couldn't get a definitive fulfilment. He felt the high scope of monetary destruction yet finally everything resisted the underlying position of Henchard. It may be a progressively awful position over that of his past one. Henchard is a sceptical hero of the novel since he couldn't get joy whenever. His prosperity has turned into the direct opposite of his joy. His little mistake bunches a wide range of joy and requested life designs. On the off chance that there is whatever is entirely dependable to give the sceptical tone of the novel. It is indeed, occurrences that have assumed the vital job to take the Pessimistic vision in the whole life adventure of Henchard. Life has been exhibited there as critical in the hand of luck or destiny. Our cynical life is a kind of truth however the very reason behind it is outside our ability to control. This kind of Pessimism is there in Henchard's life as well. When he was young and an awful alcoholic, he sold his wife and girl to a mariner. His

bereaved ex-wife tracks him down, he remarries her and attempts to be a decent spouse and father, assuming that nobody need ever know about the embarrassment from quite a while ago. The spouse bites the dust. The mariner turns up alive. The little girl is uncovered to be the mariner and not the mayor. Thus, the mayor loses his fortune and bites the dust alone, and breaks. Here Hardy shows that the drama of life is constantly under the sway of the merciless Fate or inimical luck. W.R. Goodman remarks,

“Hardy seems to inculcate that the world and its people are in the power of a relentless blind Power who is destitute of all love and passion and crushes us all under the wheel of doom. In his view the drama of life is constantly under the sway of the merciless Fate or inimical luck.” (Page 426)*1

Hardy had no belief either in Immortals or in President. He was a complete fatalist from the first movement of his novels. His ideas were based on logic and science, not on belief. He said that destiny is character. George Sampson writes,

“Though he tells us, in Aeschylean phrase, that the President of the Immortals has ended his spot with Tess, Hardy had no belief either in Immortals or in President.” (Page 655)*4

Conclusion

Thus, we can say that Hardy is a great novelist in English literature. In his novels, he portrays various themes of life, death, society, God, destiny, chance, religion, fate, marriage, and many more. He deals with all subjects very philosophically. His pessimism is quite different from that of other writers. His note of pessimism is scientific and logical and depicts realistic ideas – his depictions are based on earthly facts and how a man lives in the world. He neither believes in Immortals nor in President. Not only that, but he straightforwardly says that character is destiny, and it rules over the entire life of a man. Man cannot go out of his clutch. Fate is never benevolent and is always against man. Joy comes occasionally, but it is followed by suffering. Man is a puppet at the hands of Fate or circumstances. Law, society, religion, love, and gain are also executed by the game of life and finally, lead to suffering.

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