International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences
ISSN: 2278-6236

RURAL SENSIBILITY IN THOMAS HARDY'S 'THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE'

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy is a prominent novelist in the late Victorian era of Britain. He is a pioneer in portraying through his works the 'pessimistic outlooks' of the rural countryside. Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Caster bridge* embodies and enacts the age-old forms of rural culture. His novel is a return to the rural community in its more characteristic and recessive aspects. In content as well as form, Hardy's fiction proclaims a rural sensibility ingrained in a plethora of naturalistic details. His novel brings in the real and the imaginable into an effective relationship claiming them both as indistinguishable aspects of one whole of an experience. The tussles of characters, mostly rustic and uneducated, in Hardy's fiction, are regulated by their desires and situations which culminate into their collapse. Character and nature are knotty attributes discussed in this novel which result in negative consequences in the lives of his characters. Apparently, Caster bridge is a central subject in this novel because collectively it has tempers, sentiments and an alluring charm that influences all characters in some significant way.

KEYWORDS:pessimistic outlooks ,rural culture, rural sensibility, rustic

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy is one of the most renowned men of genius in the social and literary history of England. He came to the field of literature as a most gifted writer and thinker of his time. The novels of Thomas Hardy are an inescapable and evocative cultural statement about the quality of life in a rural community. They narrate to the situation of rural Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century as acknowledged by literary critics and fiction researchers cum scholars. Hardy's novels celebrate a wide rediscovery of the metaphor of rural community in life and art in the nineteenth century, they are indeed the finest flowers of this pervasive sociological apprehension. Hardy offers his notion through the rustic

existence in a backdrop of the countryside. His characters are tough natured countrymen, meticulous, influenced by pastoral needs. He brings into relation the men and women from outside the rural world, better educated, superior in status, yet inferior in human worth. The story unfolds slowly and the theme of urban invasion declares itself more clearly as the presence of a country, its labour and its past, make themselves felt. Then the story assumes some form of dramatic conflict, strong and unsubtle and the invasion wreaks its havoc. A period of ominous waiting may follow; what the situation means to become more evident it is a clash between agriculture and urban modes of life.

The country natures Hardy drew so memorably in his fiction. Oaks Henchards Marty South's – impinge upon the readers' consciousness from time to time with a certain urgency: 'they answered to a deep need in their creator for reassurance, for solidarity with a more secure, more limited, more fortifying past'. But whatever, we permit to the alchemy of memory; they remain as part of our experience. Hardy's finest characters in a sense of their resilience, he had contrived them out of a strong clear feeling for the resource, the reliability and the simplicity of personalities nurtured by the traditional agricultural society. There is a blend of nostalgia and imaginative vision. Hardy knows the manners and techniques to the labouring vocations, and because he remains alert to the gradation of social status in the village and the countryside; Hardy gives body to his respect for the countryside and community.

The Mayor of Caster bridge relates closely to The Return of the Native. The one is dominated by a Health, the other by a person, each expressing the harsher aspect of agricultural life. Oak has darkened into Henchard, and the market town of weather bury into Egdon Heath, Here, nothing is seen under an ideal light; The Mayor of Caster bridge acknowledges the bitter situation of agriculture in contemporary England. Henchard suffers defeat and passes, and the village rites pass with him; the tolling of the bell, consecrated burial and the tending of the grave. Caster bridge is an image of Dorchester, the nearby town of Hardy's youth, and his presentation of it derives from local recollection, a turning from the precarious present back to a stable past.

Caster bridge is not truly a town by the modern logic or for that matter in the contemporary Victorian-industrialized sense. It is almost as far removed from Dickens, London, say, as the smallest village of Essex.

> 'Caster bridge was the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposite. Bees and butterflies in the cornfields at the top of the town; who desired to get the meads at the bottom, took no circuitous course, but flew straight down High Street without any apparent consciousness that they were traversing strange latitudes'. (Chapter 9)

Hardy's fancied Caster bridge as a mid-nineteenth century Dorchester type town made up of few co-located villages with a common business market. This imagination of Hardy which weaves its incorporation into the existence of the surrounding country is noticeable and matches his endeavours to integrate man and nature in most of his fiction.
'Caster bridge was in most respects but the pale, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life; different from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plan, in a green world with which they have nothing in common'. (Chapter-9)

'Caster bridge has everything in common with the 'wide fertile land adjoining', and Hardy finds some striking ways of expressing its proximity to the field; it is like a chess-board on a green table-cloth; the farmer's boy could sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office window of the town clerk'. (Chapter-14)

Even this, though, is not quite the same thing as the solid natural background that weather bury farm offers is far from the madding crowd or else Egdon Heath provides in the Return of the Native. Caster bridge is as nearly portion of the country as a town can be; the conversation there is all of the seedings, reaping and farm work; the shops are full of agricultural tackles, the inhabitants are countrymen, but the sense of space that belongs to the country proper is missing, and the affiliation of the characters to the land are vaguer and less important than in the Hardy's other major novels, except perhaps Jude.
The principal mechanism engaged by the author to express this differential character is a dialectic concerning Henchard and Farfrae in a close private and collective association. Farfrae is not the crook of the member, but an anti-hero. He refuted Henchard with a logical meticulousness. To see Farfrae as a typical character in the same way as Gabriel Oak or Giles is to turn the philosophy of the writer upside-down. Farfrae focused impressions of the novel showcase it as a discourse on the decrees governing social-economic growth. The novel, however, is not an account of what is depictive of social and economic betterment.

Thus aptly Mayor of Caster bridge deals with an entire gamut of conscious social and economic problems in the period close before the abolishing of the Corn Laws. But the respective and the methods used by the novelist make it sufficiently clear that the chief interest of his novel is other than documentary or diagnostic. Hardy's approach to the contemporary socio-economic problems enhances additional backing to the assumption that he certainly never treated richness or social advancements unmixed sanctifications. Any crusade onwards in history was a reason for profound concern to Hardy. The novel treats the tragic conflict between the native countryman and the alien invader. At this point,

however, certain important distinctions need to be made. Henchard is, indisputably, the native countryman, but this native country is not a noticeably his. Casterbridge is not the realm to which Henchard fits in. There are few secluded elements in Casterbridge, the society which remains to constitute the native country in its other popular and overriding forms of life. Casterbridge is a commercial town. Significantly, Farfrae catches instant recognition and admiration in Casterbridge. He is proclaimed by the town as their natural leader. There is not even an iota of doubt or difference in his affiliation to Casterbridge. There are but only a few dissidents, voices in the background like Christopher that express that Farfrae is not in his 'ain Country'.

Henchard, on the other hand, is not as easily assimilated to contemporary Casterbridge. He drifts into Casterbridge in pursuit of work. Through extraordinary good luck and endeavour, he rises to the eminence of mayoralty, but there is no indication anywhere that he has ever been a popular public figure who sways the audience.

As Hardy's situations for his novels are rustically accurate, so are his subjects and their deeds convincing and characteristic of the rural people of whom he is so thrilled to describe. In the mayor of Casterbridge, all but two of the characters are of the tree pastoral stamp. Lucetta Templeman is depicted as a rather flighty and pathetic woman who is neither pastoral nor Urban. Donald Farfrae approximates the type of person we should expect to find the in the industrial centres rather than on the quieted, undulating fields of agricultural Essex.

For the rest, all bear the rural stamp. In these people, especially Michael Henchard the flame of ambition never burns as brightly as it does in an industrial and commercial environment of serve competition. Henchard tasted success in Casterbridge by being elected Mayor, but this success was only important to the populace of the rural Town of Casterbridge: the people of the real, progressive centre outside of Casterbridge knew nothing of Henchard's climb to eminence, and would not have been impressed if they had to. Hardy's rustic characters all play their literary roles against an entirely parochial background. Their small-town fears, loves, hates, failures and triumphs, consequently are of interest only to the inhabitants of the small agricultural towns in and about which they live, rather than being world-shattering events.

The speech of many of Hardy's characters may sound strange to the townsman. Their speech is not wordy or pedantic- it is brief, meaningful, to the point, unsophisticated and fixed in its viewpoint- like the verbal communication used by all rustic people.

Hardy's rustic characters speak the language of the Dorest country folk, a language of queer turns of phrase and dialect.

In Casterbridge, there are components in it that would validate its organization as a Gemeinschaft. It is old, adequately rural and it has misconceptions. However, there Gemeinschaft features belong more to the history of Casterbridge than to its current location. A sense of this past is kept thriving in the novel through an opulent recalling of antique memorials and moors, but above all, through the traditional impulsion of the hero and the intelligent readjustment of the readers' compassion. Throughout the story one is being recapped of another Casterbridge, a mythological object, of which the contemporary town is but a shadow; "Through the long, straight, entrance passages thus closed should be seen, as through tunnels, the mossy gardens at the black, glowing with nasturtiums, fuchsias, scariest geraniums, bloody warriors, snapdragons, this floral being backed up grey stonework remaining from a yet another Casterbridge than the venerable one visible in the strat".

But the Casterbridge perceptible in the street has a dissimilar character. It is a market town where people from different neighbouring village form a motley court. They institute an establishment for interaction to conduct trade, otherwise, they remain separate.

In the Mayor of Casterbridge, Henchard suggests vitality, an instinctive and commanding zest, which portrays assessment of human worth. He is the most Lawrentian of Hardy's figures. The novel nowhere elucidates the valuable elements in Henchard's nature; his worth is taken for granted, it seems, bound up though it is with obduracy, arrogance, blindness. The wholehearted commitment to a satisfying way of life, the virile warmth and generosity of spirit, the dogged courage, are the more effective for being left unstressed. Thus Mayor of Casterbridge is the fiction of the scuffle between the native inherent countryman and the foreign intruder; of the downfall of dismal valour and traditional outlooks by insight, dexterity and the deviations of nature, and of the perseverance through that rout of vitality seen in the rustic character. The Mayor of Casterbridge turns on

thecircumstances that ended in to revoke the corn laws. The consequence of that repeal to Victorian agricultural life is the central theme of this book.

That occurs at the moment of Henchard's first downfall in Casterbridge. On the other hand, he has spared nothing. The novel's impact comes of confidence that the qualities Henchard incarnates have more than personal roots, and will survive the personal and transitory degradations.

Casterbridge and its fold and the feeling for the community's life come first. The market town of the past has its origin in the needs of agriculture.

'Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, Focus, nerve-knot of the surrounding country life; differing from the many manufacturing towns which are a foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plain, in a green world with which they have nothing in common'.

"Scythes, reap-hooks, sheep-shears, bill-hooks, spades-mattocks, and hoes at the ironmonger's; beehives, butter-firkins, churns, milking stools and pails, hay-rakes, field-flagons, and seed-lips at the cooper's; cart-ropes and plough harness at the saddler's..." and so on. The shops of the township are filled with the equipment of agriculture.

The common folk of Casterbridge make another contribution. In the earlier novels, whether by allusion, by a report of events, or by conversation, the old village traditions and rituals strikes the reader as little climaxes, the bonfire, the shearing supper.

The mayor of Casterbridge is the story of one man and the story of his culture. It, of course, involves other men and other cultures to create an event for adjustment. This is not to say that Hardy's moral judgment interfaces with or weakens the dramatic objectivity of his tale. The other characters and forces in the story have been treated maturely and fairly but they depend for their significance centripetally in the way they respond to or get influenced by Henchard's life. Hardy's novel thus brings both the real and the imaginable into an effective relationship as indistinguishable aspects of a whole of new experience.

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