

Nature as a Victorimizer in Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge

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Thomas Hardy is one of the famous British novelists in the late Victorian era. He is considered as the founder of the pessimistic novels. This is because most of his novels show the pessimistic views of the world. Thomas Hardy applies his major works in the countryside of Wessex which refers to his gloomy outlook of life. This article shows the role of nature in destroying the lives of the characters in his The Mayor of Casterbridge. Hardy's major themes are hopelessness, loneliness, and brutality of war. These themes reflect the suffering of his characters as a result of fate, chance and coincidence. Some of these elements are the causes which make his characters victims. The struggles of Thomas Hardy's characters are limited to their passion and circumstances which cause their downfall such as; Michael Henchard, Susan, Elizabeth-Jane and others. Nature is one of the problems in most of his novels by which the negative consequences of the events occurred in the lives of their people.

Casterbridge itself seems to be a dominant character in the novel. It has moods, emotions and a magnetic appeal that affects the other characters.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a great novel which presents a wealth of naturalistic details. It shows a view of rural life which is closely linked to nature. People in this place live a purely agricultural way of life. They are associated with traditional values and customs.

Albert J. Guerard says,

*"Founding itself upon an ancient psychology, The Mayor of Casterbridge celebrates, first of all, the subordination of the passions that link man with nature to the reason that unites him with God."*¹

The story of this novel is presented by Thomas Hardy to the English countryside through topographical details. It starts in the district of Upper Wessex. This place is invented by Hardy himself. The story is based on the country where Hardy lives in as a child. He has a universal description of the landscape through which the Henchard family passes. He establishes his characters as realistic one in a rural world.

Nature has been presented in a state of decay in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The emotions of the characters have been drown accordingly. Features such as; the rotted leaves, the dirt clouds reflect the pessimistic states of the characters as a result of their downfall. Thus, nature reinforces the family's mistakes for example, when Henchard feels that his marriage is a big mistake and when Susan feels that she is going to be with the company of other man.

The identification of the characters with the natural world works as a mirror to reflect their actions along with nature such as; Susan's escapes from the tent of bar-maid with the help of the appearance of the sparrow. So, nature participates to bring the downfall of Susan by preparing the situation of escape.

Nature plays a great role for the downfall of the characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The domination of the weather is presented twice in the novel. The first one when the rain ruins Henchard's preparations for a grand entertainment. The second time when Henchard speculates heavily on the weather and loses. As a result, Henchard faces bankruptcy.

B.R. Mullik rightly observes,

*"Hardy embodies fate in various forms. Sometimes it appears as a natural force. Henchard's plan for making himself rich are brought by a bad harvest; the weather takes the part of fate here."*²

Nature rules the life of most of the characters in this novel such as; Michael Henchard and Farfrae. It affects Henchard's life negatively when he predicts that the weather is going to be well during the time of his entertainment. Whereas, weather works positively with Farfrae when the natural world appears for the success of his dance.

For example, the trees provide convenience and it has a living state to enlighten his entertainment. It also effects negatively on the lives of the characters; for example the three characters, Henchard, Elizabeth-Jane and Susan, are symbolically presented as *doomed leaves* as they die before the end of the novel. Nature gives the last chance to Michael Henchard when the Swallow appears in the tent of the bar-maid. Hardy uses such examples to show that nature is capable of victimizing the human beings.

It is said that,

*"For a long time there was none, beyond
the voice of a weak bird singing a trite
old evening song that might doubtless
have been heard on the hill at the same
hour, and with the self-same, quavers,
and braves, at any sunset of that season
for centuries untold."*

(The Mayor of Casterbridge, Page no.2)

So this kind of bird is symbolically presented to give Michael Henchard last chance to recover himself from his drinking alcohol. Henchard, on the contrary, refuses to accept the warning of the bird. Thus, Henchard's behavior is in contrast with the behavior of the inhabitants of the country people.

Albert J. Guerard comments,

*"Henchard's tragedy is that he has, in repudiating his solidarity with human community, subverted the order that has placed man in the middle ground between God and nature."*³

Michael Henchard is the victim of nature when he walks through the section of Casterbridge. It means that nature mocks the fact that he has no child. In other words he has lost his child *Elizabeth-Jane*. Hence, he becomes the first victimizer to his daughter and at the same time becomes a victim of his fate which is determined by nature.

Nature can be indentified in many ways during the whole life of the characters. It could be the concept of man and fate which the majority of the characters in this novel suffer from nature. The human kind is a fantastic image of *Egdon Heath* which suppresses the characters to their doom like; Michael Henchard, Elizabeth-Jane and others. Therefore, nature plays a great role to effect the lives of the characters. It certainly plays as a force and instrumental tool to rule their fate as a moral order. It, however, brings man to his end over his right. For example, Henchard sells off his family, Susan and his daughter Elizabeth-Jane, to a stranger. This shows the scene of the gloomy nature, which is presented in the eyes of the hero, it symbolically refers to Henchard's downfall.

The townspeople in Casterbridge consider nature as their strength way to survive. So, they live in harmony with it. The landscape surrounds the country of Casterbridge. The townspeople unknowingly believe in the traditional way which destroys their living. For instance, when Michael Henchard depends on the prediction of the forecaster, he loses all of his grains because the harvest proves to be hostile. As a result, he becomes a victim because of nature as well as his mankind. Fate pushes him downward when he refuses to take the comfort of his daughter. He puts his hand in his enemy's hand *Jopp*. It is just because they are identical and have a strange relationship. Henchard stays with Jopp to make him feel his signs of failure. Finally, he returns to the gloomy side of town handling his depression in the heart of nature.

The setting of the novel represents the ancient history of Casterbridge. The people naturally help one another as per need. It means that the customs, traditions, etc of the ancient people are still performed. For instance, Hardy has a belief in the isolated community, and the incident of the weather-prophet is the best example when Henchard loses all what he has as a Mayor in Casterbridge. This shows that nature affects Henchard's prosperity and makes him a victim of its own working.

In fact, the rural life has some limitations in the way of living and it is true to some extent that it could be replaced by the scientific innovations. It helps people reduce the dependence on knowing the natural rhythms of the country.

For example, when Farfrae invents the machine to replace the bad wheat into good one, he brings destruction to the life of the poor people who don't have the knowledge in this field including Michael Henchard.

It has been shown that the exchange from an ancient to modern inventions is symbolically represented in this novel. It is between the relationship of the two Mayors of Casterbridge, Henchard and Farfrae. Henchard represents the ancient method of predicting the weather. His methods of farming depend on trust and guess work which leads him to the downfall. So, he becomes a simple worker after losing his position as a mayor in Casterbridge.

David Daiches comments,

*"There is a limit to man's control over nature, but it is not nearly so narrow as Henchard thinks."*⁴

As a result, Michael Henchard has been replaced by Farfrae's mechanical way of thinking. Henchard's death in the deserted cottage is another example which shows how nature destroys the life of the characters in this novel. It is an opposite way to the life which Henchard had and as a result the new mayor 'Farfrae' occupies the position.

The Mayor of Casterbridge lies in the country of Wessex. It is a land which depends on the beliefs of the farming folk for centuries. The farmers are more connected to the land, therefore they follow the primal religion which is based on the forces of nature as well as the changing of seasons. For example, one of the forces of nature is cruel Fate, which stops the dream of the characters for fulfilling their hope as humans. Usually, this fate works in the form of two concepts. The first one is chance. For example, Farfrae and Lucetta are brought to Casterbridge quite unexpectedly, but their arrival ruins the lives of Henchard.

While the second is irony. This kind of dooming forces work with the characters who are in Casterbridge. For instance, Elizabeth-Jane has been convinced by Michael Henchard as she is his daughter, but the letter from Susan tells him truth and disturbs their relationship.

Sometimes nature helps the element of fate which leads to the downfall of the characters. For instance, the harvest weather is bad until Michael Henchard buys all the ruined grain at high prices. As a result, he could not sell it. So, he faces bankruptcy. Thus, nature participates to make the hero in the novel a victim. As a result, life becomes the subject of pain and suffering because of the working of primal and unchanging world against the weak humans such as; Michael Henchard as well as other characters.

W.R. Goodman observes,

*"The universal process is a meaningless thing; and man and his little life and his little doings are but play things no definite purpose, or more properly speaking, having no option in the course of things."*⁵

Nature affects the mood of people in Casterbridge and thus it brings the destruction in their lives. For example, the domination of nature on the townspeople is responsible for the skimmity-ride which Lucetta and Henchard become victims as a result.

The townspeople in Casterbridge have a belief that fate is a tool of the past. Thus, superstitions come as a result of the destructions of the people in it. For instance, Michael believes that fate is one of the causes behind his destruction. His life comes to an end and all his problems continue till he dies. By casting off his old beliefs, he could have changed his life for the better.

Albert J. Guerard comments,

*"The series of fatal reappearances that challenges and undermines Henchard's illegitimate power schematizes the determined revenge of a supernatural authority."*⁶

The grains market also plays dominant roles which governs both Michael Henchard and his town in Casterbridge. The rise and fall of the Mayor in Casterbridge depends more on the fluctuations of the harvest than of his personal relationship with Susan, Elizabeth-Jane, Farfrae and Luccetta. The demand and supply of grains are the main struggle between Henchard and Farfrae than their abilities and popularity with the townsfolk.

David Daiches comments,

"Nature does not change-or at least it has not changed, and characters like Michael Henchard regard Nature a something that can only be controlled by submitting to it." ⁷

Finally, the changing and shifting of economics in Casterbridge are the initial relationship which separate the people in that society. As a result, the crime and punishment beyond the human control are ironically exemplified in Henchard's character. This due to the demonstration of the supernatural revenge for the hero's violation of the moral order. Therefore, this revenge comes as a result of Henchard's victim.

Past affects Michael Henchard strongly especially by the Roman earth-work of Casterbridge. This place is an obscure location in Casterbridge because it is very famous for murders. Michael Henchard chooses this place to meet his long-lost wife *Susan*. Another area also has been selected by Henchard which refers to the same meaning. It is surrounded by an ancient Roman earth-work. It is used for Henchard's ill advice for Casterbridge entertainment which is in contrast to Farfrae's dance in town. Therefore, this turns out to be a failure of Henchard's life as a result of being pessimist in this place.

Albert J. Guerard observes,

"Like its maimed and guilt-haunted ruler, then, Casterbridge is demoralized and disabled by a grisly past." ⁸

The supernatural element is the second cause along with nature which causes the downfall of the characters. During his childhood, Thomas Hardy had an experience of predicting and following superstitions from his family. He had heard once that there was various stories of supernatural occurrences from the family servants, rustics from the village, and his own mother. His mother believed that she once saw a ghost. Therefore, Hardy himself becomes one of the believers in the supernatural as well as the superstitious concepts of the rustic people. As a result, he applies all the superstitious concepts in his novels including *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

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