



'THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE OF THOMAS HARDY'

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ABSTRACT :

"Happiness is an occasional episode in a general drama of pain"-this is the conclusion drawn by one of Hardy's chief women characters, Elizabeth-Jane in his tragic novel The Mayor of Casterbridge. This is also the concluding sentence of the novel. We can imagine how much emphasis is put upon this observation made by a character who has throughout her life remained a passive sufferer, and therefore an observer, of human life, of human misery. This sad realization is not something that we find in this novel only; all of Hardy's so-called novels of character and environment reflect human tragedy after the grave and sombre manner of ancient tragedies. All the novels depict the despair and agony of man in eternal conflict with external as well as internal forces. His protagonists fight not only with circumstances but also with their own impulses, their own strong passions.

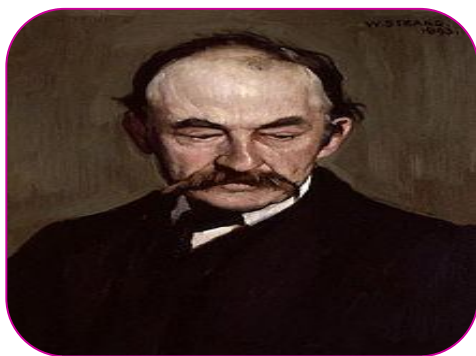
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INTRODUCTION

Hardy's conception of human life was shaped in part by his extensive critical reading of the Bible, study of ancient tragedy, contemporary philosophical and scientific works, and in part by his rural environment. Ernest Brennecke, who wrote one of the earliest appraisals of Hardy's philosophy of life, argued that Hardy developed "a consistent world-view through the notions of Chance and Time, Circumstances, Fate, Nature, Providence, Nemesis and Will tinged with metaphysical idealism" (49). This opinion has hardly changed throughout the years although critics interpreted Hardy's view of life from a number of various philosophical and ethical perspectives.

The Bible

Although an agnostic in later years, Hardy was a devout reader of the Bible which exerted a profound influence on his writing. When he arrived in London in 1861, he brought with him with two letters of introduction, a Bible and a copy of the Book of Common Prayer (Evelyn Hardy 57). Hardy admired biblical stories, particularly those from The Old Testament, thanks to their simplicity and intellectual dexterity. Biblical allusions permeate almost all his novels. Timothy Hands estimates that there are as many as 600 biblical allusions in Hardy's novels, including over 60 in Far From the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native and Jude the Obscure; the highest number can be found in Tess of the d'Urbervilles (28-29).



CASTIGATION OF RELIGION

Hardy had been brought up as a Christian, but by the age of 27 he had lost his faith, mainly under the influence of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, and he never regained it. Darwin's work undermined the prevailing concept of the divine creation of man. As he put it later, "I have been looking for God for fifty years and think that if he had existed I should have discovered him" (Duffin 196). Hardy's loss of faith led to the pessimism that permeates his fiction and poetry. Hardy believed the universe (symbolised by desolate Egdon Heath in his novels) devoid of divine meaning. In place of Christian God he put a blind unconscious will. As Brennecke observed, "He cannot reconcile the idea of an omnipotent and merciful Deity with the human sufferings that he witnesses daily" (79).

Hardy's attitude to religion was therefore very complex, if not contradictory. It seems that his rejection of contemporary Christianity was largely due to his ethical views incompatible with the practices of the institutional Church. Hardy came to a conclusion that religion had become grossly institutionalized and thereby lost its original value, which was based on compassion. At the same time, Hardy believed that the church is an important social institution. He is quoted by Edmund Blunden to say: "If there is no church in a country village, there is nothing" (372).

HELLENIC AND PAGAN SYMPATHIES

Hardy's critical vision of life was deeply rooted in his Hellenic and pagan sympathies. His fiction and poetry reflect the classical tradition of Greek and Roman literature. The pagan world had more charm for Hardy than did Christianity. In his Wessex novels and stories, Hardy promulgated a vision of an old, rustic England that was essentially pagan. For example, Angel in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* embodies the ideas of Hellenism and paganism, which Hardy derived from Matthew Arnold, who cherished hope for cultural regeneration of England through Greek revival. He shared Arnold's ideal of Hellenic paganism, with its emphasis of the development of a complete man with the harmonious body and soul. Hardy advocated rural and Hellenic paganism in *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* as an alternative for Christianity in England.

Early influences

As a young man Hardy was, as he called himself, a 'born bookworm' (Tomalin 40), who read voraciously in classical and contemporary authors. As an autodidact Hardy taught himself Greek, Latin, French and German. Under the influence of his older friend and mentor, Horace Moule (1832-1873), a classical scholar, he read fragments of *Iliad*, Horace, Ovid and Virgil in the original. Hardy's tragic vision, expressed in his major novels, was greatly influenced by the reading of Aeschylus and Sophocles. His second major novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, bears influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Allusions to Aeschylus can be found in *The Return of the Native*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Dynasts*. The famous phrase: "The President of the Immortals has ended his sport with Tess" is a paraphrase of a sentence in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Hardy, who was also familiar with English classics, studied Shakespeare intensely, making notes from *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Love's Labours Lost*. (Pite 140) He also had an extensive knowledge of John Milton's life and poetical works.

Hardy was very sensitive to contemporary intellectual debate. Horace Moule introduced him to the *Saturday Review*, where he could find articles concerning the controversy between science and Christian orthodoxy (Bloom 18). Some of the most prominent intellectuals of the Victorian age, such as Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, directly inspired the development of Hardy's ethical and philosophical views. Hardy described himself as "among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*, which was a major challenge to the Christian view of creation" (Mallett 316). He learnt from Darwin that natural order is indifferent to man's desires and aspirations. As a consequence, he broke with Victorian optimism and self-complacency.

In the mid sixties, he read and made extensive notes from the works of the French radical reformers and philosophers, Charles Fourier, Hippolyte Taine, and Auguste Comte. He read a translation of *A General View of Positivism* by Comte, which helped him to find a rationale for his loss of faith. He was also attracted

by Comte's Religion of Humanity as a substitute for Christianity. Besides Comte, Hardy also showed interest in Arthur Schopenhauer's idea of blind, irrational universal will and in Eduard von Hartmann's (1842-1906) view of the unconscious mind.

Hardy's other influences were John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, and above all Leslie Stephen, who wrote *The Science of Ethics* (1882), in which he developed an ethical view based on Darwin's theory of evolution. Hardy also read essays by Thomas Carlyle, Walter Pater and John Ruskin, as well as the poetry of Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Thus, Hardy's philosophical outlook, as Pamela Gossin asserts, has been developed under the influence of various authors, both classical and contemporary:

Hardy's eclectic reading of the classics of medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment literature as well as contemporary works, both verse and prose, exposed him to a variety of authors who had created fictional, dramatic or poetic accounts of human life in the cosmos, on minute to magnificent scales. The influence of Dante, Milton and Shakespeare on his conception of the human relation to the natural, social and supernatural can hardly be overemphasized. [44]

Following the teachings of his intellectual mentors, Hardy questioned the established moral and religious principles of Victorian society. His pessimistic view of society is derived largely from the philosophy of determinism. Hardy was a determinist who was aware that man's life is controlled by some inexplicable external force, which he sometimes calls the Fate of Circumstances (in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), the President of Immortals (in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) or the Immanent Will (in *The Dynasts*). Man is, according to him, determined by both heredity and environment.

PESSIMISM

The intellectual climate and the social and economic transformations in the nineteenth century created in Hardy a deep pessimism. Tragic coincidence and the irony of fate are deeply rooted in his vision of life. His pessimism was largely a reaction to Victorian optimism. Hardy's pessimism had several sources: (1) popular Calvinism, 2) Darwin's theory of natural selection, 3) Schopenhauer's philosophy, and 4) traditional folk fatalism. In his fiction and poetry Hardy expressed the inability of man confronted with 'the blind forces of nature', and the loneliness of the individual in dehumanised society which had lost touch with timeless and organic order.

Hardy expressed his deep pessimism when he wrote about the universal order. He held both a deterministic and tragic view of human existence, accepting the inevitability of suffering and evil. Human existence has little or no sense in absolute terms; its strength lies in individual relative virtue. Virtue is thus man's own reward in this world. In Hardy's view tragedy is created by the blind forces of nature which man opposes in vain. As R. M. Rehder pointed out, "His idea of tragedy represents a combination of Greek, Shakespearean and Biblical tragedy" (Butler 23).

Hardy's vision of life controlled by fate, blind chance, heredity and environment differed from Emile Zola's biological determinism. Zola wanted to reveal the animal side of man (*bete humaine*) in his naturalistic fiction, such as *Therese Raquin* (1867). Hardy, on the contrary, aimed at revealing the higher human aspects of man's existence: its essentially tragic character and distinct individualism. The course of individual human existence was his main preoccupation in the Wessex novels. His major fiction shows that human existence is intrinsically tragic because people are trapped by the laws of Nature and the laws of civilization. Hardy admired his tragic characters who strove in vain to live with dignity and a sense of perennial values.

The Role of Chance and Fate.

Hardy fluctuates between fatalism and determinism. Fatalism is a view of life which acknowledges that there is some malignant power that controls the universe, and which is out to thwart and defeat men in their plans. It is especially hostile to them who try to assert themselves and have their own way. Determinism, on the other hand, acknowledges that man's struggle against fate is futile and man is but puppet in the hands of destiny. In *Tess of D'urbervilles*, we are told that,

"Justice was done, and President of Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess."

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy again reminds us that,

“What a sport for Heaven this woman Eustacia was!”

In Hardy's novels, then, Fate appears in the form of chance and coincidence, nature, time and woman. None is Fate itself, but rather all of these are manifestations of the Immanent Will. Fateful incidents are the forces working against men in their efforts to control their destinies. In addition, Fate appears in the form of nature as a powerful agent that affects the lives of the characters. Those who are most in harmony with their environment can find some solace, but those who are indignant and rebellious, it destroys all their happiness. Eustacia suffers in *The Return of the Native*, because of her direct confrontation with Edgong Heath, which symbolizes nature. In the end Eustacia laments:

“How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me. I do not deserve my lot...I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control.”

Hardy remarks:

“What of Immanent Will and its designs? It works unconsciously as heretofore, Eternal artistries in circumstance.”

In Hardy's considered view, all life is suffering. Man suffers from the moment of his birth upto his death. Happiness is only occasional, it is never the general rule:

"Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain".

Hardy: *An Artist and Not a Philosopher*

Hardy was an artist and not a philosopher. He repeatedly affirmed that the ‘Views’ expressed in his novels were not his convictions or beliefs; they were simply “impressions” of the moment. His writings were all, ‘mood dictated’, merely, ‘explorations of reality’, and so it would be wrong to expect any systematised philosophy of life. But when certain impressions persist and are constantly repeated in the creative works, diaries and letters, of a writer, the readers may be pardoned, if they take them to be his convictions. Moreover, Hardy is so often passing from particular facts to life in general that we may safely take some of his views to be his philosophy of life.

IMPERFECTIONS OF THE FIRST CAUSE: HUMAN SUFFERING

There is none who gets more than he deserves but there are many who get much less than what they deserve. Not only man suffers, but all life suffers. Suffering is writ large on the face of nature. A ruthless, brutal struggle for existence is waged everywhere in nature. All nature is red in tooth and claw and life lives upon life. Thus all life, including human life, is subject to this law of suffering and none can escape the operation of this law.

But what is the cause of this universal suffering of man and nature alike. In Hardy's view the real cause is the, “imperfection of the laws that may be in force on high.” Thus human suffering is the result of the imperfections of the First Cause, the power that caused or created this sorry scheme of things. He rejects the orthodox Christian belief that this power is benevolent, all merciful, omnipotent and omniscient. He cannot reconcile the fact of universal, undeserved suffering with the omnipotence and benevolence of God or the First Cause. He indignantly asks, “What makes suffering and evil, necessary to its omnipotence?” He regards this power as blind, indifferent, if not actually hostile, and unconscious and immoral. He uses ‘it’ and not ‘He’ for this power. This power has no sense of right or wrong, love or hate. In this blind, unconscious, impersonal working, it does not, and cannot, take into account human wishes and aspirations. Hence its working .

CONCLUSION: HARDY'S HUMANISM

Such is Hardy's philosophy of life. It is certainly a gloomy one, for he regards life as suffering and man as a puppet in the hands of Destiny. But it cannot be called pessimistic, for pessimism implies negation of life, a wish not to have been born at all. It is only in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, that some cynicism enters and Hardy becomes pessimistic. Otherwise, Hardy is a humanist, a poet who wants man to turn from nature to his own kind, for,

“There at least discourse trills around,
There at least smiles abound,
There sometime are found,
Life-Loyalties.”

Some say that Hardy views life from the standpoint of pessimist. But to call Hardy a mere pessimist is to do injustice to the richness and perplexity of his art. Far from being a pessimist, Hardy stands out as a chronicler of true tragedies. Pessimism emphasizes the entity of life. It proclaims a philosophy of negation. But one who is a tragic artist not only focuses on the sorry affairs of life but also discovers the surge grandeur underlying beneath the apparent soreness of life. In this context we should do well to quote Hardy, “the business of a tragedy is to represent simultaneously the sorries underlying the grandest things and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things”. The poem The Darkling Thrush may be recalled in this connection. The poem offers the exact tragic vision of Hardy. Hardy stresses the suffering of man and yet what he seeks to locale is the beauty that suffering diffuses. When a hero suffers, he does not succumb to his situation. On the contrary, he puts up a sound resistance and finds undo, the last. In The Return of The Native, Clym Yeobright and Eustycia Vya are surrounded with obstacles that they cannot release themselves from the trap. But this is not to they give up struggling. The more they struggle, the more they suffer. But suffering cannot daunt them. Of late, an American critic has said, “resistance is the staple of Argue”. Hardy is novel, almost all of them, and Native is particular fairly conform to this idea advocated by the American scholar.

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