

# Pessimism in Thomas Hardy's novel The Mayor of Casterbridge (BA Part II Eng Hons 2018-21)

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Thomas Hardy represents the age of transition. He stands at the threshold of modern age. The features of Victorian as well as modern age get assimilated in his writings whether novel or poetry since he started his career as poet and finally shifted his attention to novel. Towards the fag end of his novel The Mayor of Casterbridge he has hinted at his commitment to pessimistic ideology while saying 'happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain'. He seems to have inherited this idea from the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Hegel has defined life saying that 'life is a short postponement of death'. Hardy seems to be in league with Hegel while developing his pessimistic approach.

The socio-political condition of Victorian society also helped aggravate his problem. Eminent biologist Charles Darwin in his book Origin of Species (1857) has developed the Theory of evolution challenging the Biblical concept of the origin of human beings which led to the rift between science and religion. Darwin insisted that the evolution of multi cellular organism from unicellular organism is the outcome of the mechanical process. He outright rejected the role of a super natural being or god behind the creation as Bible had earlier insisted . People were in dilemma whether to accept science or

religion. This confusion helped in spreading pessimistic ideas the impact of which is reflected in the Victorian poetry. Except for the poetry of Browning pessimism reigned supreme in the poetry of leading Victorian poets including Tennyson and Arnold.

The industrial revolution which brought proverbial wealth to the doorsteps of the English people added substantially for spreading pessimistic ideas in society. Men's craving for material wealth gradually dissociated himself from his soul which widened the gulf between physical world and spirituality. Human relationships were broken into pieces. Man was so much indulged in personal advancement that interest of others was pushed to the background. The entire society was made victim to moral bankruptcy and spiritual sterility. Man turned into island. There was a lack of communication and loss of faith in the relationship between man and man. The situation further worsened which pushed the society on the threshold of war. Under the backdrop of these alarming situations Hardy switched over to novel writing which gripped his novels substantially.

The varied incidents which took place in the life of the hero of the novel Michael Henchard clearly indicate the pessimistic ideas which overpowered the reasoning faculty of Thomas Hardy. Henchard started his career as a hay-trusser and barely managed to earn the livelihood of his family. A turn took place in his life when he auctioned away his wife under the impact of Liquor in a nearby fair. He soon realised his mistake and promised not to take wine for coming 20 years but it was too late for him to mend his ways. All attempts to locate his wife proved to be Futile. In a state of Frustration he settled to a nearby settlement named Casterbridge. He worked tirelessly and diligently and was elevated to the position of the mayor of Casterbridge. The situation took a dramatic turn when the girl named Elizabeth revealed the secret of his lost wife. Henchard's joys knew

no bounds. But he kept it a secret fearing that it might give a wrong message to the masses. He stealthily arranged a meeting with his wife who revealed that Elizabeth was his own daughter. Finally he got married to his wife Susan. But his happiness was short lived. Susan died due to prolonged illness. Before her death Susan had handed over a letter to Henchard telling him to read out the contents of the letter after the marriage of Elizabeth. After Susan`s death Henchard opened the letter and came to know the secret that Elizabeth was not his daughter. Henchard`s relationship with Elizabeth further worsened. Elizabeth also noticed the change in the behaviour of her father and finally decided to leave his house and settled with Lady Luceeta whom Henchard had an affair earlier. In the meanwhile a young man named Donald Farfrae emerged as the political rival of Henchard. He was very intelligent and had given suggestions to increase the productivity of crop which was praised by all and sundry and was treated as the successor of Henchard. The growing popularity of Farfrae was not acceptable to Henchard who feared that Farfrae might replace him to the post of Mayor. The apprehensions of Henchard proved to be true and Farfrae replaced him to the post of mayor defeating him by a handsome margin in the upcoming election. With this the graph of Henchard`s career declined sharply. He lost the company of those whom he loved dearly. Finally in a state of utter frustration and desperation he collapsed. He wrote his will saying that nobody should shed tears on his grave. In this way it is almost clear that the entire life of Henchard was full of sorrow, despair and frustration. Happiness came in his life for a Brief period. Besides mayor of Casterbridge the theme of pessimism has been successfully cultivated by Hardy in his successive novels like Jude the Obscure, Tess, Return of the native and Far from the Madding crowd. Hardy`s novels are called Wessex novels because they incorporate the story of a certain province called Wessex.