

Predestination and Chance in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the problem of fate in one of Thomas Hardy's major novels, as consisting of two main elements: chance and predestination. By working according to Schopenhauer's definition of the three types of tragedy we are trying to discern the main components that can give us reasons to place it typologically into one of the kinds. At the end the conclusion is that it is a work of a mixed character where no single element works for the building of the tragic, but rather a complex interrelation between character's own traits and environmental incidents.*

Key words: *character, trait, tragedy, Schopenhauer, predestination, fate, chance, incident*

INTRODUCTION

The composition of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* has taken more than a year at the time when Hardy was building his house Max Gate. It was finished by 17th April 1885, while the serial publication in the Graphic began on 2nd of January 1886. It seems that the author did not think very highly of this work at first, as on the day of the first installment he wrote: "The Mayor of Casterbridge begins today in the Graphic newspaper, and Graphic weekly. I fear it will not be so good as I meant it, but after all it is not improbabilities of incident but improbability of character that matter." [4, page 183].

He was quite right to point out that it was the characters he wanted to attract our attention to, as with most of his other novels since and after. Here we have a protagonist around whom we have a whole bunch of events or incidents as Hardy himself would have referred to. In his autobiography, purportedly published under the authorship of his second wife Florence Dugdale, he admits that "it was a story which Hardy had damaged more recklessly as an artistic whole in the interest of the newspaper in which it appeared serially than perhaps any other of his novels, his aiming to get an incident into almost every week's part causing him in his own judgment to add elements to the narrative somewhat too freely" [4, page 185].

MAIN BODY

The period at which this novel appeared is characterized by great social, economic and philosophical changes. Religion was not as powerful as it formerly was in the previous centuries and people were looking for a more logical basis of the organization of their world. Hardy was very much influenced by various philosophical doctrines, one of which was Schopenhauer's. In a somewhat outdated by its style, but otherwise a valuable survey from 1909 Helen Garwood, states that "Schopenhauer distinguishes three kinds of tragedy. Those that deal with a character of extraordinary wickedness, such as Iago or Richard III; those which portray blind fate, chance and error as the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, and last and nearest to us, those that are brought about by simple juxtaposition of ordinary character. No one is specially to blame; trifling accidents, innocent acts bringing about great entanglements. In *The Woodlanders* Giles Winterborne refuses to turn his heavily loaded team out of the road for the passage of the haughty Felice Charmond. This sows in her mind the prejudice that makes her refuse to allow Giles to renew his right to the houses, a right lost by the merest chance. This refusal causes him to lose Grace, and in the end causes Felice to lose Dr. Fitzpiers, because he has married Grace. Such a chain of incidents conveys the force of Schopenhauer's remark that this kind of tragedy is so near and horrible and sinister as to make us feel ourselves in the midst of hell." [3, page 45].

If we delve deeper into the meaning of this passage we can say that fate of a character in Hardy is defined by two aspects: arbitrary chance or incident and predestination which depends on the character's traits.

As I mentioned above Hardy's main concern is the construction of a character and this is clear from the subtitle of the first edition of the novel too – "The Life and Death of a Man of Character". As Michael Millgate puts it, it "...sounds more strongly than ever before the note of overall moral fable and directly reflects the "wheel of fate" pattern of Michael Henchard's rise and fall. In almost Bunyanesque fashion, Hardy establishes Henchard in all his particularity of time, place and class, and then surrounds him with sequence of classical, biblical and Shakespearean imagery that require him to be viewed as a heroic figure within complexly tragic terms of reference, susceptible to analogies with Oedipus, Samuel and Lear – even perhaps with Heathcliff and Captain Ahab" [6, page 233].

Scholars often consider that Hardy's characters are placed in a hostile environment that plays against their chances of survival and happiness. However, this is typical not only with him. Richard Altick says that "the chief preoccupation of the major novelists, as it was a leading one of other prose writers, was the structure, internal movement, and moral atmosphere of contemporary society.....The proper study of mankind in Victorian fiction often took the form of a study of men and women in a given class and their efforts to maintain their status against outside pressures or, more often, to improve it" [1, page 17-18].

In the case of Henchard we have a self-willed and self-made man who suffers at the whims of incidents but predetermines his fate too. Like with the killing of the albatross in Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, which is considered to be a bad omen and dooms the ship crew and curses the mariner with life-in-death, so does the selling of the wife predetermine Henchard's tragic destiny and shows the first folly of his character. As the ancient mariner confesses:

*And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe:
For all averred, I had killed the bird
That made the breeze to blow
Ah wretch! Said they, the bird to slay,
That made the breeze to blow!*

[2, page 190]

so does Henchard atone for the hellish deed he did by selling his wife to the unknown sailor Richard Newson. He gives a solemn oath that he "will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived" [5, page 39]

And he actually keeps his promise. Hardy draws a character of strong will, who is supposedly fit to survive. He has business and managerial skill; he's also attractive for the females. If we stick only to the second part of his life he would have been supposed to live and be happy as far as his predestination goes. However, the transgression of selling his wife has to be punished and incidents in his life work together with his traits to a foredoomed end.

In Donald Farfrae we also have a strong character who is the counterpart of Henchard in many respects, as far as his traits go. A little bit more humane, perhaps, but also very strong willed and self-made man. He is also very attractive for women. Moreover, he is attracted by the same women to who Henchard is, and gradually comes to take not only his house but also supersedes him in the position of a mayor, wheat merchant and in the heart of Lucetta and Elizabet-Jane, although in the latter case as a husband, not as a step-father, of course. It means that characters of similar traits have similar predestination, at least to a certain stage till incidents don't come to the action too.

We know nothing of how Henchard became a mayor and a leading merchant but know a lot about his downfall, while we know a little of how Farfrae acquired his social

status by taking over Henchard's positions, but know nothing of his fate afterwards. The two characters are strongly juxtaposed against each other and actually Henchard's miseries start at the time when he fires Farfrae. It seems that two strong characters are too much to be at the same place. The reason for their conflict – a quarrel over the too severe humiliation of the worker Abel Whittel again sounds to be a crime against humanity. It is very similar with Henchard's first infringement against the natural order – the humiliation of selling his wife. Ere he again loses his ground, his sound judgment through which the faults of his character lights and again everything is predetermined.

"In spite of his praiseworthy course the Scotchman's trade increased. Whether it were that his northern energy was an overmastering force among the easy-going Wessex worthies, or whether it was sheer luck, the fact remained that whatever he touched he prospered in. Like Jacob in Padan-Aram he would no sooner humbly limit himself to the ringstraked-and spotted exceptions of trade than the ringstraked-and-spotted would multiply and prevail.

But most probably luck had little to do with it. Character is fate, said Novalis, and Farfrae's character was just the reverse of Henchard's, who might not inaptly be described as Faust has been described – as a vehement gloomy being who had quitted the ways of vulgar men, without light to guide him on a better way" [5, page144].

Michael Henchard has other follies of character. For all his strong features he is too inflexible to accept new ways of living and improvement. While he prefers to go to a man who thinks he has the gift to predict the weather, Farfrae uses more advanced methods and it is exactly because of this oversight that he loses a great deal of his fortune. It is because his character is very much rooted in the old beliefs that he is doomed to lose all that was dear to him. As Michael Millgate states "Henchard emerges as representative of those traditional rural beliefs, attitudes and values which hardy saw crumbling all around him – doomed, like Henchard, because incapable of withstanding the onset of new ways of thinking and doing, yet leaving behind them a sense of tragic loss at the disappearance of an ancient, deep-rooted, peculiarly English quality of life that could never be replaced or revived" [6, page 236]

Thus, on the one hand we have two different, competitive characters, who have their own unique traits, and on the other we have the environment in which they live – to one of them it is a little bit hostile, to the other more benevolent, but neither chance nor predestination are the one single force that determines their development. The initial meeting between them is a sheer chance. Farfrae understands about Henchard's problem with the grown wheat by overhearing a conversation at the city council. Till that time he is a complete stranger in Casterbridge, a passer-by. That Henchard was on the lookout for manager of his company at that particular time is a pure chance too. Arbitrary events here unleash the further development of the tragedy in the mayor's destiny.

Chance plays considerable part in the development of Lucetta too. She is very much doomed not to marry Henchard initially by the very unlikely appearance of his former wife who has been lost for the span of nearly twenty years. From her side Susan literary comes out of nowhere to spoil her plans of marrying Henchard. After Susan's death the situation changes considerably and, ironically, it is actually Henchard who cannot marry her. On the whole she is prosperous and endowed with natural lightness of heart, by no means faulty character. Her death is a sheer chance – nothing to be punished for. She gets into a hysterical fit, while she is pregnant, at the mock pageant intended to ridicule her, has a miscarriage and dies. Here we have incident dominating predestination.

More often it is exactly the case of incidents taking the upper hand than the character's traits. They viewed themselves as passive toys at the mercy of external forces. At the beginning of the novel we have a very illustrative passage describing Susan Hechard.

“When she plodded on in the shade of the hedge, silently thinking, she had the hard, half-apathetic expression of one who deems anything possible at the hands of Time and Chance except, perhaps, fair play” [5, page 28].

Notice the use of the capitals in the quote. It seems that time and chance bear names of human beings and act as characters contributing to the development of the plot too. As a matter of fact they really do as destiny forming factors in the novel. We see that although Henchard atones for his sin of selling his wife by keeping to his 21 year old oath he is punished at the end, although he tries to right his wrongs. Although he has very faulty traits, for example he is too proud, as a character there is a light in him that is unfortunately dimmed by bad circumstances. At the end he learns humility, but he is too weak and it is too late to start a new life. It seems that chance has been against him.

CONCLUSION

We can say that in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* there are two very strong forces working – sometimes together, sometimes regardless of each other. On the one hand this is predestination, defined by the characters own feature which are peculiar to each character. On the other hand this is chance which is external for the character and is shared by all of them. If we have to go back to Schopenhauer's distinctions of tragedy we should say that this novel is of a mixed kind. It is both blind fate and juxtaposition of characters that are at work here as major devices of forming the development of the plot. Undoubtedly, this proximity and life similarity to ordinary people made it one of Hardy's most successful novels.

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The paper is reviewed.