

Rustic Robustness in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Caster bridge*

Abstract

Thomas Hardy was one of the famous Victorian novelists of the late Victorian era. Born in Dorset, Hardy had lived in the country for most of his adult life. Hardy re-created the real Dorset in his fictional world as 'Wessex' - a world that was a clever blend of fact and fiction. Hardy's universally applauded fictional works feature rustic protagonist, pastoral setting and rural vernacular. Hardy's realism was thoroughly native and his philosophy was pervasive. An artist by heart, Thomas Hardy depicted the honoured ways of the rural folk and closely observed their robustness in leading the challenging life in close association with nature. Hardy goes on to celebrate the nation's roots in its rustic past. Hardy made masterly use of the Wessex dialect, a social indicator, which carries social connotations. The rustics as portrayed by Thomas Hardy are soaked in traditions and are as eternal as the earth by which they live. Their very prosaicness binds the story to reality. Taken as a group they build up a picture of average mankind in its rural manifestations. According to J.H. Miller, "Hardy is always a local writer" (Miller 53). The present paper is a study of the robustness of the rustic characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a fictional work by Thomas Hardy where the protagonist is also a rustic character, a hay-trusser.

Keywords: Rustic, Robust, Hardy, Rural, Nature.

Introduction

Thomas Hardy, a versatile genius and a conscientious writer, was a poet and novelist of the latter part of the Nineteenth century and the early part of the Twentieth century. Devoted to architecture, music, painting and problems of modern philosophy, Hardy was a sober and serious thinker untainted with cynicism and diabolism. His realism was native in feeling and imagination was always subject to the dominance of aesthetic faculty. Thomas Hardy was greatly influenced by William Barnes, a great Dorset poet and linguist, who championed the speech of country folk in preserving the Dorset dialect as the purest survival of Saxon and Elizabethan English. Hardy's first major undertaking was the firm establishment of his imaginative world of Wessex – with its geography, folkways, agricultural pursuits and landscape. The sombre beauty of the country and the quaintness of peasant ways, their folk customs, occupations, ambitions, strong-will and inter-personal relationship were dealt with full authenticity and the thoughts penetrated his spirit and became the very ground and substance of his imagination. As Keith puts it, "Hardy's conception of Wessex can assist us in establishing more precisely what constitutes a region" (Keith 37).

Aim of the Study

The researcher has read various authors and critics who have written about the rustic folks, their lives and culture. The researcher did not come across any important work that has lately been written on rustic robustness in the fiction of Thomas Hardy. The present paper aims at studying the rustic robustness in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Thomas Hardy.

Review of Literature

Thomas Hardy was a novelist and poet who was writing in the early part of the twentieth century so not many works have appeared on Hardy in the twenty first century. However it must be mentioned here that the scenes of rural life and closeness to nature depicted by Hardy must be studied again from the point of view of the eco criticism. One of the important papers the researcher came across is W.J. Keith's "A Regional Approach to Hardy's Fiction," included in the book *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy* edited by Dale Karmner (1979) and J.B. Jones' *Nature as Characters in Thomas Hardy's Wessex Novels* (2003). Important

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books on Hardy include: , Douglas Brown's *Thomas Hardy*, London (1961), David Cecil's *Hardy-The Novelist* (1954) and Raymond Chapman's *The Language of Thomas Hardy* (1990).

Thomas Hardy's strength as well as inclination lay in the elemental things – the country life and the folklore, and that was why his special interest lay in the rustic people and rural life. Hardy observed that the conduct of the upper classes was screened by conventions, and thus the real character could not be seen easily whereas in the lower walks of society the conduct was a direct expression of the inner life; and the actions of the character were a clear image of his inner self. Like Wordsworth, Hardy never glorified the rustics but tried to paint a realistic picture of their lives and went on to depict how helpless but robust they were in the clutches of fate and nature. For Hardy, the rustics were not always ideal, pure and innocent. His rustic characters were uneducated, ignorant and simple – minded. They were by no means unthinking herd, nor were they mere stage – furniture, but they had a droll logic of their own. The rustics were soaked in the traditions of a primitive class that was rooted to the soil and was as eternal as the woods, fields and heaths.

Born in upper Bockhampton, Dorset, Thomas Hardy, lived in the country for most of his adult life. Hardy was universally applauded for the fictional narratives which had featured rustic protagonist, pastoral setting and rural vernacular. His novels were set within the semi-fictional landscape of "Wessex" – a place which was partly real and partly a dream-land. An architect by profession but an artist by heart, Hardy depicted in his fictitious works the honoured ways of the rural folk and closely observed their robustness in adverse circumstances. According to Desmond Hawkins: "And by the happy circumstances of his origins, he drew his inspiration from a tradition rich in imaginative simplicity. The rural scene of his native countryside gave him the ingredients of tragic drama already tinged with the instinctive poetry of the ballad. The folk-art and dialect of the countryside formed a sort of reservoir of strong-natured passions and lyrical expression which had been very little used-except in terms of burlesque – since the Elizabethans" (Hawkins 99).

Thomas Hardy's fictional world has no great artist, philosopher or statesman for he shuns them in favour of the artless rustic being. Through the rustic characters Hardy seems to suggest the right course of life. Hardy believed that a sensitive heart would always be in pain in this world and to live a peaceful and lead a contented life, one has to have emotional-vacuity like the countrymen. The labourers have no time for luxuries and they do not bow down easily to the illnesses and injuries in life. For the precision and insight with which Hardy describes the lives of rural people, he at times, is called the historian of Wessex. A.J. Guerard comments thus : "his intimacy with the minutiae of rural life, even his precise knowledge of the legal status of the farmer and worker, helped him to see major human issues as his rustics would see them, for the material things which surround us inevitably, color our feeling" (Guerard 75). The hard-

life and the strong will of the farmers, corn-dealers and the shepherds was portrayed with full-authenticity and the minute descriptions of these rustic people are so intense and detailed that his novels in fact are not read but seen. David Cecil remarks: "No other English novelist has so great a power of visualisation: it is Hardy's most important weapon, and it is the basis of his whole method. He constructs his book in a series of scenes. We are always told what we are looking at" (Cecil 56).

The Wessex people do not have very high aspirations and desires in life and are strong enough to bear the gravest misfortunes of their lives without much hue and cry. These strong – willed souls do participate whole-heartedly in the joys and sorrows of others but for them life is not a very serious business. At times, they tend to be fatalist for they cherish the belief that the course of fate cannot be turned even by religious ordinances.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Casterbridge is the fictitious name of Dorchester, a place which had dominated the surrounding rural communities as a country town and a market town. Michael Millgate observes thus : "...Hardy achieved a full realization of the Wessex concept, a realization which depended on the establishment of Caster bridge itself... as a central point, the economic, administrative and social capital, of a whole region" (Millgate 235). Just by visualizing the shop-windows, Casterbridge could easily be identified. As Douglas Brown puts it: "The shops of the township are filled with implements of agriculture" (Brown 67)

Scythes, reap-hooks, sheep-shears, bill-hooks, spades mattocks and hoes at the iron-monger's; bee-hives, butter-firkins, churns, milking-tools and pails, hay-rakes, field-flagons and seed-lips at the cooper's; cart-ropes and plough harness at the saddler's.... (MC 29).

At the onset of the novel, we are introduced to a man who was walking with his wife and child towards the village of Weydon-Priors in upper Wessex:

One evening of late summer, before the 19thC had reached one third of its span, a young man and woman, the latter carrying a child were approaching the large village of Weydon-Priors in Upper Wessex, on foot. They were plainly but not ill-clad, though the thick hoar of dust which had accumulated on their shoes and garments from an obviously long journey lent a disadvantageous shabbiness to their appearance just now (MC 1)

The man, Michael Henchard, is looking for a job as hay-trusser and his wife is carrying a baby-daughter. It being evening time, the village fair was almost over when this skilled but poor worker entered Casterbridge. The traveller entered a refreshment tent alongwith his family and ordered two basins of firmity. After finishing his basin, the man calls for another one

and orders a large quantity of rum to be mixed with his furrity. Disgruntled and intoxicated he remarks that he could be richer if he had no family to support. Having got married at the age of eighteen he had been repenting it for the last two years. He laments: "I haven't more than fifteen shillings in the world and yet I am a good experienced hand in my line. I'd challenge England to beat me in the fodder business; and if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done o't" (MC 7). Henchard becomes reckless and offers to sell his wife for five guineas to anybody who would offer him that amount. "Here- I am waiting to know about this offer of mine. The woman is no good to me. Who'll have her?" (MC 8)

Thomas Hardy recognizes the psychological temptation of such a sale, where the man is longing to exercise his property rights over woman to free himself from their responsibilities. Irving Howe analysis that in selling his wife Henchard is fulfilling his desire, "To shake loose from one's wife; to discard that drooping rag of a woman, with her mute complaints and maddening passivity to escape not by slinking abandonment but through the public sale of her body to a stranger, as horses are sold at the fair; and thus to wrest, through sheer a moral willfulness, a second change out of life" (Howe 84). Apart from this factor, another reason was that Henchard himself was wandering as a jobless hay—trusser and did not have enough finances to support his family unit. This incident, though shocking, puts forth the fact that the rustic people though skilled in their respective fields were not materialistically in a comfortable zone.

Next morning Henchard genuinely repents on his act of folly and is remorseful over his foolish action. He takes a solemn oath not to drink for a period of twenty- one years.

'I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind, and helpless, if I break this my oath!' (MC 17)

Michael Henchard, a man of strong character, kept his vow for twenty-one years and never during that duration showed any kind of inclination or weakness to break the oath. On an inquiry by Elizabeth-Jane why the Mayor's wine glass was not filled, an old man responded: 'Ah, no; don't ye know him to be the celebrated abstaining worthy of that name? He scorns all tempting liquors; never touches nothing. O yes, he've strong qualities that way...' (MC 35).

After nineteen years, when Henchard meets Susan at the Roman Amphitheatre his first words were: "I don't drink," he said in a low, halting apologetic voice. "You hear, Susan?- I don't drink now – I haven't since that night" (MC 76). These words show his sincere regret and strength of will.

Thomas Hardy's rustics are strong-willed, simple souls who have learnt directly from the book of life and in all their simplicity, they share their perceptions with their companions. Their conversations are lively, full of observations and humour. It is the rustics who bring the children to birth, they dance at the weddings, mourn at the graveyards and speak the epitaph over the tomb. They are as eternal as the earth by which they live. Their very prosaicness binds the story to reality. If taken individually they may seem exaggerated, but as a group they build up a picture of average mankind in its rural manifestations in a convincing manner. A.J. Guerard points out, "The true Hardy rustic is of personality all compact; of gestures, turns of phrase, humours and deformities. He has a past history or conflict. For he is immune to suffering and change; he is part of the landscape, and his stability is a fixed screen for the rebellious and changeful protagonist" (Guerard 122).

Thomas Hardy was a realistic observer who had realized the vastness of nature and the littleness of man. 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" (Goodman) Hardy's realism is thoroughly native in feeling for he had a deep understanding of nature and its role in the lives of the robust rustics. In his works nature acted as an active and leading character that formed the basis of the Wessex life and was always present as a symbol of impersonal forces of fate. According to Irving Howe, "Hardy instinctively unites nature and man, making the external setting a kind of sharer in the human fate" (Howe 23). Perhaps no other writer had such a deep understanding of nature and the writing skill to portray it with immense emotional depth and convey it to the world is print. Hardy depicts all the aspects of Nature in vivid and minute details. J.B. Jones has so rightly commented : "Some of the most powerful descriptive and poetic passages in Thomas Hardy's novels involve the world of nature. His use of closely observed detail when depicting nature and natural processes is perhaps unrivaled in English fiction" (Jones 121). Hardy's forte lies in his setting the characters against the vast backdrop of space and time lending them a grandeur. His style is charged with simple dignity and a compelling sincerity.

Hardy's great characters are the greatest in their most tragic moments. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* we observe that the weather had its domination twice for the protagonist. Firstly, nature played a negative role when Henchard did not fair well at the time of entertainment and secondly, when Henchard speculated heavily on weather and lost resulting in his bankruptcy. Michael Henchard, a part of rustic robustness, though broken to the core stands strong and unyielding to the changed circumstances. His strength, physical and mental, is the most striking quality of his character. He possesses the strength to bear his misfortunes. Henchard never grumbled and the adversities were a sort of challenge to the spirit which was unconquerable. His very will reveals to us

his stiff personality, and his immense capacity to endure his misfortune. Even when everything was lost in life he says, "My punishment is not greater than I can bear!" (MC 325). Henchard's strength and strong will also comes out in another stance when the firmity woman exposes the secret of his early life in the open court and challenges that he was not fit to sit in judgment upon her. She reveals his past act of selling his wife and says, "... It proves that he's no better than I, and has no right to sit there in judgment upon me' (MC 212). Any other man in Henchard's place would have denied the charge but he accepts it for he says, "No – 'tis true.... 'Tis as true as the light... And upon my soul it does prove that I'm no better than she! And to keep out of any temptation to treat her hard for revenge, I'll leave her to you" (MC 212). Henchard, after saying so, leaves the court without any retaliation or ill-will, though this revelation of the past secret had done great damage to his reputation, Henchard robustly handles the situation and was not sorry for standing by truth. Henchard's strength, his strong-will and sense of justice comes out clear when he forced Farfrae to fight a duel with him. He fought with one arm bound in order not to have undue advantage over Farfrae by virtue of his stronger physique. Even in business dealings we find this robust man resorting only to fair competition. After deciding to ruin Farfrae in business, he goes on to instruct his new manager Jopp, to crush Farfrae by fair competition only and not to resort to any under-hand means. Again, when Henchard declares himself bankrupt and his assets were valued, he surrenders even his gold-watch and canvas money-bag. Generally, when a man declares his bankruptcy he takes due care to hide some of his assets in order to meet his day-to-day expenses. But Henchard's sense of justice does permit him to even take his meagre assets.

During the course of the events in the novel, we find that major changes have come in the life of the rustic protagonist, Henchard. He returns back of Weydon-Priors, where once he had sold his wife years ago. The wheel of suffering appears to have come full circle. A journeymen hay-trusser he was; a journeymen hay-trusser he is, as he manfully sets out afresh from the village. "Externally there was nothing to hinder his making another start on the upward slope..." (MC 332).

Henchard bears his anguish in silence and with robustness. He comes out to be a model of tranquil stoicism. Solomon Longways once refers to this quality of Henchard thus : "He has a powerful mind to hold out..." (MC 102). Again, after the discovery of Elizabeth-Jane's true parentage, Henchard abandoned by fate remains unnerved, for "misery taught him nothing more than defiant endurance' (MC 192). Henchard accepts life as it comes and does not 'consider whether destiny was hard upon him or not' (MC 131)

Thomas Hardy uses the dialect peculiar to the Dorset speech as an ancient and noble form of English. The rustics of Hardy's novels sound right because of their authenticity of the dialect. Hardy believed that dialect was the only pass-key to

anything like intimacy with the Dorset labourers. According to Chapman, R: "Hardy attends in pronunciation to the sounds of dialect speech-rather than the stresses and intonation which are more difficult to convey without distracting explanations..." (Chapman 114).

The regional dialect formed an inevitable component in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy allocated and ensured that the dialect featured to characters according to their background, way of life, position and contextual situation. The language the rustics conversed was coarse and rough but it conveyed their sincere feelings and expresses their views on life in a pious manner. The regional dialect apart from giving authenticity to the novel, brought the robust rustics closer and increased their emotional attachment with each other. This feeling of togetherness gave them additional strength to stand by each other in fighting against the odds of life. People of the same status felt comfortable using it and the social distance was reduced.

The rustics were considerably aware of status and this status-consciousness in dialect was obvious, for these characters with rural background showed the class-consciousness to be synonymous with a distinctive and instinctive desire to climb the social ladder. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the magistrates, who themselves were local people, showed little or no trace of regional dialect. Henchard, who had achieved almost standard speech at the time of success, in no time reverts to the regional dialect as his fortunes fall and he again becomes an employed worker : 'A fellow of his age going to be Mayor, indeed! ... But it's her money that floats en upward. Ha-ha-how crust odd it is! Here be I, his former master, working for him as man, and he the man standing as master' (MC 240).

Hardy's rustic characters in the novel lose regional dialect when he or she took on specific roles in action which stretched beyond their personality. The firmity woman who was the witness of Henchard's first downfall speaks the regional dialect in her first appearance; but when she is in court at Casterbridge she becomes an agent of doom and accusation and her speech becomes almost normal. The constable alleges that she had said to him, "Dost hear, old turmit head?" (MC 210); but she gives her evidence in a different tone- 'A man and a woman and a with a little child came into my tent They sat down and had a basin apiece" (MC 211).

The Wessex folks usually go to the Three Mariners Inn or Peter's Finger for relaxation and gossiping. They are the chorus- people representing mankind as a whole. In the novel, characters like Mother Cuxsom- the chiefly old and middle-aged people – knew life as a housewife knows her kitchen. These people have their daily work to attend but their business and their preoccupation is with life and human nature which they visualize through the clear country air with a humorous eye. The uniqueness of these rustics is that they act as critics. The group seems to have a sort of collective mind, where each individual member contributes his angle of

observation and the collective judgment affords a tolerably shrewd summation of objective truth.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we observe that the robust rustics took death lightly in their stride and were well prepared for it in advance. For them, death was just a passing event in life that was not to be feared and respected. Lucetta before her death confided to Mrs. Cuxsom every little thing that wanted tending after her death. Lucetta says, "when I'm gone, and my last breath's blowed, look in the top drawer o' the chest in the back room by the window, and you'll find my coffin clothes; a piece of flannel- that's to put under me, and the little piece is to put under my head; and my new stockings for my feet – they are folded alongside, and all my other things. And there's four ounce pennies, the heaviest I could find, a-tied in bits of linen, for weights.... bury the pennies, good souls, and don't ye go spending 'em, for I shouldn't like it. And open the windows as soon as I am carried out, and make it as cheerful as you can for Elizabeth – Jane" (MC 125/6). The pennies were buried as desired but Christopher Coney went and dug them up and 'spent 'em at the Three Mariners' (MC 126). Coney says, "Why should death rob life of four pence? Death's not of such good report that we should respect 'en to that extent" (MC 126). This reaction of Christopher Coney marks the attitude of these robust rustics towards death. The rustics wrestle for their humble livelihood and they consider money to be more important for their living and enjoyment rather than to fulfill the last wish of the dead. These indestructible and changeless rustics are the true representatives of mankind as a whole. The struggles and sufferings make these rustics take life as it comes. The strength of character together with the circumstances rule the lives of these robust rustics.

The rustics were self-respecting people and were not very ambitious in life. They neither soared high nor they bore any ill-treatment. These robust individuals stood for their dignity in their own way. In the novel, Jopp had a certain grudge against Henchard and Lucetta. In the course of events, when Henchard hands over a packet of letters to Jopp to deliver it to Lucetta, he had a vague suspicion in his mind and on opening the packet he found the love letters written by Lucetta to Henchard. Unable to resist the temptation he read out some of the letters to the gathering at Peter's Finger Inn situated in Mixen Lane. It was decided that a skimmity ride was to be arranged and enjoyment would be at the expense of their superiors. As Nance Mockridge put it : "A good laugh warms my heart more than a cordial, and that's the truth on't" (MC 273). In the traditional folk culture such rides were the judgmental folk 'courts' giving public expose which could not be effaced. These rustics were least concerned about the consequences of such a ride for to them it was only coarse merry-making, and for Jopp it was a sort of satisfaction for retaining his dignity in his own way.

Conclusion

Conclusively, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was to the world a curiosity of English rusticness. Hardy had set his novel in the semi-fictitious

landscape of Wessex– a place that provided a realistic countrified background against which his robust rustics live out their lives and struggle against their circumstances. The natural world is described in minute details, rendering it more significance than a mere setting against which the entire narrative unfolds. Thomas Hardy had placed the rustics within the natural world rather than ruling over it. Hardy used the dialect peculiar to the Dorset speech which added to the rusticity of the work. The Wessex rustics live their own life untouched by modernism and they suggest more through their movements than speech. Abercrombie remarks: "It is evidently so laborious for them to express themselves at all. Their lives seem to go inwardly in a way in which words are of slight use to them. And when it comes to giving thought some outward shape of words they endeavour to contrive this by a sort of general attack upon language; they hope that great many inappropriate phrases will somehow suggest the appropriate thought...." (Abercrombie). Thus these eternal as earth robust rustic characters suggest the right course of life that to survive in life one should have toughness and strength like the countrymen otherwise life will crush one into pieces.

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