

Modern City as the Source of Tragedy in Thomas Hardy's Major Novels

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Abstract

This study examines the perpetual suffering of the farmers, agricultural workers, and peasants who were forced to abandon their habitat from Wessex and settle in big industrial cities of England. This forced migration was due to the industrialization and mechanization of the rural areas of Wessex which finally led to the environmental destruction during the critical period of the nineteenth century in the history of England. The peasants and farmers, who lost all sources of living, were heading towards the big cities in the hope of finding a new opportunity and a better way of living. As a result of this displacement, the moral and the social values of the English peasantry changed greatly. The life of the displaced farmers, agricultural workers, and peasants underwent powerful transformations as a result of the social change in the cities. There, they faced unforgettable social problems that destroyed the dreams and aspirations of most of them in life. The anguish and the agonies of the afflicted group of the farmers, agricultural workers, and peasants are vividly reflected in Thomas Hardy's major novels. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* focuses on the tragic plight of the English peasantry when they come into contact with the people from the cities. *Jude the Obscure* (1895) portrays the disappointment and the tragedy of the ambitious countrymen who think that the glitter of the industrial cities offers them more happiness than the simple beauty of the rural society.

Keywords: Modern City, Tragedy, False Understanding, Peasantry, Social Change, Environmental Destruction.

The Social Background of Hardy's Novels

Most of the later novels of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) end in tragedy. This melancholic view of Hardy was not only the product of his personal and/or private experience in life, rather it reflected the social change of his age. It was an age of great scientific, social and moral upheavals that a sensitive mind such as Hardy's could not cope with; for it was an "age of transition" in different aspects of his society. As a country man, Thomas Hardy, soul and spirit, belonged to that world which was passing. The rural England, which was dear to him by every tie of childish sentiment, was beginning to fall apart as a result of mechanization and industrialization of the Wessex countryside.

When Hardy was a young child, Dorset, his birthplace which was based on local traditions, was an isolated part of England, but as he became seven years old and the railway came, changes began to occur in every aspect of life due to the fast transformations brought by mechanization and industrialization of the English rural area. Day after day, the social matrix of the society was beginning to unravel and, consequently, the old class system was diminishing. With the passage of very year, Hardy realized that the old values and social habits were diminishing; that stories, songs and other social activities that belonged to his rural community were neglected; that families who lived for years in the countryside were leaving it for good. The English society, especially the cities, witnessed tremendous changes in different fields of life, of which the industrial revolution and the mechanization of the society were quite unforgettable. Virginia Schomp in her book *The City: Life in the Victorian England* (2011, pp. 6-7) highlights the social, political, and technological changes in the Victorian society in general and the Victorian city as such:

Between 1837 and 1901, England was transformed from a mostly agricultural, isolated society into a modern industrial nation with territories all over the world. The Victorian people witnessed astonishing advances in science and technology, as well as sweeping political, legal, and social reforms.

The industrial revolution gradually started wiping out the rural areas of England; the population was on the move from the country to the city; the social ties which had united the small old communities of the past were falling apart step by step. New

problems faced the farmers. Hardy observed that the migration in the 1880s left an indelible impact on the rural community in Dorset: “there being no continuity of environment in their lives, there is no continuity of information, the names, stories, and relics of one place being speedily forgotten under the incoming facts of the next.” (Millgate, 1984, p.336)

The Industrial Revolution split the inhabitants of the English countryside into two groups: those who stayed in the village and those who migrated to the cities. Virginia Schomp (2011) focuses on both groups and portrays the plight of farmers in this way:

The growth of the cities was largely a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Life was a constant struggle in the English countryside. Most farmers toiled for wealthy landowners in return for low, unreliable wages. The new manufacturing centers offered a chance to escape from this hand-to-mouth existence. As people moved from the countryside to work in factories, mills, and mines, the population of many small towns exploded. (pp. 10-11)

Earlier than most of the writers and thinkers of his age, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) in 1845 observed the negative impact of this change on the workers who were forced to live in dingy, narrow, and dirty places in the cities to where they moved. He described this dehumanizing experience in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1845] (1987, p.69):

The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space.

This tumultuous condition of the city life got strong and prompt reaction from other writers and thinkers. James ‘B.V.’ Thomson (1834 – 1882) in his poem ‘City of Dreadful Night’ describes the nineteenth century city as dark, fearful and place of isolated inhabitants. (Thomson, 1880, p.3) To John Ruskin (1819-1900) the new city created an environment which was ethically and aesthetically inferior to the countryside. (Ruskin, 1884, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks>)

Side by side with this breaking down of the old social and economic structure ideas started to disintegrate. Additionally, the English society got disturbed by the criticism of the Bible. This was most likely due to the emergence of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). Darwin's theory of evolution postulates that all the species, including man, are the outcome of natural development without the interference of a Creator. This was a fatal blow to the philosophic principles of Christianity and people started to doubt the credibility of the Christian beliefs which remained unchanged for thousands of years. Individuals were feeling effectively skeptical about the rational standards of Christianity. According to Nick Prentice: "With Darwin and the spread of evolutionary ideas, Hardy turned towards the environment as a medium through which to express the tragic." (Prentice, 2016, p. 53) The loss of hope in a loving and sympathetic God, together with other factors that affected the city dwellers in particular, created a sense of pessimism in many intellectuals. Hardy was one of those intellectuals who felt very deeply about the problems of his age. This is due to the fact that "the tragic in Hardy is always predicated upon the coercive forces of the material conditions of life." (Ibid., p. 14) In both novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy depicts the tragic struggle of the country people against the harsh reality of the new industrial age.

Man as the Victim of Natural and Social Change

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy "comes as close as he ever can to being a social novelist". (Howe, 1985, p. 92) Hardy presents in this novel a real picture of a country man who suffers most bitterly from the social change, which is the outcome of technology. Neither the country town nor Michael Henchard, the country man who is the mayor of Casterbridge, can stop or comply with or at least understand the changes that come gradually from the advanced cities not much far away from their own country town. According to Irving Howe "Henchard does not really care to understand what is happening to him; he merely wants, through will and magic, to coerce the direction of his personal fate and the turns of the impersonal market, which in his case are almost indistinguishable." (Ibid., p. 92) Only very few people from Casterbridge try to change their lifestyle to reorganize their lives according to these inevitable changes. Most of the inhabitants of Casterbridge want to have their lives remain unchanged.

Step by step Casterbridge has to undergo decisive changes. Only when machinery is introduced into the agricultural process, the life of the traditional agrarian labourers, Henchard and his like, will be at risk. They can neither stop the technological mode of production nor can they be successful with their traditional mode of production. This will lead to a change in the income of almost all the inhabitants living in Casterbridge. New class division starts to appear and with it a change of roles in the society happens. So, with the appearance of the new class a clash between the old and the new is inevitable. Michael Henchard, representing the traditional society and the outmoded social values has to leave his place to Donald Farfrae who has come with new experiences from the advanced cities of England to bring a change to the life, the system and the values of the isolated Casterbridge. The young Donald Farfrae, in a confident style faces the old Michael Henchard when Henchard speaks with him proudly in this manner:

"Then," said Henchard, "I am under the impression that we have met by accident while waiting for the morning to keep an appointment with each other? My name is Henchard, ha'n't you replied to an advertisement for a corn-factor's manager that I put into the paper -- ha'n't you come here to see me about it?"

"No," said the Scotchman, with some surprise.

"Surely you are the man," went on Henchard insistingly, "who arranged to come and see me? Joshua, Joshua, Jipp--Jopp-- what was his name?"

"You're wrong!" said the young man. "My name is Donald Farfrae. It is true I am in the corren trade--but I have replied to no advertisement, and arranged to see no one. I am on my way to Bristol--from there to the other side of the warrld, to try my fortune in the great wheat-growing districts of the West! I have some inventions useful to the trade, and there is no scope for developing them heere." (Hardy, 1989, p. 49)

The novel describes in a very vivid way the destructive power of money which is "constantly reducing the human to a market commodity. Henchard's rise and fall can be viewed in terms of his obsession with the power of money...." (Prentice, 2016, p. 113) As such, the rise and the fall of Henchard's fortune happens only after Farfrae's arrival with ideas and experiences from various technological cities. Farfrae's ideas, values, and mindset are the product of the city rather than the country lifestyle. At the start, their cooperation leads to a quick rise of Henchard and later on when they are involved

in an everlasting conflict, Henchard becomes bankrupt and destroyed. So, if Farfrae ultimately is negatively responsible for Henchard's downfall, he contributes positively to the economic system and working structure of Casterbridge. "Thus the rise and fall of Henchard juxtaposed to and related to the rise of Farfrae is one indication of the complex theme of change." (Fussell, 1979, p. 19)

As seen, without the full presentation of the social environment of the English rural society in general and the arrival of industrialization at the Casterbridge community in specific, it would not be conceivable to comprehend the battle between Henchard and his young opponent, the Scotchman Farfrae who was first his companion and his boss, after that his rival in work and love, and lastly his manager and substitution as mayor.

At its outset, the conflict appears as the conflict between two types of personalities. Henchard, being a passionate man, responds to all his problems in an emotional way; Whereas Farfrae, being more educated than him, he responds in a rational way. In other words, Henchard wants to bend his environment to his wishes, whereas Farfrae wishes to reorganize his life according to the new situations. Thus, Henchard, can never adjust himself to the catastrophic changes facing him and his society. In contrast to this, Farfrae prefers to keep himself and the social role harmonious. As a result, their clash is inevitable and unavoidable.

The conflict between the two reflects a shake-up within the dominant social class of Casterbridge, the merchants and traders. Henchard prepares the way for a triumph of bourgeois economy, but cannot live at ease with end products of the system. He cannot distinguish between business and personal affairs. In fact, here lies the true reason of Henchard's downfall. Farfrae is the opposite of Henchard. If Henchard represents the countryside with all its values, Farfrae represents the city with all its modern values and complex ideas. As it is implicit, in the novel, Farfrae bears the fruits of science which is the product of industrial cities; he introduces new machines to the farmers and treats his men with " progressive" blandness or in an impassionate way. (Jeffares, 1989, pp. XII-XIII)

Henchard's inability to break free from the repercussions of his youthful sins of being drunk and selling his wife intensifies his distress and accelerates his downfall. Henchard's problem is that he fails to understand the setting, the environment, the chronology, and the locale where he lives. He tries to escape from his past by resorting

to the city of Casterbridge which preserves and adores its past on the one hand and is open to technological advancement on the other. So, here lies the irony. But the reverse occurs when the firmity woman reappears to "hasten the collapse of Henchard as a social force in the world of Casterbridge." (Howe, 1985, p.99)

Two major forces, at the end of the novel, are working to destroy Henchard both socially and psychologically. One of these social forces is represented by the industrialization and the introduction of machinery and their consequent transformation in the class hierarchy. The "second one is the natural force represented in the seasonal changes and their impact on the drop in corn production." (Allen, 1984, p.254) Both forces unite to bring about Henchard's downfall as quick as possible. If only Henchard had understood the laws of these two forces and had adjusted himself to their conditions, he would have remained at the top of Casterbridge society. But the tragedy of life, as Hardy stated in the novel, is that "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain." (Hardy, 1989, p.326) This pessimistic view reflects Hardy's deep belief in fatalism and man's tragic existence which is recurrent in most of his novels and poems as well.

Man as the Victim of False Understanding in a Changing Society

Jude the Obscure is the tragedy of the three main characters –Jude, Sue and Phillotson. Among all the three Jude Fawley's tragedy is the greatest because he is torn between two worlds, the world of spiritual love and ambition represented by Sue who is the symbol of learning, and the world of flesh represented by the sexual appeal and the vulgar behaviour of Arabella.

The conflict in this novel is between the ideal life Jude wished to lead and the sordid real life he was fated to live. So Jude's hope in life was to be accepted in Christminster (Oxford). He dedicates most of his time and thinking for this noble purpose. For Jude who is a stonemason who comes from a rural background or from the labourer class, fulfillment of such a desire will be like turning dream into reality. Though Jude comes from the country, he spends most of his time in the towns. Unaware of the hardships that will encounter him when leaving his rural habitat, Jude thinks that the cities are the seats of happiness and the centres of glittering life. Unfortunately, modern cities offer no relief for an obscure little man like Jude; rather they will become the source of

tragedy. In fact, Jude's ordeal is that he is obscure both in that he is a mere working man of no social position and in that he does not understand himself or the forces at work in his life. According to Barry N. Schwartz, "Jude is the little man. He might be characterized as a Victorian Willie Loman." (Schwartz, 1970, p. 801) Jude asks meaning and purpose from a world that denies him both. So, if Jude is considered as a tragic hero, he should have what is called "the tragic flaw". Jude's misunderstanding of the capitalist world is the main weakness in his character.

From the start of the novel, Jude is accompanied by a feeling of loneliness and step by step this feeling is aggravated till he finds himself a misfit in the society. Alvarez comments on Jude's isolation in the most effective way and sees that,

the essence of this tragedy is Jude's loneliness. He is isolated from society because his ambitions, abilities and sensibility separate him from his own class while winning him no place in any other. He is isolated in his marriage to Sue because she is frigid. Moreover, the sense of loneliness is intensified by the way in which both women are presented less as characters complete in themselves than as projections of Jude. (Ibid., 1970, p. 803)

Not only Jude is trying to swim against the current, but Sue does the same too. Sue quits her lawful husband to live in an irreligious way with Jude. Her tragedy is that she will be neither happy with Jude nor Phillotson. Each of them has something that the other lacks. Sue, being a dreamer like Jude, the harsh reality of the Victorian society tosses her like a ball from one lover to the other. Only after the murder to her two children by "Father Time", Jude's son by Arabella, she turns her back at her past leaving Jude and returning to her husband Phillotson to lead a life of chastity and piety.

As for Jude, he moves towards atheism. His lasting curse at the society in which he lived and the world that defeated him in the most bitter way is epitomized in these terrible words, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived!" (Hardy, 2005, p. 337 and 497) Eventually, Jude dies in the most obscure way all alone by himself.

It is noteworthy that the novel started with the depiction of the loneliness of a child and ends also with his death in loneliness. So, Jude was both obscure in his life and in his death. In every society there are many people like Jude but most of them are aware of their limits. Only few people will be like Jude who go beyond their limits and have a

false understanding of the reality of the modern world. It is his struggle with the morbid reality that surrounds him gives him a tragic stature in modern fiction. His false understanding is also his tragic flaw. As such, his struggle and final defeat turn him from a little man in the Victorian society into a great tragic figure in the world fiction.

Conclusion

In both novels studied above one concludes that the modern city with its technological advancement is not the source of blessing for the farmers, agricultural workers, and peasants. On the contrary, the modern city will be the source of suffering and distress for most of them when they come into contact with the city and the city dwellers. In most cases, they will be destroyed in the most tragic manner when they leave their habitat and the problems of the modern city will follow them to their graves.

Both protagonists are at odds with the changing society and the new way of living engendered by industrialization and mechanization of their areas. They are in a continuous struggle with the new factors working on their lives. Though they know quite clearly that there are very small chances of success, they rebel against the norms and traditions of their new societies. In spite of the fact that both protagonists lack proper understanding of their new environment, they bravely go on fighting against the adverse conditions imposed on their lives till they are defeated. These non-conformist characters have strong will to face the worst type of catastrophes, but due to their own tragic flaws, they become tragic figures in a modernized sense.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the protagonist's tragic flaw is that he does not have a rational understanding of what goes around him. Besides, he cannot adjust his life to the new conditions and various problems he encounters in his new society - because the mechanization and industrialization of his rural habitat destroys not only the land but it destroys the values, customs and traditions that were dear to him. He cannot conform to the social change or the social laws, but instead he clings tightly to his past which is diminishing. In the past, humanity was ruling among the various classes of the society, whereas after the change what is counted for is the capital. This de-humanizing effect of money and materialistic view of life destroys old Henchard.

In *Jude the Obscure* the case is a little different, because Jude himself chooses this type of life and he whole-heartedly wants to reject the past for the sake of his future.

That is, he left the rural area for the town to fulfill his big ambition, but he is rejected by the new society and that is why his obscurity clings to him till the very end of his life. As such, Jude neither understands the town society nor the town society understands him. In fact, from the very beginning, he is the victim of his own false understanding. Therefore, his defeat is to some extent justifiable, comprehensible, and approvable because of his fatal mistake and his tragic flaw.

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المدينة الحديثة بصفتها مصدر المأساة في الروايات الرئيسية ل(توماس هاردي)

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المستخلص

تحلل هذه الدراسة المعاناة المستديمة التي يعاني منها الفلاحون و العمال الزراعيون و القرويون المجبرون علي ترك محل سكنهم في (ويسيكس) ليستقروا في المدن الصناعية الكبرى لأنجلترا. كانت هذه الهجرة الاجبارية بسبب التصنيع و المكننة في مناطق (ويسيكس) الريفية التي أدت في النهاية الى التدمير البيئي خلال فترة خطيرة في القرن التاسع عشر من تاريخ إنجلترا. كان القرويون و الفلاحون، الذين فقدوا كل مصادر معيشتهم، يتجهون نحو المدن الكبرى أملين العثور على فرصة جديدة و طريقة عيش أفضل. و كنتيجة لهذه التشرذ، فقد تغير القيم الأخلاقية و الاجتماعية للقرويين الأنجليز بشكل كبير. وقد طرأت تغييرات قوية علي حياة الفلاحين و العمال الزراعيين و القرويين النازعين كنتيجة للتغيير الاجتماعي في المدن. وهناك، واجهوا مشاكل اجتماعية لاتنسى التي دمرت أحلام و طموح معظمهم في الحياة. و تنعكس معاناة و ألام هذه المجموعة من الفلاحين و العمال الزراعيين و القرويين المنكوبين بشكل حيوي في روايات الرئيسية ل(توماس هاردي). ان رواية (عمدة كاستربريدج - 1886) و يركز على المأزق المأساوي للقرويين الأنجليز عندما يحتكون بالناس من المدن. تصور رواية (يهوذا المغمور - 1895) خيبة الأمل و مأساة الريفيين الطموحين الذين يظنون ان بريق المدن الصناعية يتيح لهم سعادة أكثر من الجمال البسيط للمجتمع الريفي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المدينة الحديثة، المأساة، الفهم الزائف، طبقة القرويين، التغيير الاجتماعي، التدمير البيئي.