

B.A. Second Year

Thomas Hardy as a Great Novelist

Thomas Hardy is one of the greatest English novelists. With his fourteen novels, he has carved for himself a niche in the glorious mansion of the English novel. He is a great poet as well as a great novelist; but the success and popularity of his novels-especially his six major novels - has overshadowed his glory as a poet.

As a delineator of human beings pitted against the vast forces of Nature, he stands supreme, and his deft handling of plots, situations and settings reveal the hand of a superb craftsman.

The world of Hardy's novels consists of the region consisting of a part of southwest England, to which he gave its old name 'Wessex', and some other similar rural places. Belonging to the rural working class, he was keenly interested in depicting the life of the peasantry and advocating their beliefs and values. When he went out of his chosen region to deal with the civilized and sophisticated life of cities, his writing lost its natural gusto, and became artificial and laboured. As David Lindley points out, "Hardy was the first English novelist to write about the countryside and its inhabitants in a serious fashion, and obviously he drew constantly on the inspiration offered him by the people of the country in which he was born and spent most of his life." Hardy's novels contain a detailed description of the scenes and places of interest in Dorsetshire (Wessex). S. Diana Neill remarks "No other novelist can render the sights and smells of the countryside with such evocative sensuousness." The vicissitudes in the life of his characters are described as occurring against the background of scenes located in the countryside.

It is the countryside that abounds in the various phenomena of Nature in their changing aspects. Hardy observes Nature closely and presents it in his novels with fidelity to the details related to it. Though it seems often to share the feelings of Man as a whole, it remains indifferent to his suffering. It is against the background of the vast Universe that the drama of human life is enacted in Hardy's novels, and the tragedy of their heroes and heroines takes place. Hardy presents a picture of the vast elemental forces, and shows their working on Man's life. The character of human beings is shown by him as been shaped by the environment around them. Often some natural object or scene directs the movement of the story and guides the actions of characters, as is seen in the case of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* in which the two prominent characters, Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright, "take on the characteristics they have in the novel partly because of their relation to the heath." Hardy differs much from George Meredith in that in Meredith's novels greater importance is attached to Man than to the universe around him, whereas for Hardy the natural universe is much more important than Man and his society, and also quite unintelligible to him.

Tragedy is Hardy's forte. He presents Man's struggle and suffering in the face of a hostile universe, and ultimately encountering defeat and death at the hands of Fate and circumstances. Henchard and Tess are two examples of such suffering persons. For Hardy, life is essentially tragic, and Man's destiny is governed by irony of circumstances over which he has no control. Several of Hardy's major novels - viz. *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* - are tragedies and abound in the element of gloom and despair intensified by the death of their central figures. The tragedy in Hardy's novels transcends the purely local and

individual, and seems to engulf the whole human race in its cosmic sweep. It is caused by the defeat of human beings at the hands of vast and powerful, forces of Nature, universe or Providence.

In presenting human life as a tragedy, Hardy may be said to be expressing his pessimism and his gloomy view of life. He seems to have a Manichean belief in the inevitable presence of Evil in the universe, which annihilates the good with its cruel hands. The roots of Hardy's pessimism may be thought to be lying, like Matthew Arnold's, in the conditions existing in his age, that comprised a rapid advancement of science and the consequent loss of old religious faith and long-cherished values of life. Hardy himself suffered from a loss of religious belief, which was followed by the adoption of a belief in an impersonal Fate which is conveyed in several of his novels. His disgust at the modern life and civilization may be said to be responsible for this loss of faith and growth of pessimistic outlook.

Because of his pessimistic outlook, Hardy restricts the scope of human endeavour and makes its outcome subject to Chance, coincidence, accident and workings of a malignant Fate. These things play a significant role in all his novels, and shape the destiny of his characters. The excessive use of these elements takes off much of the effectiveness of his tragedies, because they overshadow the actions of Man, which are supposed to lead to tragic consequences. Characters like Henchard, Jude and Tess suffer much in life, not only because of their own mistakes or weaknesses, but also because of the circumstances prevailing around them, and the cruel hands of Fate pushing them towards their doom.

Hardy is a master in the art of characterization, and portrays his characters faithfully through their manners, speech and other such distinguishing features. However, only his major characters are portrayed with a psychological insight, the minor ones being used only to provide some comic relief and Chorus-like commentary on the existing situations. Often his characters such as Sue, Eustacia Vye and Gabriel Oak, are delineated in a subtle manner, but most of them - especially the minor ones comprising rustics - hardly ever come under the purview of his analytical scrutiny. In fact, Hardy is more interested in portraying the elemental powers of the universe and the world around him than individual characters. Moreover, he often employs his characters as mouthpieces for the expression of his philosophy of life. Another characteristic of Hardy's characterization is his greater concern with Man or Woman as a whole than with a particular man or woman. According to Earnest Baker "His chief character is Man, and the play Existence." Hence, to give his interpretation of Existence and his views on the interplay of Man and nature, "Hardy chooses his human types from those who are closest to nature, those in whom the primitive impulses are the strongest." (Moody and Lovett). Instead of remaining preoccupied with the psychological complexities of his characters, Hardy shows the struggle between these characters and the indifferent universe, they have been thrown into by the accident of their birth.

The plots of Hardy's novels are constructed with great skill, and reveal his inventive powers. But they are often marred by the element of improbability, implausibility, causality and excessive use of coincidence. These plots comprise both the internal and external conflicts, and often present a blend of these two types of conflict, as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Sudden shifts from one scene to another put a strain on the common reader's attention. However, a careful arrangement of various events and situations has been helpful in imparting a unity to the structures of his novels despite the complex nature of these structures. On the whole, Hardy makes his plots serve as a compact unit to

convey his tragic view of life, and all the scenes and events lead towards a climax which embodies this view.

There can no doubt about the merit of Hardy's art as a novelist, despite certain shortcomings that it may betray. As a story-teller, as a constructor of plots, as a delineator of character and as a painter of scenes and situations, he is simply superb. His pessimism and his predilection for tragedy may not be palatable to many, but the authenticity of his treatment of human life and the genuineness of his concern for the tragic destiny of Man, are beyond dispute. His greatness as a novelist lies in his cosmic view of life, and the beauty and dignity of his best work. His view of a malignant Fate and hostile Nature may be a bit too gloomy to be easily acceptable; but his concern for and depiction of the pitiable lot of Man in this world is admirable indeed.

Dr Rajdhan
Assistant Professor-English