

Fate in Thomas Hardy's Poetry

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) paved the way for modernism. His writings reflect the core of the modernist era that covered the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Shaped by the rapid growth of the industrial societies and the panic of the First World War, modernism is the age of experimenting with everything. Among other features, modernism concerns with fatalism; the continuity of time. The present paper sheds light on the writings of Thomas Hardy as he experiences in his writings his different viewpoints of the continuity of time and the indifferent attitude of time, taking "The Convergence of the Twain" and "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" as a models to be discussed.

Keywords: fate, modernism, nature, pessimistic, time

I. Introduction

Modern poetry depicts the actual aspect of the twentieth century life. It emphasizes humans' political, ideological, and economic systems. In fact, poetry sheds light on the experiences of man whose society suffers from a continuous weakening of values, discouragement, disruption, and anarchy. It is the poetry of man's strife, his everyday life, his chances and mischances. Modern poetry presents the dystopia of what was assumed as an ideal and utopian world. Thus, it rarely considers the fascination of old romance. Actually, the dreams of the Romance are smashed by the sullen realistic world. Due to their harsh environment, modern poets revolt against the present structure of life, against the unequal distribution of both wealth and power through which few people are treated in respect as opposed to the minorities whose basic needs are unattainable. Therefore, it is the task of poets to create images through the use of words to frame a picture of the social reality.

Unable to escape the writer's world, modern poets follow the trend of writing poems that tackle events from their surrounding and societies. With their insistence to break with the past, modern poets tend to draw a statement through the use of words about the world instead of evoking personal statements. With its emphasis on the impersonal and the objective social life, modern poets like Thomas Hardy, reflect their pessimistic view of life, taking the concept of fate and time as two forces responsible for the man's suffering, frustration, and confusion. Thomas Hardy hints at the man's predetermined future as being fixed and unchangeable and thus holds a pessimistic view of life. The present paper tends to reflect Hardy's pessimistic view where fate is held responsible of the speaker's ruin, taking "The Convergence of the Twain" and "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" as models to be discussed.

II. Fate in "The Convergence of the Twain"

Fate is a predetermined future. It refers to the fixed events that can't be handled by any kind of human agency. In the modern period, writers and poets write about loneliness, boredom, and emptiness in twentieth century. They predict and anticipate the life that would be seen later after World War I. Thomas Hardy displays, in his poems, the belief about people in the modern world as being fragile and living an empty life. Incontrovertibly, the twentieth century destroys the spirituality of humans, leading them to live a meaningless life.

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Fate exhibits a major role in the writings of the modern poets through which the unexpected events take place to show the sense of fragmentation and frustration of people at that time. In "The Convergence of the Twain," Thomas Hardy examines chance, accident, and coincidence to demonstrate his philosophy of life in which fate is predicted as a timeless unseen force. Such force destroys people's happiness in the same way that modernity does in bringing its pessimistic progress to the world. Hardy's poem portrays the sophisticated relationship of humans to nature through the confusion of who is stronger and greater than whom. Hardy depicts the chaos and the similarity between the Titanic and nature.

The connection of human, represented in the Titanic, to the natural world is felt from the beginning of the poem. The speaker makes a remark that man's vanity is detached from nature. Nature's creatures cannot perceive such useless and weird stuff. In the first stanza, the sea is described as "a solitude," as being removed and detached from humanities and their vanities and arrogance. It is man's "Pride of Life" that brings development to the world; thus, capitalized while nature is indifferent to such progress. Man's "Pride of Life" creates and builds the ship, referred to as 'she', as opposed to the "solitude" of the sea whose nonchalance rejects and destructs man's glory indignantly.

Moving inside the ship, Hardy paints a picture, through the use of words, of what is seen inside. This luxurious ship has not been able to stand against the power of fate. The "steal champers" and the "opulent mirrors" can neither stand nor escape the power of nature. These chambers are useless compared to the cold currents. They are invulnerable to flame due to their late pyres, making the ship cold, filled with "cold currents" instead of heating the ship. Moreover, the mirrors, like the steal champers are useless, depicted as 'grotesque' because of the crawling of the warms over them. Man, unlike the force of nature, portrays the ship and its parts as valuable things. Believing in their luxurious and mighty presence, human beings are removed from the harsh reality of the world through which they are blind, unlike the 'moon-eyed fishes' which are able to gaze and see the 'vaingloriousness'. These fishes, being part of the natural world, question the vanity of human beings whose modernity 'ravishes the sensuous mind' and brings chaos to the world.

Represented by the lightless jewels, nature is indifferent to man's plans and designs. Like that of the jewels, man's mind becomes "lightless, sparkles, bleared, black, and blind" rather than sensuous. Hardy depicts the fact that "fate alters the course of people's lives and events and can take someone to the top and another to the bottom"(S.Vaishnavi, and S.Sheela:123). Similar to the ship with its immanent power, human beings are governed with a divine force that controls and moves everything around without being able to track its every single movement. It is at this point that the power of fate reverses and displaces man's luxurious, but yet, useless glory. The conflict between the "Immanent Will" and the individuals reaches its outmost at the moment of the convergence of both the natural world, represented by the ice-berg, and with humans' vanity, represented by the ship itself. Human beings find themselves beaten and defeated at the hands of malicious chance and fate that devastate human happiness. There is a persistent dispute between man and the omnipotent fate which ignores the "sinister" shape of the "Ice." Capitalized, "The Shape of the Ice" represents the ugly side of the 'Immanent Will' since a 'sinister mate' is prepared to take place. Having two sides, one that is pretty in "stirring" and "urging" everything and one that is ugly in preparing a 'sinister mate', the "Immanent Will" is described thoroughly by F. R. Southerington who speaks of Hardy's Vision of Man:

Hardy's description of the Immanent Will exploit a tense, contradictory style; and the language indicates that at least two elements, the conscious and the unconscious, organic and inorganic, constitute with Will. It would also seem obvious that the Will is regarded as a vital force, possibly as a thing-in-itself, and at least as a phenomenon greater than Man, since it expresses itself partly through Man (178)

Hardy believes in an almighty power that is in charge of all the things happening in the world, assuming an inevitable power. It is this inevitable power of fate that combines two equal but opposite entities, the ship in one hand and the ice-berg on the other hand. Both the ship and the ice-berg seem to be 'alien' to each other the way that humans' useless stuff looks weird in the world of trees, plants, and fresh air.

Seeing this struggle between the ship and the ice-berg, Hardy's pessimistic view point is highlighted by the inescapable collision. 'No mortal eye can see' and expect the meeting of the two entities. In fact, their collision emphasizes the concept of fate that demonstrates humans' situation. Their meeting becomes part of history, to be recorded, describing the meeting as an 'intimate welding' to be eminent through history, as David Cecil points out:

A struggle between man on the one hand, and on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent fate- that is Hardy's interpretation of human situation"

Hardy moves further to emphasize the inevitable and thus pessimistic collision. He points out the 'august' act of combining the two spheres together like two halves which are meant and destined to meet. Surprisingly, Pinion, in his book entitled *Thomas Hardy: Art and Thought*, remarks the way Hardy regards man as a "puppet" who is affected by events beyond his control (46). The two hemispheres; the ship and of the ice-berg, are knitted together and are inseparable. Hardy portrays the unified spheres to be under the control of the 'Spinner of the years,' implying kind of higher or divine power. To put it forward, on Hardy's birthday in 1907, during the period when he was editing a book entitled *The Dynasts: Part three*, he wrote:

The will of man is ...neither wholly free nor wholly unfree.
When swayed by the Universal Will (which he mostly must
be as a subservient part of it) he is not individually free; but
whenever it happens that all the rest of the Great Will is
equilibrium the minute portion called one person's will
is free (50).

The conflict between two different forces runs through most of his works where he pictured the "Immanent Will," which underlines and manipulates the universe, through a variety of symbols that represent human ways of thinking and feeling. Caused and manipulated by fate, life has been shown as a pessimistic entity in the hand of chance. Hardy, through his poems, scrutinizes and sets forth his pessimistic philosophy of life through which the cause behind life and its events are removed and away from our control. Such a pessimistic vision of life is what characterized the beginning of Modernism where the technological devices were viewed as useless in the hand of nature and fate. In "The Convergence of the Twain," the unexpected happens, giving a clear cut pessimistic view of people's life whose sense of pride is shocked due to the sinking of the unsinkable and immune ship. Hardy's vision of life is pessimistic at core. In fact, Hardy himself says: "My pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly Melioristic" (Goldwag 105).

Following other poems, written by Hardy, it becomes clear that Hardy's vision of life is interwoven with uncertainty. No sense of certainty colors people's lives. People seem to think of their returning home safely, yet the image of death comes at the very beginning of the poem to shake people's belief of the advanced world as symbolized by the ship. Hardy's vision of life is what is seen as pessimistic, not the human beings themselves. In an article entitled "Pessimism in Thomas Hardy Novels," R.S. Scott James observes that "Hardy did not set out to give us a pessimistic philosophy ... Hardy is pessimistic about the governance of the Universe, but not about human beings."

Therefore, Hardy's point of view depends on the position of human being in life rather on human beings themselves whose fate plays an indispensable role in their lives. In "The Convergence of the Twain," death comes at the end to assure that time, the force of time, is what guides our presence. It is intended and prehistoric that the ship which symbolizes civilization, will inevitably bend down to the force of nature.

III: Fate in "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave"

In another context, Hardy paints the continuity of time and the power of fate that replaces any other forces from a different point of view. Written in a form of a dialogue, "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave" emphasizes his attitude toward life by making the two forces meet; the natural force represented by the dog and the power of human beings whose death is their ultimate ending, represented by the dead woman in the grave. Hardy, through the use of dialogue, frames a similar picture of the constant conflict between nature and mankind.

In both "The Convergence of the Twain" and "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave," a collision is expected to take place, but it is the power of nature and time that will be valid toward the end of humans' existence.

Hardy's "Immanent Will" remains unchanged in conception, but is shown in different ways. Hardy visualizes, through a humorous dialogue, the struggle for existence. In the poem, a deceased woman carries on a dialogue with someone who irritates the site of her grave. The identity of this figure remains anonymous during the first half of the poem, through which the woman thinks of him as her lover who ironically 'went to wed/One of the highest wealth has bred' and forgets his beloved. The woman then inquires that the one who digs and disturbs her grave site is a kin, but a shocking answer comes to say 'what use' of sitting and thinking of a dead woman and even to plant a flower on her grave. Hardy tries to paint a dreary picture through which the dead are forsaken from the memory of living.

In fact, the woman is so attached to the living world where her acquaintances, a lover, a kin and even an enemy, have all abandoned her memory. The woman is so desperate to have a company to the extent that she expects an enemy's presence besides her grave since her lover and her family relatives leave her alone.

Hardy's belief in chance and fate are depicted in the responses to the woman's inquiries by pointing out that even the enemy is no more bothered with hating her, asserting Hardy's belief of the power of fate. In fact, Pinion indicates Hardy's philosophy as the following:

Since limited circumstances governed the lives of the most people, and choice could be reasonably exercised only when they were not under great stress, it was natural that Hardy's heart went out most to those whom Chance had given little choice (83).

Hardy's skeptical view of human conditions is similar to the digger's role in the dialogue who disturbs the woman's grave and points out that the living world 'cares not where [she] lies' (18).

In the final lines of the poem, Hardy concludes and presents his philosophy of time and its continuity. Time in this poem, like fate in the previous work, is described as a divine power that everyone is controlled by. Therefore, taking the woman as an example, Hardy unties any ties that might bind human nature as compared to the real natural world. He goes to the extremes in saying that even the dog is upon the woman's grave not out of its fidelity but only to bury its bone. The dog shows no interests in the woman who thinks that her dog is "the one true heart was left behind!" However, the dog's only interest is in its daily life and needs, forgetting the fact that the site is near its owner's grave.

Hardy uses the theme of the woman's expected sense of love as a shared concept among humanity in order to reflect its worthlessness compared to the natural world whose power is represented through the passage of time. Hardy characterizes nature as an undefeatable power whose parts, the plants and the animals, are interrelated and invulnerable to the pessimistic governance of the universe. Through this dialogue, Hardy wants to highlight the conclusion that all humanity share the same ending; thus. Through this conclusion, Hardy asserts his pessimistic view not of the human beings themselves but rather of the law that governs and controls their existence. As concluded by Harold Orel's *The Final Years of Thomas Hardy, 1912-1928*, the relationship between human pain and a Supreme Law is inevitable.

IV: Conclusion

Both "The Convergence of the Twain" and "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave" represent the continuous struggle between man and nature to highlight the state of human beings at the beak of Modernism. Both poems, through the use of different symbols, refer to the inferiority of mankind compared to the superiority of the providence represented by nature in the two mentioned poems. Both poems paved the way for the rise of modernity with its pessimistic and realistic view of life.

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