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Rustic Characters in Hardy's Select Novels

Dr. K. Sundararajan^a, G. Arokiyadas^b

^aAssociate Professor & Research Advisor, Department of English, A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Poondi, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

^b Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Poondi, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

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Abstract

This paper aims to present Hardy's "Rustic Characters" through his novels. Hardy's characters may be divided into three groups. First those who are protagonists in the whole human drama who take leading parts, secondly those who are in contact with them and have some part in their affairs, and lastly "the rustic bystanders not only provide comic relief, but also to fulfil a much more important function. Their services in making the machinery run smoothly and perspicuously are invaluable, and they also help to bring out not only the immediate but also the ulterior significance of all that is taking place. In a sense, they represent Hardy himself. They are quiet but deeply interested observers who see more of what is going on than the gentlefolks are aware, and they are continually dropping shrewd comments... they are asked in tradition, the traditions of a primitive class, rooted in the soil, which it is their function to typify. They are as external as the woods and fields and heaths; whereas the diffident lovers, the weak or faithless women, are anguished victims of despair, are symbols of a present phase of disturbance, restlessness, and maladjustment".

Keywords: Affairs, perspicuously, gentlefolks, philosophic party, imperceptible.

1. Introduction

Hardy is considered as great a tragic novelist as Shakespeare, a tragic dramatist. Like Shakespeare's four great tragedies, Hardy also produced four great tragic novels: Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Jude the Obscure, The Mayor of Casterbridge and The Return of the Native. Hardy found life a tale of woes and sufferings. Shakespeare's dramas also present a spectacle of suffering and pain. But the tragic vision of both the artists is quite different from each other.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are men of high rank and status. They are kings, princes, generals and warriors. A Shakespearean tragic hero is an exceptional creature with uncommon qualities of head and heart. His fate affects the destiny of the whole nation. His fall from prosperity to adversity excites feelings of pity and terror. But Hardy's heroes and heroines are different from those of Shakespeare. They are very ordinary individuals, not kings or warriors. They belong to the lower sections of society.

A novel is a story about human beings, and if we are not made to feel they are convincing human beings. Their story does not move us. Hardy's novels do move us because they are stories about memorable characters. Hardy's remarkable creative power shows itself in his characters. However,

Hardy did not have the power to conceive character very variously. His range of character is limited. But the characters are built of the uttermost underived elemental material that is common to all humanity. Most of the great characters of the Wessex novels are neither types nor mere individuals, but 'universals'. Each comprehends within himself the whole of human nature which is one and indivisible. They have their varied casings of the coloured glass of individuality, but the light at the centre is white. To call Hardy a 'fearless realist', is to misunderstand him, to abuse the term. In the matter of incident he is certainly neither romanticist nor prude: but in character his eye and hand are those of the idealist – the idealist who rises above the accidents and distinctions of external show, and looks deep down into human nature itself."

The rustic characters in Hardy's novels play a very vital role. These rustics come from almost every walk of Wessex life. We see them as shepherds, farm labourers, grass-cutters, wood-cutters, dairy-maids, etc. In *The Return of the Native*, some of these characters are Fairway, Grandfer Cantle, Christian, Charley, Susan Nunsuch, Olly Dowden, etc.; in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, they are Solomon Longways, Christopher Coney, Buzzford, Abel Whittle, Mother Cuxsom, Nance Mackridge, etc.; in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, they are Joseph Poorgrass, Henry Fray, Billy Smallbury, Jan Coggan, Matthew Moon, etc.

In Hardy, the rustic characters or the Philosophic Party as they are known, are in the straight tradition from Shakespeare. They appear to be the direct descendants of Bottom and Dogberry. Hardy's rustics entertain as much as any of Shakespeare or Fielding or Goldsmith. But they have their own peculiar personality, their own group traits.

One of the important functions of Hardy's rustic characters is that they work as chorus, much in the tradition of the chorus of the Greek tragedy. This chorus is the symbol of the great majority of humdrum mortals, who go on living through their unconventional life, whatever misfortunes may overtake the finer spirits placed among them. Henchard and Eustacia may love and suffer and die, but the rustics go on. It is they who bring the children to birth, dance at the wedding, mourn at the graveyard, and speak the epitaph over the tomb. They are eternal as the earth they live by. These rustics are observers of life around them and they pass their shrewd comments on this life. It is their comments which enable the reader to understand a lot about the Wessex life.

Another function that is performed by these rustics is that they provide the chief source of humour in the novel. Hardy's novels are another function that is performed by these rustics is that they generally serious and grim. Therefore, a sort of dramatic relief is an essential necessity which is fulfilled by the rustic characters in Hardy's novels. In fact, whatever humour we find in Hardy's novels, is provided by the rustic characters. In this also, Hardy comes close to Shakespeare whose minor characters provide a fund of fun. In Hardy, this humour is rustic it is elemental, it is grotesque, it is Gothic, It is traditional. The humour of the rustics is not, satirical. Hardy does not make us laugh by exposing the foibles and follies of his characters. His jokes simply fill the cottages and inns with enlivening laughter which simply make us laugh at the immemorial butts of village life. The comic comments and actions of these characters add cheer and sunshine to the otherwise grim and gloomy atmosphere of Hardy's novels. The absence of these characters in *Tess* has made this novel at times tedious.

Hardy's rustic characters are also important in that they represent the norm of Wessex life. These characters are of the earth. Therefore they represent the normal human behaviour. While the protagonists are carried off their feet by the passions of the moment, these rustics keep their feet firmly planted on the earth. They always show their disliking against excess of sentiments. These characters very often represent the novelist's point of view. They express their opinions on various happenings. The reader gets a view of the perspective on the main action. He gets the view of the action through the eyes of the characters involved in that action of and a still another view of the through the eyes of the villagers. Lest the readers be misled by the characters matter of fact acceptance of their own behaviour, the novel presents a second perspective which reminds the reader just how distant this behaviour is from that of ordinary people. Thus the set of these characters is also known as the 'Philosophic Party'.

2. Conclusion

These rustic characters were first of all introduced in the novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. He made them a necessary part of the great tragedies that followed it. They have great importance in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and in *The Return of the Native*. But in his final works *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* they are more or less discarded. Though in his final works they are not present in plenty yet they play a significant role in "Tess". They appear in groups only three or four times. Hardy ignored these characters in *Tess* and *Jude* merely because he wanted to purify and simplify his style so that he might concentrate on the great social issues he proposed to discuss in these novels.

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