THE INFLUENCE OF CHANCE AND TIME IN THE SHAPING OF MAN'S DESTINY

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In Thomas Hardy's fourth novel: Far from the Madding Crowd, the citizen's 'Then' is the rustic's 'Now'. Thus, a changeless, rigid and uncompromising village is set against human beings who can never remain immobile! It is this scene that shapes the action in the novel. Time and Chance are the cords that bind all the episodes concerning each character irrevocably to them. Bathsheba Everdeen, the heroine, and all the major characters are thoroughly 'beaten' by Time and Chance. The author successfully uses Time and Chance to subdue Everdeen to a mature, disillusioned and knowledgeable adult. One can see that Time and Chance indeed happen to all. At work is an implicit moral judgement which appears to work against the society, or the inscrutable nature of the universe with its chance of destruction or reform. And man often finds it difficult which is preferable! The lesson here is man, like Gabriel Oak, through sheer initiatives, endurance and ability to adapt in spite of Time and Chance, should reach out through to a successful and happy position/ending in life.

Thomas Hardy, the author of Far from the Madding Crowd was born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, on 2 June, 1840 and died at Max Gate, Dorchester, on 11 January, 1928.[1] Far from the Madding Crowd was written in 1873 for a serial publication in the Cornhill Magazine, before it finally came up in this form in 1874, when it was first published. Carpenter (1964:90) says of this novel, "The most representative and balanced of the Wessex novels is the fourth one Hardy wrote following A Pair of Blue Eyes".[2] We are told in the Introduction to the text:

> Hardy chose for this setting a Dorset Village and a county – town five or six miles off. He called them Weatherbury and Casterbridge and modelled them on Puddletown and Dorchester, places linked with his family that he had known since childhood. They lie at the heart of that district called Wessex.[3]

There are however, glimpses of Bath and the coast at Weymouth and several episodes in outlying towns, but Weatherbury, the village and its farms, and Casterbridge close by are the novel's practical limits.

The novel has a remote setting – more remote in 1874 than it is today. It is also timeless. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The author wants us to know that the citizen's 'Then' is the rustic's 'Now'. In our

days, one can say twenty or ten years ago are old times in Ilorin, five or so years in Abuja and even two or three years in Lagos! But in Weatherbury the author wants us to know that,

> three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter... Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity.[4]

This description of the setting of the place is quite relevant to our topic. The changeless, rigid and uncompromising village set against human beings who cannot remain immobile. This scene is an important element in the novel. The central characters with a single exception are an intimate part of it. If they do not always speak its language, they understand it. It is this scene that shapes the action. And it is when it is invaded that the story begins.

The plot is one quality of this novel which is demonstrably superior to the minor works of Hardy for it grows principally out of character and natural situations. Bathsheba Everdeen, is a beautiful and willful young lady, who spurns the earnest suit of Gabriel Oak from sheer caprice. Subsequently, Oak loses his flock of sheep and becomes an itinerant farm worker, while Bathsheba inherits a large farm. Although, this is coincidental, it is thoroughly embedded in the rural scene and does not seem gratuitous. Oak saves her grain ricks from fire and he is hired as her bailiff. Oak's motive is to look after Bathsheba and be near her. But though he may save her property, he cannot save her soul from disaster. But once again, Bathsheba overlooks the worthy man to become infatuated with the rakish sergeant Troy and eventually to elope with him. Neither of them was aware that Troy's former sweet heart, Fanny Robin, is pregnant and searching for him.

Bathsheba too has sown the seeds of later grief in her careless encouragement of Farmer Boldwood. The later is a man who appears too solid and staid to lose his heart but who is actually a highly emotional and sensitive person. Bathsheba encourages him to love her and yet disapproves him.

Fanny eventually dies in childbirth in the work-house. Troy distracted with remorse, tells Bathsheba that he really love Fanny, and not Bathsheba. Hear him:

> Ah! Don't taunt me, madam. This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or can be. If Satan had not tempted me with that face of yours, and those cursed coquetries I should have married her...[5]

With this, Troy disappears into the thin air, only to be reported later as drowned. Bathsheba is naturally crushed by all that has happened, but the way is eventually opened for Farmer Boldwood to renew his 'courtship'. After much hesitation Bathsheba agrees to become Mrs. Boldwood, only to have Troy reappear, quite alive and very sadistic. But he has not reckoned with Boldwood's emotional nature, and he is shot by the distracted farmer.

Finally, after much suffering of spirit and body, Bathsheba and Oak, who has remained loyal by her, and has endured to wait for so long, as his name implies; the heroine and hero of the novel, are quietly married.

It will be profitable to use the Marxist approach in attempting the analysis of this topic. Marxist criticism is derived from the writing of Karl Marx and his soul-mate, Friedrich Engels. Marxism Aesthetics refers to the construction of art or literature in line with the principles of Marxism.

> The Marxist idea is basically that situations in society are historically determined. This has been described as historical materialism. Man relates to the world on the basis of his material needs; it is this that forms the basis of all interaction within society.[6]

In other words, the production of material life is the base on which the superstructures of society dwell. The latter includes the spiritual and aesthetic life of a man in society.

Man's behaviour in general, his attitudes, his aesthetic outlook and so on, are determined by his material acquisition. It is the same in this novel under consideration. The classes of society – capitalist and the labour – are diametrically opposed, and their struggles are basically the struggle for the control of the means of production of material life. Thematically, Marxism is often expressed in terms of the opposing classes and the struggles of the under-privileged for emancipation. Though, such struggles as expressed in Marxism are not prevalent, if at all there is any, in this novel, we can see the individual especially the major characters struggling against Time and Chance, in the process of acquiring the material life.

Thus, as the topic implies Bathsheba's problems do not arise alone from ambivalent desire. She is like any other protagonists, subjected to the influence of Chance and Time. This influence of Chance and Time on Man seems to be the overriding theme of the novel. The novel is so dominated by these forces that without them the novel could not take the course it took.

Chance has its place in Bathsheba saving Farmer Oak from choking to death on his farm. Chance has its way when, because of his own farm ruin, Farmer Oak has to help, unknowingly to him, Farmer Bathsheba's Farm from

ruin. Again, chance has it that Bathsheba has to employ Farmer Oak, who once wooed her for a wife without success.

Chance also is at work when Bathsheba uses the ancient device of divination by Bible and key to decide whether or not to send the Valentine Card to Farmer Boldwood. Again, chance has its way in the prank of Bathsheba sending the Valentine with the seal 'Marry me' to Farmer Boldwood.

We also see the shaping hands of Chance and Time in Fanny's mistaking the Church where she is to marry Troy so that the wedding does not take place. Chance and Time are also in operation in the encounter of Troy with Fanny on the way to the work house and Fanny's eventual death during childbirth at the same workhouse which is shunned by everyone except the most destitute poor.

As the story progresses we see Chance again at work in Bathsheba, after marrying Troy, seeing Fanny's hair in the back of Troy's watch. Not only that, Chance is at work in the torrential rain, the like that has not occurred in the past four hundred years, washing away the flowers Troy has planted on Fanny Robin's grave. What about, the current of flood which sweeps Troy out to the sea, so that he is reported dead? It is all by Chance and Time.

One can also see Chance at work when Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba together replant the flowers on the grave of the dead girl she has seen as a rival,

> with the superfluous magnanimity of a woman
> whose narrower instincts have brought
> down bitterness upon her instead of love[7]

It is Chance which has its way when Boldwood is made to eliminate Troy, so that Bathsheba is left with Gabriel Oak as the only option for a husband. And Chance it is when eventually, Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdeen eventually marry.

Thus, Time does not function in co-operation with characters in the novel. The village life and structure are permanent while Time and Chance make the villagers impermanent. The Shearing barn and the rustics are permanent or give the impression of permanence "against which the individuals are seen in their tragic finitude"[8]

Hardy makes features of the landscape to stress this finitude. Norcombe Hill, for example and some objects like the leering automation, mark the time while Troy waits in vain for Fanny at the Church, and so on. All these images point to the fact that man struggles not only against himself but against the simple fact of Chance. If Man can remain stable, if things are not subject to the hands of Time and Chance, then all would be well. But, Man cannot, especially when he has desire and intellect which invariably lead to instability.

The barn is 'timeless' not in any mystical sense but because the human needs for food and shelter never change. The workers in the barn are engaged in a 'timeless' activity because they are meeting these needs. We see the flashy Troy sharply contrasted with these workers in the most direct language. "With him the past was yesterday; the future; tomorrow; never the day after".

Troy completely absorbed in the moment; he is unaware of all the permanent needs and emotions. His activities are exercised on whatever object Chance might place in their way, and his feelings continually change.

Troy's energy usually takes the form of destructiveness, and his profession is destructive too – a soldier. Troy squanders the money which Bathsheba needs to keep up the farm and almost ruins her financially. Nothing prospers in Weatherbury since he gets married to Bathsheba. Thus, it is only superficial that he is fascinating in the scarlet and glided form in which Bathsheba sees him. Shorn of his brilliant externals his human quality is poorer and meaner than anyone else in the novel.

Chance has it that Bathsheba is the only person who comes to help Gabriel. Bathsheba and the Corn, the human beings who sustain the land and the food which sustains them become, at least equal in their value in Gabriel's eyes. The product of human labour and the value of unselfish human love are defended at the same time. Throughout the actions, although Bathsheba treats Gabriel badly, she depends on his strength and endurance to help her through her personal disasters. And it is just because she swallows her pride to appeal to him when the sheep have to be cured. Chance has it that Gabriel had not left Weatherbury then. Their relationship is grounded in the experience of years of shared labour, in the care of the crops and animals, the well-being of farm and those who work in it – which is what in the end matters most to them both.

Gabriel can be seen as the romanticized archetypal country man. His name and occupation are relevant here. He is the traditional Good Shepherd saving the flock from disease and new born lambs from the cold. He is the angel Gabriel that always brings Goodnews of great joy to the people. His character is simple and strong, but it is not to depict absence of skill and intelligence. He is able to cure the sheep just because he possesses a certain kind of knowledge which nobody else in the neighbourhood has. The other labourers call him a clever man in talents.

Like Bathsheba, Gabriel is gifted with much higher talent and energy than the rest of the community and as Chance and Time bring them together, he is able to rise to a leading position within it.

Gabriel's great strength is his ability to adapt and endure. It is through sheer initiative mixed with Chance and Time that he reaches his finally successful and happy position. And this is because he believes in himself that he is made for better things than a life of mechanical toil.

Conclusively, one can see that Time and Chance come to all. And that what is at work is an implicit moral judgement which rebels against either the common sense of the society or, the inscrutable nature of the universe, has its choice only of destruction or reform and it is not always easy to decide which is preferable. And it does this through Time and Chance. . . .

In the end, the easy-going Weatherbury community having expelled the destructive forces which menaced it, is revitalized by the two outsiders, Bathsheba Everdene and Gabriel Oak. It is their eventual and long postponed union (though unromantic and unexciting) that restores the desirable norm to the village as if to sanitize it. The norm is that of maintaining communal labour, looking after the sheep and getting food from the Land. It is because both of them fundamentally want to live according to this norm that they possess a real basis for marriage. They have both developed into mature human beings who are prepared to grapple seriously with their responsibilities both in work and love.

Although Thomas Hardy allows us the questionable sop to our feelings of a marriage with Oak as a denouement, the novel does not really end happily. The vibrant and proud girl we see at the beginning has been as thoroughly destroyed (purged) as Troy and Boldwood. Michael Millgate (1989:87) says:

> Never again, we are sure, will she burst forth in a fine blaze of fury, her black eyes shaping and her cheek flushed; nor will she blush as furiously with love or at her temerity. [10]

Thus, in subduing her through Time and Chance, to a mature disillusioned and knowledgeable adult, Hardy has subdued (or is it destroyed?) our enjoyment of her as a charming character. Symbolically, it shows that the Victorian era, which she represents, is not completely dead but not powerful enough to be what it used to be. One is led to believe that the Author wants the Victorian era to die because Oak and Bathsheba do not have an offspring in the novel. Thus the novel is both tragic and as well comic – a Tragi-comedy of a novel.

ENDNOTES

[1]Thomas Hardy, Far From The Madding Crowd (U.S.A.: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. ii.

[2]Richard Carpenter, Thomas Hardy (U.S.A.: Twayne Publishing Inc., 1964), p. 81

[3]Thomas Hardy, Far From The Madding Crowd (U.S.A.: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. vii.

[4]Ibid., p. vii.

[5]Ibid., p. 266.

[6]Omolayo Oloruntoba-Oju, "Themes and Tendencies in

Literature and Criticism: A short Introduction" in Efurosibina Adegbija, ed. The English Language And Literature In English: An Introductory Handbook, ed. (Ilorin: The Department of Modern European Languages, University of Ilorin, 1999) p. 214.

[7]Michael Millgate, ed. The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy (Hongkong: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1984 rpt. 1989), p. 132.

[8]Richard Carpenter, Thomas Hardy (U.S.A.: Twayne Publishing Inc., 1964), p. 90

[9]Thomas Hardy, Far From The Madding Crowd (U.S.A.: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. viii.

[10]Michael Millgate, ed. The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy (Hongkong: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1984 rpt. 1989), p. 87.

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