

A CRITICAL STUDY OF HARDY'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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Abstract:

Thomas Hardy's short stories have not received the kind of attention they deserve because, like Dickens, Hardy is primarily known as a novelist. The paper attempts to critically examine two of Hardy's short stories from Marxist point of view. Set in the south of England, his stories depict the poverty among the laborers in the fields. Hardy is critical about the industrialization in the country which resulted not only in the migration of the farm laborers but also it ended the age old customs and traditions in the rural area. The paper argues that Hardy not only depicts the grave consequences of the migration of the poor workers from villages to towns but subtly criticizes the social system for wrecking up the ancient cultural world of England. The paper also studies how the laws were ineffective to protect the rights of workers.

Key Words: *Marxism, exploitation, migration, industrialization, farm laborers.*

Hardy wrote four volumes of short stories and published many of them in different English and American magazines and dailies. His collections of short stories are: *Wessex Tales* (1888), *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), *Life's Little Ironies* (1894) and *A Changed Man and Tales* (1913). "The Three Strangers" from *Wessex Tales* and "What the Shepherd Saw: A Tale of Four Moonlight Nights" from *A Changed Man and Tales* are selected for analysis.

Hardy's fame rests on his novels and his poems published between 1898 and 1928, till his death. James Gibson in the introduction of his edited book *Thomas Hardy Selected Short Stories and Poems* rightly points out:

That he is also a short-story writer of a very remarkable kind is not nearly as well known. Yet between 1874 and his farewell to prose fiction in the late 1890s, he wrote and published more than fifty short stories, and among them are at least a dozen which deserve to rank among the very best in our language.¹

Throughout the 19th century English fiction the illusory stereotype of a happy, innocent countryside where all the villagers were hard working and virtuous remained very popular with urban readers. In the 19th century England, there were 'two nations', the rich and the poor, each ignorant of the life of the other. The poor living in the countryside were unaware of the lives of the aristocracy; whereas the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie shut themselves up in their houses and parks and were rarely seen out of their society. They knew little about the actual life in the country, and therefore felt little for the toiling class. The laborers were regarded as necessary implements of agriculture. Simon Gartell in her essay "Wessex" in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy* (1999) says that, "Hardy found that though his instinct was to work within the rural working class, his audience required something different- some sort of gentility, some superiority of social status, something to identify with"²

The South-west part of England, where Hardy lived, was dominated by poor farm laborers. Agriculture was the main business there and unlike the northern part, the south-west remained backward till the end of the 19th century. In fact Dorset - where Hardy lived most of his life - was one of the poorest and least industrialized areas which retained many of the old customs and superstitions which Hardy records in his fiction.

1. "The Three Strangers":

Hardy, primarily, uses the countryside and the country people in his fiction to entertain, to amuse the particular class of readers, mainly the bourgeoisie or the middle class. He tries to project the Arcadian picture to his readers. "The Three Strangers" depicts the life of shepherds, artisans at a lonely cottage, standing far from a county town. The action of the story takes place in an imagined, isolated cottage during one stormy night. The story goes like a suspense thriller as readers keep wondering about the identity of the criminal. The story is a representation of the rustic life where a group of neighbors have gathered together to celebrate the birth of Shepherd Fennel's child. It also reveals how the spirit of community binds and sustains the working class in Wessex.

The story is about a poor countryman who steals a sheep as he has been starving for days. All the working class people at the party - shepherds, dairymen and carpenters sympathize with Timothy Summers - the countryman as the punishment given to him is too harsh and unfair. He will be hanged for poaching which is actually a minor offense. But the then British law was against the poor. It was used by the wealthy to rule and chain the poor.

The story takes a turn when a stranger come to the party telling the gathering that he is in search of a runaway criminal. Soon, the second stranger also joins him and both tell each other that there are enough people to search the fugitive. The first stranger opines that it is the duty of the government to find out the runaway prisoner. The story towards the end draws our attention to three important aspects or things. First, the first stranger is the poor fugitive Timothy Summers - the clock maker who had been given the death sentence. When all the people at the cottage set out for the escaped prisoner he comes back to the shepherd's house to eat food. Thus, Hardy underlines the scarcity of food for the poor. Timothy Summers had already put his life in danger by stealing a farmer's lamb but his hunger drives him to put his life in danger for the second time when he comes back to Fennel's house for food. He seems to be ready to do anything for food. Secondly, the narrator talks about the people's unrest regarding the punishment given to the clock-maker for such a minor offence. Hardy writes, ". . . the intended punishment was cruelly disproportioned to the transgression, and the sympathy of a great many county-folk in the district was strongly on the side of the fugitive". (17)

There is strife, at least among the 'county-folk', for the punishment given to the clock-maker. Some revolutionary spirit could be seen among the poor against the established order. Thirdly, the fact that the clock-maker was never found and people believe that 'he went across the sea' to escape punishment, underlines that it was common in Victorian England to transport the criminal or criminals who would flee the country to avoid punishment. Like Dickens, Hardy implies that there was no system of rehabilitation of the criminals in England; they got permanently rejected by the society. Thus, though the story goes like a suspense thriller as readers keep wondering about the escaped prisoner, Hardy does raise the social issues subtly. By and large the story glorifies the ways of living of the poor; the author also succeeds in depicting the hardships of the country people.

Hardy was extremely attracted towards the punishment of hanging and towards hangman. In 1856 he himself witnessed a hanging and was deeply moved by it. Public hanging, also known as 'hang-fair' was popular in the 19th century and attracted huge crowds. In 1868 public hangings were abolished and people lost a form of entertainment! Hardy was fascinated with the profession of the hangman and in his two stories - "The Three Strangers" and "The Withered Arm" - he focuses upon the personality of the hangman. In the 19th century it was a popular job among the poor even though it was not well paid. Sophie Gilmartin and Rod Mengham rightly observe in their book *Thomas Hardy's Shorter Fiction: A Critical Study* that:

One has to infer that the theatricality, the power and the ritualistic nature of the execution held a fascination for those who wanted the position. A man did not have to be educated to become a hangman. . . his job gave him the right to stand beside the sheriff, chaplain and surgeon on stage before thousands. There, after prayers and a special order of words and

ceremony, the hangman would be the centre of attention, aside from the person to be hanged.³

Thus the limited power assigned to the hangman, the momentary attention he receives makes the job lucrative for the poor. In "The Three Strangers", the hangman, though himself a poor man, behaves rudely and arrogantly as he knows that the people are afraid of him because of the nature of his job. Therefore he asks for more mead from the host as if he were at an inn. Instead of relying upon the generosity of the hosts he imposes himself upon them and extracts more food and mead. The hangman's job was not a dignified or noble profession. He was considered a 'King's Man' as he himself represented the King's justice. But with his greed and disrespect to the host he does an injustice to the gathering. He uses his authority as a King's man and asks the gathering to look for the escaped prisoner. One can notice after reading Hardy's works that he is cautious about expressing his political views, sympathizing with the poor and criticizing the rich. However in his life he maintains that he is a 'young man with a passion for reforming the world. . . [holding] socialistic, not to say revolutionary' beliefs (63). The narrator of the story, too, does not always reveal his political or social views, he keeps himself at a distance from the present situation in England. The celebration among the country people when Timothy Summers escapes reveals that they are against the unjust law. The narrator also boldly declares, ". . . the intended punishment was cruelly disproportionate to the transgression". (23)

2. "What the Shepherd Saw: A Tale of Four Moonlight Nights":

"What the Shepherd Saw?" is a kind of suspense thriller. The Duke's crime is kept secret from the society and the only witness to it - the shepherd boy - is pressurized by the Duke to change his way of living in order to keep the Duke's crime hidden. Certain things are obvious from the story - that Bill Mills, a small shepherd boy has to work in order to help his family; that his father was the Duke's 'hedger' and his mother the 'cinder-woman'. Bill Mills is altered into William Mills by the Duke but Bill has to pay a heavy price for the metamorphosis.

Bill Mills at a very young age works as a sheep keeper during lambing season at Lambing Corner, Marlbury Downs. Although the story highlights the murder of the innocent Fred Ogbourne by the Duke and his successful attempt to keep the murder secret, what still remains to be analyzed is the social condition in rural England. While Dickens showed the evil effects of industrialization in England in his works, Hardy makes us aware of the life of the poor in the country. As children worked in factories when industries / factories were newly established, children working on the farms were also a common sight in England.

Hardy in this story puts forth how the rich, gentry of 19th century took advantage of the social and economic status of the poor. Since, Bill Mills comes from a poor background and has lost his father, he is victimized. The Duke lures Mills that if he keeps the secret, he will be given food, good clothes and education; he will be sent to the city. The boy sees an opportunity there and agrees to keep the secret of the murder in order to get material comforts. The Duke certainly plays a trick here. His behavior is more of a selfish kind than being generous. In order to make sure that the boy does not reveal the murder, the Duke takes him in his patronage. But it seems that after living in the city for several years Mills is not happy with the city and the atmosphere in it. He is basically associated with nature and free living. In the fourth part of the story - Fourth Night - the narrator observes:

He appeared at this time as a person of thirty-eight or forty, though actually he was several years younger. A worn and restless glance of the eye now and then, when he lifted his head to search for some letter or paper which had been mislaid, seemed to denote that his was not a mind so thoroughly at ease as his surroundings might have led an observer to expect.

Thus the narrator implies that Mills is not at all at ease with the position he has got. Bill's whole personality changes, the transformation occurs externally as well as internally when he comes from the country to the city. He is called 'William' instead 'Bill' in order to erase his past. William lives like a captive

with the Duke in the city. The Duke also does not give him enough opportunity to prosper in life. He is made a steward at the Duke's estate. The Duke makes sure that Bill stays with him along with the secret and he also does not rise higher in the scale of social class; Bill remains a servant throughout his life.

Even at the young age Bill is conscious about the class difference. When he first sees the Duke on the field he gets afraid. By accident he witnesses the meeting between Harriet - the Duchess and her cousin Fred Ogbourne. But Bill also sees the Duke watching the meeting and he is afraid that if the Duke comes to know that Bill secretly watched it, he will be harmed. Initially it appears as a secret meeting of lovers, a liaison. The secrets of the rich are not supposed to be known to the public as it will bring humiliation and disrespect for them. The narrator says:

Fear seized upon the shepherd-boy: the Duke was Jove himself to the rural population, whom to offend was starvation, homelessness, and death, and a spark of light appeared, and hastily buried himself in the straw that lay in the corner.

The Duke not only lures the boy with education, comfort and life in the city but also tricks him by making him take an oath of a pagan God for not revealing the secret. The poor in Hardy's works are shown as superstitious and God-fearing like Joan Durbeyfield-Tess' mother-in Tess of the d'Urbervilles. In the novel Tess' mother is shown as a simple and superstitious woman who consults a magazine - The Fortune Teller - to make any decision. The Duke makes Bill take oath of the pagan God that he will never talk about the murder to anyone; he will keep the secret with himself. Bill is forced to swear on the Devil's Door that he will not tell anyone about the secret. Throughout his life Bill observes the oath. Thus the Duke uses religion for his own benefit, to gull the shepherd boy. Bill does not realize till the end that he took the pagan God's oath and it does not matter if he breaks it. Thus the Duke uses the power of money, his status and religion in order to save himself from potential trouble.

We do not get to know much about Bill's family. His mother was a servant of the Duke but we do not know till the end what happened to her. When Bill was sent away she must have stayed back in the country serving the Duke till the end of her life. Bill does not get married or may be the Duke does not allow him to marry and have a family. Bill dies in the end without anyone to mourn for him.

In his short stories and novels Hardy seems to be occupied with social injustice, and he heavily criticized Victorian morality which trapped people and destroyed their lives. The increasing industrialization drove the huge forces of change in all areas of society and led to widespread disruption and distress. Hardy's rural vision gives us a picture of Wessex as a still largely undeveloped area with few urban centers. Hardy is often criticized for his intense pessimism and gloomy despair. But he was trying to be a realist, a man who saw life closely as it really was. He knew that life was not something that could be borne lightly; it involved sufferings and imperfections. In Hardy's writings we mainly get to see the sufferings of the poor and imperfections of their lives.

In his stories he presents a critique of the social processes that hindered and constrained the lives of the people in the Victorian age. He criticizes the 19th century society, its conventions and societal pressures which tried to enforce conformity. He questions established notions of morality, arguing that poverty, frustration and deprivation result in different moral codes among the working class. Hardy was conscious of his poor class origins and modest education. The awareness of social rank and class difference in the society remained with him throughout his life and is present in his short stories. Many of his stories are about the harmful effects of the idea of class system and social position.

Hardy's short stories reveal the sufferings of the poor at the hands of the rich. William (Bill) in "What the Shepherd Saw" suffers because he has been wronged by the upper class characters in the story; he is not a victim of the circumstances but victim of his masters' treatment towards him. Hardy seems to imply that the then laws in England were ineffective and useless for the poor. The socialistic movements, thoughts in England had not spread and had not been as strong as they were in the 20th century and, may be therefore Hardy is not seen as taking a stand in his writing; he was, it appears, unaware of the theory,

thoughts of socialism. Moreover he is a literary writers and not socialist thinker. He does show the poverty in rural England of his time but does not comment on it; he tends be as objective as possible in his stories.

Primary Sources

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