



Character and Fate in the Mayor of Casterbridge

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Abstract: *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is one of Thomas Hardy's typical 'Wessex novels'. This novel narrates a series of stories that happened after Henchard sold his wife when he was drunk at early 19 century England, Casterbridge. Combining with other Wessex novels we can summarize that Hardy believed that human fate was closely linked with character, it is "the novel of character and fate". In traditional literature, a tragic hero is utterly vicious, but in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard is not the typical tragic man, he is a tragic hero. He was impulsive, arrogant and honest, ambitious at the same time. So the moral value supported his control over his wife, daughter and lover. By analyzing Henchard's defective character, we can safely come to the conclusion that Henchard is mainly responsible for his own tragedy which is inevitable for his own defective personalities. Apart from Henchard, Susan and Elisabeth are the female roles in the story who also have different fates because of their unique characters. For living environment, they were living in the same society when people have prejudices against women. For character, they were completely different. Compared with traditional woman, Susan, the mother, Hardy created a new model of female, Elisabeth, the daughter, who desired for freedom and explored for self-improvement. For their fates, Hardy believed that there was a kind of mysterious and unavoidable power that can change people's life, and their different fates are the result of their different personalities. Susan as a tragic great mother, died miserably, and Elisabeth as an independent daughter, gained liberation and lived happily. This paper observes the human being from these two angles, the character and the fate, to deeply and systematically analyze the close relationship between fate and character in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

Keywords: Character, Fate, The Mayor of Casterbridge

1. Introduction

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a masterpiece of Thomas Hardy. It was published during the mid-term of Hardy's literature creation. It followed Hardy's style of creating stories that happened at the join of the old and the modern society. It narrates the tragedy life of the hero Michael Henchard who made his life by trussing [1]. He sold his wife and daughter when he was drunk. To relive his guiltiness, he took an oath that he shall never drink for 21 years. The stage suddenly jumped to 18 years later when the wife Susan Henchard came back to Wessex with her daughter Elisabeth Jean. They tried to find Michael Henchard who has already turned to be the mayor of Casterbridge, a rich and noble man. Unfortunately, Henchard's stubborn character led to his miserable life that his lover left him and married to his enemy, his biological daughter died long time ago, his step

daughter hated him for keeping her from the truth, and finally died alone.

Thomas Hardy did a splendid work on creating the hero Michael Henchard. His stubborn character has been vividly created that the mayor himself seems standing right in front of the readers with his eyebrows floured tied and his hands fold back. The description of the landscape of Wessex and Casterbridge was also a highlight of the story. Hardy draw a beautiful village which was at the transport time when industry revolution brought a huge change to it. It's the time when industrial revolution brought mechanization to the villages and led to a change over the way of industry manufacture. Reciprocally, people's minds changed too, which generated the coexistences and contradictions of the traditional mind and the modern mind.

Besides Michael Henchard, Susan Henchard and Elisabeth Jean also influenced the story. They are Henchard's wife and his daughter. Thomas Hardy also described women's life

situation of this period in his novel. These two female roles in the book *The Mayor of Casterbridge* showed different levels of resistant and obedience. From their life story, we can guess that Thomas Hardy himself hold a complex view towards women. He approved that women were affiliated property of men. However, he showed his sympathy and pity to those who suffered because of their tragic fates. The women's tragedies are closely related to their fragile and obedient personalities.

Many critics have already analyzed it from all kinds of different angles. Especially, the male hero Michael Henchard has been repeatedly investigated since the novel published. First, Hardy did a splendid work on creating Henchard's distinct characteristic. He is impulsive, arrogant, stubborn, straightforward and autocratic. Second, Henchard's tragic fate leads to scholars' deep thoughts as well. It is a sad ending that affected by both his characteristic and the social factor. But many scholars analyzed it by comparing it with other female roles of Hardy's novels. Scarcely have they analyzed it from the people's character and their fates.

This paper analyzed the close relationship between the fate and character in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In the novel, when Hardy compare the different fates of the characters, he concludes "But most probably, luck had little to do with it, character is fate, said Novalis, and Farfrae's character was just the reverse of Henchard's, who might not be inaptly described as Faust has been described--as a vehement, glommy being, who had quitted the ways of vulgar men without light to guide him on a better way" (p115). All the characters' fates in the story were closely linked to their distinct personalities. Hardy gave a vivid description of the characters and fates in the novel. And the people's characteristics and fates are closely linked.

2. Henchard---A Tragic Hero

2.1. Henchard's Defective Character

The full title of *the Mayor of t* to change his fate was fut ile. His impulsive and arrogant character ruined his family and life. His defective character was to a l *he Casterbridge is the Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character*, which indicates the close relationship between the character and the fate. Henchard's tragic fate was determined by his defective character, his struggle arge extent responsible for his failure in the end.

Henchard can like and dislike others suddenly, and tend to make impulsive decisions which will bring disastrous result. At the beginning of the novel, Henchard was very ambitious and wanted to get a high positon in the society, and he thought it was his wife and daughter who were responsible for his failure. Therefore, he sold his wife and daughter after he was drunk. Afterwards, he attributed his foolish behavior of auctioning his wife and daughter to the influence of alcohol. He even blamed his wife for her "simplicity" to let

him go through with the act, "Seize her, why didn't she know better than bring me into this disgrace" (p19). But he eventually blamed himself and vowed not to touch any strong liquor for the next twenty one years which shows his determination to correct the past wrongdoings and make amends for them, he immediately set out to search his wife and daughter which indicate that his remorse was genuine and heartfelt, this contradictory impulsive character is very typical for Henchard.

In *The Mayor of the Casterbridge*, Henchard can not simly be defined as good or bad person, he is a man of complicated personalities. He has good qualities such as honest, hardworking, ambitious and so on, but at the same time, he has some intolerable bad qualities such as arrogant and impulsive. Having these complicated personalities makes him different from other common people, and he can go to extremes easily. As Hardy introduce in the preface of the novel "The story is more particularly a study of a man's deeds and character, perhaps, any other of those included in my exhibition of Wessex life."

Arrogant may be the most disastrous flaw for him, and is mainly responsible for his failure. Henchard was ambitious and dissatisfied with his family and life at the beginning of the story. This dissatisfaction was clearly shown in his conversation after drunk "The ruin of good man by bad wives, and more particularly by frustration of many a promising youth's aims and hopes, and the extinction of his energies, by a early and imprudent marriage" (P10). Although he sold his wife unconsciously, he wanted to get rid of them subconsciously from this conversation. When he finally was freed from marriage again, he was able to realize his immoral fault which haunted him for the rest of his life and he was bound to pay for its price. To a extent, we can conclude that Henchard's ambition was his process to seek for his own tragedy while arrogance was the catalyst for his doom. He was unwilling to reveal his true identification to other when he was seaching for his wife and daughter because of his personal pride and arrogance. He was too arrogant to hear any suggestions which were against his will, and a lot of incidences and coincidences happen as a result of this defective character which lead to his destruction in the end. Hechard is a man who is easily to go to extremes, and mixed with other flaws such as rashness and inconsiderate of others, it is inevitable for him to commit something evil and unforgivable. As an impulsive man, he can not control his feelings, and arrogance make him pay no attention to others feelings an reactions when they are in conflict. He was so arrogant and impulsive that one problem and conflict in one aspect would lead to bad influences in almost everything else he does. He made compromises to no one and always made decisions which were even unfavorable to himself. It was obvious that his defective characters affected Henchard's behaviors and lead him from a poor hay-trusser to a rich mayor, and eventually to his downfall. No matter how hard he tried, he could not control and change his destiny. His tragedy was the effect of his own behaviors, and his behaviors were determined by his impulsive and arrogant

personalities.

2.2. Henchard's Tragic Downfall

Hardy believed that the world was controlled by "Immanent Will" which had been adopted in most of his novels. "The Immanent Will is an abstract blind energy that moves on mechanically, without intelligence and to no purpose. It knows no justice because it has no consciousness, and as it moves on blindly, it crushes everything in its way and heaps up misfortunes upon unsuspecting souls".

Henchard's fate was decided by "Immanent Will" which he can not control or change. The tragic fate shows the progress of the character, and any efforts to change his destiny were futile. His sinful act of selling his wife was born to be the source of his tragic fate, and all of his sinful acts were the result of his defective characters. As a tragic hero, Henchard has suffered everything possible for a man to suffer in the world, and in a way, he fails in the material world, but wins in the spiritual world, he is a tragic hero, and a complicated mixture of angel and devil.

The last two chapters are very important to the novel as a whole, and it mainly about the tragic downfall of Henchard. In the end of the novel, Henchard must encounter his sinful past and deal with his decent present at the same time. He could not forget about Elizabeth, and he had to make amends for Susan. He was his own enemy, and he was a complete failure. Although he died, he remained to be a man of dignity. For Henchard, life was tragic, but he never lost his dignity. There is a short passage which best illustrate the tragedy of Henchard. "But it seems to me that there is of necessity a severe limitation of self-awareness in any character, and more, that this very limit serves to complete the tragedy and, indeed, to make it at all possible. Complete consciousness is possible only in a play about forces, like Prometheus, but not in a play about people"

Henchard's death was tragic and brave. In the end of the novel, Elizabeth and Farfrae found a crumpled scrap of paper, on it was Henchard's will.

"& that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground."

"& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell."

"& that nobody is wished to see my dead body."

"& that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral."

"& that no flours be planted on my grave,"

"& that no man remember me."

"To this I put my name."

MICHAEL HENCHARD

Henchard spent the rest of his life to make amends for his wrongdoings in the past, he believed that he can live a peaceful life by making compensations for the past, but, no matter how hard he tried, he could not change his defective character, and his tragedy was inevitable. As a novel of character and environment, a series of accidents and coincidences combined to prevent the happiness of Henchard, his struggles against fate never succeed, the only result of his struggle was to make him even more miserable and misfortunate.

3. Susan---The Great Tragic Mother

3.1. Susan as a Traditional Woman

In the Victorian era of the history, men were superior to women in more than one aspect, and women were inferior to the men in the family as well as in the society. Men can dominate almost everything, and the society as a whole is patriarchal. The society or the men work out the rules for the women to obey, and women were supposed to be dependent and submissive to the men. Susan Henchard is the beautiful wife of Michael Henchard, and she is a very traditional woman. Under the influence of the patriarchal society, she holds firmly to the belief that men are important to her life and she can not live without her husband. As a wife, she fully obeys her husbands and takes good care of them. As a mother, she struggles to make her daughter happy and provide her with an easy and comfortable life. She never disobeys her husbands even when they are obviously wrong. And she is contented to life the life as it is, she never try to change her life or even think about the source of her tragic life except for the occasional complaints of the difficulties in life. As a traditional woman, she only cares about her husband and daughter, and it is these cares which finally becomes the heavy burden to her and lead to her tragic fate in the end like many other submissive women in the patriarchal society.

Susan Henchard, as a woman who married twice, is just like one of the angels in the house in the Victorian Age, she is a perfect woman with ideal characteristics that the society has asked for in the Victorian Age. She is a soft, kind, dependent, submissive and inferior woman. As Charles E. Bressler pointed out: "If a woman is depicted as the angel in the house, she supposedly realizes that her physical and material comforts are gifts from her husband. Her goal in life, therefore, is to please her husband, to attend to his every comfort, and to obey him, through these selfless acts, she finds the utmost contentment by serving her husband and children" (Bressler, 1998: 186). As a wife, Susan feels that it is her obligation to take care of her husband and children, and create a loving and comfortable atmosphere at home, she has to be tolerant and obedient to meet the requirement of the society and the social expectations for the housewife.

However, Susan could not live happily and peacefully, even though she can meet all the requirement of the patriarchal society. She can not escape from the tragic fate of the married women in her time. As a wife, she completely failed. At the beginning of the novel, Henchard talks with others about "the ruin of good men by bad wives"(12), he started to express his dissatisfaction about his marriage with Susan, he complaint that he was too young to think about the consequences of the marriage to the man when he got married at 18. From his conversations with others, we can see that he has no respect for his wife, Susan. And Susan does not mind his rudeness and seems to be used to his blames. As a wife, she fully dependent on her husband, and tolerant to any complaints, obedient to him without any serious thoughts about herself. To some extent, she cannot escape from being sold for five guineas after Henchard got drunk, which is the

beginning of her tragedy. Marriage has complete different meanings to men and women. Women regard marriage as the most valuable thing in the world while men treat it as nothing special but a process to be adults. After a woman gets married, "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being...before her there is no other future, this is to be her whole lot on earth, she knows just what her tasks are to be: the same as her mother's". As a married woman, Susan lives with her husbands without any complaints. And she had to tolerate all the harms they have done to her, and be submissive to the men under any social circumstances.

As a mother, Susan does all she can to provide her daughter a peaceful and comfortable life. On the one hand, she cares for her daughter and keeps her away from any dangerous things in a society, while in the patriarchal society, women are regarded as nothing but objects and have no rights to pursue happiness including her daughter. On the other hand, she has to make compromises to the society and her husband because of her daughter, she knows that she has the obligation to take care of her daughter while she admits that she has no ability to support herself and her daughter, she has to be dependent on the men. All through her life, she does not live one day for herself, she lives for her husband and her children, which makes her a complete tragic character in the novel.

3.2. Susan Henchard's Inevitable Tragic Destiny

Susan Henchard's tragedy is inevitable as a wife and mother in the patriarchal society, and being the wife and mother had become heavy burdens to her. In the patriarchal society, she has been deprived of any rights to fight against the unfair treatment she has receive, and her education requires her to be obedient and submissive to the man and the society. As a young girl, she had to obey her father, and meet every requirement her father set for her. And after marriage, she has to take care of her husband and obey him unconditionally as her father told her before getting married, just like her mother and grandmother do all their life. In compensation, she can live in the patriarchal family and get what she desires from her father or husband if they think it will not harm their superiority at home.

Susan does not fight against these unfair treatments, she chooses to accept what the society imposes on her as what she was educated since she was born. She is completely relied on men and obey to men. At the beginning of the novel, we can notice her fully reliance on Henchard. They walk along without any signs of communication, she knew that her husband did not want to talk to her, but she still walk closely to Henchard as if she is protected by her husband, she did not feel secure if she walked too far away from her husband. She completely obey to his husband even when she was sold, she chosed to silently accept her destiny and follow the seaman. 19 years later, Susan met Henchard again, she completely forgive Henchard for his sinful past. And she remarried Henchard to provide her daughter a comfortable life. After

getting married to Henchard once again, she utterly lost her independence and obeyed to him completely. She did nothing for the wedding but to obey all the decisions her new husband had made and wait for the day to come.

Susan's reliance on her husband originates from the social customs, the society desires the woman to rely on men without any individualities. The society only wants the unconditional obedience for women, and asks the women to tolerate all men in her life. Susan is just one of these traditional women to be docile and take care of the family without a word of complaint. For Susan, her fate doomed her loneliness and suffered life. For instance, Newson walked into that tent and bought Susan at the last moment; she coincidentally found her first husband and he dramatically became rich; her letter had been read in advance which ruined her plan of protecting her daughter till her marriage; even after she died, people still digged out her humiliated past. Nothing had that strong of power to coincidentally let these things happen unless fate. It isn't hard to see that Susan's life had been secretly dominated by her fate. There was nothing she can do when Henchard managed to sell her; there's nothing else she can do when she thought Newson was dead; there's nothing she can do when Henchard took her back. She has being persecuted by her fate and she was too weak to fright with it. Susan's tragedy fate stopped her from discovering of self-awareness. From the beginning to the end, we haven't found her exploring her self-awareness. That is an obvious character shortage of most females in the patriarchal society.

The society has affected Susan's characteristics and thus makes her tragedy inevitable. It never occurred to Susan that all the inequalities and unfairness had been imposed to her since she was born by her father and other males in her life. Susan's inevitable tragedy was actually caused by the social discrimination against women and the patriarchal society which was dominated and completely controlled by men. Susan was the ideal woman of the patriarchal society, she completely conform to the social conventions, and she did nothing to fight against the control of the males in her life, her blind submissiveness and dependence to the men make her tragic destiny inevitable.

4. Elisabeth Jane as an Independent Woman

4.1. Elisabeth Jane's Unique Childhood

Elisabeth Jane is a distinct and very few females in Hardy's novel who has gained happiness while most of the other females in Hardy's works suffered from tragic fate. The average women at Victorian age were defined as loyal and meek. They shouldn't have any lust or need. Many writers described this kind of women as pour and innocent. They rigidly followed the conservative and unequal society customs and moral standard. Hardy, however, he created a new kind of women like Elisabeth. He gave them right to chase for their happy and freedom. He refuted the old moral

value which lopsidedly emphasized feminine obligations and completely ignored their emotional right. In Hardy's opinion, this prejudiced moral value strangled feminine characteristic and impeded women to enjoy the rights they deserved like men. Hardy created a new model of female. They were brave, independent and strong. Elisabeth was a typical one of this kind of women. In the novel, Elisabeth is quite different from her mother and other females who are dependent and submissive to the men unconditionally, she is an independent woman. And her characteristics are closely linked to her unique childhood.

Femininity does not come to women naturally, it is closed linked to the civilization of the society, and the social conventions play very important roles in the formation of femininity. And a woman's behaviors have close relationship to the society. The social setting of the novel was set in the patriarchal society, and men are the dominant figure in the society, and had complete control over women. Women were supposed to obey all the rules set by the men and be fully rely on the men if they want to live in the society. They have no choice but to accept all the discriminations and unfair treatment imposed by the society. Elisabeth's mother was just one of these traditional obedient women, but Elisabeth was an exception. Her happy life in the end of the story has close relationship with her unique childhood.

Firstly, Elisabeth grew up by the sea in England, where the main industry is boating or fishing. The industry revolution didn't make male's role more important here. Men and women made the same contributions to the economy, so they were more equal and their minds were more open. What's more, it is far away from the main land where people were conservational and traditional. In the main land at that time, males' power spread from families to society. They formulated strict social rules to restrain women's behaviors. Elisabeth is far away from all this. Those strict and unfair rules couldn't limit her movement and mind. Furthermore, she moved a lot with her parents from one country to another to make a living, and the convention of a particular place had not affected her greatly in her childhood. And she already had a strong desire for knowledge since her childhood. "The desire---sober and repressed---of Elisabeth Jane's heart was indeed to see, to hear, and to understand. How could she become a woman of wider knowledge, higher repute---better, as she termed it---this was her constant inquiry of her mother. She sought further into things than other girls in her position ever did" (32).

Secondly, as the only child of Susan and Newson, Elisabeth spent a lot of time staying with her mother, Newson did not stay at home for long. For Elisabeth, it was her mother who controlled her family all the time, not her father. This declined her obedient quality towards men. And she was lucky enough to receive a quite different education and freedom from her mother Susan. Susan took good care of Elisabeth Jane, and did not restrain the independence and freedom of her daughter, she encouraged the free thoughts of her daughter, and she can sacrifice her pride and remarried for the sake of Elisabeth Jane. She can do everything to

protect Elisabeth Jane and provide her the comfortable and good life.

Elisabeth Jane is an independent and unconventional woman, she would not sacrifice herself to meet the requirement of the males and society. She is the lucky character in the novel to live happily in the end of the novel which is closely linked to her unique childhood.

4.2. *Elisabeth Jane's Liberation and Happiness*

Women all over the world have never stopped to fight for the liberation and happiness. However, the education the women received in the patriarchal society prevented them from getting the freedom and equal treatment in the society, they had no choice but to be subordinate to the men. Elisabeth Jane was an exception of her age, she had an independent way of thinking due to her upbringing and education she received in the childhood. She never had any thoughts to be inferior to anyone, including the men. She was independent and had her own unique way of thinking. Her mother's sacrifices and abeyance provided her with an easy and comfortable life.

Elisabeth's liberation as an independent woman benefited a lot from her reading. At the beginning of living with Henchard, she benefited a lot from the new rich life, and she paid more attention to her appearance. "a girl rapidly becoming good looking, comfortably circumstanced, and for the first time in her life commanding ready money, she would go and make a fool of herself by dress" (99). However, she soon realized that it is irrational to spend all her time and money on clothes and ornaments, and she decides to sell all her clothes and ornaments to buy books she needed to read. She tried her best to read as many books as possible, and find peace and contentment in reading books. This habit of reading books helped her to get through the difficult times when she was seriously ignored and criticized by her stepfather. Her interest in art, literature and philosophy helped to reconstruct the world and gain the freedom and happiness in the end of the novel.

Her independence from men brought her liberation. The women were at the bottom of the society in the patriarchal society, and women were completely dependent on men for a living. And women can simply accept what the society imposed on them, they did not fight against the unfair and prejudiced social status. Elisabeth Jane was a unique existence. She has her own thoughts about the relationship between men and women, she was in no way inferior to the men in her life, and she was quite independent from men which are very crucial in her liberation. She overcame all the difficulties, kept learning and improving herself. There is no doubt that she can live happily in the end.

5. Conclusion

This paper tried to analyze *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from the close relationship between the character and fate. We analyzed three people of the novel, Henchard, Susan and Elisabeth. Henchard is an ambitious man who fights against

the fate, but his tragedy is inevitable due to his impulsive and arrogant characteristics. Susan is a traditional woman in the patriarchal society, and she does not try to improve her miserable situation and unconditionally accept all the unfair treatments and prejudices and that is why she died tragically in the novel. Her daughter, Elisabeth, is quite a different woman. She is brave to fight against all the unequal treatments and she realized that her self-improvement is the only key to her happiness, there is no doubt that she became an independent and respectable woman in the end of the novel.

By analyzing the three people's different characteristics and consequently distinctive fate, we can see the close relationship between fate and character, character determined the fate, and no matter how hard one tries to change the fate, it will be useless. Women are at a great disadvantage if they do not improve themselves. They are fragile because they rely on men's protection all the time. Susan and Elisabeth showed different levels of resistant and obedient peculiarity. From their life story, we can guess that Thomas Hardy himself holds a complex view towards women and feminism. He approved that women were affiliated property of men. However, he showed his sympathy and pity to those who suffered because of their tragic fates. Characteristics and fates jointly affected people's lives and changed them entirely. And any efforts to fight against the fate regardless of characteristic are futile.

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