

PASTORAL AND TRAGIC ELEMENT IN THE POEMS OF THOMAS HARDY

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy is known for writing novels but his first love was poetry. His poetry had a great influence on later poets such as Philip Larkin, Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Ezra Pound. His poetry is characterized by pervasive fatalism. He laments on the bleakness of human condition. There is distinctive blend of pastoral and tragic elements in his poems. He is not pessimist but rather has faith in goodness of men and women. He is a meliorist and thinks that together we can make the world better. He presents self and nature in a close-knit companionship. In the coherence of nature, life seems to flow better.

Keywords: Pastoral, Bleakness, Desolation, Gloomy, Weather, Optimism

Thomas Hardy passed his childhood in following village traditions which affected his creative faculty throughout his life. His panoramic outlook gave full thrust to his writing abilities. This is one of the reasons that in his poems one can see everything related to nature without obstruction. He was very close to country people and county life. Most of his poems have often rural setting but are exemplar of personal feeling too. Compton-Rickett in their History of English Literature have summed up Hardy's writings as "Hardy's work may be considered under three aspects: as an interpreter of Nature—the descriptive artist; as an interpreter of Character—the analytical; as an interpreter of Life—the philosophical artist." (Rickett, 542)

His towering fame as a novelist eclipsed his poetic talent. Initially his poems were not well received though verse was his first love. Hardy is now hailed as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. His poetry had a great influence on later poets such as Philip Larkin, Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Ezra Pound. In 1898, Hardy published his first volume of poetry 'Wessex Poems'. Some of his famous poems are from 'Poems of 1912-13' written after the death of his wife Emma in 1912. His poetry is characterized by pervasive fatalism. He laments on the bleakness of human condition. There is distinctive blend of pastoral and tragic element in his poems. He is not pessimist but rather has faith in goodness of men and women. He is a meliorist and thinks that together we can make the world better. He presents self and nature in a close-knit companionship. In the coherence of nature, life seems to flow better. His ability to depict the beauty of eye catching landscape makes a notable contribution to English poetry. "Hardy's love of the earth is an intensely personal and local one. What Scott felt for the Tweed and Morris for the scenery of the Thames, Hardy feels for the heaths and pastures of Wessex." (Rickett,

542) Some of his famous poems; *An August Midnight*, *Weathers*, *The Darkling Thrush*, *At Middle-Field Gate in February* are discussed in the present paper.

Many of his short lyrics breathe a spirit of joy. His poems start in pessimism in immediate present but when he reaches final moment there appears optimism. In the poem '*The Darkling Thrush*', the poet is pleasantly surprised by the carol of sweet sound amid the gloom of nature. Desolation is spread in the first two stanzas of the poem. Many words such as 'coppice gate', 'Frost', 'Winter's dregs', 'weakening eye of day', 'tangle bine-stems', 'broken lyres', 'haunted', 'Century's corpse', 'cloudy canopy', 'death lament' etc. present a gloomy atmosphere. Everything seems lifeless to the poet and he says:

And every spirit upon the Earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

These words point towards lack of joy in the poet's life. But suddenly he notices:

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;

Other humble creatures of mother nature are full of hope and life. Even an aged, frail, thin thrush sings his carols in 'growing gloom'. The poet was feeling hopeless and desolate thinking that the new year would bring nothing. After hearing the song of thrush, his gloom changes into elation and he becomes hopeful. He feels that the bird knows some secrets of new year which would bring something joyous which the poet was unaware of. He says:

That I could think their trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The poet ironically chooses an aged thrush to represent optimism and hope for future century. Moreover, it is not the thrush which is darkling rather it is buoyant and hopeful. On the contrary it is the speaker who is hopeless, dejected and down-hearted one.

There is one more poem '*An August Midnight*' which resembles '*The Darkling Thrush*' in theme. The speaker meets four insects alone in a quiet room at mid night. The phrase 'we five' has some implications. The poet is interested in establishing relationship between men and nature. "Everywhere the life of the earth and of its denizens is subtly and inextricably interwoven." (Rickett, 542) That is why the poem presents the meeting of the speaker with four insects. Both are treated and described as equals. The poem begins in a somber atmosphere.

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,
And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:

This calm and quiet scene is interrupted by a breeze that disturbs the blind and some humble creatures of the nature. These four humble insects a longlegs, a moth, a dumbledore and a

fly are referred to as 'guests' and thus personified. "A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands..." has more human characteristics than the previously described 'a longlegs, a moth and a dumbledore'. The poet leaves his work behind and starts enjoying their company. He says:

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
At this point of time, at this point in space.

The words 'this still place', 'this point of time', 'this point in space' show oneness with the creatures. He treats these insects equally and very minutely observes what they are doing. He doesn't bother when these guests besmear his 'new-penned line'. He is not hostile to them. He has left his window open and the shaded lamp attracts the insects inside. He becomes one with the other four creatures and says 'Thus meet we five'. He doesn't feel annoyed at having his newly penned lines smudged. He remains static when they 'bang at the lamp and fall supine'. He calls them 'God's humblest, they!'. He is sure that these small creatures know some secrets of the earth that are hidden from him. All living things are akin to each other and have some important place in the scheme of the earth. They have some hidden power that man doesn't know.

In the poem '*Weathers*' Hardy contrasts two weathers—spring and autumn. This outwardly simple poem is formed in a concrete detail in use of words, mood and tone. The first stanza gives warmth of the sun, i.e., spring is portrayed here.

And maids come forth sprig-muslin drest,
And citizens dream of the south and west,
And so do I.

People can be seen relaxing at 'The Travellers' Rest', maids can be seen in muslin clothes, citizens are dreaming to go south or west for holidays. Birds too like this season. Cuckoos and nightingales are busy in teaching baby birds fly. This means that spring gives freedom to birds and they leave the comfort of their nest and soar high in the sky. The second stanza shows rain and storm. There seems absence of human beings.

This is the weather the shepherd shuns,
And so do I;

The landscape in this stanza seems hostile. Cuckoos and nightingales are replaced by homewards going rooks. This means that rooks are going towards home with their families. In the first weather there are showers but in the second weather the earth is sodden with heavy rain. Shepherds don't like this weather because winter season is at hand. In this weather there are many things to avoid. Nobody is out of door. Hardy contrasts joyous picture of spring which has beautiful sounds, hopes and enjoyments with the soggy pictures of autumn in which all the creatures seek shelter. One's mood changes to remain indoors and close to home. There is hope and despair represented by two weathers using pastoral and tragic element.

At Middle-Field Gate in February is a poem in which the poet paints a bleak picture of February. Newly ploughed heavy wet soil is described. Here also, there is a contrast between second and third stanza. In the second stanza bleakness of the scene intensifies:

While the fallow ploughland turned up nigh
In raw rolls, clammy and clogging lie—

The poet expresses our physical sensation through rhythmic words which give exactly the sticky consistency of a clayey soil in the month of February. He uses the words: 'Too clogging for feet to pass'. In the third stanza there is a remembrance of the “far-back day” reinforcing that the lost love is underground. The poet says:

In curtained bonnets and light array
Bloomed a bevy now underground!

“The ancient pulse of germs and birth was shrunken hard and dry.” (web)

Weathers don't remain the same forever. After every bad weather there comes a new hope of life. “Though revered as one of the greatest writers of his time, Hardy remains a man of utter simplicity and modesty...he hopes to be remembered as one who sympathized with hedgehogs, had an eye for nightjar...as one who used to notice such things”. (Hewett, 131)

Hardy's over nine-hundred poems explore the themes of pastoral life, nature, love, loss, humanities' struggle against fate, pessimism, man's futile struggle against cosmic forces, cosmic indifference, inevitability of death, moral conviction, etc. He deals with unexpected twists and surprises that life gives. His tone is often bleak and communicates a sense of loss. “Sometimes nature illustrates change through its cycles. At other times, forces of nature represent permanence, in contrast to human feelings and prosperity.” (web) He felt a mysterious power in Nature. There is no denying the fact that there are some cosmic forces that guard and guide every creature.

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