

## THE ROLE OF CHANCE AND FATE IN THOMAS HARDY'S THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Surya Prabha, H<sup>1</sup> & Sumathi, K.M (Dr.)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> Assistant professors of English,

M.V.Muthiah Government Arts College for Women, Dindigul.

Email : suryasri1909@gmail.com

### Abstract

Thomas Hardy is the creator of the philosophical novel. Man's predicament in the universe is the theme of Thomas Hardy's novels. He has no faith in benevolent and omnipotent God of Christianity. The style of Hardy is deliberate and grave; his thought falls into phrases and paragraphs of massiveness. The measured expressions one with another compose an organic whole. The reader accepts everything without any immediate sensation of wonder or surprise. This paper aims at an analysis of the role of Chance and Fate in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. A struggle between men on the one hand, an omnipotent and indifferent fate on the other hand is Hardy's interpretation of the human situation.

**Keywords :** Fatalism, destiny, Catastrophe, Coincidence.

---

Hardy has come to be universally recognized as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. Indeed, he is one of the greatest novelists in the whole range of English Literature. Some critics have even called him the Shakespeare of the English Novel. Hardy's first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, appeared in 1871 and thereafter novels flowed from his pen in quick succession. His last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, which was published in 1895, was vehemently criticized as being immoral. Hardy is a regional novelist. He is the creator of "Wessex", a small tract of country consisting of six odd-counties in South England. His knowledge of this limited region is as thorough as that of Scott of his beloved Scotland and that of Wordsworth of the Lack District. Wessex scenes and sites are made a part of universal nature and his characters are at one with humanity as a whole.

Fate and Chance play an important role, even an exaggerated role in the novels of Thomas Hardy. His plots are governed by "Fatalism" or "Determinism". Fate plays an important role in his tragic novels as it does in Greek tragedies. Human beings are mere puppets under the thumb of Fate. Fate and Chance always work against the good of man. They always go against and frustrate all human plans and endeavours.

By Fate, Hardy means all those powers and factors which are beyond the power of man to control. All those conditions and circumstances over which man has no control and

which play an important role in his life constitute Fate. They include man's heredity, parentage and his place of birth, the socio-economic position of his parents and his chance, meeting with many persons. Hardy's God is malignant and vengeful. God employs Fate and Chance as two powerful whips to lash human beings with.

The importance that fate assumes in the novels of Hardy is entirely in keeping with his philosophy of life. Fate works in various ways. It takes the form of heredity of a character. He does so in the case of Tess, Eustacia, Troy and many others. It is a fate that determines the nature of a person. Eustacia is impulsive and gloomy. This is not her seeking. This is in her nature. She cannot alter it. Tess is a pure woman and suffers a spiritual conflict. More often than not Fate assumes the form of love in Wessex novels. According to Hardy only love can give happiness in life. But even love generally leads to tragic consequences. The workings of love are erratic. Two persons of dissimilar nature are drawn together but soon they find themselves in grief. If Eustacia had loved Wildeve and Thomasin loved Clym the tragedy of *The Return of the Native* would have been avoided.

Fate also appears in external forms. Generally it assumes three forms : (i) nature, (ii) circumstances and (iii) chance. Henchard's hopes of good harvest are ruined by bad weather. The sultry heat of Egdon kills Mrs. Yeobright and precipitates the tragedy in *The Return of the Native*.

Many things which are mysterious and sudden, which cannot be accounted for in any natural way, take place and cause havoc in the lives of the characters. The unexpected often happens and always it is the undesirable unexpected. Such chance events are heavy blows aimed at Hardy's protagonists and they spell their doom. There is a great difference between chance and irony of circumstance. Chance is entirely unexpected or accidental and has no relation either to character or to the course of action, while the essence of irony of fate or circumstance is its opposition to the wishes or merits of a particular character. Chance may sometimes work in favour of particular character, but in Hardy's works it always operates against them, for it is caused by the same indifferent, even hostile First Cause. Thus chance is another agent chosen by the Supreme Being to express itself. Chance or accident plays an important part in life and so in the novels of Hardy.

It should be noted that Hardy's philosophy of life is marked with a strong note of fatalism. In Hardy's novels Destiny is character. Man is a helpless creature, a mere puppet at the hands of Destiny or Fate. Man in Hardy's world does not enjoy Free Will. The keen eyes of fate are always looking intently on his activities with a view to intervening as and when it so likes. Man is not free to choose the type of life he wants to live. Obstacles and hindrances swarm on his path of life and they thwart all his hopes and aspirations, though man wages a futile battle against the odds so created.

In *The Return of the Native*, no doubt, character plays a significant role in bringing about the tragedy. Eustacia's tragedy results from her exclusive love of the glittering city life and from her extreme hunger of love. But in this novel also cruel Destiny in the form of

chance is ever present. It is just a chance that Clym is asleep and Eustacia does not open the door to Mrs. Yeobright thinking that her husband would do so. It is also by chance that Clym comes to know from the real facts about his mother's death. It is cruel destiny which places Eustacia in an environment which proves to be her ruin in the long run.

"Character may be destiny" in Shakespeare, but in Hardy, "Destiny is Character". In all his novels, chance events happen throughout. Fate expresses itself as chance. However in *The Return of the Native* character too plays a significant role in bringing about the tragedy. Eustacia's tragedy results from her excessive love of the glittering city life and from her extreme hunger for love. Isolation in Egdon makes her rebellious, morose and gloomy. It intensifies her hunger for love and for the pleasures of city life. Similarly, Clym's idealism is responsible to a very great extent for his tragedy. He is impractical and lacks worldly wisdom. Character and environment play a larger part in causing tragedy in this novel than in other novels of Hardy.

Considered as a tragedy, *The Return of the Native* has other peculiar features as well. For one thing, while in Shakespearean tragedy both the hero and the heroine die at the end, in this novel the heroine, Eustacia, alone dies, and the hero lives on a life of deep anguish, virtually a life-in-death. This is another instance of the relentless cruelty of destiny.

Secondly, *The Return of the Native* has a double-ending. While Eustacia Wildeve and Mrs. Yeobright come to a tragic end and Clym too suffers terribly, the end of Thomasin's love-story is a happy one. We find her in the end married to the faithful Venn and likely to enjoy a happy life ever afterwards. In this way, the novelist has introduced a note of meliorism in the novel. He has thus shown that a limited happiness is possible even in this sorry life of ours. The happy end of the Thomasin story does not reduce the tragic intensity of the Catastrophe; rather it enables the novelist to present his vision of life truthfully and honestly.

Hardy's plots are dominated by chance events. This is also true of *The Return of the Native*. In this novel also there are many things which happen at the wrong moment, when they are least expected to happen and the result is sorrow, suffering and tragedy for all concerned. For example, Clym's coming across Eustacia by chance as he returns home with his mother and Thomasin, leads to their sad tragic love. It is just a matter of chance that Diggory Venn is a few minutes late in coming to propose for Thomasin's hand. Wildeve reaches before him and is accepted. Had Diggory reached earlier, he would have married Thomasin and Wildeve would have married Eustacia.

Much sorrow and suffering could have been avoided in this way. It is by chance that Christian meets some friends and goes with them to the Quiet Woman. It is also by chance that he wins at the game of dice. The result is that Wildeve comes to know that he has Thomasin's guineas on him and he wins all of them from him on the Heath in the light of the glow-worms in a game of dice. It is just a chance that Wildeve comes to Eustacia's house exactly at the moment that Mrs. Yeobright also reaches there. It is just a chance that Clym

moves and mutters “Mother”, in his sleep, just at the moment Mrs. Yeobright knocks at the door. The result is that Eustacia supposes that her husband is awake and so does not herself open the door. This leads to the death of Mrs. Yeobright and the separation of Clym and Eustacia after a violent quarrel. It is just a chance that Johny Nunsuch repeats the dying words of Mrs. Yeobright, exactly at the moment that Clym reaches the cottage of Susan Nunsuch. The chance meeting of Wildeve and Eustacia at the fair leads to their dancing together and the renewal of their love. It is just a chance that Clym’s letter of reconciliation does not reach Eustacia in time.

The evil Wildeve’s nature is fully revealed when he leaves Thomasin even after marriage and turns again to Eustacia, who is now married to Clym. There is no doubt, that it cannot be denied that chance plays its own part in Wildeve’s life to make it a tragedy. The sudden return of Clym from Paris to be his rival in love, the chance meeting with Eustacia at the dance, the chance fortune inherited by him, all contribute to his ultimate tragedy. But in Wildeve’s case character is also destiny. His own villainy and evil contribute a great deal to his tragic end. The plot of the novel is heavily overloaded with chance events. Too much depends on chance. This introduces an element of artificiality into the novel. Indeed, this is one of the pieces of criticism levelled against the novel as a work of art.

Chance incidents also happen in the same erratic way. A very striking chance occurs when Eustacia neglects to go to the door to open it when Mrs. Yeobright knocks at Clym’s house, where she has gone to reconcile with her son. If Eustacia had opened the door, a very great tragedy might have been averted. The poor old woman, broken in heart, goes back across the Heath and is stung by a poisonous serpent. This accidental death of Mrs. Yeobright finally leads to the final estrangement between Clym and Eustacia and the death of Eustacia.

In fact, a series of coincidences occur from the very beginning of the novel. The novel opens with the coincidence of some irregularity in the marriage licence for Wildeve and Thomasin. Further, the fact that Mrs. Yeobright hears of her son’s intention of marrying Eustacia on the very day when Clym had planned to bring her mother and Eustacia together, frustrates his plan and the two women never reconcile to the end. Later, when Mrs. Yeobright knocks at the door of Clym, he is found asleep and does not hear his mother’s knocking. The mother, however, believes that her son had intentionally ignored her knocking. Again, by coincidence, Clym stumbles across his dying mother on his way to visit her.

Fate and Chance frustrate the attempts of both the mother and the son to meet and get reconciled. Further in the story, Charley tries to surprise Eustacia by lighting a bonfire on the fifth November, but she takes this light as signal given by Wildeve to call her for a secret meeting with him over the Heath. This meeting brings about Wildeve’s offer of aid to Eustacia and results in their doom. On the very day Eustacia sets out to meet Wildeve, Clym sends her a letter asking her to return to him, but by chance the letter does not reach her. Clym, finally arrives too late to save Eustacia from drowning.

Love is equally the cause of tragedy in *The Return of the Native*, Eustacia is dominated by the passion and the result is not happiness but tragedy. It is rarely that love leads to happiness, but it always leads to tragedy. Elizabeth-Jane, too, suffers in love, though ultimately she gets the object of her desire. All these coincidences prompted by fate and chance finally lead to the catastrophe. Fate and chance pursue human characters as a hunting dog would pursue his prey. Man is helplessly caught in the trap of fate and change.

**References:**

1. Butler, John Lance St. 'Thomas Hardy', Cambridge: Cambridge, 1978. Print.
2. Bradley, A.C. 'Shakespearean Tragedy', London: Macmillan, 1965. Print.
3. Gillan, Maria. *The Return of the Native* New York : Barrister, 1966. Print.