

The Rise and Fall of Michael Henchard in the novel “The Mayor of Casterbridge” by Thomas Hardy A story of a man of character

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Abstract

There are many determining factors that can be considered as the main cause of success and failure of a certain person in life which is full of challenges. And those who never care for the certain causes of their failure will fall, meanwhile those who want to learn the causes of their failure will rise. It seems so simple if just talk about ‘realize’, but in this context is the person who realizes and determines to change the causes, or at least to suppress them so that they will not be the influential elements for certain failure. “Several critics have pointed to the classical tragic shape of ‘The Mayor of Casterbridge’. It is the story of the rise and fall of a man of character, a man flawed in certain destructive ways; his story is confined in space and time: there clear echoes of Greek tragedy and of King Lear.

Keywords : success and failure, The portrait of Michael Henchard

1.Introduction

The portrait of Michael Henchard, the protagonist of this novel is prtrait of the people who never went to look inwards, but outwards; the people who never try to instropect themselves for what mistakes they have done. Thomas Hardy again presents us a story of man of character; a man that never realizes the causes of his disaster; and a man who always ‘plans’ his own fall.

Henchard’s Rise

When the Henchards come to Weydon Priors, it is told that in spite of his indifference to his wife and his life he has some positive qualities: strong, hard-working and hard-willing. This basic elements are required for a man’s success, though we must not neglect that there are still some qualities necessary for it. A person with the qualities mentioned above will not find it difficult to succeed in life. *“I haven’t more than fifteen shillings in the world, and yet I am a good experienced hand in my line. I’d challenge England to beat me in the fodder business; and if I were a free man again I’d be worth a thousand pound before I’d done o’it”*¹

Henchard speaks those words in the tent of the furnity seller in front of some people. It is obvious that Henchard wants to stress that his wife and baby are the prominent obstacles that prevent him from making fast progress. His confession, too, about his ‘early marriage’ may indicate that he regrets it for he can be free without being burdened with the responsibility of his family. The wife-selling, thus, is his great fortune even though he is sorry for it. The purchase of his wife and his baby by Richard Newson opens a new opportunity for Henchard to do what once he was wanted to. Although Hardy doesn’t describe how Henchard achieves his rise, we are quite away that Henchard deserves such a

thing. His stern being has brought him up to the peak of his success by holding a position of mayor and a successful businessman. His separation from his wife and baby has enabled him to do more.

“The prologue is now complete. A period of twenty years is skipped over, years in which Henchard rises to merchantile prosperity and political prominence. This leap in time strictly justifiable, once we have been persuaded by the opening chapters that, if Henchard can but hold his turbulence in check, he is a man vigorous and hard enough to succeed in the commerce of a country town.”²

Indeed Henchard can control his feeling before his wife and daughter’s return. Their return brings a new story for Henchard; that is, he is again haunted by his past sin. And Henchard successively loses his property, including his own soul. His tragic end, is not merely his wife’s fault. It is Henchard himself that cannot be thoughtful by controlling his feeling. His achievement will not be gone if only he can forget his past and accepts things as they are.

Henchard’s Fall

Henchard’s fall cannot be separated from his wife’s return to him. He has lived a quiet life during the absence of his wife and her return brings a new story for Henchard, that is the conflict that he encounters. It is obvious that her return is welcomed warmly by Henchard for he has been in search of her for quite a long time. Only later, he is put into difficult situation that even Henchard himself believes there is something wrong with him. Irving Howe states:

“I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, to take an oath before God here in this solemn place that I will avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year that I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be strook dumb, blind, and helpless, if I break this my oath!”³

Henchard only intends to punish himself for the guilt he has done over his wife. He doesn’t realize at all that this oath will bring him into his ruin. The ritualistic nature of his oath – one year of abstention for each year he has lived – leaves the possibility of ruin open to him, if in a distant future. Most men would have sworn off liquor for ever – and then either broken their pledge, or stuck to it. So, in this situation, Henchard ‘plans’ his own fall by limiting the time of the absence from liquor. But Henchard is different; He arranges his own fall though he doesn’t realize that he has done so.

Henchard ought to have been suspicious of Susan when she does not approve of Henchard’s intention to put Henchard’s name at the end of Elizabeth-Jane’s name. Susan will be glad to put his name if everything is fine, but here Susan is uneasy about it. She knows that Henchard is not Elizabeth’s father by law, yet she doesn’t let Henchard know about it for fear that Henchard will be sorry. Susan’s countenance also invites suspicion when they (Elizabeth-Jane, Susan, and Henchard) are having breakfast together; she is confused to

² Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy, Macmillan, London, 1985. P. 89

³ Thomas Hardy, The Mayor Of The Casterbridge, Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978, p. 85

answer Henchard's question about Elizabeth's brown hair instead of black as it promises to be. He is too ignorant.

Susan's unhappiness after her remarriage with Henchard is conspicuous though she always tries to show him that she is very happy to live with him. She is always sick, and she looks so pale. Henchard just considers this thing natural. He never assumes that Susan might suffer a kind of mental disturbance because of certain stress. And when he knows later that Elizabeth-Jane is not his own daughter he is terribly upset.

"... Elizabeth-Jane is not your Elizabeth-Jane – the child who was in my arms when you sold me. No; she died three months after that, and his living one is my other other's"⁴

The quotation above is taken from Susan's letter to Henchard. When Susan is dying she writes a letter to be opened on Elizabeth-Jane's wedding day. Susan just wants to make the matter clear to Henchard by writing the letter. The problem is that Henchard is not patient enough to wait until Elizabeth Jane's wedding day. Hencard is not a type of man who can wait. He has his own impatient character. He is far from being considerate. Susan has attempted to find the right moment to open the envelope and read the letter: Elizabeth-Jane's wedding day. She considers that if Henchard finds out that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter on her wedding day, Henchard might not be too furious for at this time she has got married and has got her independence. As Henchard doesn't think the letter is serious, he just opens the envelope and reads it. Henchard is impatient, and too sure of his personal judgement. He proceeds further before the time comes. His lack of respect to his wife is also the cause why he just opens the letter when he sees that the letter is not properly sealed.

Susan's letter makes Henchard unhappy, moreover when the following morning Elizabeth-Jane calls him 'father' instead of 'Mr. Henchard' as she usually does. Only the night before Henchard explains to Elizabeth-Jane that actually his her real father, not Richard Newson. As a matter of fact, it is hard for Elizabeth-Jane to accept the truth. She is in doubt about it, yet she is ready to call him 'father'. Elizabeth-Jane has expected that Henchard will be glad to hear it but she is very confused to find out that Henchard is not. Henchard just smiles bitterly at her. Although Elizabeth-Jane is curious to know the reason, she just keeps it in her heart.

Henchard behaves rudely to Elizabeth-Jane since he knows that she is apparently not his daughter. He often criticizes the way she talks, the way she behaves and everything she does. In short Henchard is always finding faults with everything Elizabeth-Jane does. Henchard's silence is also a key to his fall; he should have told Elizabeth-Jane the truth that he misunderstands about her position by showing the letter from Susan, but it seems that Henchard is reluctant to do so. They can put the matter right by being frank to each other. Elizabeth-Jane is not a narrow minded girl, so Henchard's confession will not become a great blow on her. Instead, she will appreciate Henchard's frankness about the misunderstanding.

Henchard's indifference to Elizabeth-Jane is a torture for her, so she makes a decision to stay away from Henchard. Elizabeth-Jane proposes that she should live with a woman

⁴ Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor Of The Casterbridge*, Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978, p. 196

whose name is Miss Templeman (She is actually Lucetta herself who disguises as Miss Templeman when she comes to Casterbridge) in High Place Hall. Henchard gives his consent, but later he is sorry when Elizabeth-Jane leaves him on the following day. Henchard is like a child who wants to give his things away and then he is sorry afterward. We may consider that Henchard is a frustrated man. He feels cheated by his wife, Susan about Elizabeth-Jane. This makes him disgusted and wants to get rid of her, as the cause of his trouble. In spite of this, Henchard has nobody with him without Elizabeth-Jane. And her leaving him is a great loss. Look at the quotation below.

*“Now Henchard had not the slightest suspicion that Elizabeth-Jane’s movement was to be so prompt. Henchard when just before six, he reached prompt. And saw a fly at the door from the King’s Arms, and his stepdaughter, with all her little bags and boxes getting into it, he was taken by surprise.”*⁵

In his despair, at last Henchard passed away; but before he died he left a note that his death is not to be mourned. In his loss of fortune and position of a mayor, Henchard thought that fate was against him. The death of the bird in the cage that he left in the bush as a present for Elizabeth-Jane on her wedding day could symbolize his bitterness in life. It can be considered as a trap for his unfortunate fate. In fact he never learns that his character is his fate; and he never tries to understand that he can have lived properly and quietly only if he had been practical in his judgement. It is contrast to Elizabeth-Jane who can survive and live happily in spite of her difficulties because she understands human nature. She knows that only her herself can change her miserable life. She learns from her situation and environment, but Henchard doesn’t. His wrong judgement has led him into his tragic fall.

Donald Farfrae also plays an important role in analyzing the rise and fall of Henchard in this novel. Donald is a Scotsman who is on his way to Bristol when he arrives in Casterbridge. The problem of bad corn in Casterbridge interests this young man that he sends a note to Henchard (as a mayor of the town) stating that he knows how to make bad corn ‘looks’ good. Henchard is impressed by this man that he immediately asks him to be his manager. Farfrae accepts the offer though at first he refuses it.

Contrast to Henchard, Farfrae is always full of ideas. He applies new methods in managing corn business professionally. He knows how to distinguish what is personal and what is professional.

“Henchard runs his affairs by hunches – which works well enough as long as he needs only confront problems he can apprehend intuitively, as elements of economy local familiar. Toward the men who work for him Henchard is both generous and despotic, close and overbearing. He can be an autocrat, but never a hypocrite. He prepares the way for a triumph of bourgeois economy, but cannot live at ease with the style it brings. And he is not really able to distinguish between business and personal affairs, since for better or worse, he assumes that a man’s life should be all of a piece. Will farfrae be his manager? Then Farfrae must be his friend. And not only must Farfrae help with the books and the grain, he must eat heavy breakfast with him and listen to the story of his life, as if to slake Henchard’s thirst for relationship and impact.”

⁵ Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor Of The Casterbridge*, Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978, p. 216

When Abel Whittle, an ordinary worker, wakes up late for work one day, Henchard comes immediately and scolds him furiously. He doesn't even give him time to put on his trousers. At that very moment, Farfrae comes and asks Abel to put on his trousers. The disputes between Henchard and Farfrae begins.

Henchard is a generous man, but he can also forget what he has said. And when he is in his bad mood, he forgets everything and loses his control of his emotion. On the contrary, Farfrae, who is always business-like never shows his true feeling. He can conceal his own feeling. Farfrae realizes that Abel Whittle is wrong, but Henchard's treatment on him is so painful that it can hurt the other workers too. Henchard is rash, rough and revengeful. He is not well-educated. Farfrae is the contrast. He is prudent, charming, and well-educated. If Henchard comes to Casterbridge to build his business with strength and power, but not with Farfrae. He runs business with his knowledge, by applying modern methods that Henchard can neither understand nor compete. Henchard is not a hypocrite; he is too honest. Farfrae is not.

The rivalry that has started between Henchard and Farfrae keeps them farther to each other. They are not often seen together anymore as they used to be. Henchard never puts his arms on Farfrae's shoulders. When the celebration of the national event comes, Farfrae asks Henchard to lend him some rich clothes for he wants to make an entertainment for the people with a charge of admission for people who want to see it. Being a mayor, Henchard feels beaten. He then organizes a kind of entertainment to compete Farfrae's. He plans not to charge people for admission. Since the weather is always fine, he makes the entertainment in the open air, not like Farfrae who uses the cloths as a big tent. The tent is built among the branches of the trees. When the day of the entertainment comes, the weather changes and rain begins to fall. Only a few people come to see the amusement prepared by Henchard. Many of them go to Farfrae's Scottish dance for they can enter the tent and protected from the heavy rain. Henchard is very upset and angry. Again he blames his fate for all of it. Henchard should be aware of what might happen in the future. He should be thoughtful like Farfrae who prepares everything.

Superstitions

One unique thing that can be analyzed in this novel is the factor of superstition that Michael Henchard practises in his daily life. His tendency to believe supernatural things eventually leads him to his tragic fall. Why should Henchard swear not to drink alcohol for twenty years? Why not for ever? It seems that Henchard believes that his oath is his fate.

One of the characteristics that make Henchard unique is his reliance on superstition. This is one of the major differences between Henchard and Farfrae, who is the most practical, literal-minded person in the book. Henchard is very in tune with nature and the natural world, and also to events that seem somehow symbolic to him. His sensitivity to these things is both a strength and a flaw.⁶

On the contrary, Farfrae is a man of logic, an educated man who bases his plan and decision upon logical things. Being logical and wise, Farfrae survives the hardships and problems he experiences during the plot of the novel.

*Hardy draws Farfrae as Henchard's counterpart in every way. He is physically small, polite and charming, careful and controlled, forward thinking, and methodical. Whereas Henchard propels his fate through moments of rash behavior, Farfrae is cool and calculating in all he does. Although his personality is friendly and engaging, Farfrae maintains a certain detachment from people and events, always considering the possible consequences of his decisions and actions before he makes them. As a result, his path through life is as smooth as Henchard's is rough.*⁷

4. Conclusion

Success and failure keep tracing Henchard's life in the whole of the novel. His life is a portrait of many people in the natural world who cannot balance the what should be put into the first priority and what should be put aside. His family life is tortured by his being addicted to alcoholic drink which later 'forces' him to sell his wife Susan to a sailor. His only daughter, Elizabeth-Jane died three months after the shameful 'trade' of selling his own wife. He doesn't realize this for when later he finds Susan, the girl is still with her wife. As it turns out, the girl is Wilson's daughter with Susan, his sold wife.

*Henchard's judgement error and his poor personality play a significant role in leading him to the fall rather than his misfortunes. His failure to keep his wealth, his social life and his relationship with those who care for him are mostly caused by these both. In taking actions and making decisions, Henchard comes up with his excessive pride rather than uses his brain. This excessive pride, then, led to the tragic downfall of the character. As a conclusion from this novel, we may take lesson that excessive pride can lead someone to zero point.*⁷

Henchard tragic life begins when he gets drunk and sells his wife to a sailor although he later on regrets to his death. Along with the journey of the story, Henchard is successful in business and later remarries Susan, his former wife. The peak of success comes when he becomes the mayor of Casterbridge. The conflict of family life, career and business puts Henchard's life to the tragic end before he dies.

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⁷ *Andri Hermansyah, An Analysis on Tragic Character in Thomas Hardy's novel "The Mayor of The Casterbridge", 2009 p. 47*

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