

## Exploring Effects of Symbols in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

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### Abstract

*'This qualitative study explores the implicit values of symbols in Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge (1985) from formalistic perspective. The chief objective of the current study is to examine how Hardy's philosophy becomes distinct through symbols and imagery. The paper aims at revealing the effects of coded and figurative meanings of symbols, various words, phrases and other expressions that have a symbolic value by bringing forth their underlying and folded meanings, in particular reference to the symbol of firmity woman as a symbol of evil. This study found certain aspects of reality characteristic to novelist's worldview represented in multi-dimensional facets of symbolic expressions. The thesis opens new ways of reading for the future researches.'*

### Introduction

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge (1985)* is the life-story of Michael Henchard who is a full-length portrait, and Hardy truthfully subtitled the novel 'A Story of a Man of Character'<sup>1</sup>. The novel owes its strength to its symbolic structure. Although we read the novel as a straightforward story, yet a deeper analysis shows that it is replete with symbol messages as there are certain situations, which can be interpreted in a symbolic manner. In other words, the novel abounds in symbols, which have their own significance. These symbols can be interpreted variously if we analyze them as Thomas Hardy himself declared while *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was coming out serially that: My art is to intensify the expression of things....so that the heart and inner meaning is made visible. Hardy seems to be inspired to write *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by the selling incident of a wife by her husband.<sup>3</sup>

### Statement of the problem

*The Mayor of Casterbridge (1985)* is a tragedy of a man of character. The novel seems to be a straightforward story of the rise and fall of Michael Henchard, but, on deeper analysis, we can see that it is replete with symbols emanating from his philosophy. The aim of this paper is thus to explore his philosophy through symbols and to bring forth the messages wrapped in these expressions. The study attempts to find out such expressions which not only carry symbolic significance but also enrich our understanding of Hardy's vision of human condition under the vision of formalism. The study synthesizes symbols and his philosophy of life so as to examine how certain symbols steer the readers to his way of thinking.

### Literature Review

A symbol refers to a word, a sentence, or an image that has two meanings: one is explicit and other is implicit which is derived from a Greek word *symbollein*, which means a mark or sign and imparts meaning to other things. Therefore, a symbol always contains a message that requires close interpretation and exploration<sup>14</sup>. Symbols, thus, make the readers think deeper for getting the hidden messages and values which the author wants to give. Moreover, most of the writers utilize subjective or personal symbols through which they intend to give exposure to their philosophy. The current study is a critical examination of the use of symbols carrying a symbolic value and how these symbols take a reader to Hardy's philosophy. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge (1985)*, symbols are represented in the inner tension, conflict, psyche, hate of the characters.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge (1985)* is a classic novel so it has attracted many scholars to analyze it from different lenses. Benazon<sup>16</sup> in his thesis, analyzed Hardy's work through the perspective of romanticism and he has justified that Hardy takes interest in nature and romance like Wordsworth. According to him, Hardy's works are the reflection of his own age and the effects of environmental changes on the lives of characters. Lisa<sup>15</sup> points out that from conventional classical to a contemporary scientific view, nineteenth century philosophy and science influenced Hardy's thinking and consequently on his writings. She further states that there are many mythical references used by Hardy. She also identifies the utility of these images to suggest future happenings and the trend of character development, to set the mood or tone of situation, and to release the reader's own imaginative perceptions by these analogies". Popsova<sup>16</sup> traces the extraordinary female characters in Hardy's

fictions. She has a view that Hardy's heroines are strong and unconventional that's why they spend much of their life time in struggling against the restrictions imposed by the society despised by the people because of her femininity. Prithwi<sup>17</sup> throws light on the issue of class conflict in England by using Marxist approach through his work to analyze the conflict between upper class and the lower class. Abdul<sup>17</sup> said that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is famous for its scandalous beginning. Human emotions and weaknesses have been portrayed effectively by the writer. The review reveals that symbols in novel have not been analyzed from formalistic approach so a gap appears to fill.

### Research Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature which explores the impact of symbols on the meanings in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1985) from formalistic point of view. Formalism or New Criticism is the theory through which structural purposes of a particular text is observed in this sort of study that focuses on the inter-textual elements. For the accomplishment of this task, close reading of the text is the main thing to be focus on the symbolic values of certain expression. Reckoning the specific requirements of study qualitative paradigm is used for this research. Formalism has the advantage to evaluate the writer's any piece of writing on its own terms rather than to rely upon the accepted notions of the writer. Formalism is very suitable on the genre of poetry and novel rather than drama. Formalism deals with the text itself<sup>14</sup> which is used to explore the meanings in a text from the structural elements of a particular text dealing with the critical approaches which analyze, interpret, focus, examine, and also evaluate the main inherent characteristic to the text. Symbol is also the integral part of the structure to examine that meaning is contained in the structure of the text<sup>14</sup>.

### Analysis and Discussion

The researcher has focused on the symbolic value of certain expressions used in the novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1985) that is replete with symbols, which are scattered in the events, characters, scenes, places, objects, and actions of this novel, and the same is true of women characters as well. There are four women characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: Susan, Elizabeth-Jane, Lucetta, and the furmity-woman, Mrs. Goodenough. All of them play significant roles in the novel, because they stand for something more than they appear, but the present study is focused on the furmity-woman, because her part in the novel is very significant. Henchard's tragedy begins in the very first scene of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which is one of the most memorable openings among Hardy's works. Michael Henchard, his wife Susan, and daughter Elizabeth-Jane are travelling in Wessex, searching for work and shelter. They walk along the road together, yet alone, and their isolation here foreshadows their inability to connect personally<sup>4</sup>. They come across a fair in the town of Weydon Priors and enter a refreshment tent. Henchard is angry with his wife and wants to sell her and vows that "I know that I've said it before; I meant it. All I want is a buyer"<sup>5</sup>. This shocking scene in the furmity tent is meant to arouse:

Such forces of retribution as will not be satisfied with less than the total humiliation of the offender and the ultimate restoration of the order offended.<sup>6</sup>

Hardy emphasizes this fact by having the auctioning off outside the tent and suggests to Henchard the auctioning off of his chattel wife inside. When Hardy wants to describe a scene, he uses sufficient imagery so that the readers may get the appropriate atmosphere and a detailed picture. For this purpose, he uses the symbol of the old horses to represent Susan at the fair:

The auctioneer selling the old horses in the field outside could be heard saying; 'Now this is the last lot--now who'll take the last lot for a song? Shall I say forty shillings? 'Tis a very promising broodmare, a trifle over five years old and nothing the matter with the horse at all, except that she's a little holler in the back and had her left eye knocked out by the kick of another, her own sister, coming along the road'<sup>7</sup>.

The furmity woman, Mrs. Goodenough, appears in the first chapter as a symbol of evil and, in a much later chapter, as a symbol of the past, which always pursues human beings. She sells furmity and mixes rum with it if a particular customer so desires. To sell furmity, and also rum whenever necessary, is this woman's occupation and her source of livelihood, though the sale of rum is illegal and unlawful. She is a means of ruin for Michael Henchard, a hay-trusser, who comes to her tent accompanied by his wife, Susan, and his daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, on a Fair Day at the village of Weydon-Priors in Upper Wessex. He takes strong liquor and gets intoxicated. The drunken hay-trusser sells his wife and daughter to a sailor named Newson. The furmity woman presides over a stove containing a charcoal fire on which rests a large three-legged crock. She is slowly stirring the contents of the pot, and the dull sound of her large spoon is audible throughout the tent:

A haggish creature of about fifty presided, in a white apron, which, as it threw an air of respectability over her as far as it extended, was made so wide as to reach nearly round her waist. She slowly stirred the contents of the pot. The dull scrape of her large spoon was audible throughout the tent as she thus kept from burning the mixture of corn in the grain, flour, milk, raisins, currants, and what not that composed the antiquated slop in which she dealt<sup>8</sup>.

She is described as an ugly old woman who does or is thought to do evil. She strongly resembles a Shakespearean witch, especially in her second appearance as a crone croaking over a kettle. There are faint

echoes of witchcraft in her stirring the concoction in her three-legged vessel, reinforced in her later appearance at crucial junctures in the plot. Over the pot stooped an old woman, haggard, wrinkled, and almost in rags. She stirred the contents of the pot with a large spoon, and occasionally croaked in a broken voice, 'Good furmity sold here'<sup>9</sup>!

The tent of the furmity woman is more than a mere tent, because here an illegal trade is going on, which symbolizes a trap for human beings. On entering the tent, Henchard winks at the furmity woman, and she mixes some rum with the furmity meant for him. He drinks it, gets intoxicated, and begins to talk aloud in the tent. But there was more in that tent than met the cursory glance; and the man, with the instinct of a perverse character, scented it quickly. After a mincing attack on his bowl, he watched the hag's proceedings from the corner of his eye, and saw the game she played. He winked to her, and passed up his basin in reply to her nod; when she took a bottle from under the table, silly measured out a quantity of its contents, and tipped the same into the man's furmity. The liquor poured in was rum. The man as silyly sent back money in payment<sup>10</sup>.

This description makes us feel that the furmity woman presents an image of evil, which symbolizes Henchard's deserved fate and also a justified punishment for his wrongdoing. She plays a vital part in the story of the novel. She gives the needful information to Susan regarding the whereabouts of Michael Henchard. She remembers that year before the man who had sold off his wife in her tent had told her that he was going to Casterbridge.

Thus, the furmity-woman makes it easier for Susan to find her husband. At first, the furmity woman tempts Henchard to drink the liquor, which ruins him, then, charges him with wife-selling at a critical point in his career and overthrows his reputation, and, in the end, helps to plan the skimmity-ride, which results in humiliating him almost to the point of suicide. She pursues her illicit trade in the tent, which the hay-trusser, Henchard, enters with his wife and child. The hay-trusser sells his wife as if she were no more than one of the horses which have been on sale at the fair. We see Mrs. Goodenough four times in the novel: twice in Weydon-Priors and twice in Casterbridge. She quickens the decline of Henchard by disclosing the secret of his early life in the open court. She has been charged by the police with committing nuisance and she is produced for trial before Henchard in his capacity as one of the magistrates. She ironically rises as a specter of the past before magistrate, Henchard, and hands down a long-delayed retributive sentence on her judge. She declares that Henchard is not fit to try her case because he is no better than her. She reveals that Henchard had long ago sold off his wife. Her arrival is a symbol of threturning of Henchard's guilty past, which comes back to haunt him. She says:

And the man who sold his wife in that fashion is the man sitting there in the great big chair."  
The speaker concluded by nodding her head at Henchard and folding her arms<sup>11</sup>.

This information spread rapidly in the town and makes Henchard the victim of social censure. Already Henchard has lost much of his credit in the town, and this revelation merely accelerates his downfall, because it depicts him in a most unfavorable light. This revelation has particularly an adverse effect on the mind of Lucetta who, despite the promise, resolves not to marry Henchard. Lucetta hastens to marry Farfrae in order to put herself beyond Henchard's reach. She pricks Henchard like his conscience so much that he considers himself to be the worst man of Casterbridge. He is convinced of his guilt and does not try to deny it. Each time we see him, the furmity woman's appearance and fortunes seem to have deteriorated him further. Her appearance in the court on the very day when Henchard is to preside as a judge and at the moment when his fortunes might go either up or down is an evidence of the malignancy of Fate. She goes from mistress of the furmity tent to the town vagrant.

Although her fall is in direct contrast to Henchard's rise, in the end, she helps to bring him down to her level. Mrs. Goodenough seems to fill a role as Henchard's conscience and an instrument of his self-destruction. She is a symbol of Henchard's inescapable past, which pursues his foot-steps, a demon that cannot be driven away. Perhaps that is the reason for her name. She reveals to Henchard that she is not always good enough.

### Conclusion

The study shows through symbols, Hardy presents his philosophy that man is too insignificant to be of relevance to the universe and is unable to direct his actions in the struggle for existence, because he is weak and trapped in an alternatively indifferent and hostile universe. Hardy seems to have been far more concerned with utilizing symbols for a philosophic message. It seems that through symbols, Hardy could express his philosophy in a way that a reader could comprehend. Hence, Hardy's highly developed artistic prowess seems observable when he creates symbols. This study developed a comprehensive understanding of the novel as well as to synthesize Hardy's art and his philosophy. The artistic device of symbolism is illustrative of and bound to Hardy's philosophic belief that man is a helpless creature in a Darwinistic universe<sup>13</sup>. Islam, it may be observed, is opposed to the fatalistic view of human nature. Instead, it presumes that the out-pouring mercy of God, has endowed man with two basic attributes: intellect and freedom. Intellect, so that he can see the difference between the devil and the Divine, and freedom, so that he may make the appropriate choice. Man, so to say, is not determined. Instead, he is free to make or mar his own being. Man is, indeed, punished or rewarded by his own deeds.

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