

Economic Sagacity in Thomas Hardy's *the Mayor of Casterbridge*

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Abstract

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a true reflection of a turbulent time, where two protagonists, driven by two combative moralities and instincts, cross their sword at the battlefield of Casterbridge. Interestingly, while one party is keen to carry out the battle till death, the other shows reluctance which makes things more bizarre. In this article, I would try to understand the economic scheme of a protagonist in Marxist framework and show to the readers how the complex current of economic base and superstructure effects and affects changes to the lives of characters in this explosive novel.

Keywords: Economic, Rationality, Capitalism, Novel

JEL Classification: Z11

1. Introduction

England was seized in crossfire between two different economic modes of production. On one hand, there was volcanic eruption of several industries empowered with astronomical capital and splendid scientific tools. English agriculture, on the other hand, was on steady decline. With the repealing of Corn Law and the introduction of Free Trade Policy, imported food stuffs, especially American wheat, conquered English market and drove English farmers to the periphery. Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, written at the backdrop of this volatile period, catches the true spirit of such dialectics.

Michael Henchard, the protagonist of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, begins as does Defoe's shipwrecked hero, a penniless and isolated individual, forced to rely on his own initiative to survive in an alien world. His gradual emergence from penury and obscurity to social eminence is solely motivated by his raw physical strength, determination and courage. In an early stage of pre-industrial capitalism, his endeavour can thus be seen in a heroic light. But unlike Defoe, Hardy covers over the unheroic and ordinary tenor of economic enterprise which must have characterized two decades of his hero's life. After his drunken fraudulency in furnity woman's tent, we meet Henchard eighteen years later enjoying mayoral status at Csasterbridge. (Henchard's Character)

Prior to Donald Farfrae's arrival in casterbridge, Henchard's economic triumphs depends upon his skill and energy, but after many years, Henchard's business becomes too large for one man to manage by himself. His very success thus forces Henchard rely upon the help of another for the first time. Farfrae offers technical and managerial skills, as well as a secret

scientific process by which Henchard's bad grain can be restored. But in case with Henchard, who is always driven by his intuitive morality and impulsive nature, this desire for greater economic success eventually produces a competitor whose superior commercial talent jeopardize Henchard's position.

Henchard initially needs only a skilled manager to assist him in his growing business, but upon hiring Farfrae, he insists that the young man becomes his close friend and confidante. Henchard's terrible penchant for relationship and inability to discriminate between private and public world would eventually lead him to a series of ruinous decision. On the other hand, Farfrae, baptised in the fire of capitalism, always operates from an objective point of view and plans his decision without any tinge of romanticism.

Before Farfrae's arrival in Casterbridge, relationship between members of different social strata remains personal, direct and subject to mood. Rather than summarily dismiss a perpetually turgid man from his job, Henchard humiliates Abbel Whittle before his fellow workers and town folk to give him a lesson. Farfrae vehemently reacts against such humiliation and his protest is the stepping stone of his slowly-turned-sour relationship with Henchard. In the later part of the novel, we see Henchard secretly compensating for his severity by helping Abel's mother in distress. On the other hand, Farfrae lowers the wage of his labours and hurls them into more arduous work immediately after his emergence to power. Such difference in master-slave relationship can be understood in the light of Marxist reading. In the feudal period, as there remains an absence of alternative mode of production, a common preoccupation with agriculture engages master and slave into a personal relationship. This relationship, however, is severely thwarted with the advent of capitalism. In a factory, a worker performs labour on raw materials, and thus transforms those raw materials into an object; in the process, the labourer adds surplus value which ensures that the object is worth more than the original raw material. Now, the mill owners, only interested in the surplus value which can fetch them a profit, distance themselves from their slaves. Such ideological disparities create an unbridgeable gulf between Henchard and Farfrae.

As Farfrae gradually supplants the mayor as the most admired man in Casterbridge, Henchard dismisses his highly talented and productive manager in a fit of pique and jealousy, thereby creating a commercial rival for him. Henchard's commercial combat with Farfrae constitutes the tenor of this tragedy. Now, what discriminates Henchard's squabble from any other mercantile rivalry is Henchard's desire for prestige and personal glory. Both Farfrae and Henchard could do hefty business in Casterbridge market and make a prosperous living. But far from seeking economic security, Henchard risks his entire fortune to engage in a Homeric contest with his friend-turned-foe.

Henchard's economic heroism should be understood in the light of the philosophic foundation of modern middle-class regime. Hobbes and Locke champion commercial enterprise over traditional aristocratic pursuits as the chief activity for the modern citizen. They regard commercial activity as a means of taming man's vainglorious pursuits and aggressive impulse. Farfrae, in their definition, appears as a modern economic hero who enters in a marketplace without any elevated moral pursuits. He never deviates from his temperature and fully rationalised system of 'small profits frequently repeated'.

Henchard engineers his plan for an economic triumph on the basis of witchcraft and superstition. These qualities primarily enthrone Henchard in the high seat of Casterbridge; but on the face of post- industrial scientific exploits, all primordial bulwark falls like dry leaves. After rejecting Farfrae, Henchard resorts to superstitious folklore, personal vitality and rash courage. Rather than depend on the advice of a modern businessman, Henchard in the end relies on the auguries of local weather prophet in making his fateful financial decision and ruins his slightest chance of any economic revival.

Farfrae incarnates the spirit of mechanization by in Casterbridge by bringing the horse –drill to the city. Its arrival creates a stir in the market; only Henchard ridicules it. Henchard does this not because of his personal hatred for the owner of this machine, but underneath his personal dislike we can see a more impersonal reason: Henchard speaks from a rugged world where the advent of machine threatens his feudal existence. Henchard’s vehemence is not a byproduct of his personal grievance, but a mere act of facile defence on the face of aggressive capitalism.

Henchard loses everything to Farfrae: his economic sway, mayoral status and love interest. Moreover, he has to savour the indignity of working under a man who was his erstwhile employee. The fact that Farfrae has acted without malice, and is not likely to bear a grudge, makes things more unbearable still, for it is this very coolness and detachment that reminds Henchard how he has exposed himself emotionally by his impulsive acts of friendship and hatred: Farfrae’s calm ignites a murderous desire in Henchard.

But again, when he takes on unprepared Farfrae in a remote place, his intuitive morality propels him to the grotesque action of binding his left hand to his side so that he can fight with a physically inferior contestant on equal term. Because of the impulsiveness of his reflections Henchard is given no train of reasoning, simply the sudden thought that issues in his saying aloud ‘I’m stronger than he’.

He never also has necessary poison in his heart to engineer a colossal disaster. Every time Henchard comes to the edge of taking revenge, and then draws back. He settles down to expose Lucetta’s love letters to her present husband Farfrae intending: “to affect a grand catastrophe at the end of his drama by reading out the name; he had come to the house with no other thought. But sitting here in cold blood he could not do it. Such a wrecking of hearts appalled even him. His quality was such he could have annihilated them both in the heat of action; but to accomplish the deed by oral poison was beyond the nerve of his enmity.” (Chapter 35, 150)

“Character is Fate” (Hardy 2008, 107), says the narrator in Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), quoting Novalis. Through the words of the German Romantic writer, Hardy reveals his humanism, intimating that it is through the choices an individual makes rather than because of an external force that the individual determines his trajectory in a certain direction in life. While unpacking Novalis’s claim, the novel depicts fate as an inner rather than an outer force and simultaneously reveals the narrator as a humanist and the protagonist as a human being animated by desires that, as we shall see, conflict, to a certain extent, with societal dictates. Thus, the novel represents an occasion not only for exegesis but also for a critical examination of the concept of the self, stimulating self-interpretation and self-evaluation. By citing Novalis’s simple claim, the narrator deems the individual, and

particularly the protagonist, Michael Henchard, responsible for his own failure as capitalist and father as well as for his exit from the society whose order he has disrupted. Here Hardy joins the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who had advanced the idea that we can understand an individual within a total structure.

In *Ethics*, Spinoza had thought this total structure to be one substance, God, whose existence he found necessary, and to have universal laws, to which man is subject (ID6, Spinoza 1). Yet, as a humanist, Hardy diverges from Spinoza, supplanting the one substance with the social network of the communities in Weydon-Priors and Casterbridge, in Upper Wessex, where individuals have the power to make decisions regarding their fate. I propose that Henchard fails to develop *qua* individual and as a member of society because he considers the individual and the social facets of development to be separate and chooses his action as a response to his desire rather than his reason. Following, I will illustrate that at the heart of Henchard's choices lies his fear of death, materialised as desire, first to rise on the social scale and then to be the father, a fear that the narrative uncovers when Henchard faces the uncanny effigy representing him, floating down the river. He does not understand that being a husband and father implicitly and inextricably binds the private sphere with the social network. Nevertheless, his failure makes him appear as a human being who, trying to fulfil his desire, is subject to error, inviting thus the readers' sympathy. And although to err is human, erring does not appear as justification for Henchard's actions; it merely suggests the destructive potential that lies in the individual's choices when based solely on desire.

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