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Symbolic Significance of Bird in Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge"

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate Hardy's employment of symbolism in The Mayor of Casterbridge, a masterpiece of Thomas Hardy. Hardy is primarily an artist and only incidentally a philosopher, so it is natural that he would present his philosophy artistically. He uses various artistic techniques to make his philosophy enriched. One of these techniques is the use of bird as a symbol. Thomas Hardy has used this symbol very skillfully. Through the use of bird imagery, he elucidates his philosophy as well as adds special artistic charm to his style. So far, his critics have only cursorily analyzed this symbol and have never applied it to an analysis of his philosophy. This study is an interpretation of this artistic technique and can be viewed as a new approach to an understanding of Hardy's philosophy.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Symbolism, Philosophy

Introduction

The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of the masterpieces and the imperishable novel of Thomas Hardy, although it has never enjoyed the popularity of *Tess* and *Jude*. Hardy was at the height of his creative powers when he began work on it at the age of forty four. Initially, the novel appeared serially, in twenty installments, in 1886 in an English periodical, *The Graphic*, and was published in book form in 1886 after revising for two or three times. The book appeared as soon as the serial publication was complete but it differs a lot from the serial novel. It is a magnificent novel, although Hardy himself was not entirely happy about it.

It was a story which Hardy fancied he had damaged more recklessly as an artistic whole, in the interest of the newspaper in which it appeared serially, than perhaps any other of his novels, his aiming to

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get an incident into each week's part causing him in his own judgment to add events to the narrative somewhat too freely.¹

On the first reading of the book, it seems to be a straightforward story but on deeper analysis one can see that it is replete with symbols which have their own significance and that can be interpreted variously if we analyze them as Thomas Hardy himself wrote 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."²

Symbolism is an artistic technique used in literature by writers—poets, dramatists and novelists—to provide meaning to the writing beyond what is actually being described. It is used in literature to give to the literary work meaning that transcends what is evident to the reader. Symbolism in literature helps in giving the piece of writing feeling and mood without the writer having to actually spell out the same. By giving certain things human like characteristics and also defining them with certain qualities, the writer can manage to give the novel another level that may refer to things that are completely alien from what is mentioned in the piece of writing. It is the use of a word, a phrase, or a description which represents a deeper meaning than the word themselves. It can be a material object or a written sign used to represent something invisible. It enhances a piece of writing. A symbol appears in a work of literature in a number of ways which suggests a number of different things. According to E.E. Stoll, symbolism means "what it says and another thing besides"³. Most commonly a symbol presents itself in the form of a word, a figure of speech, an event, the total action or a character. According to J.A. Cuddon, "the word symbol derives from the Greek verb *symbollein* 'to throw together', and its noun *symbolon* 'mark', 'emblem', 'token' or 'sign'. It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else"⁴. A symbol differs from an allegorical sign in that it has a real existence, whereas an allegorical sign is arbitrary. A literary symbol combines an image with a concept. It may be public or private, universal or local. The term symbol, when used in literature, is often a figure of speech in which a person, object or a situation represents something in addition to its literal meaning. It implies additional meaning that we are likely to discover in things, scenes, situations and even in persons on a closer scrutiny of a piece of writing. According to Martin Gray "A symbol is something, which represents something else (often an idea or quality) by analogy or association"⁵. The use of symbols lends a deeper significance to a work of art and extends its scope. Symbolism is a broad term. Literally it is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities. A symbol is anything which signifies something else.

Symbols are message within a word that must be analyzed to discover their meanings. Sobol says that “the use of symbols explains many other seeming coincidences and unbelievable occurrences”.⁶ They are often meant to reveal something to the reader, rather than the pure fact. People hold different things to be symbolic. Dove and peace, rose and love, they are simple things yet widely symbolic. Symbolism is commonly used in literature to change or deepen meanings or instill a different meaning to the mind of the readers. The reader is forced to think, make connections, and succeed in adding a new meaning to the novel. Some writers use symbols which they develop for themselves. Hardy is one of them. His symbols are unique, personal, philosophical and thought provoking.

When Henchard walks to Farfrae's house and notices the cloth around the knocker, the sparrows in his way hardly fly up from the road-litter. The birds are not concerned with man's presence since it is early in the morning, but the interpretation which Hardy puts on their lack of activity heightens the idea that the birds recognize the “aggression” in man. Hardy infers that the birds would try to escape if it were later in the day because they know man for what he is:

*The sparrows were just alighting into the street, and the hens had begun to cackle from the outhouses. When within a few yards of Farfrae's he saw the door gently opened, and a servant raise her hand to the knocker, to untie the piece of cloth which had muffled it. He went across, the sparrows in his way scarcely flying up from the road-litter, so little did they believe in human aggression at so early a time.*⁷

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, birds react to man's cruelty. A bird comments on an improper human act and, in effect, momentarily averts the doom which waits for Henchard. With the action of the bird, Hardy reveals the reaction of birds toward evil in man. At the beginning of the novel, Henchard and Susan are in a furmity tent. Henchard is angry with his wife and slightly drunk. He says that he wants to sell her and vows that “I know that I've said it before; I meant it. All I want is a buyer”.⁸ The atmosphere in the tent becomes rather heated and Susan is upset. The entering of a swallow to the tent through an opening and making finally its escape may be regarded as a symbol of Susan's entry in the tent and her escape from there in the company of the sailor, Newson. “In the middle of the scene where the future Mayor of Casterbridge is selling his wife, a swallow flits into the fair-booth and passes to and fro a while before it goes out again; and the conversation lags while the bird momentarily absorbs attention”.⁹ The swallow's appearance is an attempt

of Nature to ward off the catastrophe that is likely to occur at any moment. At the same time it also provides a last opportunity to Henchard return to a normal condition from his unnatural behaviour:

*At the moment a swallow, one among the last of the season, which had by chance found its way through an opening into the upper part of the tent, flew to and fro in quick curves above their heads, causing all eyes to follow it absently. In watching the bird till it made its escape the assembled company neglected to respond to the workman's offer, and the subject dropped.*¹⁰

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy concludes that man is weak like a bird and because of this weakness in the inhospitable natural world, man can be trapped. By entrapping his characters Hardy suggests that man has no real free will. The characters in this pessimistic novel seem unable to direct their fates and never have even a small chance to escape. Moreover, they appear to be acted upon by external forces which seem totally foreign to them. These characters are far more fragile than any other Hardy characters. Whatever strength they possess is expended in the struggle for survival, leaving them with no strength to overcome controlling forces. Furthermore, they never seem to understand why external forces conspire against them. In this sense they are reflective of the sentiment in "The Caged Goldfinch," a poem which succinctly illustrates the plight of an entrapped weak creature.

*Within a churchyard, on a recent grave,
I saw a little cage
The jailed goldfinch. All was silence save
Its hops from stage to stage
There was inquiry in its wistful eye,
And once it tried to sing,
Of him or her who placed it there, and why,
No one knew anything.*¹¹

Elements in the universe act against weaker creatures without any apparent reason. Furthermore, the image of death suggested by "recent grave" hints at the result of this unreasoning entrapment.

Therefore, at his most pessimistic Hardy uses bird imagery to express the idea that man is trapped in a malevolent, or at best indifferent, universe; with these images he shows that man's bird-like weakness prevents him from overcoming stronger powers. Happy endings are impossible in this novel because of Hardy's pessimism.

Instead, the main characters all die. Thus Hardy has moved from a fairly optimistic philosophy to a philosophy which exhibits no hope for man.

With more detailed and sustained images in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy continues to express his belief that man is highly susceptible to ensnarement. In this novel, "we are more clearly conscious of a directive power than in any earlier novel".¹² To reveal this directing force Hardy frames the story with bird images. When Henchard first tries to sell Susan, the company is distracted from his offer by the appearance of a swallow. "Here, at least, Henchard is afforded an opportunity to avoid an action whose consequences will later enmesh him".¹³ Henchard is enmeshed, however, after he succeeds in selling his wife, for this act determines his entire future. His fate is sealed as soon as Susan leaves the tent. Even though he struggles to do good throughout the rest of the novel, perhaps to prove that he is sorry for his action, Henchard never is able to erase the act. His struggles prove futile inasmuch as he is trapped by a fate which he can never again control.

With two images of cages, Hardy continues to suggest that Henchard is trapped. First, Casterbridge itself is physically like a cage. To emphasize the idea of a cage Hardy also describes how the birds and man perceive the town:

*To birds of the more soaring kind Casterbridge must have appeared on this fine evening as a mosaic-work of subdued reds, browns, greys, and crystals, held together by a rectangular frame of deep green. To the level eye of humanity it stood as an indistinct mass behind a dense stockade of limes and chestnuts.*¹⁴

It is in this jail-like area that Henchard is bound fast. To emphasize Henchard's entrapment, Hardy uses a second cage image. Appropriately, when Henchard and Susan talk for the first time since he sold her, they meet in a cage-like area. This amphitheater is symbolic of the relations between Henchard and Susan; he is engaged by his immoral act.

At the end of the novel when Henchard brings Elizabeth-Jane a caged bird, Hardy is providing the reader with "a symbolic link".¹⁵ This is a link to the bird image at the beginning of the novel and completes the frame inasmuch as Henchard's story begins with him as a free man. He is free like a swallow which flies about the tent. However, when he sells Susan he becomes "caged by the consequences of his own deeds".¹⁶ It is interesting to follow this concluding symbol as a reflection of Henchard's demise. Henchard wonders what he should give Elizabeth-Jane as a wedding present.

What should that present be? He walked up and down the street, regarding dubiously the display in the shop windows, from a gloomy sense that what he might most like to give her would be beyond his miserable pocket. At length a caged goldfinch met his eye. The cage was a plain and small one, the shop humble, and on inquiry he concluded he could afford the modest sum asked. A sheet of newspaper was tied round the little creature's wire prison, and with the wrapped up cage in his hand Henchard sought lodging for the night.¹⁷

But Henchard does not want to embarrass Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane by appearing at their reception so he leaves his carriage and walks alone. *"He alighted here, with his bundle and bird-cage, and was soon left as a lonely figure on the broad white highway"*.¹⁸

In this scene Hardy reveals the depth of Henchard's loneliness; due to the evil act of selling Susan, Henchard is doomed to alienation from the world of man. When he reaches the house the reception is taking place. Therefore, "he went round into the street at the back that he knew so well, entered the garden, and came quietly into the house through the kitchen, temporarily depositing the bird and cage under a bush outside, to lessen the awkwardness of his arrival".¹⁹ Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane meet, but she is unable to forgive him. Hence, he leaves without giving his present to her. Sometime later Elizabeth-Jane discovers the cage.

Mrs. Donald Farfrae had discovered in a screened corner a new bird-cage, shrouded in newspaper, and at the bottom of the cage a little ball of feathers--the dead body of a goldfinch. Nobody could tell her how the bird and cage had come there, though that the poor little songster had been starved to death was evident. The sadness of the incident had made an impression on her. She had not been able to forget it for days, despite Farfrae's tender banter; and now when the matter had been nearly forgotten it was again revived.²⁰

The bird serves as a metaphor for Michael himself. The cage represents the self-made prison of his flaws, "plain and small". The bird is a goldfinch, symbolizing the true, golden nature of Michael's character. The newspaper represents the public opinion that covers Michael, just as it covers the bird. What has happened to the bird when Michael leaves the house? When Elizabeth-Jane discovers Henchard's intended wedding

gift, she realizes that Henchard had meant to resolve things when he came to her

*The caged bird had been brought by Henchard for her as a wedding gift and token of repentance. He had not expressed to her any regrets or excuses for what he had done in the past; but it was a part of his nature to extenuate nothing, and live on as one of his own worst accusers. She went out, looked at the cage, buried the starved little singer, and from that hour her heart softened towards the self-alienated man.*²¹

Shortly after this she learns that Henchard had meant to give her the bird as a present. The symbolism of the starved goldfinch is quite effective, since Henchard himself, becomes sick and is unable to take nourishment. Furthermore, an added sub textual symbol is evident in the fact that Henchard, too, is starved to death for want of Elizabeth-Jane's love. According to Southerington,

*"the caged bird, dying, is like a sacrifice to Elizabeth-Jane's happiness; and its sentimentalism does not outweigh its symbolic effect, the image of freedom transformed to the image of captivity and death".*²²

Such an interpretation supports the idea that Hardy employed images of cages to show that in his weakness man is always in danger of being trapped. Hardy uses birds in his novels as signposts which help to elucidate a relatively confusing philosophy. Samuel Hynes says that "their presence can be explained by their function as images".²³ Frequently in Hardy's work "birds are victims, victims both of human cruelty and of the blind cruelty of nature. They are ...starving or starved, blinded, caged, or shot by hunters, and by their sad fates they provide images of the inevitable harshness and suffering of existence".²⁴ Such suffering is not unique to birds; often in the novels they suffer to suggest the suffering of mankind. In this way Hardy reveals his philosophic concept of life. Through bird imagery Hardy expresses his fatalistic philosophy. Henchard sells Susan in a moment of weakness and, in so doing, is destined to a fate over which he has no control. In this sense, he is a man with no free will and Hardy propounds the final element of his philosophy: man is a weak creature with no free will.

Conclusion

Throughout his life Hardy was concerned with the plight of helpless and harmless creatures. Whether these helpless creatures were man or

animal, he sympathized. As if to emphasize his commitment to weaker creatures and his deeply humanitarian concerns, in his will he “left a hundred pounds to be used for 'condemnatory action against the caging of wild birds’”.²⁵ This deep concern for the weaker elements in the universe became the basis for his philosophy. Inasmuch as he perceived a relationship between helpless man and helpless bird, he utilized this relationship to express his philosophy. He relied on traits of weak birds to suggest that man too is a weak creature. Because of his weakness man participates in a vain struggle and the artistic device of bird imagery is illustrative of and bound to Hardy's philosophic belief that man is a helpless creature in a Darwinistic universe.

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