

TRAGEDY, CONCEALMENT, AND REVELATION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN HARDY'S *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

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Abstract

This study attempts a reading of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* with the critical lenses of psychoanalysis, with a view to understanding the role of the unconscious in the tragic sequence of the text. Some readings of tragedy in the text have been based on the cosmic myth in which the hero rises like the sun in the morning, reaches the apex in the afternoon and wanes in the evening. Although this sequence is seen in the text, the cosmic myth offers no logical reason as to what leads up to the tragedy of Henchard in the novel. But we can circumvent the imprecision behind the determination of which event holds the key to the tragedy of the hero by studying the events that lead to the tragedy of the hero as systems of constraint' that create the necessity of tragedy. The visions of fear are found in the unconscious' of characters in the novel and are either concealed or revealed in language, especially the fear of scandal. It is even from the revelation of some contents of the unconscious that we get to know about Henchard's key tragic flaw, which is fear of loss of honour, respectability and dignity which retains him on the path to his tragic destination as a constraint. The dispossession which he fears manifests in different patterns, with pride as the centripetal point to which other instances of deprivation are drawn. In this study, we draw analytic insights from the psychoanalytic views of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

Keywords: Tragedy, fear, constraint, the unconscious, psychoanalysis.

Introduction

The Mayor of Casterbridge has generated a lot of readings. A search on the internet with any search engine will reveal the plethora of critical works the text has generated. The critical productions the novel has generated strengthen its artistic status and also validate the claim about the inexhaustibility of the literary object (Frye 17) because of the necessary ambiguity that characterizes it. The readings draw theoretical insights from different theories of or about literature. Marxism is one of the adopted theories which we consider suitable in approaching this study. This is because of its role in addressing class conflicts in the novel. Some other studies concentrate on establishing a relationship between the social conditions that surround the place in which the novel was produced and the events in the novel.

Theories developed and used in dealing with the matters of other disciplines other than literary criticism have been mainly used in studying literature. These theories, commonly classified as humanist theories (sociological theories, psychoanalysis and many others) are in 'varying degrees, strategies of alienation;' (Akwaya, *Literary Criticism* 151) that alienate literary criticism from its function of identifying, classifying and preserving literary works. The entrance and dominance of these theories in the enterprise of literary criticism is, however, not rationally out of place given that literature is a human and cultural production and undoubtedly takes materials for representation from accessories of the human community. It follows that in many literary works, for instance, we find human beings who have feelings, emotions, memory, the faculty of thinking and different mode of behavior forming community that have values through which the belongingness of characters, who uphold that values, is justified. With these presents in literary works, one may be moved to carry out criticism with humanist theories which will end up in baring the representational differences among literary works and frustrating the unifying end of literary criticism. In our study, nevertheless, we have analyzed the system of constraint

that generates the tragedy that we witness in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* through the lenses of psychoanalysis. In taking this approach, we are not accounting for the psychological composition of the characters. Instead, we are accounting for how the tragedy of Henchard is hinged on the concealment and revelation of the contents of the unconscious of characters in the text. Before we start, we have to discuss the understanding of the complex term, ‘the unconscious’ which we are going to adopt in this paper.

The unconscious, being a property of the mind, is inaccessible if not by means of language. This is why Fink argues that ‘the Lacanian unconscious is not only structured like a language but is language, insofar as it is language that makes up the unconscious’ (69) (*italics original*). This pattern of thought however never begins with Lacan. It can be traced back to the reason why ancients studied language which is because of the dependence of meaning on it and the importance of meaning in reasoning (*Semantics and Discourse 11*). Therefore, language is studied by the ancients as the access route to the mind. John Locke states that ‘the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs, the mind makes us of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to other.’ (qtd in *Semantics and Discourse 11*). This is to say that the contents of the mind are communicated and known as items of knowledge by means of language. This is similar to the premise on which Sarup concludes that ‘language is the condition for the unconscious that [is] it creates and gives rise to the unconscious’ (9).

Apart from Lacan’s assertion that the unconscious is represented in language, he also argues that the unconscious is the real self. This is in contrast to the belief of Cartesian philosophers like Descartes, whose philosophy is anchored on rationalism. Being or existence for Descartes is anchored on possessing an active faculty of reasoning (rationalism). He encapsulates this in the proposition, ‘I think, therefore, I am’. But Lacan disagrees with this; he instead relocates the determinant of the true being to the unconscious, revealed or unrevealed. He introduces a counter proposition: ‘I think where I am not; therefore, I am where I do not think’. Defining the being of man this way is however extreme as it excludes rationality, one of the characteristics of man that hold him in contradistinction to other animals. Given the aspects of the Freudian and Lacanian views of the unconscious we have presented here, we shall use two non-opposing aspects of their views. In this study, we are going to explore the Unconscious as presented by Freud, being a reservoir of awful and traumatic experiences. This, Hardy presents in his principal characters through a concealment of a hard-fought past.

We have not lost sight of tragedy in whose sequence we want to examine the place of the revelation or concealment of the characters; unconscious. Tragedy is fundamentally different from comedy in the sense that it bears and sustains the vision of fear, through the systems of constraints and its necessity while comedy sustains the vision of hope. We are going to study the manifestations of the unconscious in the tragic sequence of the novel and their place in determining the destination of the novel as tragic. This would be achieved by studying aspects of the concealment and revelation of the characters; unconscious and how they sustain the narrative in the path to its tragic destination. We are also going to study what the formative tragic moment in the text shares with other tragedies.

The Formative Tragic Moment and the Unconscious

Although we have stated that it is not clear which event is the key cause of the tragedy of Henchard, there is a basic one which happens at the formative stage of the tragic sequence of the novel. This key event is his successful auctioning of his wife and their daughter. In that event, we see a familiar occurrence that takes place in some pre-destination tragedies like Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*, Goethe’s *Faust* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* which is that the heroes make an intentional or unintentional movement toward falsifying or validating the pre-destination offered as their destiny or fate. If the pre-destination offered is positive, as in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the hero strives to have it accomplished. But when the pre-destination is negative, they devise any means of falsifying it as we have in *King Oedipus*. However, the basic idea is that all of them are headed for tragedy.

Although in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* pre-destination is hardly the case, we find an adequate system which can substitute pre-destination: necessity. The attempts by Susan to avert the impending danger of being offered for sale by her husband, yield results that contradict her intentions. First of all, we find

the traveling couple, Henchard and Susan with their baby Elizabeth-Jane. Inferring from the narrative voice's description, we observe that they have no interactional cordiality between them as they travel; they maintain cold silence and 'the women enjoy[s] no society whatever from [her husband]'s presence' (1 parenthesis mine). They get to a place where they have to seek a 'refreshment tent'; two options are available one is with the advertising inscription 'God Home Brewed Beer, Ale, and Cyder' and the other 'Good Furnimity Sold Here'. According to the narrative voice, 'the man mentally weighed the two inscriptions, and inclined to the former tent' (4). But a sharp response comes from his wife: "No – no – the other one," said the woman. "I always like furnimity; and so does Elizabeth – Jane; and so will you. It is nourishing after a long hard day". "I've never tasted it," said the man. However, he gave way to her representations, and they entered the furnimity booth forthwith (4).

The reason that informs the nature of this choice comes immediately they enter the furnimity tent. We learn that when Henchard requests that his furnimity be strongly laced with rum, Susan observes with much 'uneasiness;' when he persuades her to lace hers too, she agrees to a milder version but the 'some misgiving'. The reason for Susan's feeling is clearly seen when Henchard offers her for sale in an auction, saying that she is a burden to him: "She turned to her husband and murmured, "Michael, you have talked this nonsense in public places before. A joke is a joke, but you may make it once too often, mind!" [Henchard replies] "I know I've said it before; I meant it. All I want is a buyer." (6).

This is to say that the choice of the furnimity tent is not because furnimity is practically 'nourishing' but because it is an option that Susan thinks will save her from the already known result of her husband's initial choice. This therefore becomes a necessary lie which is an instance of substitution, one of the strategies of repressing the contents of the unconscious. Henchard still becomes inebriated by strongly lacing the furnimity (non-alcoholic drink) with rum. At the point when Henchard is about to conclude the transaction of auctioning his wife to the sailor for five guineas, Susan flings the lid that has been repressing the awful marital experiences she has had with Henchard: "She turned, and pulling off her wedding-ring, flung it across the booth in the hay-trusser's face. "Milke," she said, "I've lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper! Now I'm no more to 'ee; I'll try my luck elsewhere. Twill be better for me and Elizabeth – Jane, both. So good-bye!" Seizing the sailor's arm with her right hand, and mounting the little girl on her left, she went out of the tent sobbing bitterly. (9).

This formative event sends the tragic sequence to its next level. It is also important to note that in the narrative, Henchard is not the only one who contributes to the strands of narrative in the tragic sequence. There are those whom Jacobson calls 'contiguous heroes the same tale' (qtd in Akwanya Verbal Structures 43); they control certain strands of the narrative and their actions are connected to the main hero by their closeness to him. Susan is a contiguous heroine whose actions contribute to the successful auctioning of her and her daughter. One may begin to ask questions about the reason why it is not at the feared place, the Beer tent, where Susan fears her husband will be drunk to the level of offering her for sale that the sailor who buys her goes. Why is it that in the furnimity tent, there is an illegal alternative for making the drink an alcoholic one by lacing it with rum? These questions can only be answered only by recourse to tragic necessity which is the system that controls the narrative.

Strategies of Concealment and Revelation in the Tragic Sequence of *the Mayor of Casterbridge*

In varying degrees, the concealment of the unconscious or its revelation keeps certain characters in awareness of an experience or in total or partial ignorance of it. Both, the knowledge of some experiences and the ignorance of them by some characters, sustain the tragic sequence of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In this section, we are going to examine the strategies characters adopt in the concealment or repression of knowledge in the unconscious and also how they reveal it. We shall also examine their implications in the tragedy of Henchard. But before we do these, it is pertinent to examine the most prominent element that controls the concealment and revelation of the unconscious, namely, the quest for the retention of the façade of lost or endangered respectability, dignity or honour.

In Hardy's novels, we see class consciousness forming the conflict sequence. This is one of the reasons why Ekeh reads tragedy in one of Hardy's novels taking the class structure as the formative of the system of constraint that leads up to the tragedy in the text (See Tragedy and the Dynamics of Class

Structure: A Reading of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*). It then appears that in the society of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, there is a presupposed primal configuration of the primacy of honour, dignity and respectability above genuine guilt and repentance. Even when repentance and guilt seem to be demonstrated by some characters, the end is to sustain the façade of honour, dignity and respectability. This is of course conditioned by the society in which they live. For instance, when Susan sets out to find Henchard after the presumed death of Newson by being lost at sea, she goes back to the furmity tent where she was sold years back to seek him or any information about him. Because the furmity woman is old, 'haggard, wrinkled, and almost in rags,' Elizabeth-Jane tells her mother 'don't speak to her-it isn't respectable!' Her mother's response by presupposition relays to us her subscription to the same pattern of thinking. She responds: 'I will just say a word – you, Elizabeth- Jane, can stay here'. It is seen later that it is the furmity woman that gives the useful pieces of information that guides them to where Henchard is.

Concealment as a strategy is adopted by Susan in keeping her daughter in utter ignorance of her disgraceful past with Henchard. Through this strategy, Elizabeth-Jane is kept in ignorance of what has transpired between Susan and Henchard in the past. When Elizabeth-Jane requests to know the relationship they have with Henchard, Susan tells her that Mr. Henchard is their kinsman. The conversation where Susan tells their daughter about the furmity tend goes this way:

'And it was here,' continued her mother, with more hesitation, 'that I last saw the relation we are looking for-Mr. Michael Henchard,' 'What is his exact kin to us, mother? I have never clearly had it told me.'
 'He is, or was – for he may be dead – a connection by marriage,' said her mother deliberately. (5)

The hesitation is the interval of search – the search for a suitable signifier to appropriately conceal the experience encountered in the place which Susan tells her daughter about. This is another strategy of concealment employed by Henchard in order to suppress his past shameful experience with Susan. After coming to a regrettable realization of the successful auctioning of Susan and their daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, he takes an oath not to taste any 'liquor' for twenty-one years to come; being a year each for every year he has lived. Although it is not stated explicitly by Henchard himself or the narrator the reason for the oath, it can be inferred, from his reactions to the realization of his actions, that his seemingly repentant decision is a strategy of concealment. When he realized his shameful action, the first thing he asks himself is 'did I tell my name to anybody last night, or didn't I tell my name?' He however concludes that he never told anyone his name. Even his intention of finding them is informed by the need to exterminate the shame the event has caused him. The following validates our claim:

On a previous occasion when he had declared, during a fuddle, that he would dispose of her as he had done, she had replied that the world not bear him say that many times more before it happened, in the resigned tones of a fatalist... 'Yet she knows I am not in my senses when I do that' he exchanged. 'Well, I must walk about till I find her... Seize her, why didn't she know better than bring me into this disgrace!' he roared out. 'She wasn't queer if I was. "Tis like Susan to show such idiotic simplicity. Meek – that meekness has done me more harm than the bitterest temper! (12).

That is to say that it is the protection of honour and respectability that Mr. Henchard is after: by wondering if he has told anyone his name entails that it is possible to have his identity and shameful past revealed whenever he is inebriated. This is what happens to Mr. Henchard during his years of sworn sobriety when he meets the Scotch man, Donald Farfrae. As the Mayor of Casterbridge, Henchard does not keep a friend but maintains solitude (But this is not demanded of mayors)' therefore, his past experience becomes a burden to him as he has no therapeutic means of releasing the contents of the unconscious and restoring his mind to a desired state of calmness and peace. Although he warns Susan,

when they meet again at The Ring at Casterbridge, against revealing their shameful past to anyone, given that he is the Mayor of town and churchwarden, he is compelled by the burden of the experience to reveal it to Farfrae. Henchard starts his story this ways: “it is odd that two men should meet as we have done on a purely business ground and that at the end of the first day I would wish to speak to ‘ee on a family matter. But, damn it all, I am a lonely man, Farfrae: I have nobody else to speak to; and why shouldn’t I tell it to ‘ee?’” (59).

Henchard however goes on to tell the story of his shameful past, in spite of the recognized oddness of telling Farfrae this. After the story, and also an additional story of meeting Lucetta at one of his business trips at Jersey and feeling obliged to marry her for the kindness she has shown him when he falls sick. He concludes by telling Farfrae: “I feel it a great relief, to tell some friend o’ this! You see now that the Mayor of Casterbridge is not so thriving in his mind as it seems he might be from the state of his pocket’. (62) However, this pattern of revelation, which is explicit, creates temporary relief as it keeps Henchard in fear of the knowledge Farfrae has about him when he is at loggerheads with him. He lives through this fear till his tragic end.

Another key revelation, whose strategy is writing, is the contents of the letter Susan addresses to her husband, Henchard, before her death. The letter has a restriction, ‘Not to be opened till Elizabeth-janes wedding day.’ {96 Italics original} Although the narrator makes a defence for Henchard about the poor sealing of the letter and an obvious reason not to take the restriction seriously, his lack of deep respect for Susan makes him ignore the restriction to read the letter. The letter reads thus:

MY DEAR MICHAEL, - For the good of all three of us, I have keep one thing a secret from you till now. I hope you will understand why; I think you will; though perhaps you may not forgive me. But, dear Michael, I have done it for the best. I shall be in my grave when you read this, and Elizabeth-Jane will have a home. Don’t curse me, Milk-think of how I was situated. I can hardly write it, but here it is. 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 this living one is my other husband’s. I christened her by the same name we had given to the first, and she filled up the ache I felt at the other’s loss. Michael, I am dying, and I might have held my tongue; but I could not. Tell her husband of this and not, as you may judge; and forgive, if you can, a woman you once deeply wronged, as she forgives you. SUSAN HENCHARD (97).

This revelation conditions some of the decision Henchard makes which contribute significantly to his tragic end .for instance, this discovery cost him his prospective marriage with Lucetta because he starts treating Elizabeth-Jane badly to the extent that he leaves his house for Lucetta a newly found friend whom she knows not her relationship with Henchard, her step father. Farfrae who is in love with Elizabeth –Jane goes looking for her at Lucetta house where he meet Lucetta and falls in love with her too and marries her latter. This suppression of the obvious, Henchard falls from the status of mayor, loses all formerly possessed property and his marriage with Lucetta which make him so frustrated that he becomes impatient with the term of his oath.

Lucetta, another interesting character in the novel who further complicates the plot of the novel, is herself in a scandalous relationship with Mr. Henchard. In revealing their scandalous tale, she uses a subtle strategy that keeps Elizabeth –Jane in ignorance of the names of the actors in the story. She seeks advise from Elizabeth –Jane about the dilemma her choice between Henchard and farfrae as husband poses. She subtly conceals the identities of the participant in her story by using the third person pronoun in referring to the characters with her as the narrative voice. However, Elizabeth-Jane figures out that the she in the story is Lucetta. Lucetta adopts this strategy of revelation to save her façade of dignity from the scandal of her relationship with Henchard. Everyone thinks of her as a respectable lady;

therefore, she does everything to play on the respectable lady she is taken as, irrespective of her questionable past.

We have seen from the forgoing the strategies characters adopt in concealing and revealing the disgraceful contents of the unconscious and how the ignorance or knowledge of certain pieces of information in the unconscious, which cannot be accessed if not by means of language alone, direct the tragic destination of the tragic with the preservation of a facade of dignity already lost in past action. We see the value a character like Lucetta attaches to honour causes her death when she sees a mockery spectacle of her past life with Henchard. Henchard ultimately loses his life on account of the confirmation of his fear of losing the highly esteemed position he has been in, and the honour, respect and admiration he once enjoyed. When the loss of these become inevitable the tragic end he faces become necessary

Conclusion

Just as we have seen through the psychological exploits of Hardy's characters, concealment played quite an expedient role in saving the story a befitting tragedy. This played to the gallery of the unconscious as an element in the Freudian analysis of the human mind. Henchard, just like some of the characters shows the extent the unconscious can hold the expressive side of the human mind, thus, suppressing the past as a means of maintaining a psychological balance. These characters committed their painful past to same process; Susan and Lucetta all contributed to the climax of this concealment strategy of suppressing some long buried past. In this novel, the constricted self struggles primarily with personal actions and pre-configured social norms or presupposition especially about honour disaster associated with their loss. This is traced to the concealment and revelation of the awful pasts of the characters which are resident in the unconscious. These traits are capable of endangering the human psychological formation, as these past experiences will eventually play out someday, as seen in Henchard. This end is implosive and tragic.

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