

B.A - Part II

English - Hon

Paper - IV

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Topic - Hardy's philosophy of life.

Thomas Hardy was the last great novelist of the Victorian age, though his works as a poet and a story writer covers a few years of the twentieth century. He began his career as a novelist at the insistence of his wife Emma, who wanted to see her husband's name blazing in letters of gold in the galaxy of British novelists. Acting according to his wife's wishes, Hardy launched on the unexplored region of novel writing and achieved eminent success in his art. Hardy's first experiment in novel writing was an utter failure and his two early works *The Poor Man and Lady* and *Desperate Remedies* were condemned in severe terms by George Meredith. He received instructions from the sagacious master in the technique of plot-construction, and his later works were acclaimed as successful experiments in fiction writing.

Hardy's attitude towards life is essentially tragic and pessimistic. He ranks with those to whom life is by no means a boon. His entire outlook towards life can be summed up in a few words. In "The Mayor of Casterbridge" he says, "Happiness is but an occasional episode in a general drama of pain." In this connection Baker remarks, "His was an extremely sensitive temperament, rather given to melancholy, easily moved to tears, fond of solitude, though by no means inaccessible to good fellowship and enjoying

a good laugh as much as anyone, especially if the joke was a profane of sardonic character. All his life he had a weakness for gruesome incidents, grim legends, creepy stories, accounts of spells, omens, ghosts, murders, suicide and the like.<sup>4</sup> Hardy was much affected by his environment. Several influences worked effectively in the formation of his impression about life. Hardy's physical ill-health, the morbidity of his temper, and his general inclination towards the funereal side of things determined his melancholy and pessimistic outlook and impressions about life.

Hardy's vision of life is certainly not very attractive and glamorous. He came across despair, dejection, failure, frustration in human life. He noticed plenty of tragedy in the life of wretched people who were poor, dependent and ignorant. He found them exposed to the oppressions of the social system, the caprice of weather and "The President of Immortals" every now and then undoing their lives. This is what Hardy saw, and this is what is actually presented in his novels. His attitude towards life is pessimistic and gloomy in the sense that almost in all his tragic novels like *Tess*, *Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Return of the Native* we come across pictures of despair and dejection, of hopes unfulfilled, and plans uncarried out. Man proves feeble before chance, fate or destiny that so often comes to vitiate man's plans and schemes. Hardy considers men and women as mere puppets in the hands of a mocking fate which is relentless in its blind justice. He believes in Omar Khayyam's lines about destiny:

The moving finger writes: and having writ  
moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line  
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

Again and again, in Hardy's novels we view the spectacle of misery and suffering for human beings. Man proposes and God disposes stands true in all his works. This attitude towards life is being presented by Hardy through the character of Henchard in 'The Mayor of Casterbridge', where the Mayor struggles and fights against the decrees of fate throughout his life though he ultimately meets his tragic end.

Hardy is not for intellectual coward and invalids. His pessimism will be depressing to those who are morally and intellectually incapable of standing shocks in life. He does not supinely give way to the cheap optimistic feelings that "somehow good will be the final goal of ill." He is a sturdy realist who takes life at its face value and what actually is the state of affairs in the world. He considers it simply wish-fulfilment to indulge in cheap optimism, when the forces of evil, sadness and despair overpower us on all sides. It is foolish and unwise for anybody to be an optimist when he sees the conditions of life in a realistic and faithful light. Such is the realistic vision of life unfolded by Hardy in his novels. He is a pessimist, but his pessimism is more satisfying than the cheap optimism of some thinkers who hesitate to call a spade a spade, and gloss over the realities of life by a thin veneer of superficial optimism. Hardy's philosophy and sturdy realism will enable human being to drive away day-dreaming and come to the realities of a hard and stern world. Hardy brings home to us to view life realistically as it is without expecting too much from the world, its controller and his created beings.

Hardy always impresses upon his readers that it is mere folly to seek happiness at the hands of Destiny or Providence. Man must depend on himself and learn to face the vicissitudes of fortune in a

brave and heroic manner. Hardy exhorts his readers to be sympathetic to the victims of social injustice and inequality and pleads feelingly for those who have to suffer the blows of fate and society in a rapacious manner. His philosophy is thus based on a sympathetic and catholic attitude towards life and is surely one of the finest fruits of literary culture in modern times.

Hardy, himself, did not like to be dubbed as a pessimist, but a meliorist. Hardy seems to have winced at the suggestion of pessimism in his thought. He has answered the charge to pessimism in the following words:

"People call me a pessimist; and if it is pessimism to think, with Sophocles, that not to have been born is best, then I do not reject the designation. I never could understand why the word 'pessimism' should be such a red rag to many worthy people; and I believe, indeed, that a good deal of the robustious swaggering optimism of recent literature is at bottom cowardly and insincere.

On the contrary my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist."