

Hardy's Art of Characterization

From the point of view of characterization Hardy is one of the greatest novelists in English literature. He stands very high among the novelists of his age. His characters are drawn with the subtle art skill of a painter. He has presented them in relation to heredity and environment. They are born to suffer and are puppets in the hands of a cruel fate or destiny, chance or coincidence. But here too he has his limitations within which he has created wonderful persons whom we can never forget.

The range of Hardy's characters is limited on account of his philosophy and attachment to Wessex. It means that his characters are not drawn from all classes of society as we find in the case of other novelists. He can not present every type of human beings. He fails to present a very clever type of intellectual or an aristocrat. He is satisfied with the rustic life and with the tragedy of the people and the poor. But within these limitations he has achieved considerable success. David Cecil writes — "In Hardy's novels, man is presented to the reader as the helpless, creature of impersonal circumstances, the circumstances become as important as the men. He certainly can not dominate them. His memorable characters all have a family likeness. Most of them indeed can be grouped in to a few simple categories. There is the staunch, selfless, tender-hearted hero - Gabriel Oak, Giles Winter-borne, John Loveday, Diggory Venn, there is the dashing, fickle breaker of hearts - Troy

Wildere, Fitzpices, d'Urberville; There is the patient, devoted, forgiving woman - Tess, Marty, Elizabeth Jane; there is the wilful, capricious, but fundamentally good-hearted girl - Bathsheba, Grace, Fanny, Anne. Sometimes he modifies one type by mixing in a quality from another. But when Hardy deliberately attempts to break away in to a new type he fails in the end to make it intrinsically different from the old.

Hardy emphasises the emotional life of his characters. When we ask ourselves as to why we remember his characters, we recall their passions how deeply they have love for one another and often with what tragic results. T.S. Eliot rightly points out that Hardy is interested not at all in men's minds, but also in their emotions. It is only, indeed, in their emotional paroxysms that most of Hardy's characters come alive. They can be complex to some extent but seldom subtle. Hardy's method is that of a psychological analyst, recording the minutest fluctuations of emotional experience with a wonderful insight.

Hardy penetrates in to human hearts and presents the conflict, the passions and the ideas that exist within the heart of his character. He goes below the surface of individual idiosyncrasies and reveals the conflicts or passions that disturb it.

He deviates from the line set by his predecessors in drawing most of his characters from the lower walks of life. Before him most of the novelists and dramatists had followed the theory of Aristotle that a tragic hero must be a man of high rank. But Hardy believes that the real character of men and women of higher classes is screened by conventions and can be neither seen nor studied easily. The character of the people of the lower class is the real expression of their inner life so he deals with them. Tess is a milk-maid, Jude a stone mason; Oak, a shepherd; Sue - a school mistress, and Henchard - a hay trader. All of them have fine nature.

Hardy's most important male characters are rustics living in close association with the earth, away from the confused commerce of towns.

Hardy moves with ease and sureness when he is dealing with simple natures but he shows certain awkwardness and theatricality when he has to deal with more complex characters of the highly civilized men and women. But he is particularly superb at drawing the character of those people who are sufficiently of a fine nature. He never presents a superficial character.

Hardy exhibits his characters first by their actions, secondly by their words. But their inner life is left to our imagination. If their speech does not reveal their individuality, we never get to know it. David Cecil remarks - "Hardy's characters are

made living to us by their conversation. We recognise them because we get to know their voices and tricks of speech. The only mode of speech which Hardy can vividly reproduce to us is that of the Wessex country men.

Hardy has also excelled in presenting feminine characters. They are head and shoulder above his male characters. "Admirable as many of his male characters are, they yield both in clarity and intensity of interest to his women; and since woman is more elemental than man, swayed far more by the instinctive life, their superiority is another illustration of Hardy's peculiar skill in dealing with primal types."

Thus it is proved that Hardy's range of character is limited. But as David Cecil puts it, "when he chooses a subject fully within these limitations, when he is drawing native of the Wessex country with deep feelings and susceptible of finer feelings, he is superbly successful; the peculiar composition of his imaginative faculty turns in to an asset."