

Prometheus in the Guise of Pessimism: The Tinder of Hope that Thomas Hardy Brought to his Audience at the End of the 19th Century

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Abstract. This paper is devoted to the substantive significance of Hardy's pessimism, mainly based on Thomas Hardy's poems and novels written in the late 19th century. Although pessimism has been recognized as an essential feature of Thomas Hardy's literary career as a novelist and poet, he refuses to admit to being a pessimist, instead enabling the use of pessimism as the first step in exploring reality and improving the soul and body of human beings. Through a dialectical reading of Hardy's works, this paper will further analyze the specific audience groups targeted by Hardy's pessimism and the extraordinary positive impact it brought to this group at the turn of the century and during the period of social change; compare it with the literature of other culture to deconstruct the contradictions of this pessimism and extract its unique value. In addition, this paper will introduce Hardy's precise prediction of the future movement, which can demonstrate the unique value of literature compared to political and quasi-scientific discourse.

1 Introduction

Pessimism has been recognized as an essential feature of Thomas Hardy's literary career as a novelist and poet. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, he wrote, "Happiness is but the occasional episode in the general drama of pain" [1]. However, in his anthology *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, Hardy refuses to define himself as a complete pessimist, arguing that pessimism is the first step in exploring reality and the betterment of the soul and body [2]. In other words, Hardy's pessimism is not merely a widespread negative attitude but a trigger that stimulates the progress of human beings. However, despite Hardy's clarification, the factual meaning of pessimism in Hardy's work remains controversial. Irish literary critic and writer Fergal McGrath, in his essay entitled "The Pessimism of Thomas Hardy," doubts Hardy's self-evaluation of pessimism. He claimed that Hardy's pessimism cannot be divorced from severe philosophical contradictions. When pessimism is considered noble, a prominent and almost crude determinism arises: the world is driven by Immanent Will, absolutely blind and neutral [1]. Therefore, Hardy's pessimism should not be justified as a noble mechanism because the essence of life is the struggle between humans and the world, and the hope of winning this struggle is doomed to be bleak. From this perspective, the meaning of human progress is

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open to question. From this perspective, Hardy's pessimism actually inspires "regretful admiration" [3].

Through the critical reading of Hardy's representative novels and poems published in the late 19th century and a comparison with East Asian literature in a similar context, it can be concluded that Hardy's pessimism is not entirely dominated by determinism. It still has value for the betterment. While the criticisms of Lascelles Abercrombie and Fergal McGrath are partly valid because Hardy's pessimism does not lead to substantial betterment. Still, its value is a suitable foothold for the ordinary public who are vulnerable or lost in social change so that they can persist in life. With this temporary settlement, the ordinary public can escape the tendency to fall into despair and nihilism and survive in a temporary compromise. Nevertheless, it can hardly be called "progress for all" because it is unsuitable for all societal audiences. Conversely, the elites have made progress in their own way; Hardy's work does not have an obvious resonance for them, which is not the group of people Hardy deeply influenced. Moreover, Hardy's works have value beyond time because they accurately predict the social and literary trends hidden behind the curtain of pessimism.

2 Thomas Hardy and his audience: the general dilemmas in the age of transition

Pessimism for Hardy is a disguise, a vehicle. To analyze the true impact of pessimism, it is essential to focus not on pessimism or the tragedy itself but on the circumstances and realities outside it. Hardy's literary career was accompanied by the end of the Victorian era, the decline of the romantic movement and the rise of modernism, and the world outlook and lifestyle that dominated British society also underwent major changes. Under this kind of social change, the lower strata of the society represented by the working class fell into a lost state. For them, the Romanticism that once gave them hope has changed from a revolutionary worldview that liberates human minds and passions to a false lie that cannot change the status quo.

Hardy's description and critique of these phenomena are evident; in his poem "The Dead Man Walking," for example, Hardy depicts a group of people whose lives were once guided by passion and "meaning," but whose destination they reached was not a paradise of happiness, but a "pulseless mold" of oblivion and death [4]. This reflects the romantic lie nature of the destruction of people. Hardy's intended audience and the group he hoped to influence were never the elites of society. His major novels and poems contain scathing critiques of the upper classes: Much of the tragic story in *Jude the Obscure* is based on the brutal rejection of the ordinary people by the elites who control the social system. In addition, elites' rampant materialism and hedonism were criticized in his poem *The Convergence of the Twain* [5]. On this occasion, he refused to express comfort and sympathy for the loss of human life in such circumstances. In this case, Hardy was doomed to fail to resonate with the elite, whose image was somehow tarnished and who were not the group he was trying to "spark progress" with.

The audience group Hardy sought to influence was not the "working class" or the rural peasant class in the narrow sense but a broad "desiring class" left after the exclusion of the elite, which could be defined as a group of people who aspired to progress in life, but whose fate was highly controlled by a higher class. This special group cannot be defined in terms of absolute quality of life and income but is defined relatively: Jude belongs to the "desire class"; he is from the rural working class and grew up in a backward and ignorant environment, but he has a dream of getting a quality education, and the top of the intellectual elite controls his access to this demand, therefore he is almost impossible to succeed. Michael Henchard can be considered as another example. He apparently entered the middle class after a successful career. However, he still had the desire to continue upward mobility. Still, this desire had to

depend on the decision of Lucetta Templeman, who occupied more wealth. Under this circumstance, his failure was inevitable. Hardy is particularly concerned with the plight of those in society who, in times of change, are forced to take a realistic look at their flawed lives. The pessimism in Hardy's work is closely related to this existing social repression, mainly from the Victorian age's sharp class consciousness. On the one hand, it was an expression of Hardy's class anxiety [6], and on the other, it was a critique of the social class system itself [6].

3 The hope under indifference and compromise: Hardy's "method of spiritual victory"

In Hardy's work, pessimism is often introduced in a way that ruthlessly destroys the natural existence of Romanticism. For instance, in *Jude the Obscure*, when the passionate Jude first arrived at Christminster, his absurd and humorous contrast between dream and reality is obvious. In Jude's dream, the pursuit of knowledge was embodied as the ghosts of the great scholars of Oxford University giving free and romantic lectures and debates [7]. However, when Jude woke up, he must face the "mean bread-and-cheese question" [7], which ironically replaced his romantic dream. Hardy's rejection of Romanticism is based on a realistic test of Romanticism. When Romanticism is placed in an unpleasant and chaotic reality rather than in the daffodils, bourgeois sofas, or picnic fields as Wordsworth wrote, its hypocritical nature is bound to be exposed because Romanticism only provides an emancipating thought from its birth but fails to provide a practical methodology that can really get rid of the restrictions of the social system.

Nevertheless, a profound problem is that this fictional worldview has dominated ordinary people's thinking and mainstream culture for a long time. At the time of Hardy's writing, the symbolism and aesthetic influence of romantic influence deeply influenced popular art, as evidenced by the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who belonged to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Moreover, this romantic culture is contrasted with appalling living conditions, a life expectancy of less than 40 years, and rampant cholera and other infectious diseases [8].

However, in this case, Hardy did not induce an outright nihilistic tendency through pessimism but introduced a cynical tendency. Interestingly, this subtle tendency can prove that Hardy's pessimism still has an exceptional positive value for his readers who were deceived by Romanticism, rejected by Modernism, and utterly disoriented at the end of the 19th century. This pessimism-inspired cynicism offered them a way to go on living. Although life is still bound to be full of pain and loss, cynicism subtly guides people to reduce pessimism to a filter in which they view the world. In this state, on the one hand, people return to simple traditional morality and reason. On the other hand, people enter a general state of doubt about the world, romantic values apparently no longer win trust, and people begin to accept their own flaws and dark sides, clearly realizing that they cannot succeed at anything beyond their humble capabilities. This return to cynicism is of profound significance because it is the ideal state of transition between Romanticism and modernism, which is both a process of widespread repudiation of Romanticism and a rather crude modernism.

This return of cynicism is also evident in Hardy's novels, exemplified by Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*: She had a revolutionary idea of love and personal spirit, and after the death of a child and a miscarriage, returned to the traditional church and marriage she had resisted. Angel Clare in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can be seen as another typical character [9]. His image embodies an idealist's compromise with traditional social norms and views of love, from a "beyond the mundane" personality, slowly transformed into an image of a compromise with love and the mundane - he can't get his way after all. Hardy's pessimistic style and the characters he portrays represent a compromise attitude. Still, at the same time,

there is a faint hope because they do not give up traditional morality and reason; their rejection of Romanticism is only based on their own lack of ability. Therefore, there is still a hint of yearning in their mind. This cynical tendency does not bring betterment for everyone, as Hardy explains. Still, it sweeps away absolute pessimism and uses pessimism as an external veneer, thereby preserving the hope that people in confusion can continue to live. Furthermore, rather than seeing this pessimistic attitude as a form of determinism, it is better to see it as a prelude to inspiring a “spiritual victory” to deal with the generally cruel nature of the world. People in this state can get a relatively good feeling in the face of tragedy or personal failure through self-paralysis. Although they still achieve substantial success or change, they effectively avoid falling into the trap of despair and nihilism.

Interestingly, such a state of “spiritual victory” has been conveyed in the literature of different cultures worldwide, especially in times of chaos and change. In China's revolutionary era, Lu Xun created such a character, the most typical representative of which is Ah Q in Ah Q's True Story from *Call to Arms*. Although Lu Xun's design of such characters and stories is obviously different from Hardy's, he uses the exterior of madness and optimism to cover the inner despair and emptiness. In contrast, Hardy uses the exterior of pessimism to cover the inner faint hope. Still, their purposes are similar: According to an open letter published by Lu Xun in 1934, the purpose of composing Ah Q was “to make the reader unable to distinguish this character from himself/herself” [10]. As a writer in a time of change, Hardy's application of pessimism inspires this “Method of Spiritual Victory.” He also leads the reader to introspection and temporary compromise with life's insurmountable difficulties. This introspection and compromise can also be regarded as progress because his literature hindered people's retrogression to a certain extent in a time of widespread despair and decline.

4 An accurate prediction of the modernist movement and the future: the value of Hardy's pessimistic literature beyond the times

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when Romanticism fell into depression, Modernism cut its umbilical cord, and some basic ideas were already in rough shape. In response to romantic mass culture, the elitist ideology and literary style of modernism deliberately shut out ordinary readers, and the purpose of literature shifted from the liberation of personality to the dissemination of knowledge and truth. According to John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, the logic and human sympathy of imaginative writing make more sense than these writers' political and quasi-scientific discourse [11]. In other words, literature actually possesses the ability to predict and simulate future trends.

Hardy's literary work in this period neatly supports this view. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy succeeded in introducing some modernist ideas by rejecting romantic ideas with absolute pessimism. Although the modernist ideas in this novel are still in the early stages of immaturity, *Jude the Obscure* is somewhat successful in predicting the prosperity of modernism in the 20th century. Most notably, the novel's most successful prediction of Modernism, namely the intellectual elite's general rejection of the masses, is highly compatible with Carey's views. In the 20th century, people like Jude, who came from the bottom of society, would no doubt have been regarded as the “stupid masses” by modernism, whose exclusion was based mainly on rigid social classes and ideologies.

On the other hand, while Hardy's work successfully predicted the trends of the modernist movement, it successfully revealed to his readers the correct transition from Romanticism to modernism, a process of social iteration that is not a straight line but a screening and acceptance. Unlike the romantic movement, in which everyone could choose to embrace this worldview, the world of modernism was not for everyone. It belongs to intellectual elites

with a threshold that is high enough to keep the vast majority of people out. In this case, however, people who recognize the hypocritical nature of Romanticism and reject this worldview do not necessarily try to accept modernism or become modernists; they can find a suitable footing to settle in. While despair and pessimism are hard to avoid, when people think about their own lives and difficulties, they can gain the strength to move on from introspection. Indeed, this power cannot change reality, but it can bring betterment to the soul of humans, making it more mature and perfect, and thus more mature and realistic to “survive.” Hardy uses Gabriel Oak to explain this view in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. It is not that an individual has more knowledge and wealth but that a person is in a better state based on a higher stage of cognition [12]. A simple life that focuses on life itself can also be called a good life.

Moreover, looking further into the future, while the cynical way of life exhibited by Hardy still fails to solve the fundamental problems of ordinary people's lives, it implies a rebellious attitude of postmodernism. According to Elbarbary, this attitude can be seen as a solid response to despair and nihilism [13]. From this perspective, *Jude the Obscure* is undoubtedly very insightful in its predictions of later intellectual movements, reinforcing Carey's views and demonstrating the unique importance of literature relative to political and quasi-scientific discourse.

5 Conclusion

Although Hardy thought he was combining pessimism with literature to bring about upbeat betterment for all mankind, in fact, his pessimism was not suitable for everyone, just as modernism was not for everyone. Hardy's critique of elitism's relentless rejection of the general public, for example, doomed his work cannot resonate with the elite class because the image of the modernist intellectual elite was somewhat tarnished. Hardy's pessimism could have had a profound impact on the confused and hesitating "desire class" of that era, that is, the people who could really be affected by his work and provoke their introspection. This kind of introspection allows them to find the right way of life in a time of change, even if it is highly cynical, but at least life goes on, and hope for life and progress is preserved, although it is still a compromise overall. On the other hand, Hardy always focused on the mundane, backward everyday life, and this environment often breeds characters who can show tragedy and despair [6]. From this, it is evident that pessimism comes from the ordinary, and people's hope and energy for progress are also contained in their thinking about the ordinary nature of life. If the nature of life is a tragic determinism, then there is still strength in sorrow and anger. Therefore, realizing this nature and finding a suitable way of life instead of falling into absolute pessimism and nothingness can be called valuable progress.

In conclusion, Hardy's pessimism is not a bad determinism. For a specific audience, it still has a positive value, which can be reflected in stimulating people's reflection on real and ordinary life and self-reflection to find a proper foothold in the era of drastic changes. In this state, people are saved from total despair and retain a faint spark of hope, not a “regretful admiration” but a peaceful self-awakening after suffering.

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