

## 'The Mayor of Casterbridge': A Critical Appreciation

:- 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' is generally regarded as one of the four great novels of Hardy that provided him the world-wide recognition. This novel is great from the point of view of Characterisation, plot-construction, narrative technique, dialogue, ~~and~~ style and language. There are a number of dramatic situations and the interest of the readers is not allowed to flag even for a single moment; there is nothing incoherent ~~or~~ superfluous in it. It is all absorbing from the beginning to the end. It is an artistic whole.

Abercrombie divides the novels of Hardy into the Dramatic and the Epic. 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' shares the characteristics of both the epic and dramatic novels. It stands midway between the earlier dramatic novels, and the later epic novels. Prof Pinto rightly says, "The life and death of the Mayor of Casterbridge belongs certainly to the dramatic group. But Abercrombie has pointed out that it differs from the other dramatic novels in the fact that <sup>one</sup> character is of such monumental power and compelling

force that he completely dominates the rest and assumes a position almost comparable to that of the central figures of the two epic novels, 'Tess' and 'Jude the Obscure'.

Hardy's conception of tragedy differs from that of both Aristotle and Shakespeare. Shakespeare following Aristotle selected his tragic heroes from the ranks of kings and princes because it was thought that when a colossal personality falls from the heights of prosperity, the effect is more cathartic than it would be in the case of the suffering of a less exalted individual. Moreover, in Shakespeare, the tragic hero has some 'flaw' in his character which leads to his downfall. He suffers primarily because of this fatal weakness in his character. Towards the end, just before the catastrophe, the hero regains for a moment his earlier glory and grandeur. Shakespeare's heroes are greatest in their most tragic moments. But Hardy's usual practice was different.

Hardy's tragic heroes are drawn from the humblest ranks of society and they suffer not from any fault of their own. But both character and destiny are responsible for the tragedy of



Henchard. Henchard's character, his "buffalo wrong-headedness", his volcanic temper, his hot, impulsive nature, his vehemence, his vindictiveness, his lack of tact and prudence, plays a very important part in bringing about his ruin. "Henchard is like King Lear in his majesty and grandeur." He grows in stature and grandeur with each successive misfortune. He is a ruined man, but still, he is noble and majestic.

Hardy is the greatest regional novelist. Wessex is his only locale. He has delineated dexterously and with great realism and completeness not only the geography of this locality but also its history. The rural characters have also been emphasized from the very beginning. Hardy tells us that in Casterbridge, "the village and the town meet in a mathematical line." It is a market town. Casterbridge is essentially a rural town, and life in it goes leisurely by. ~~the~~ The people are simple and unsophisticated, efficient in their work and hard-working, but also given to gossiping and drinking. We are given ample accounts of their simple recreations. They are also fond of singing and dancing. The rustics are victims of a number of old superstitions and customs.

They believe in witchcraft, ghosts, apparitions and love-charms. These rustics, simple and innocent, take great pleasure in ridiculing their superiors and their adultery.

In his love ~~for~~ of Nature, there is nothing mystic or transcendental as in that of Wordsworth, he loves nature for her beauty. To him, Nature is both benovolent and malignant as well. His Characters are all drawn from among those who live and work in the lap of nature. His best Characters are hay-trussers, dairymaids and men, wood-cutters, and furze-cutters etc. Hardy loves simple, elemental natures and portrays them with great effectiveness.

"The Mayor of Casterbridge" is a great and powerful tragedy, "one of the most Aeschyllean tragedies in English literature." He is a perfect tragic hero in the Aristotelean sense, and at the moment of ~~his~~ the final catastrophe, he rises to the heights of tragic grandeur and majesty. Rutland sums it up, "he moves remorselessly to its remorseless close."

The End

Prashant