

**Hardy's existentialist approach to life with
reference to his major novels**

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Abstract

Hardy has a multidimensional approach to the work of art. His philosophy is concerned with the nature of existence and individual's freedom of action and its consequences. His art is the reflection of his realistic approach, marked with sympathy and empathy, to life in general and his innate association with his indigenous land. He holds human actions and passions responsible for producing dire consequences.

Keywords: Hardy's fiction, existentialism, boredom, alienation, freedom, pessimism, atheism, nihilism

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Existentialism can be defined as the philosophy of freedom as it lays great stress on individual freedom and primacy of individual feelings. Warnock states that, 'Broadly speaking, we can say that the common interest which unites Existentialist philosophers is the interest in human freedom. They are all of them interested in the world considered as the environment of man, who is treated as a unique object of attention, because of his power to choose his own courses of action. What his freedom of choice amounts to and how it is to be described . . . these are topics of central concern to all Existentialists. But many philosophers have been concerned with human freedom, with the 'problem of the freedom of the will', who have not been Existentialists. So, it is necessary to add that for Existentialists, uniquely, the problem of freedom is in a sense a practical problem.

They aim, above all, to show people that they are free, to open their eyes to something which has always been true, but which for one reason or another may not always have been recognized, namely that men are free to choose, not only what to do on a specific occasion, but what to value and how to live.'" (Warnock,1970). The term existentialism connotes for a lay man the philosophical, religious, and artistic attitudes contributed by Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) after World War II. Kierkegaard's writings emphasized

human alienation. According to him our feelings of powerlessness, excommunication and alienation from the rest of the social order are the outcome of the dehumanized and indifferent social institutions. Like Kierkegaard in Hardy's writings human beings, while making personal choices, are entrapped in 'existential situations'. Hardy's major novels reveal his skeptic approach towards abstract dogma. The writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) are a great source of twentieth-century existentialism. Hardy's existential insight bears affinities with the existentialism of Nietzsche and Jean Paul Sartre.

Although Paul Sartre's, "... philosophy is often portrayed as gloomy and pessimistic this is a misrepresentation he complained about ever since it started circulating soon after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. Sartrean existentialism is an optimistic theory, which teaches that we can learn to accept the way we really are, to see one another as we really are, and thereby get away from the basic problem underlying many of our ills. Not only that, but it also argues that the values we each already hold should lead us to embrace this alternative to bad faith, which he calls authenticity...".(Webber,2009).

Hardy had witnessed many upheavals during his life – including the First World War. Incredibly prolific, Hardy wrote a bulk of fiction including novels and poems between the years 1871 and 1897. His fiction is a manifestation of his affinity with existentialism. The reciprocal affiliation between character and environment exhibits the shift in human life in the post Darwinian Victorian England. Hardy's ethical views are shaped by his innate association with Auguste Comte, J.S. Mill and Leslie Stephen and their contribution to the theory of ethical evolution. His characters can be defined in terms of egotism and altruism. Hardy came under the influence of Darwinism at a quite early stage of his life. Hardy's novels concentrate upon current social issues and are concerned with universal existential dilemma.

Introduction

“Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and individual emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life. Existential philosophers often focused more on what is subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret as supposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science”(Mambrol, 2016). Hardy presents the universe as a complex web in which human beings are eternally entangled due to their unfulfilled aspirations. Hardy's characters try to escape from the shackles of determinism but all remains futile as their desire to achieve personal freedom seems impossible due to labyrinthine fate whose motives are eternally unknown and obscure. This very feature of his fiction links his philosophy to existentialism. Hardy's major fiction is evidence that human aspirations are dashed to doom. There are plethora of instances from his novels in support of this statement for example his characters such as Eustacia , Jude, Tess and the rest try their best to

achieve their goals but they couldn't escape the cruel destiny and finally succumb at the hands of circumstances. The core issue in the works of existential writers is the search for life and search for self that resultantly lead the characters to self-awareness.

Hardy in his fiction highlights the significance of personal freedom that exists in self-awareness. Awareness with human situation blesses the individuals with freedom. Preoccupation with existential themes such as human predicament, approach to religion and Providence, estranged relationships resulting in the alienation of the human beings in the modern world are the key features of Hardy's fiction. Hardy presented man as marionette in the Omnipotent hands that makes or breaks creatures for personal pleasure. Hardy's parables portray eerie pictures of the world devoid of God and meaning. Another common theme of Hardy is Man's alienation and isolation in the hostile world. Hardy attitude to the Christian religion was ambiguous. He was a devout reader of Bible but he was only able to accept Christianity as tradition and couldn't accept it as faith. Hardy was a great humanist thinker. The post-war critical work on Hardy's fiction concentrated on his pessimism. Others focused upon his humanist creed. His vision of life highlights the social perspectives. In his fiction the readers come across Individuals who, living in a hostile world that is at times incomprehensible, are alienated from their species and natural surroundings. They feel a sense of loss, hopelessness, loneliness and powerlessness.

Discussion and argument

To critics, Hardy is an author with a least favorable conception of life. The dilemma with Hardy lies in the fact that his personal opinion remains darker than the real matter. A C Ward deems that, "Hardy must always have been exceedingly unhappy. If this was so, his unhappiness originated not in his philosophic pessimism but in his acute sense of pity. He was vulnerable through his emotions rather than through his mind, and was almost morbidly sensitive to pain suffered by other creatures:

*Why, O starving bird, when I
One day's joy would justify,
And put misery out of view,
Do you make me notice you?*

'Life had bared its bones' to Hardy, and he sought refuge from the, long drip of human tears'. He found the refuge in what others call pessimism, but he preferred to define it as "obstinate questioning" in the exploration of reality', and he regarded this policy of obstinate questioning as 'the first step towards the soul's betterment and the body's also'. (Ward, 1965).

Hardy had a thinking mind and his profound musings about the nature and causes of existence led him to raise multiple questions. Hardy concentrates on the problems of

life and his rational or sensible mind probes deep into these inevitable matters. Hardy is labeled as a social realist and reality which is often bitter, cannot be ignored by him. As it is well quoted that, “tragedies cannot and should not be brushed aside with superficially upbeat thought” (Fido, 1968). Realism demands the writer to realistically portray the life that is drenched in bitterness. Ultimately, the writer who transcends the ordinary level of humanity as his philosophy being vague or obscure, is, often, misunderstood.

Geoffrey Harvey states that, “Hardy also assimilated something of his parents’ fatalism. From his father it was a straightforward acceptance of what life offered, but from his mother came a strong vein of pessimism.” (Harvey, 2003). To critics the publication of Hardy’s last novel, entitled, *Jude the Obscure*, proves to be the culminating point with reference to the pessimistic attitude of the author and consequently, his persistent pessimism jeopardizes his vocation as a novelist. Though the mentioned novel is full of objectionable material, yet the critics outrage is multiplied when every action in the story resulted in a cul-de-sac. With reference to this Molly Lefebure comments that the critics expressed their indignation without any restraint. The Rall Mall Gazette called it *Jude the Obscene*. Hardy was labeled as Hardy the degenerate for writing a shameful, gloomy, grimy story and the most indecent novel ever written. “The Bishop of Wakefield burned a copy of *Jude* in public- Probably in despair at not being able to burn me, commented Hardy” (Lefebure, 1997). The critics merely highlighted his melancholic or pessimistic attitude to life and criticize him due to his skeptical and pessimistic approach yet he mainly criticized acutely the social evils in his novels and this is unfortunately, ignored by critics. Hardy is prone to naturalism and in his novels he depicts the worst given and sordid conditions of life. To critics with this very feature he forms links with the naturalistic movement in France. The naturalistic movement, “...forced modern writers to treat the novel as a mature art form which not only reflected social reality but also mirrored the moral problems involved in this reality...the novel seemed to be the ideal instrument for social reform” (Fleischmann, 1969).

Jude the Obscure presents the leading characters as having the ultimate goal of fulfilling their wishes and as being slaves of their wishes and to gratify their wishes they don’t hesitate to get involved in illegitimate affairs. Especially Jude, the protagonist, burns his theological books to get involved in an illegitimate affair with his cousin, namely, Sue Bridehead. Hardy disapproves such an attitude of Jude and his condition gets worse. Hardy’s pedagogical motive becomes evident by depicting the catastrophic end of a blasphemer. In this regard Hammer quotes that the motive of literature is to portray, ... “lively pattern”-that is, specific individual examples of human behavior that could be consciously imitated or shunned.”(Hammer, 1967). Hardy warns the readers by showing Jude’s descent and that such sort of mannerism should be shunned by the society. Hardy has a complex approach towards religion and for this he is often blamed as an atheist. Hardy is not an existential writer in the strict sense. According to critics his fiction reflects the thought of existentialism. In his novels we find the general themes of existentialism such as despair, alienation,

estrangement and quest for self-awareness. The elements of estrangement and despair are found in almost all the major novels of Hardy. Such as soon after Tess and Angel's marriage the newly married couple is estranged and separated. In the course of the novel Tess' journey of self-sacrifice leads Angel to self-realization. Angel's decision to return and recompense Tess is too late and all his plans to live a happy life with Tess are thwarted. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy again broods over an absurd world where human beings are never asked if they wish for life on any terms. In the world of Hardy the right man encounters the wrong woman and the right woman is pursued by the wrong man. *The Woodlanders* (1887) is another tale that provokes existential queries. Giles Winterbourne is alienated from the world which is too absurd for him to live in. In the world of Hardy man is alienated from the rest of the world, from his fellow beings and ultimately from the indifferent cosmos that remains hostile to human aspirations. This is the key point to understand Hardy's views of existence. Winterborne's loss of his beloved Grace results in frustration. Ultimately the world and life loses worth for him and he adopts a cynical and skeptical attitude towards Providence. *Far from the Maddening Crowd* echoes the same existentialist philosophy where Boldwood falls in love with Bathsheba Everdene who in turn is mesmerized by a young fellow, namely, Sergeant Frances Troy. Boldwood dejected and lonely complains that Providence is indifferent to his plans and that is why it better to die than to live. In Hardy's fiction all the prominent themes in existentialist literature are incorporated. Almost all of his characters are led astray due to lack of direction. Their lives are marked with certain existential anxieties such as unrequited love, fear and concern about death. The major characters' lives can be summed up as a quest to find meaning of life.

Traces of existentialism can be found in the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, though neither of the already mentioned 19th century philosophers referred to the term in their work. Later in 1940s and 1950s, Jean- Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simon de Beauvoir, the French existentialists, wrote scholarly and fictional works popularizing existential themes. Their work highlighted such features as the absurd, world-weariness, alienation, freedom and nothingness. The Victorian novelists show an inclusive picture of the industrial society in their work. Such society abounds with socio-economic problems and as a result man in such an environment becomes hopeless failing to grasp the meaning of existence. This leads the masses to be alienated and estranged from the rest of the social order. Austin Cline informs us about Sartre who, "... then reminds us that we aren't isolated individuals but, rather, members of communities and the human race. There may not be a universal human *nature*, but there is certainly a common human *condition*—we are all in this together, we are all living in human society, and we are all faced with the same sorts of decisions." In the modern world is people are alienated from the rest of the social order. Especially the dilemma of alienation and isolation in an industrial society has vast connotation. Referring to the nineteenth century, the term alienation gives multiple meanings as it refers to powerlessness, hopelessness, normlessness, etc. In the mentioned century, the invention of machines caused the laborers feel isolated from their traditional tools

of tilling as machine took the place of worker replacing human skill with the inanimate objects. In Hardy's novels we confront similar situations where his characters remain unskilled at the advent of modernization and mechanization. We may quote the instance of Michael Henchard and Tess here as they both couldn't survive at the vogue of mechanization. Henchard couldn't operate the machine, whereas, Tess works on machine for nonstop hours. Neither could survive in the society that was changing from agriculture to industrial.

Social isolation of the individuals, as portrayed in Hardy's work, is also due to their poor social status. Poor people's excommunication from the rest of the social stratum results in the adoption of such ways for their survival which result in their isolation. Their failure to cope with an estranged situation results in their powerlessness which in turn leads them to normlessness. Hardy's work refers to isolation and alienation of the characters. In this regard we may refer to Tess who goes to serve at the fowl farm at Trantridge to save her siblings from poverty. It is due to her vulnerable state that she is seduced. Later she again has to solve the economic problem of her family and her inability to fulfill the requirements of her family causes her to perform the norm less act of consenting to be Alec's mistress, when Angel Clare deserts her. Passivity also causes estrangement of an individual from the rest of the social order. Hardy's heroines are being criticized as being passive. For instance Susan, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, is sold in an open fair due to her passivity. She acts as her husband demands and does not raise any hue and cry. Similarly, Tess' hamartia such as docility and passivity are responsible for her tragic descent. Hardy actually, according to critics, hold man responsible for the consequences of his doing. In his stories the characters are free to choose the course of their life and ultimately they are held accountable of the catastrophe.

Though Hardy is not included in the list of world's renowned philosophers his work has a religious and mystical and significance. His philosophical bend of mind imparts an ontological approach to literature. Hardy while observing the behaviors and actions of men strives to know the meaning of existence and being weary of existence, he often complains about the world which in his words is run without design. To him the world is ruled by some blind Nature that is acting without plan. Nadler like Hardy refers to the problem of existence and says that, "When I open my eyes to consider the visible world, it seems that I discover there so many defects, that I am once again led to believe something that I have nevertheless denied so many times, that the world is the work of blind Nature, which acts without design" (Nadler, 2008).

Hardy's existentialism also includes certain elements such as nihilism and agnosticism. He seems to be weary of existence and according to him the planet of ours run short of sufficient material for gaiety and humanity dwell on the world that is a blighted one and not a splendid one. Hardy seems to ask that, "Why, then, is there evil in the world? Why are there floods and droughts? Why is there sin and suffering? And why do virtuous people sometimes suffer while vicious people prosper? And why, especially, are not all human beings saved by the grace of God?" (Nadler, 2008).

Hardy's loss of faith in religion led him to develop a melancholic approach to life is. To think of life without religion is a miserable conception as religion is the essence of life. The only way to escape from worries is to submit before the will of God as this can lead to happiness. With reference to this Martin states that, "The paradox of submission is also a familiar theme in religious conception of happiness, which enjoin submission to a deity." (Fido, 1968). Hardy's disbelief in Christianity was under the influence of Hardy's friend, namely, Horatio Maule. He early in life planned to enter the church but so due to his humble educational and financial background couldn't do so. An age of great religious and social questions, the Victorian Age, under the effect of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) raised many questions. Mill and Huxley, the renowned intellectuals, already lost faith in Christianity and Hardy was no exception. According to Masoud Moghaddam, "Albeit these religious beliefs vary in nature, their main thrust is an internal connection between an individual and a supernatural force (a divine other) that one can fall back on in the times of need" (Moghaddam, 2008). Religion consoles and gives justification of all the sufferings in this material world. Hardy failed to find explanation for man's pathetic condition after losing faith in the existence of God and religion. Ultimately, he wailed out,

"GOD is not in His heaven
All's wrong with the world". (Hardy, 1981)

Existentialism is prone to non-belief in religion. Hardy as an existentialist and skeptic has a doubting attitude about God and religion. Universe for him is irrational that failed to provide any justification for the sufferings of the individuals. As a result he adopts a melancholic approach. It is commented that, "Skepticism is one of a class of doctrines that have built into them means to avoid critical scrutiny. Marxism, Freudianism and Pragmatism are other examples." (Jarvie, 2008). The nineteenth century fiction exposes the skeptical approach of the authors, especially, Hardy, often, manifests his religious doubt in his work. When everyone raised the slogan,

"God's in his heaven-
All's right with the world .". (Tappan, 2006)

Hardy's fiction mirrors his skeptical approach towards religion and is of an opposite opinion. His stories are prone to macabre and the focal point of his work is mostly crimes, convicts funerals, etc. Hardy gives a touch of terror, awe and mystery to his tales. His stories provide us with scenes that show his innate association with omens, charms, specters and spells. The preparation of Eustacia's waxen image, In *The Return of the Native*, by Susan Nunsuch and the widow Jethway's mysterious character, in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, whose image remains haunting Elfride wherever she goes and the incidents of the sale of hair and brain and, finally in *The*

Woodlanders and in *Tess* the sale of Tess' soul at the hands of her seducer, namely, Alec, are the events which arouse terror and awe. Peter Widdowson rightly comments in this regard, that, "...We might call 'My Thomas Hardy' or MYTH for short" (Widdowson, 1989).

Hardy is, also, deeply interested in nature. As he had a melancholic temperament so, he decorates his bleak stories with the bewitching natural scenes and sights. He portrays nature as a living character with different motives, moods, and impulses. Quite early in life he developed a mysterious relationship with nature that played a role in the life of those who remain close to it. He presents the world of humans and nature with its full mystic environment. Hardy had great sympathy for the people living in the countryside as their life was full of suffering. His existential musings were enhanced due to the pathetic condition of Dorset. He, being an existentialist, holds the opinion that the universe is irrational, resultantly; he is pessimistic about man's destiny. He emphasizes human individuality as, for him; nature is conceived subjectively. Existentialism stands for individuality and in Hardy's fiction the individuals choose their particular existence and rebelled against the system to prove their individuality and for the pursuit of personal gains. Revolt being a personal than a social action is a key notion of his work and his characters, weak and isolated, dare to stand in opposition of the great forces such as community, society, government, etc. According to Hardy man is not an object or a thing rather he is a subject.

Conclusion

Towards the close of the nineteenth century English fiction went through a shift and the 19th century moral and psychological assumptions with reference to the Victorian novel were challenged. Thomas Hardy's fiction gave multiple evidences of his contribution in the development of modern existentialist awareness in fiction. Not only his novels but his poetry is also a clear evidence of his existentialist approach. Referring to Hardy's poetry Sulaiman writes that, "A comprehensive investigation of Thomas Hardy's poetry reveals the doctrines of Existentialism which were new and not common during the 19th century. Hardy's poetry, combining both Modern and Victorian elements, proclaims the emancipation from the fetters of money and religious oriented orthodox heritage" (Sulaiman, 2018). Hardy is an existentialist as his philosophy of life is drenched with the unifying principle which is the core of all existentialist thought. According to the existentialist thought man can give meaning and direction to his life by the specific acts he chooses to perform. The existential philosophy is concerned with the practical matters. In Hardy's novels we find this particular instinct with reference to his major characters that all of them want to give meaning to their lives by their specific acts. Being an existentialist he believes in the freedom of man and exercise of free will. His characters are free to make their choices as a response to the painful existence. Since Hardy was skeptical and lost hope of transcendence (or of resurrection) as a result in his fiction we find immense stress on man's existence as meaningless and ephemeral. Hardy holds the opinion that this universe is indifferent to man's aspirations which in turn is the cause of man's alienation in a world devoid

of meaning. In the world of Hardy love being the ruling passion can exercise its spell to change the lives of the people.

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