Alienation of Nature and Society in The Mayor of Casterbridge

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Citation

Abstract
The Mayor of Casterbridge is an important novel of Thomas Hardy which has aroused heated discussions. The paper tries to analyze the alienated world in The Mayor of Casterbridge. The alienation of nature and the society is analyzed in details in the paper. The alienation of nature includes two parts, the ups and downs of the fair of Weydon-priors in the town of Casterbridge, and the ebbs and flows of the town of Casterbridge. The alienation of the society is also discussed from two aspects, the insurmountable disparity between the rich and poor, the life of the grass roots in the alienated world.

1. Introduction
Thomas Hardy is regarded as the great writer in British Victorian period. Born in the transitional period of England from a rural society to an industrial world, Hardy has a keen insight into the rural society under the encroachment of modern industry. The Mayor of Casterbridge gives a vivid description of an alienated world of the British rural town in the end of the 19th century by telling the story of Henchard from a poor hay-trusser to the mayor of Casterbridge who died miserably and lonely in the end of the novel. During the transitional period, the conflicts between man and nature, man and society are inevitable. The alienation of nature and society is the trend of the times [1-2]. The theme of an alienated world runs through the whole novel, in the paper, I try to analyze the alienation of society and nature in The Mayor of Casterbridge.

2. Alienation of Nature
Thomas Hardy is a keen observer of nature, and nature plays an important part in The Mayor of Casterbridge. In the novel, the town of Casterbridge has a close relationship with the theme of alienation. The life of Casterbridge presents to the readers a picture of alienation. Human beings have to fight against the forces of nature, to endure the natural disaster and live in the alienated atmosphere.

2.1. The Ups and Downs of the Fair of Weydon-priors
In this novel, the fair of Weydon-priors is mentioned for three times. In the course of industrialization, the fair went through the ups and downs. At the beginning of the novel, the fair of Weydon-priors is an old and traditional fair where everything is labeled by the price which appears to be noisy and prospering.

The trusser and his family proceeded on their way, and soon entered the Fair-field, which showed standing-places and pens where many hundreds of horses and sheep had been exhibited and sold in the forenoon but were now in great part taken away. At present,
as their informant had observed, but little inferior animals, that could not otherwise be disposed of, and had been absolutely refused by the better class of traders, who came and went early. Yet the crowd was denser now than during the morning hours, the frivolous contingent of visitors, including journeymen out for a holiday, a stray soldier or two come on furlough, village shopkeepers, and the like, having latterly flocked in; persons whose activities found a congenial field among the peep-Shows, toy-stands, waxworks, inspired monsters, disinterested medical men who travelled for the public good, thimble-riggers, nick-neck wanders, and readers of Fate. (Hardy, 2010: 6) [3]

It is in this noisy fair that Henchard sells his wife and daughter and leaves for Casterbridge. At this time, the traditional fair can prosper because the industrialization has not reached the town. The decent and fair trade can make profits, and people in Casterbridge are simple and unsophisticated. However, with the development of capitalism, the fair of Weydon-priors gradually loses its glamour. Eighteen years later, Susan and her daughter returned to the fair of Weydon-priors only to find the desolate place.

Reaching to the outskirts of the village they pursued the same track as formerly and ascended to the fair. Here, too it was evident that the years had told. Certain mechanical improvements might have been noticed in the roundabouts and high-fliers, machines for testing rustic strength and weight, and in the erections devoted to shooting for nuts. But the real business of the fair had considerably dwindled. The new periodical great markets of neighboring towns were beginning to interfere seriously with the trade carried on here for centuries. The pens for sheep, the tie-ropes for the horse, were about half as long as they had been. The stalls of tailors, hosiers, coopers, linen-drapers, and other such trades had almost disappeared, and the vehicles were far less numerous. The mother and daughter threaded the crowd for some little distance, and then stood still. (Hardy, 2010: 23) [3].

The fair changed after eighteen years, the traditional trade of “pens for sheep” has gradually lost their appeal to the people in the town, the competitions from other markets has taken place, the friendly and simple relationship has gone, replaced by cold and competitive business relationships. Certain mechanical improvements” has broken the peaceful environment of the fair. The decent and straightforward dealings cannot bring any profit, while the sly and underhand deals get on at that time [4]. The harmonious relationship in the fair was disrupted by the encroachment of capitalism. And the fair of Weydon-priors is doomed to be deserted by the society. There is no doubt that the fair of Weydon-priors is completely ruined by the modernization when it appeared lastly in the novel.

The renowned hill whereon the annual fair had been held for so many generations was now bare of human beings, and almost of aught besides. A few sheep grazed thereabout, but these ran off when Henchard halted upon the summit (Hardy, 2010: 363) [3]

The sharp contrast between the desolate fair and the prosperous one is shocking to the readers. The fair of Weydon-priors went through the ups and downs in the course of the industrial revolution. The complete transformation of the fair offers the readers a deep insight into the alienation of nature. From the downfall of the Weydon-priors, it can be concluded that the backward mode of trade would inevitably be replaced by the advanced mode of modern trade. In other words, the old traditional ways of business are so incompatible with the industrial world. The modern capitalist force would dominate the rural society [5]. All indications of the old traditional rural mode and style would be out of date with the progress of modernization. The fair of Weydon-priors is no exception.

2.2. The Ebbs and Flows of the Town of Casterbridge

Like the fair of Weydon-priors, the setting of the story, Casterbridge itself, goes through the ups and downs as well. Before the encroachment of the capitalism, the relationship between man and nature in Casterbridge is harmonious and peaceful. Casterbridge used to be a peaceful and beautiful place where people live intimately with nature. And people were an integral part of nature before the industrial revolution. Hardy presented the readers with the picture of the peaceful pastoral landscape at the beginning of the novel.

Casterbridge, as has been hinted, was a place deposited in the block upon a corn-field. There was no suburb in the modern sense, or transitional intermixture of town and down. It stood, with regard to the wide ferrite land adjoining, clean-cut and distinct, like a chess-board on a green tablecloth. The farmer’s boy could sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office-window of the town-clerk; reapers at work among the sheaves nodded to acquaintances standing on the pavement-corner; the red-robed judge, when he condemned a sheep-stealer, pronounced sentence to the tune of Baa, that floated in at the window from the remainder of the flock browsing hard by; and at executions the waiting crowd stood in a meadow immediately before the drop, out of which the cows had been temporarily driven to give the spectators room. (Hardy, 2010: 107) [3]

The farmer’s boy, the reapers, the sheep and the cows all together constitute a harmonious picture of the town of Casterbridge, the readers can perceive Hardy’s love for the nature from his vivid descriptions of the picturesque landscape in the town. The town remained tranquil without any traces of modern industry. People are integral parts of nature. Man lives harmoniously with nature, and the interpersonal relationships are pure and intimate. People trade in and out honestly and fairly. Casterbridge is the heaven to live in for both animals and human beings.

However, with the development of modern industry, the harmonious world in Casterbridge is getting more and more alienated from the people. The tranquil and harmonious world of the town becomes a ghastly and desolate land with the progress of capitalism [6]. The harmonious nature transformed into an alienated nature, and the heaven for man
and animals turns into a hell for all kinds of evils.

The lane and its surrounding thicket if thatched cottages stretched out like a spit into the moist and misty lowland. Much that was sad, much that was low, some things that were baneful, could be seen in Mixen Lane. Vice ran freely in and out certain of the doors in the neighborhood; recklessness dwelt under the roof with the crooked chimney; shame in some bow-windows; theft (in times of privation) in the thatched and mud-walled houses by the shallows. Even slaughter had not been altogether unknown here. In a block of cottages up an alley there might have been created an altar to disease in years gone by. Such was Mixen Lane in the times when Henchard and Farfrae were Mayors. (Hardy, 2010: 295) [3]

Hardy’s dissatisfactions in modern industry are vivid presents in his description of Mixen Lane in Casterbridge. The old rural tranquil town of Casterbridge had been completely destroyed by modern industry. Under the vigorous attack of capitalism, the pastoral landscape had turned into a disgusting place which was filled with dirty and evil air [7]. The town of Casterbridge is no longer a picturesque paradise, it is a desolate hell. People living in the Casterbridge have a strong sense of loneliness and being alienated in this developed modern new world.

3. Alienation of Society

The society of Casterbridge plays a negative role in the life of people in the town. The traditional society of Casterbridge is full of darkens and evil. The feeling of alienation by the society is creeping upon everyone in the town. In the novel, Hardy spares no efforts to describe the grassroots of the alienated society in the town, and the striking contrast between the rich and poor is shocking to the reader.

3.1. The Disparity Between the Rich and Poor

Early in the novel, Henchard, the representative of the rich people who indulge in his extravagant rich life, has sold the grown wheat to the poor. Farmers in the town work hard all year round to harvest the crop, but they cannot enjoy the good productions of their sweat, they are separated from their products [8]. The estranged labor makes the lives of poor men worse, while the rich people benefit from it. The readers can have a glimpse of the increasingly wide disparity between the rich and poor from the complaints by the poor man in the town.

“Ye may as well look for manna-food as good bread in Casterbridge just now,” she said, after directing them. “They can blare their trumpets and thump their drums, and have their roaring dinners” -waving her hand towards a point further along the street, where the brass band could be seen standing in front of an illuminated building- “but we must need to be put-to for want of a wholesome crust. There’s less good bread than good beer in Casterbridge now.” (Hardy, 2010: 34) [3]

The poor men in the town have no choice but to eat the bad bread sold to them by the rich businessmen after a year of hard work. They grow the good wheat which they do not deserve to enjoy. The estranged labor gives the reader a clear awareness of the insurmountable disparity between the rich and poor. In sharp contrast to the miserable living conditions of the poor men, the rich people enjoy their extravagant life, the poor folk have to eat the bad bread to maintain their poor lives to survive in the world while the rich enjoy their delicious meal in a state of ease and comfort. The town of Casterbridge is no longer a pleasant place for the poor.

The impassable gulf between the rich and poor is presented even at the beginning of the novel. The bad bread mentioned above is the top concern for the poor people in the town of Casterbridge because it matters the life and death for the poor folk. However, in the eyes of rich, the problem of the bad bread is so trifling that they just turn a blind eye to the miserable food the poor people have to eat to maintain their lives in the world. The relationship between the rich and the poor are so indifferent and cold that Hardy cannot ignore [9]. As a keen observant of the society, Hardy gives a vivid description of the life of rich people in a very sarcastic way.

By this time toasts and speeches had given place to songs, the wheat subject being quite forgotten. Men were putting their heads together in twos and threes, telling good stories, with pantomimic laughter which reached convulsive grimace. Some were beginning to look as if they did not know how they had come there, what they had come for, or how they were going to get home again; and provisionally sat on with a dazed smile. Square-built men showed a tendency to become hunchbacks; mn with a dignified presence lost it in a curious obliquity of figure, in which their features grew disarranged and one-sided, whilst the heads of a few who had dined with extreme thoroughness were somehow sinking into their shoulders, the corners of their mouth and eyes being bent upwards by the subsidence. Only Henchard did not conform to these flexuous changes; he remained stately and vertical, silently thinking (Hardy, 2010: 46) [3]

The estrangement of the rich and poor is clearly shown in the above vivid and sarcastic description. Coldness and ruthlessness prevent the rich people to sympathize the miserable life of the poor people [10]. The rich and the poor isolate themselves from each other. They live in two different worlds which are caused mainly by the estranged labor. In fact, the great difference between the rich and poor is just the tip of the iceberg.

3.2. The Life of the Grass Roots in the Alienated World

The estranged labor not only causes the great disparity between the rich and poor, but also deprives the poor man of the opportunities to improve their economic conditions. The poor people have little control over their labor. In order to support in this world, they have to sell their labor unconditionally [11]. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy gives a vivid description of the life for the grass roots of the alienated world.

Among the rest, at the corner of the pavement, stood an old shepherd, who attracted the eyes of Lucetta and Farfrae by his stillness. He was evidently a chastened man. The battle of life
had been a sharp one with him, for, to begin with, he was a man of small frame. He was now so bowed by hard work and years that, approaching from behind, a person could hardly see his head. He had planted the stem of his crook in the gutter and was resting upon the bow, which was polished to silver brightness by the long friction of his hands. He had quite forgotten where he was, and what he had come for, his eyes being bent on the ground. A little way off negotiations were proceeding which had reference to him; but he did not hear them, and there seemed to be passing through his mind pleasant visions of the hiring successes of his prime, when his skill laid open to him any farm for the asking.

The negotiations were between a farmer from a distant county and the old man’s son. In these there was a difficulty. The farmer would not take the crust without the crumb of the bargain, in other words, the old man without the younger; and the son had a sweetheart on his present farm, who stood by, waiting for the issue with pale lips. (Hardy, 2010: 191) [3]

The aged shepherd is a wretched victim of the alienated world. The rich people make a lot of money on his flesh and blood when he was young. However, he was abandoned by the alienated society when he was old. Both the old shepherd and his son were the cheapest commodities in the hiring market because of the lack of knowledge and skills. They were treated not as human beings in the market, to the employers, they were dehumanized, and they were just tools to make profits for the capitalists [12]. In the capitalist economy, the poor people have a strong feeling of alienation from the society, the more values they created, the more valueless they became.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that there is an insurmountable disparity between the rich and poor in the modern industrial world. And the relationship among the people is quite indifferent and cruel with the development of modern industry. The tensions and alienations between people and society make the town of Casterbridge no longer a paradise but an alienated world.

4. Conclusion

In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy presents to us the transformation of nature in the process of industrialization, vividly describes the gradual change from the harmonious nature and society to the alienated ones. The Mayor of Casterbridge provides us with an access to the alienated world in the Victorian age. In this sense, it is worthwhile to reread The Mayor of Casterbridge from the perspective of an alienated world for the modern readers.

Acknowledgements

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References