

## Darwinism in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

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Thomas Hardy, one of the greatest British novelists in the 19th century. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which is usually regarded as one of the best novels for Thomas Hardy, has received different interpretations since its publication. This thesis tries to explore novel from the perspective of Darwinism and Social Darwinism. The spirit of Darwinism is expressed all through the novel. Thomas Hardy's firm adherence to Darwinism and social Darwinism is reflected in his design of the rise and fall of Henchard, and the competition between Henchard and Farfrae. The rise and fall of Henchard, the competition between Henchard and Farfrae are analyzed by employing the principle of adaptation and the principle of struggling for existence.

**Keywords:** *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Darwinism, adaptation, struggling for existence

### Introduction

Thomas Hardy is regarded as the great writer in British Victorian period. With the introduction of Darwinism and Social Darwinism in the 19th century, the literary and artistic creations of this period are greatly influence by its theory (Dickens, 2000), especially the theory of evolution embodied in Darwinism. Thomas Hardy is one of the firm advocates of Darwinism during that period. And his acceptance of Darwinism had a profound impact on his literary creations.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy makes a vivid portrayal of the rise and fall of Henchard, the inevitable ruin of agricultural society is also lively presented (Donnelly, 2016). In the novel, the transformations Henchard and the town underwent are the demonstrations of Hardy's acceptance of Darwinism. The law of evolution is employed by Hardy to explain the rise and fall of Henchard and the town of Casterbridge. The transformations of Casterbridge and the fall of Henchard are the irreversible consequence of the evolution of mankind and society. In the paper, the principle of adaptation and the principle of struggling for existence are employed to probe into the deep reason for the failure of Henchard and the transformations of Casterbridge.

The early criticisms on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* mainly deal with the theme of the novel, the tragedy of the protagonist, the writing techniques of the novel, and the archetypes of characters in the novel. Very few scholars associate Darwinism with the novel, Nie Zhenzhao is among the early critics to link Hardy's novels with Darwinism, in the paper "Hardy's Novel Writing and Darwinism" (2002), he explored the reasons of the downfall of agricultural southern countryside of England by employing Darwinism in Hardy's novels. Norman Page also did some research on Hardy and Darwin in his paper "Thomas Hardy: The Writer and His Background"

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(1980). This paper will employ Darwinism and Social Darwinism to offer a new perspective on the study of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

### **Darwinism and Social Darwinism**

In 1859, the famous English naturalist Charles Robert Darwin published his famous book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, in which he stated his theory of evolution (Darwin, 2010). In the book, he stated that the populations evolve over a long period of time through a process of natural selection and the diversity of life arose by common descent through a branching pattern of evolution. This book caused heated debate not only in biology but also in religion in the Victorian period. The theory of evolution brought about severe criticism from the church because it challenged the authority of the divine God. There are two important elements in Darwinism. The first one is that all the species on the earth are changeable, all organisms, large or small, are evolutionary. The second one is that the power of evolution is natural selection. Darwin demonstrated that all the species in the world have the power and tendency of over-reproduction, however, the natural resources are limited, the living space and food can not satisfy the increase of all the species, thus, they must struggle for existence, the principle of struggle for existence is the important principle in Darwinism. And Darwin also believed that all the living things in the world must fight for their own existence, however, it is not the strongest of the species that will live, but the one most responsive to changes, that is the principle of adaptation. Only the one who is quick in adapting to the changing environment can live on, which is also called the natural selection, the key component in Darwinism.

The principle of adaptation and the principle of struggling for existence are the two important principles in Darwinism. Darwinism refers to the theory of evolution proposed by Darwin with regard to the origin of species and the law of natural selection. The term Social Darwinism is used to refer to various theories which applied the law of natural selection to the human society in the second half of the 19th century. Social Darwinism is a phrase first coined by Herbert Spencer (Herbert, 1852). The competition among individuals for limited resources to survive, was described by the phrase “survival of the fittest”, a term was also coined by sociologist Herbert Spencer. Social Darwinism demonstrated that the suffering of the weak and poor are inevitable results of the “survival of the fittest”, no one can intervene and relieve the suffering of human beings, and social development and the elimination of the weak groups are the inevitable consequence of the human society. According to Herbert Spencer, the weakest members of the human race will finally die out and only the strongest group will survive and reproduce in the world.

In this paper, Darwinism and social Darwinism will be utilized to analyze the sociality of Henchard's tragedy. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* will be analyzed in details from the perspective of two principles in Darwinism, the principle of adaptation and the principle of struggling for existence worked together to explain the destruction of a decrepit agricultural society. Thomas Hardy symbolically portrayed the inevitable transformation of the city of Casterbridge based on Darwinism.

### **The Principle of Adaptation**

Thomas Hardy's adherence to Darwinism can be inferred from the beginning of the novel when he designed the plot of Henchard's selling his wife. Henchard's selling of his wife had been criticized by many scholars as the

violation of moral value, and Henchard himself had spent the entire life to make redemptions for his unforgivable sins, however, without the acts of selling wife, he would not come to the city of Casterbridge (Kareem, 2017), and he would not be the mayor of the city, the only result for him would be a poor hay-trusser in the countryside. His wife-selling action can be seen as his efforts to adapt to the environment and self-improvement. He adapted himself very well to the society by selling his wife which changed his fate. His later success proved to the readers that his wife-selling action was the proper adaptation he could do to adapt himself to the society.

Being drunk but sober in mind, Henchard complained about his wife for ruining his life, and Henchard was well aware of his weakness and strength, he knew that he could be successful without his wife, and his wife trapped him in the poor marriage and miserable life, as he put it in the novel as following.

I haven't more than fifteen shillings in the world, and yet I am a good experienced hand in my line. I'd challenge England to beat me in the fodder business; and if I were a free man again I'd be worth a thousand pound before I'd done o't. But a fellow never knows these little things till all chance of acting upon'em is past. (Hardy, 2010, p. 9)

Just as he put it, his life would be totally different without his wife. Marriage to him was shackles which prevented him from realizing his dreams. He was confident of his talents, and he was sure that he would make a fortune by working hard in his field. However, he was not free as a married man. He married at eighteen, like "the fool" as he described, and he lost his job because of his marriage. As a young and ambitious man, the promising future is out of reach for him, and he witnessed the extinction of his energies by an early and imprudent marriage. Frustration and desperation became the theme of his life. It is not difficult to imagine his disappointments and eagerness to change his life. His selling of his wife made him become a free man again, he can make full use of his strength to realize his ambitions. Though the act of selling wife violated the social morals, Henchard benefitted a lot from it. He adjusted himself well to the need of the society by selling his wife, under that social circumstances, he had no choice but to leave his wife if he wanted to be successful (Brown, 2016). And his later success is a powerful evidence of the truth that his effort to adapt to the environment is a success though it violates the social morality.

Henchard's success in business is also relied on his effort to adjust to the society. As a businessman who starts from scratch, Henchard is well aware of his advantages and disadvantages (Showalter, 1979). It is his hard work and persistent efforts that make him a successful businessman, however, his weakness as an old man from agricultural society prevents him from getting stronger in the new capital society. And his trouble at the beginning of the novel proved the fact that he would soon be discarded by the society if he did not make any adaptations to the new world. His limited knowledge and bad judgement can not solve the problem of bad corn and bread which make his relationship with people in the town of Casterbridge intense. To his surprise, Donald Farfrae from the new world can solve the problem of bad corn and bread, with "some operation" he can restore the bad corn and make it taste less awful. Therefore, Henchard hired Farfrae to boost his business and make amends for his limitations in business. His hiring of Farfrae is his reasonable effort to adapt to the business world which proved to be very effective. As a hay-trusser, Henchard was experienced in handling the hay and he understood a lot about hay, but now his business was not only in hay but also in corn which he knew little about it, it was urgent for him to hire a person who is good in corn. Farfrae is the good choice for Henchard. What he said when he employed Farfrae can prove the fact that he was very clear about his disadvantage in business.

In my business, it is true that strength and bustle build up a firm. But judgment and knowledge are what keep it established. Unluckily, I am bad at science, Farfrae; bad at figures—a rule o'thumb sort of man. You are just the reverse—I can see that. I have been looking for such as you these two year, and yet you are not for me. (Hardy, 2010, pp. 55-56)

His decision and effort to hire farfrae as the manager is worthwhile in the long run. The corn and hay business conducted by Henchard thrive under the management of Farfrae. Farfrae from the new world transformed Henchard's old way of doing bussiness, the old traditional method of Henchard disappeared because of its inconveniences, and the new scientific way of Farfrae rise sharply in the capital society. If Henchard could cooperate firmly with Farfrae in the business world, he would not go bankrupt later in business. His jealousy of Farfrae ruined his business career and pushed him to the desperation and death.

Henchard spent all of his life adapting to the surrounding environment. His life seemed to go round in a circle, and Hencard eventually failed in adjusting to the society. Weydon Priors is the place where he sold his wife and daughter to challenge his life as he regarded his wife and daughter as bondage, being drunk but sober, he got freedom by selling his wife and daughter. His first adaptation proved to be necessary and successful. However, the second time when he came to Weydon Priors, he was a complete failure, he was lonely and poor, he lost his wife, his daughter, his business and even himself, he had to be a hay-trusser just as he did when he first came to this place. His life is a circle, he failed in his attempts to adapt to the environment, and he died as a poor hay-trusser with nothing better changed in his life, poor and desperate. He sacrificed his love and family for a better position in the society, he made a successful deal with the world, however, he failed to adapt himself to the changing society and different environments, he lost his poison as the Mayor of Casterbridge due to his stubborn adherence to the old, and he lost his wife because of his obstinate attitude towards love and family, he lost Elizabeth, which was the last straw to him, because he impulsively adhere to his wrong expression of love. To sum up, Henchard was a complete failure in adapting to the changing environment, and it was inevitable that he died miserably in the end of the novel.

### **The Principle of Struggling for Existence**

Darwinism had an indelible impact on Hardy, and Hardy is one of the earliest advocates of the theory of evolution which indicates his concern about the conditions of man and nature. Thomas Hardy employed the principle of struggling for existence to analyze the competition between Henchard and Farfrae. As Douglas Brown discovered in his study of the novel.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, then, is the tale of the struggle between the native countryman and the alien invader; of the defeat if dull courage and traditional attitudes by insight, craft and the vicissitudes of nature; and of the persistence through that defeat of soom deep layor of vitality in the country protagonist... *The Mayor of Casterbridge* turns on the situation that led to the repeal of the Corn Laws. The consequences of that repeal to Victorian agricultural life are the centre of this book. Provide the impulse that makes it what it is (Brown, 1962).

Henchard was doomed to fail as a traditional representative of the agricultural society, and Farfrae was certainly going to win as a new class brought by the Industrial Revolution (Gale, 2016). The success of Farfrae and the loss of Henchard have its source in Hardy's acceptance of the principle of struggling for existence. Faced with the limited resources of the world, the old and out-of-dated will inevitably be ruled out by the fierce competition, and the new and modern will replace the obsolete, which is the rule of the society and nature.

In business, Henchard lacked of the scientific way of managing business, and he was ignorant when it came to the scientific speculation and estimation. Before Farfrae came to help him in business, Henchard's way of doing business was rather obsolete and even ridiculous to some extent. Henchard never kept his own accounts, and he knew nothing about ciphering and measuration. He counted his sacks by using chalk strokes which was obviously outmoded and unscientific, he judged the conditions of the hay by chewing, and he even "settle the price with a curse" which was exaggerating. Henchard's failure in business is irreversible with the development of the society. Henchard's unique way of dealing business is childish even foolish compared to Farfrae's modern and scientific way of doing business, the former outmoded and the latter novel and practical. In the novel, Hardy gave a vivid description of the different ways of doing business between Henchard and his opponent Farfrae.

His accounts were like a bramblewood when Farfrae came. He used to reckon his sacks by chalk strokes all in a row like garden-palings, measure his risks by stretching with his ram, weigh his trussers by a lift, judge his hay by a chew, and settle the price with a curse. But now this accomplished young man does it all by ciphering and measuration. Then the wheat—that sometimes used to taste so strong of mice when made into bread that people could fairly tell the bread—Farfrae has a plan for purifying, so that nobody could dream the smallest four-legged beast had walked over it once (Hardy, 2010, p. 125).

In Casterbridge, the harvest of the wheat is very important for the agricultural town, whoever can ensure the smooth production of wheat will win in business. Farfrae, at the beginning of the novel, got the attention from Henchard the Mayor, because he can solve the problem of wheat in a scientific way. Farfrae "has a plan for purifying the wheat" which made him popular in Casterbridge and win in business. In addition to that, the production of wheat was greatly affected by weather, and Farfrae grasped the weather information and made full preparations for the weather changes in business and life. Farfrae's competition with Henchard in preparing for the party is a vivid demonstration of their different attitudes to weather. Although Henchard made full preparation for the celebration, he ignored the important factor, the weather. A sudden and unexpected storm completely ruined the celebration. Conversely, in preparing for the celebration, Farfrae took the weather into consideration, and made full preparations for it. The party in the tent proved to be very successful which made Farfrae popular in the town.

Henchard was rather superstitious when it came to weather. He turned to the prophet "Mr. Fall" to tell him the weather, which finally led to his bankruptcy. His decisions based on the so-called "weather forecaster" is evidently against the law of nature which made his downfall inevitable. Henchard, poor in knowledge and science, would certainly be the loser in competition against Farfrae.

In the novel, Hardy portrayed Henchard as the representative of the traditional agricultural society struggling for existence against the newly developing capitalist society. According to the theory of evolution, Henchard as an individual and the class he represented would be destined to fail in the competition for survival, and Farfrae as the newly arising capitalist would certainly win in the competition.

### **Conclusion**

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy portrayed the great transformations occurred in the town of Casterbridge. Influenced greatly by Darwinism, the principle of adaptation and the principle of struggling for existence are employed to analyze the protagonists in the novel. The rise and fall of Michael Henchard is a vivid

presentation of the principle of adaptation. The competition between Farfrae and Henchard was not limited within the individual sphere, but extended onto the level of two different social groups. Henchard and the group he represented would certainly fail when confronted with Farfrae and the newly arising capitalist class he represented according to the principle of struggling for existence in Darwinism. It can be concluded that Hardy's firm belief in Darwinism and Social Darwinism is evidently presented in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

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