Volume IV
Issue IX
September

IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities

ISSN INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Concept of Suffering in the Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Thomas Hardy

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Abstract:

Thomas Hardy set his regional novels in the semi-fictional region of Wessex and Harriet Beecher wrote her novels set in New England. Hardy and Stowe portray life in a realistic manner, striving to arrive at a proper understanding of the meaning of life. The fact that they were diametrically opposite in their beliefs further enthused me. This paper juxtaposes their works to attempt a comparative study of their concept of suffering and analyzes how differences in beliefs alter a person's attitude towards life and its unpredictable occurrences. Thomas Hardy and Harriet Beecher Stowe based their plots and characters from real incidents which they witnessed. Both Stowe and Hardy believe that vanity and caprice of an individual is often the cause of suffering in one's life. Stowe and Hardy highlight the fact that man-made laws and customs are often the cause of untold sufferings to the members of a community. Both call for a more sympathetic approach when judging individuals on the standards of these laws and call for a more rational perspective when judging oneself or others against man-made customs and beliefs. This can mitigate sufferings to a great extent. Stowe and Hardy attribute divinity and sublimity in natures that have the capacity to suffer. This is truer of individuals who are ready to embracing sufferings for the welfare of others. These are individuals who are dignified in the face of sufferings and prefer embracing it rather than escape the sufferings. While Stowe believes in a benevolent God taking active interest in the lives of men, Hardy celebrates the spirit of man as he faces the sufferings of life in a spirit of fortitude and perseverance.

Key words: Suffering, Sacrifice, Faith, Predestination, God, Man Made Laws, Amelioration,

Introduction:

Thomas Hardy set his regional novels in the semi-fictional region of Wessex and Harriet Beecher wrote her novels set in New England. Hardy and Stowe portray life in a realistic manner, striving to arrive at a proper understanding of the meaning of life. The fact that they were diametrically opposite in their beliefs further enthused me. I felt that juxtaposing their works to attempt a comparative study of their concept of suffering would be an enriching experience in terms of how differences in beliefs alter a person's attitude towards life and its unpredictable occurrences. Thomas Hardy and Harriet Beecher Stowe based their plots and characters from real incidents which they witnessed.

This paper seeks to arrive at an understanding of how Harriet Beecher Stowe and Thomas Hardy perceive suffering and how thy appropriate it in human life. The reactions of the characters to the unevenness of life are obviously in consonance with the religious beliefs or the lack of it in their lives. It is in these responses that Stowe and Hardy differ and an analysis of the same is an interesting and profitable enterprise in terms of arriving at a better understanding of life.

"My pessimism," Hardy said, "if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs…On the contrary my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist." But melioration had to start from an honest facing of human suffering. "If the way to better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst" ("In Tenebris"). Only when the fact and the character of social evils are (and optimistic illusions stripped off) can we hope to study scientifically, and therefore partly control, their causes. (Thomas Hardy, (http://www.beturner.com/soapbox/2003/02) 3 Sept. 2004

Hardy once said:

As a novelist, I tried hard to give a truthful account of the human condition in both its darker and its lighter aspects. Stories such as those of Tess and Jude may leave us with a feeling of great sadness, but such things happen all the time, though not necessarily in exactly the way described. I would be quite wrong to turn ones back on such tragedies and pretend they do not exist. (Thomas Hardy, (http://www.talkingto.co.uk/tth/htm/tth_ackn.asp?AuthorID=7) 3 Sept. 2004

In the light of the above assertions of Thomas Hardy, it is obvious that the grim picture of life portrayed in his novels is not merely a naked manifestation of his nihilistic tendencies. He presents these sufferings because they do exist in life. He presents a realistic picture of life with a view to appropriate the reality of sufferings in the life of man. Moreover, the very manner in which the heroes and heroines embrace the trials and tribulations that come to their lives necessitates a change in our perspective of suffering and our outlook towards trials and tribulations that confront man.

The personal sufferings and first-hand observations of sufferings around led Hardy to remark that 'happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.' (Hardy, Casterbridge 420). Giordano validates the fact that Hardy's presentation of the painful and even the bizarre in his novels are not figments of his sick imagination but rather based on real incidents:

Hardy's imagination greedily, almost compulsively, sought to represent his impression of life's frailty…In his unpublished "Facts" notebook are many entries from "Accidents and Offences" column of the Dorset County Chronicle, the local newspaper, whose files Hardy apparently worked through in the early 1880s. Drownings, rick burnings, shipwrecks, robberies', poisonings, murders: such were the staples of this column, and many such events find their way into Hardy's notebook…Hardy's use of this kind of "fact" in The Mayor of Casterbridge illustrates his commitment to the real and true, particularly when the real possesses the attractions of the violent and uncommon. (Giordano, 11)

The following extract reveals how Tess of the D'urbervilles was the cumulative outcome of Hardy's personal struggles with his faith and a tragic incident he witnessed.

"My religious views have during the last three years been very unsettled." The more Hardy himself meditated on the views of the Church, the more he was impressed by the fact that ecclesiastical dogma seemed in complete disagreement with the laws of nature which he had been observing for nearly fifty years. He concluded that an act, which might be socially a great tragedy, could be in nature not at all alarming. From these meditations emerged the plot of Tess of the D'urbervilles. (Weber, 103)

This fidelity to the true and the real can be conclusively said of Harriet Beecher Stowe as well. The tragic episodes in her novels are creative presentations of her personal tragedies and experiences she witnessed in real life:

How little the countless thousands who read, have read, and will read, Uncle Tom's Cabin enter into or sympathize with the feelings out of which it was written! A delicate, sensitive woman struggles with poverty, with weary step and aching head attending to the innumerable demands of a large family of growing; a devoted Christian seeking with crying and tears a kingdom not of this world, is this popular conception of the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin? Nevertheless, it is the reality. When, amid the burning ruins of a besieged city, a mother's voice is heard uttering a cry of anguish over a child killed in her arms by a bursting shell, the attention is arrested, the heart is touched. So Uncle Tom's Cabin was a cry of anguish from a mother's heart, and uttered in sad sincerity. It was bursting forth deep feeling, with all the intense anguish of wounded love. Charles Edward Stowe, The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe (http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext03)N.pag.8Sept.2004

Stowe writes in The Minister's Wooing:

Behind every scale in music, the gayest and cheeriest, the grandest, the most triumphant, lies its dark relative minor, the notes are the same but the change of a semitone changes all to gloom; all our gayest hours are tunes that have a modulation into these dreary keys ever possible; at any moment the keynote may be struck. (Stowe, Wooing, 359)

The works of Hardy and Stowe, if they appear tragic, can be attributed to their willingness to portray life in a realistic manner and to arrive at an understanding of life. Stowe's primary aim in portraying the sufferings of man is to convey the message that God maintains an active presence in the world and in the lives of His people. She emphasizes her belief that sufferings in our life are not the result of a blind fate but the ordination of a Diving Being who loves and cares for us.

Suffering-Consequence of Vanity and Caprice:

The novels of Hardy and Stowe illustrate the fact that naivety and caprices of human beings often subject them to sufferings. A person who is vain and capricious tends to behave in an arrogant and a reckless manner until it becomes too late to avoid its disastrous consequences.

Bathsheba, the heroine in Hardy's Far from the Madding Crowd, is initially a naïve, vain, and capricious lady. And as a result, she suffers intensely before she finally gains wisdom and maturity, and her true love. Bathsheba's flippant responses to the honest declaration of Gabriel's his love for her reveals her conceit. She says, 'I'll try to think, she observed, rather more timorously; 'If I can think out of doors; but my mind spreads away so.' (Hardy, Madding Crowd 33). Later, she gives proof of her caprice when she tells Gabriel, 'I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know'. (Madding Crowd 35) The speeches of Bathsheba clearly bring out her naivety and caprice. It is such a disposition that blinds her to the true love of Gabriel and makes her vulnerable to the seductions of the villainous Sergeant Troy.

Bathsheba's vanity is aroused when Liddy informs her that Boldwood did not pay attention to her in the church. '…it was faintly depressing that the most dignified and valuable man in the parish should withhold his eyes, and that a girl like Liddy should talk about it. So Liddy's idea was at first rather harassing than piquant.(Madding Crowd110). And Bathsheba is tempted to send Boldwood a Valentine message just for sport and to satiate her vanity. Hardy describes Bathsheba's misadventure in the following words: 'So very idly and unreflectingly was this deed done. Of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of subjectively she knew nothing.'.(Madding Crowd111). This reckless jest of Bathsheba breeds great emotional turmoil in the heart of Boldwood and then she begins to realize its serious ramifications and decides to keep off from such practical pranks that eggs one to toy with the deepest and most sacred emotion of human beings. 'Bathsheba resolved never again, by look or by sign, to interrupt the steady flow of this man's life. But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible.' (Madding Crowd, 141). It is Bathsheba's capricious and flippant act that reduces Boldwood to sheer emotional wreck who in his desperation murders Sergeant Troy. Bathsheba suffers heavily because of her awareness of 'having brought about this situation by a series of actions done by one in an extravagant dream.' (Madding Crowd 347)

In Stowe's novel, The Pearl of Orr's Island, Sally, is a capricious character like Bathsheba. Stowe presents her caprice in the following words:

Well, Sally was a good girl…But as for any sentiment or love toward any person of the other sex, Sally, as yet, had it not. Her numerous admirers were only so many subjects for the exercise of her dear delight of teasing, and Moses Pennel, the last and most considerable, differed from the rest only in the fact that he was a match for her in this redoubtable art and science, and this made the game she was playing with him altogether more stimulating than she had carried on with any other of her admirers.(Orr's Island 300-301). Stowe expressed her views about the dangers of indulging in such capricious games in the following words:

There is but one danger in play of this kind, and that is, that deep down in breast of every slippery, frothy, elfish Undine sleeps the germ of an unawakened soul…something altogether too good, too scared to be trifled with;…and the woman awakes in all her depth and strength to feel the of real meaning of love and life, she finds that she has played with one stronger than she, at a terrible disadvantage. (Orr's Island 300-301). But, unlike Bathsheba, Sally comes to her senses in time. She realizes her folly and enlightens Moses also about the fatal game they were indulging in. But for this moment of wisdom, Sally, too, like Bathsheba, would have played with the emotions of Moses and would have brought great sorrow upon herself, Moses, and Mary, who is Moses's true love.

The portrayals of Stowe and Hardy are the two faces of the same coin. Hardy sheds light on the terrible consequences of blindly indulging in one's capricious whims. Stowe reveals how a bit of discretion needs to be observed even when the tendency to indulge in such reckless jests is very strong so that such heartache and sufferings as that befall Bathsheba and Boldwood can be avoided.

Suffering-Consequence of Man-made Customs and Traditions:

Hardy, in his novels, highlights the fact that man-made customs and traditions are instrumental in aggravating the sufferings of human beings. Time and again, he emphasizes the truth that man-made laws are often at variance with the natural instincts and longings of human beings. This results in great suffering for anyone who violates the social code even if they are the innocent victims and not the perpetrators of the violation.

The portrayal of Tess is a case in point. She is seduced by Alec and carries the stigma of being an unwed mother. Hardy comments: Moreover, in a desert island would she have been wretched

at what had happened to her? Not greatly…No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein. Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensations. (Hardy, Tess of the D'urbervilles 121)

Sue Bridehead in Hardy's novel, Jude the Obscure, echoes this consciousness of how aberrant social laws work and war against the natural yearnings and aspirations of human beings. She finds herself wrongly married to Phillotson instead of to Jude but finds herself psychically unable to extricate herself from this social contract of marriage. She says, 'I perceive there is something wrong in our social formulas: what it is can only be discovered by men or women with greater insight than mine…' "I have been thinking," she continued, still in the tone of one brimful of feeling, "that the social moulds civilization fits us into have no more relation to our actual shapes than the conventional shapes of the constellations have to the real star-patterns." (204).

Stowe also emphasizes how man-made laws, and forces of market economy work against the aspirations of man, his yearnings and his freedom to live a full life. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, Shelby, is a helpless victim of the power of market forces: Having decided to sell the slaves, he remains in the drama only as a weakened character-one who refused his moment to be heroic, taking the familiar road of submission to the ruthless master of economics. Kenneth Hada, "The Kentucky Model: Economics, Individualism and Domesticity in Uncle Tom's Cabin. "Papers on Language & Literature 35.2 (1999): 167 Questia. 2 Feb. 2005<http//www.questia.com/>

In Stowe's Dred, the Gordon children also suffer because of man-made laws:

Each of the three Gordon children falls victim to the same curse: the fierce energy and initiative that they inherit from their ancestors becomes perverted and frustrated by the slave system. David Grant, "Stowe's Dred and the Narrative Logic of Slavery's Extension," Studies in American Fiction 28.2 (2002): 151, Questia, 28 Jan.2005http://www.questia.com/

Stowe also highlights how religious doctrines unnerve credulous individuals and put them under tremendous fear psychosis. The Minister's Wooing highlights how the pre-dominant Calvinistic doctrine lie at the core of the intense agony of its characters. Marvyn, the mother of James is thrown to the brink of insanity because the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and election forces her to believe that her son, James (who is presumed dead) is eternally damned, pending the lack of a conclusive evidence of his salvation.

Hardy highlights the sufferings inflicted on individual human beings due to aberrant social laws and the lacunae that afflict social wisdom, and advocates the need to modify and calls for a mature and broadminded perspective towards the innocent people who are condemned by the yard-stick of a defective and myopic social order. Ernest Brennecke says, "Likewise in the most pessimistic novels, Tess and Jude, there is implied hope that the world will become happier when the laws of man are made to conform more closely to the laws, or impulses, of nature. (147)

Stowe's novels also demand for a remodeling of religious dogmas so that much of the sufferings that have their origin in them can be reduced to a considerable extent. 'Stowe affirms the longevity of Calvinist thought, yet also confirms that theology has been and must continually be reconfigured to suit the social and political happenings of the time. Hopkin's Calvinism, she infers, is an outgrowth of an old (and now dated) order. (Haynes, 58)

Suffering-An Attribute of the Divine:

For Stowe, suffering is an inevitable aspect of life and an attribute of the divine. The sufferings of Christ on the cross were not the sufferings of his human nature merely, but the sufferings of the divine nature in Him. In Christ we see the only revelation of God, and that is the revelation of one that suffers…To Miss Beecher's mind the lack of ability to suffer with his suffering creatures was a more serious imperfection. She berates natures that have not the capacity to suffer. She writes, "And yet sorrow is godlike, sorrow is grand and great, sorrow is wise and farseeing…What are the natures that cannot suffer? Who values them?" (Stowe, Wooing 360)

For Stowe suffering is an inevitable aspect of life and an attribute of the Divine. This is most poignantly pictured in the following passage from The Minister's Wooing:

From the fat Oyster, over which the silver tide rises and falls without one pulse upon its fleshy ear, to the hero who stands with quivering nerve parting with wife and child and home for country and God; all the way up is an ascending scale marked by increasing power to suffer and when we lok to the Head of all being, up through principalities and powers and princedoms with dazzling orders and celestial blazonry to behold by what emblem the Infinite Sovereign chooses to reveal himself, we behold in the midst of the throne, "a Lamb as it had been slain." (360)

Sublimity in Human Nature that Suffer:

Hardy perceives sublimity in human nature that can suffer. Cecil D. Lewis remarks,

In so far as man's struggle is against fate, his tragic heroines are representatives of humanity rather than individual characters; and when they rise to the height of their destiny, whether they be defiant or acquiescent, they are ennobled by what they represent and enlarged by what they confront. They are raised to more than mortal stature. Marty South putting flowers on Giles Winterborne's grave, 'touched' sublimity at points and looked almost like a being that had rejected with indifference the attributes sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism. (Lewis, introduction, 14-15) When Tess (in a state of intense metal agony) baptizes the child, 'her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist. The kindly dimness of the candle abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed-the stubble scratches upon her wrists, and the weariness of her eyes-her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, sowing it as a thing of immaculate beauty with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. (Tess 124)

And as she baptized the child, Hardy says:

The ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her; it set upon her face a glowing irradiation, while the miniature candle-flame inverted in their eye-pupils shoe like diamond. The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a will for questioning. She did not look like Sissy to them snow, but as being large, towering, and awful-a diving personage with whom they had nothing in common. (125)

We get a similar picture in Stowe's The Minister's Wooing: Then came the fullness of mysterious communion given to the pure in heart, that advent of the Comforter in the soul, teaching all things and bringing all things to remembrance; and Mary moved in a world transfigured by a celestial radiance. (362)

Dignified in the face of sufferings:

Stowe and Hardy demonstrate how their characters do not compromise their dignity in order to escape sufferings. They would rather suffer humiliation and pain than compromise with their dignity and sense of righteousness and thus, reflect the grand nobility of mankind. For Tess, a wrong of a serious nature committed by a villain is not to be amended by a logical and face-saving option of forcing him to marry her. Any other woman would have done it. It is not to be

trifled with by a base act of putting up with a man whom she cannot look upon but as a villain who had eternally wronged her. And so regardless of the shame that could have been easily obliterated by the recourse suggested by her mother, Tess opts for the more painful path of enduring the shame. This path though agonizing to its utmost, is nevertheless, compatible with her higher sense of what constitutes dignity. Nor does she live the life of a recluse, struck by a sense of guilt, unable to face the huge conglomeration of accusing eyes. For Tess, life is serious and has a halo round it. And so the bundle of life named Sorrow is loved, valued, and nurtured with all the love a mother could possible give. Tess is definitely far above the common rung of human beings. If Tess were just another one for whom life holds no greater meaning than what years of conventions have given it, her life could well have been called a tragedy. If it were so, she could well have avoided that tragedy. Tess belonged to those few who are chosen to perform a higher duty from which the masses are happily kept out. It is in their limited and myopic perspective that life and its events get bound by definitions of tragedy or comedy. Tom in Uncle Tom's Cabin would not run away like a coward from his cruel master and end his suffering. He would rather die with his dignity intact. Tom's readiness to suffer is the outcome of his unflinching faith in the ultimate goodness of all that God has ordained him to endure. 'Sorrow is the great birth-agony of immortal powers,-sorrow is the great searcher and revealer of hearts, the great test of truth; for Plato has wisely said, sorrow will not endure sophisms,-sham and unrealities melt in the fire of that awful furnace. Sorrow reveals forces in ourselves we never dreamed of.' (Wooing 358)

Suffering for Others:

Stowe and Hardy present character who experience suffering entirely on account of their anxiety for the well-being of their loved one. Tess suffers great agony at the thought that her fatherless child (who is about to die) is not baptized. 'And when she had discovered this she was plunged into a misery that transcended that of the child's simple loss. Her baby had not been baptized.'(122) Gabriel Oak in Far from the Madding Crowd suffers intensely in the pursuit of seeking the well-being of Bathsheba Everdene. He wages a lone struggle to save Bathsheba's grains from the storm and rain and experiences contentment having suffered for Bathsheba's

sake. 'It's done!' He was drenched weary, and sad and yet hot so sad as drenched and weary, for he was cheered by sense of success in a good cause. (300)

Elizabeth Jane in The Mayor of Casterbridge exemplifies this attribute of suffering wherein she is ready to undergo pain and loss for the welfare of others: If there was one good thing more than another which characterized this single-hearted girl it was a willingness to sacrifice her personal comfort and dignity to the common weal. She had learnt the lesson of renunciation, and was as familiar with the wreck of each day's wishes as with the diurnal setting of the sun. (239)

Stowe also presents instances of characters suffering for the well-being and redemption of their loved ones. The ministrations of sufferings are very pronounced in Uncle Tom's Cabin. Eva's heart agony is all the time for her unregenerate kith and kin. The sufferings of Eva, her life and death serve to transform Topsy. Eliza is another character in the novel who braves the icy river to save her boy Harris. Augustine St. Clare loses his life in his attempt to save others. All these characters are Christlike in their readiness to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of others. In The Pearl of Orr's Island, it is Mara's sacrificial ministry that brings Moses to an understanding of the value of true love.

It is scarcely accidental that several of Stowe's redemptive heroines-Mary
Scudder in The Minister's Wooing, Mara in The Pearl of Orr's Island, and Mary Higgins in Poganuc People-even bear Marian names. (Gatta, 54)

Conclusion:

Stowe constantly expresses her faith in God and invokes the strength of the Divine while passing through the value of suffering. Though this overt prescience of a Divine plan in the scheme of things is absent in Hardy, there is never a vilification of life because of the sufferings that overshadow it. The fact that Hardy calls Henchard a 'man of character' and Tess a 'pure woman' shows that Hardy intends to celebrate the spirit of man placed as he is in the midst of trying circumstances. There is never a wry smile of despondency over the helpless condition of man. On the contrary, we witness an exaltation of life and a celebration of the spirit of man.

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