

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

---

---

### Irreversibility in Literature

Subrata Biswas

#### Abstract

This paper is divided into two parts. Whereas the first part theorises the role of order and disorder in literature, the second one throws light on Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from the perspective which has been theorised in the first part. In the novel, the Mayor's transitions create disorder that plays a very important role in calling in the death of the eponymous character.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, order, disorder, conflict, tension.

#### I

Let it start with a cliché—no conflict, no drama. In the Preface to *Plays Pleasant* (1898), George Bernard Shaw wrote; “The end may be reconciliation or destruction; or, as in life itself, may be no end; but the conflict is indispensable: no conflict, no drama.” Though Shaw weighed conflict as the basic characteristic of drama, there is, either dormant or prominent, a conflict in a novel, a short story or some poems as well. However, conflict is a very harsh term for applying in poetry. To generalize, we may choose a gentler and politer term, tension. Often in

literature two opposing forces or situations are found to be conflicting with each other. It is called tension or conflict. While Shaw was talking about the thematic conflict or a conflict within the action of the play, Nietzsche found “a tremendous opposition” (14) between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus, as the basis of art. All are fine and frequently discussed. This article is not going to discuss the origin and process of the conflict but its effect in literature.

The conflict, sometimes, gives way to an irreversible situation which cannot be changed or reversed; it can only be corrected by abolishing or banishing some character(s). This irreversible situation is caused by a disorder which occupies a vacant space created during or after the conflict between two opposing forces or between two characters. However, the vacant space may also be created by a transition—the transition of a character from one particular situation to another, hence, the conflict takes place between two phases. The amount of disorder may be sometimes ignorable: it may have very little effect on the plot or characters. But, sometimes, the disorder is tremendously powerful and causes a disaster. Interestingly, neither art nor its agents i.e. the characters can tolerate disorder for a long period. So, they must try to restore the order. Poetic justice is also sought to be maintained at the end of a literary work. Yet they are not similar at all. We find many novels and plays that fail to maintain poetic justice whereas the order is generally restored or maintained except in the literary works with the anti-Aristotlean ending<sup>1</sup>. However, in restoring the order, one or more characters change (or try to change) their nature or shift (or try to shift) from one state to another. Sometimes one finds it impossible to restore that order; so one becomes desperate to move one’s own way and further increases the amount of disorder. The nature of the disorder may also change or the amount of disorder may increase or decrease. Conflict may have a representation—it may have an

---

<sup>1</sup> For Aristotle, as he said in the *Poetics*, the end should be the natural consequence of the earlier incidents but nothing should follow it. Hence, anti-Aristotlean ending means open-endedness and vagueness of ending. Propagandist literature, stream of consciousness narrative, epic theatre, and some Modern fictions are some of the important genres which may have anti-Aristotlean ending. So Shaw’s third alternative—“may be no end”—is exempted from this analysis.

effective, prominent and comprehensible presentation and consequence, what T S Eliot called “objective correlative.” So is the disorder.

It has already been pointed out that the disorder caused by the conflict between two forces leads to a situation which is sometimes irreversible. This nature of disorder determines the end of a play or novel. So, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the irreversible situation and the disorder. But the relationship is not inevitable, that is to say, the cause does not always lead to the same result, that is, an *irreversible condition*. When such a situation is created that the character (generally the protagonist) cannot reverse, nor can he restore the earlier order or, at least, the equilibrium, the denouement is tragic or at least sorrowful and disastrous. In *Oedipus the King*, we find the conflict between fate and the protagonist's will to escape and defy it. The conflict caused several devastating consequences which had already been determined by fate—Oedipus murdered his father and married his mother. Yet he hoped against hope that he was not the murderer of his father and the seducer of his mother. He couldn't change or reverse it as it had already taken place in the past. Jocasta could easily get at the truth. Initially, she decided to go with what happened earlier and requested to stop the investigation. But when she saw Oedipus being adamant to know the truth (before the courtiers and the citizens of Thebes), Jocasta found that condition hanging heavy on her and committed suicide. Oedipus had an impossible desire to escape from fate. The recognition of truth was so late that he was literally trapped in it. King Laius also in the same way tried to escape fate but failed because it was impossible. So, in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, the impossibility is the irreversible fate that forced three characters to their catastrophe.

## II

This section will focus on Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to show how this sequence of conflict, disorder and an irreversible situation gives way to Henchard's destiny. It is no wonder that the novel is centred on the character of Michael Henchard—we can assume it from the subtitle of the novel, "The Life and Death of a Man of Character." However, it is not Henchard only but Michael Henchard as the Mayor of Casterbridge. The novel begins with an apparently abrupt but highly relevant episode of Henchard's life—his auctioning off his wife and Daughter (Susan and Elizabeth-Jane) and his immediate repentance for it. The novel then shifts to Susan's returning to the same place after eighteen years in search of Henchard who happens to be the Mayor of Casterbridge. Though the central position of Henchard's life is being the Mayor the first two chapters let the readers know about his past for which he must suffer. We find three different phases of his life— a glimpse of his early life with an irremediable error, his position as the Mayor of Casterbridge, and the downward movement from the loss of his mayorship to death. So, there are two transitions in his life; whereas the first transition of his life is quite unknown, the latter one is narrated in detail in the novel.

Here, during the second transition, Michael Henchard is trapped in an impossibility. He repented for his earlier misdoing to his wife and daughter and wanted to correct what can never be corrected. The disorder here comes out of the shift from one position to another in the life of the protagonist. The transformation from Michael Henchard as a hay-trusser to Michael Henchard as the Mayor of Casterbridge creates a large amount of disorder, selling off his wife and daughter to Richard Newson, a foolish and wicked decision making him completely lonely and repentant for the rest of his life. What is a more foolish act in his life is his endeavour to restore his life to an earlier situation setting everything right. Henchard desperately tries to restore the order first by getting back his long-lost wife Susan and remarrying her and again finding his daughter (who happens to be Newson's daughter). He is consoled that he has been

able to reverse the order. Fearing shame, neither the Mayor nor Susan reveals the truth to Elizabeth-Jane. Earlier, while they were in search of Henchard, Susan thought to tell her daughter the truth—the truth surrounding the relationship between Henchard and her:

A hundred times she had been upon the point of telling her daughter, Elizabeth-Jane, the true story of her life, the tragical crisis of which had been the transaction at Weydon Fair, when she was not much older than the girl now beside her. (Hardy 24)

Henchard never thought of telling her the truth till Susan was living. Rather he rejected Farfrae's advice: "I am not going to let her know the truth" (78). Just after the death of Susan, he moves on to tell Elizabeth-Jane the truth. It is another step to restoring order. Coincidentally he reveals the blunder when there is no Susan to rectify him. Henchard convinces Elizabeth-Jane that she is not his stepdaughter but his own daughter. Immediately Henchard learns from Susan's letter that this young lady is the daughter of Richard Newson with the same name as the daughter of Henchard. The whole world crashed up before Henchard. All his endeavours to restore the order have gone in vain—his hope for a new life with his daughter has turned to desperation and a sort of hatred grows in him for Elizabeth-Jane. But at that very moment, his stepdaughter leaves his house for Lucetta's, Henchard again finds himself lonely, realizes his wrongdoings and misbehaviour toward Elizabeth-Jane and requests her to stay in his house which she rejects. So, again, he fails to start afresh.

The second part of the novel starts with new hope for Mr Henchard to re-establish his relationship with Lucetta Templeman whom he wronged once by denying her when he wanted to do "right with Susan" (Hardy 76). The situation was surely unavoidable: Henchard was in a position to choose between Lucetta and Susan. Choosing one and leaving the other disappointed created a disorder. It would not be otherwise if he chose the young lady in lieu of

his old wife. On the contrary, the amount of disorder might have been greater. So, the second volume of the novel throws Henchard into a different situation and amidst different friction between his desire to find somebody of his care and the actuality of Lucetta's changed mind that preferred Farfrae to Henchard. Lucetta's inclination towards Farfrae enhances Henchard's contention against Donald Farfrae. However, the lady's helplessness—rather weakness—is enough for Henchard not to interfere in the marital relationship between Farfrae and Lucetta, and concentrates on Farfrae. This time also his virtue wins over his vice. His anger, hatred, and desperation are pacified not only by the weakness and helplessness of others (Farfrae and Lucetta) but also by his renewed desire to live with his stepdaughter.

This might have been a happy end—Henchard proposes and Elizabeth-Jane agrees to be reunited and live together as father and daughter. But Hardy prepares such a world for Henchard that cannot let him be appeased. The pacified situation must be agitated by a transformation or a change of status or an advent or re-advent of somebody else. Now we find Richard Newson who was earlier supposed to be dead but reappears in Casterbridge in search of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane. Incidentally, before meeting Elizabeth he meets Henchard who sends him back with a lie that his daughter is dead. Here Henchard counts his time being well aware of its consequences. So, he settles everything with Elizabeth and bids her goodbye because, as he thinks, the present condition is irreversible and his errors are irreparable. Moreover, with the reappearance of Richard Newson, Henchard apprehends the intervention of his former guilt in the present that he has always tried to remediate and repented for. Earlier he had little hope that he would be able to rectify his wrongdoing toward his wife and daughter. Now the situation is more turbulent than before—the disorder created by Henchard himself is too powerful to be given order. And, most importantly, a daughter cannot have two fathers at the same time—one must be denied, but Newson being the real father cannot be denied nor can Henchard be as he has long cherished the idea that Elizabeth-Jane is his daughter even after

knowing the truth and as for the daughter it has not been any different, that is, she has also considered Henchard her father. So, the situation is irreversible and cannot be corrected or restored. Michael Henchard is just a victim of this situation.

## Works Cited

Hardy, Thomas. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. London: Penguin, 1886. Print.

Shaw, Bernard. "Preface to Plays Pleasant." *Arms and the Man*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1953. *Internet Archive*. <https://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.242944/page/n3/mode/2up>. Accessed 5 June 2022.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. London: Penguin, 1993. Print.

## About the Author

Subrata Biswas is an Assistant Professor at City College, Kolkata. He co-edited *Peacocks in a Dream: An Anthology of Contemporary Indian English Verse*. He also translated a poetry collection named *The Journey*. He wrote several research articles in both English and Bengali published in *Spring Magazine on English Literature*, *Erothanatos*, *Kinshuk* and *Mukh*. His areas of interest are Modern European literature, folklore and literary philosophy.

Email: [subratabiswas.eng@citycollegekolkata.org](mailto:subratabiswas.eng@citycollegekolkata.org)