

Original Paper

On the Factors of Tragicomedy in 'On the Western Circuit'

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy writes many works on the basis of his philosophy that however hard human beings struggle to break out of a miserable situation by their will and efforts, they can't escape from their determined fate, because they are controlled by 'Immanent Will'. And he describes the life and death struggle between human beings and 'Immanent Will' in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

In 'On the Western Circuit', however, Hardy suggests that people can control their fate by their will and efforts but that the problem is whether or not they can make a right choice by their will and value judgement, in making a choice in a situation of ambivalence.

My aim in this essay is to focus on some of the factors involved in choices that are doomed to catastrophe by analyzing the psychology and behavior of three characters, and to examine some of elements in the construction of a successful tragicomedy.

I Introduction

Thomas Hardy wrote about fifty short stories and published them in four volumes.¹⁾ His short stories have been regarded as minor works for a long time because of what Hardy himself often would say that - he wrote them with only a light feeling between his best long novels. However, with the study of his short stories increasing, Hardian scholars and critics have come to estimate them more highly.

Here I take up 'On the Western Circuit' (1891)²⁾. This short story won the praise of Hardy's second wife, Emily Florence, and many critics. 'On the Western Circuit' was written in Hardy's mature age between his best novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1893).

This story is a simple melodrama, in which there are three main characters: Mrs. Edith Harnham, a lonely woman, married to an elderly wine-merchant; Mr. Charles Raye, a young barrister; Mrs. Harnham's maid, Anna,

a beautiful but illiterate country girl.

They happen to be involved in a strange 'triangular network of fraud and deception'³⁾ caused by miscalculation, unexpected events and well-intentioned motives, etc..

K. Brady comments on this point as follows:

Its [= 'On the Western Circuit'] plot typifies the sort of bizarre web of events and motives found in the well-made play.⁴⁾

Hardy makes this story tragicomical by interlacing ingeniously each fraud and deception that the three characters are obliged to commit, intentionally or unintentionally, according to their circumstances. Hardy excites the readers' sympathy and anxiety for them by combining the subject matter and circumstances of comedy with the feelings of tragedy. He says in his *Early Life*:

If you look beneath the surface of any farce you see a tragedy; and, on the contrary, if you blind yourself to the deeper issues of a tragedy you see a farce.⁵⁾

That is, tragedy and comedy are two sides of the same coin. Thus we can see tragedy in a comical situation and comedy in a tragical one. K.Brady on this point states: 'the funniest moments are also the most painful'⁶⁾ in this story.

Take the case of Raye, he at the beginning of the story idly seduces Anna without any intention of marrying her, but in the end decides to marry her because of the poetic love letters he received from her. After the wedding he knows that those sweet letters were written by Mrs.Harnham and realizes it was not Anna herself, but sweet letters named 'Anna' that he has loved. This scene is the funniest and at the same time the most painful. Raye is doomed to marry Anna in body, but to marry Mrs. Harnham in soul and spirit. The result is very tragic for him, but

the process leading to the tragical catastrophe is very comic. The key to success in this tragicomical story is Anna's role; that is to say, she is indispensable for analyzing the other two characters' psychology and portraying their personality.

Hardy's insight into the complexities of human psychology is always very prominent and acute. In this story he also cuts to the heart of each character's mentality: for example, Mrs.Harnham's self-deception and her deception of others; Mr.Raye's egocentric idealization and self-centered miscalculation; Anna's self-defense and vanity, and so on. Hardy skillfully interlaces these psychological factors with their circumstances and describes human stupidities, weaknesses, and sorrows, etc..

In this essay I will study this story from a psychological standpoint and deal with the factors of tragicomedy through analyzing the three main characters' psychology in detail.

II Mrs. Edith Harnham's self-deception and her deception of others

Edith's self-deception started with her marriage to an elderly wine-merchant. The narrator explains the details of her marriage as follows:

Influenced by the belief of the British parent that a bad marriage with its aversion is better than free womanhood with its interests, dignity, and leisure, she had consented to marry the elderly wine-merchant as a *pis aller*, at the age of seven-and-twenty—some years before this date—to find afterwards that she had made a mistake. That contract had left her still a woman whose deeper nature had never been stirred.(467)

She is a lonely young woman with no child and she feels frustrated sexually and emotionally in her married life. She doesn't care

much about her husband and their loveless life creates a deep chasm between them, as shown in his words: 'But I'll go if you wish, though I'd rather go a hundred miles the other way'. (460) However, she invites her own misfortunes because she entered into a contract with an elderly man whom she doesn't love as '*a pis aller*' (in the last resort). In this fact, she deceives herself as well as her husband and lives a life as his wife under self-deception. Her second self-deception was when she took the orphaned Anna into her household to train her as a servant, because they came from the same district; the Great Mid-Wessex Plain. Mrs.Harnham is seemingly very generous and kind to Anna with an altruistic love for her, but she only wants her vacant mind to be filled up by taking charge of Anna, which is no more than egoistic love for herself.

The following episode is proof of that fact. At Melchester Fair, the three persons meet and at a glance Raye falls in love with Anna, while Mrs.Harnham is so gently stirred with his manner and voice, with the tenderness of his idle touch—a touch given by mistake, though he intended to clasp Anna's fingers. Moreover he 'playfully slopped two of his fingers inside Mrs.Harnham's glove against her palm'(460). This sexual touch attracts her body and spirit like magic; that is to say, he stirred her 'deep nature' as a 'she-animal'. (467) And she feels jealous of Anna for her youth and position wondering: 'how he had come to be attracted by the girl,'(461) and watches their behavior from behind the wall not as a protector but out of jealousy. However she says to Anna: 'Well, if he's respectable, of course I've nothing to say against your knowing him,'(461) in spite of her general principles and the fact that she is attracted to him herself. Here we notice that Mrs. Harnham's saying and doing is full of incon-

sistencies but that she wears a mask of self-deception from her dilemma.

Her self-deception was shown in her correspondence with Raye as the ghost-writer for Anna. When Mrs.Harnham found Anna was illiterate and that she had received a letter from Raye, she agreed to write her love letters for her as 'only a protector, to keep alive his attachment to the girl if possible.'(466) But in reality, she only wished to keep alive her attachment to him. As shown in the expression, 'The humble note - paper is Anna's, but the life, the spirit, the individuality of the letters are Mrs.Harnham's'(466). Thus 'the same process of manufacture was accordingly repeated by Anna and her mistress.'(467) Mrs.Harnham and Anna were to deceive Raye as well as themselves.

As time went on she was 'possessed to the bottom of her soul with the image of a man to whom she was hardly so much as a name.' (467) She completely took the place of Anna; she got into Anna, and came to answer his letter 'on her own responsibility, from the depths of her own heart, without waiting for Anna's collaboration on 'the manufacture.' (467) As a result she fanned Raye's emotion more and more to bring about 'a magnetic reciprocity' between them.(467) This is the big sin perpetrated by Mrs. Harnham toward Raye and Anna. She was to deceive both Raye and Anna by her self-deception, which caused them to fall into a catastrophe.

If Anna had not become pregnant, their deceiving each other (their fraud and deception) by the 'manufacture' might have continued without being disclosed. Mrs.Harnham wrote to Raye who knew of Anna's pregnancy but who couldn't come down to Melchester as follows:

She desired above everything to be no weight upon him in his career, no clog upon his activities. She had wished him

to know what had befallen: he was to dismiss it again from his mind. Only he must write tenderly as ever, . . . (468)

This letter was not written by a protector but by her selfish feeling as shown in the sentences 'Only he must write tenderly as ever,' or 'One thing was imperative: to keep the young man's romantic interest in her alive.' (468) Mrs. Harnham herself didn't want to lose the romantic fantasy of love for Raye, because the vacuum of her married life was filled with the love letters she sent to Raye by projecting herself into Anna's position.

It is ironic that he was moved to read 'the self-sacrifice apparent in every line' (469) and decided to marry her, because Mrs. Harnham wrote the self-sacrificing letter to him only to maintain correspondence with him in spite of the uneasy feeling she had about this. As a result, contrary to her intention the marriage of Raye and Anna caused her love in the 'ecstasy of fancy' to end. In this scene the more serious his attitude is, the more comical it is for the readers who know everything.

By Raye's wish, the marriage ceremony was to be held in London. Mrs. Harnham offered to go up with Anna so as only 'to see the end of her.' (472) But we can notice her self-deception in her words; she wanted to see 'the death of her dream' and 'the man who by a species of telepathy had exercised such an influence on her.' (472)

Immediately after the marriage ceremony, Anna was obliged to write a letter to his sister who couldn't attend the ceremony because of illness. He was shocked to find her unable to write a beautiful poetic letter; this very ability had been the reason he had decided to marry her. Then at last he realized that he was deceived by these two women whom at first he had intended to deceive. This scene is very tragicomic for

Raye and is brought about completely by his own initial actions. Let's cite part of the conversation between Mrs. Harnham and Raye.

'You have deceived me — ruined me!'

'O, don't say it! I can't bear that!'

'Delighting me deceptively! Why did you do it — why did you!' (475)

However it is nonsense to reproach these two women for deceiving him, because it was he who challenged them with fraud and deception first.

Mrs. Harnham is no better than her self-deception. Her answer to his 'Why' is as follows:

I began doing it in kindness to her! How could I do otherwise than try to save such a simple girl from misery? But I admit that I continued it for pleasure to myself. (475)

In the last two lines, she shows her real motive, because she only wanted to convey her deep infatuation for him at the death of her dream. Whatever the fact, they confessed their love to each other and admitted that 'they are friends — lovers — devoted lovers — by correspondence!' (475) Moreover, Raye swore that 'Legally I have married her [= Anna] — God help us both! — in soul and spirit I have married you and no other woman.' (475) As a result he accepts this fate calmly, saying 'It serves me right!' (475)

Her remorse for what she did to him is as follows: 'I have ruined him; because I would not deal treacherously towards her.' (476) It is part of her self-deception that she never blames herself, saying she did it for the sake of Anna. Here Hardy suggests that she will repeat her self-deception in the future. Her passionate dream in the ecstasy of fancy is awakened by her husband's emergence. She completely forgot her real husband while she was in the strange position of having to corre-

spond with a man that was not her husband. Let's listen to their conversation. When her husband entered the room where she stooped over in despair just after coming home from London, she asked him:

'Ah — who's that?'

'Your husband — who should it be?'

'Ah — my husband! — I forgot I had a husband!'(476)

What a comical but bitter irony of 'marital disharmony' this scene is! Hardy seems to hint that a loveless couple who can't divorce must be obliged to live their married life by self-deception on the part of each linked to the deception of each by the other.

III Raye's egocentric idealization and miscalculation

Raye is a young barrister in London, but he drops in at Melchester on his tour of the 'Western Circuit' and happens to meet Anna and Mrs. Harnham at the Melchester Fair. Though he is fascinated with Anna's beauty, he has no intention to marry her; that is to say, he seduces her by only 'a passing desire.' (463) As proof of this he tells her his 'pseudonym, or rather partial name, 'the initials "C. B"'(463) with an address at a stationer's near-by his lodging.

He regards Anna as only 'the negative good of keeping him from idle pleasures in town.' (463) He wishes to see her only when he drops in at Melchester on the Western Circuit, but an unexpected state of affairs begins when she doesn't write to him. Other girls who have relations with him have been sure to write to him. Here his egocentric idealization makes him falsely suppose that she must be too reticent to write a letter to a man. As a result, contrary to his idea that he doesn't want to get too deeply involved on a love affair, he is obliged to write to her to give him 'a brief line' of himself. Hardy shows us

paradoxical human psychology in Raye's behavior toward her. Raye's miscalculation becomes the first factor of the tragicomical catastrophe.

Next, when he received an unexpectedly beautiful and poetic letter from Anna, he miscalculated again and thought she must be an intelligent and educated girl. As the readers know of Mrs. Harnham and Anna's 'manufacture' of love letters to him, his egocentric idealization of her seems to be both comical and pitiful. He was to misjudge the situation for a third time because of Anna's pregnancy. Namely, when he received a letter filled with self-sacrifice and tenderness toward him, he cries:

She had a nobility of character that he had never dreamt of finding in woman-kind. And I didn't know she was such a treasure as this!(469)

Making up his mind to marry Anna in spite of his intention of only continuing correspondence with her, he wrote to her in his real name for the first time. He also thinks of his own advantage by the marriage with her because of his egocentric idealization as follows:

She would make as good a professional man's wife as could be desired, even if he would rise to the woosack.(471)

However, such an egocentric idealization of Anna collapses at a stroke immediately after the marriage ceremony, and he realizes that it was beautiful, poetic letters signed "Anna," not Anna herself that he loved; that is to say he was aware of his loving a false image, not the real image covered up by these two women. Shocked to know that he was deceived by a young girl whom he had intended to deceive as only an object of 'passing desire,' he reproaches Mrs. Harnham, saying 'You have deceived me — ruined me! . . . ' but it had been the accumulation of his

own egocentric idealization that had caused the misjudgement that drove him into the catastrophe. He secretly compares his married life to 'a galley' as he watches the uneducated girl despairingly:

She did not know that before his eyes he beheld as it were a galley, in which he, the fastidious urban, was chained to work for the remainder of his life, with her, the unlettered peasant, chained to his side.(476)

There is no hope for his married life in the future, but he can't divorce her because a divorce wasn't legal at that time:

'What are you doing, dear Charles?' She said timidly from the other window, and drew nearer to him as if he were a god. 'Reading over all those sweet letters to me signed "Anna",' he replied with dreary resignation.

In the last scene, the contrast between Raye's despair for his future, and Anna's happiness that she could marry at last, also seems to express the bitter irony of marital disharmony.

IV Anna's vanity and self-defense

Orphaned Anna was brought up by 'an aunt by marriage,' who was an ignorant woman with no interest in education, so she had no chance of even completing elementary school. Anna's profile is described through Raye's eyes as follows:

'fairer product of nature'(457)
 'the pink and breezy Anna'(464)
 'his fascinating child of nature,' 'the prettiest girl,'(456)
 'unreserved — too unreserved — by nature'(457)

She is simple and innocent enough to give him her 'body and soul' as soon as she met him, but her self-defense and vanity are very strong.

I will mention several scenes that give an illustration of her vanity and self-defense. When she asks her mistress to write a letter for her, she says:

'You'll do it as well as ever you can, please? Because I couldn't bear him to think I am not able to do it myself. I should sink into the earth with shame if he knew that!'(466)

And she defends herself against her mistress' advice that she had better at least sign her name for herself: 'I should do it so bad. He'd be ashamed of me, and never see me again.' (466)

Anna doesn't realize that such vanity and self-defense are much worse than confessing her illiteracy. If she had made an effort to do letter writing exercises, the story might have had different ending. However, Anna, ruled by her vanity and self-defense, never tried to write letters to Raye by herself, forcing the ghost-writing upon her mistress.

By and by the positions of mistress and maid came to reverse themselves in the 'manufacture,' which K.Brady points out as follows:

Throughout the story, the 'mistress' and 'maiden' are constantly compared, and at several crucial moments, the one actually assumes the role of the other. In education, intellectual sophistication, and social standing, Edith is in every way Anna's 'mistress,' but at a deeper level they are akin.'

It is strange that the educated 'mistress' and uneducated 'maiden' are put on the same level, but perhaps Hardy intends to point out women are the same at 'a deeper level' regardless of differences in their education or social standing.

As Mrs.Harnham goes too far into the 'manufacture,' she suffers the pangs of conscience for deceiving Raye, who has already

decided to marry Anna, and advises her to confess the truth to him before the marriage in order to avoid tragedy after the marriage has taken place. But Anna still holds fast to her vanity and self-defense and says:

If you were to do it, perhaps he would not marry me; and what should I do then? It would be terrible what would come to me!(471)

And besides, she says:

You do it so beautifully, and say all that I want to say so much better than I could say it, that I do hope you won't leave me in the lurch just now.(472)

Her self-defense and vanity can be read in what she says and implores. Even if she had the courage to confess the truth to Raye at the present stage, she might not be able to avoid tragedy. Nobody knows what they would be in the future. After the marriage ceremony, when her secret was disclosed, she makes an excuse to him:

I can't! . . . I — I didn't write those letters, Charles! I only told her what to write! And not always that! But I am learning, O so fast, my dear, dear husband! And you'll forgive me, won't you, for not telling you before?(474)

It is very ironic and pitiful that she falls into the fate of being deceived by him in the marriage, which she had got by deceiving him because of her vanity and self-defense, even if she loved him deeply.

V Conclusion

Hardy blends both tragic and comic effects into a well-made tragicomedy. The plot of this story is very comical and satirical, while its ending is very tragic and ironic. Namely

Hardy succeeds in eliciting tragical feelings from the reader by using a comical plot and farcical situations. Hardy skillfully combines an illiterate maid and an educated mistress, who comes to ghost-write love letters for her maid, with a man loved by these two women at the same time and divided into 'spirit and body'. It is here that Hardy produces the circumstances of catastrophe leading to the complex and tragic ending.

In this essay I examined the factors involved in catastrophe by analyzing the psychology and behavior of the three characters, and found that among such factors are self-deception, deception of others, vanity, self-defense, egocentric idealization and miscalculation, and self-love.

Hardy in this story describes the agony of people living their life in contradictory situations, and in the web of fraud and deception repeated without end. That is to say, when they choose to blind themselves to such contradiction, they must first deceive themselves and inevitably deceive others, and it is not long before they realize that they are driven into catastrophe.

Lastly, Hardy also emphasizes that it is not their determined fate, but their own will and value judgement that guides their choices when falling into ambivalent situations; that is, he seems to suggest that human beings are not controlled by fate, but they can control their destiny and carve out their own fate in contradiction to Hardy's own philosophy, 'Determinism.' We can read in this tragicomedy Hardy's deep compassion for people who must live in the world full of contradiction, involved in the web of fraud and deception.

Notes

1) *Wessex Tales* (1888)

A Group of Noble Dames (1896)

Life's Little Ironies (1894)

A Changed Man and Other Stories (1913)

- 2) Hardy T (1988) *Collected Short Stories*, Macmillan London, p458. (The page number of each quotation from this textbook is written at the end of each sentence.)
- 3) Brady K (1982) *The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy*, Macmillan London, p127.
- 4) Ibid., p120
- 5) Hardy F E (1933) *The life of Thomas Hardy*, Macmillan, London, p282.
- 6) Brady K, op.cit., p120.
- 7) Ibid., p123.