Hardy’s philosophy of life is marked with a strong note of fatalism. In Hardy’s novels Destiny is character. Man is a helpless creature, a mere puppet at the hands of Destiny or Fate. Man in Hardy’s world does not enjoy Free Will. The keen eyes of fate are always looking intently on his activities with a view to intervening as and when it so likes. Man is not free to choose the type of life he wants to live. Obstacles and hindrances swarm on his path of life,
and they thwart all his hopes and aspirations, though man wages a futile battle against the odds so created.

A struggle between men on the one hand and, on the other an omnipotent and indifferent fate—that is Hardy’s interpretation of the human situation. This struggle determines the character and nature of his drama. Like other dramas, this turns on a conflict, but the conflict is not, as in most novels between one man and another, or between man and an institution. Man in Hardy’s novels is ranged against impersonal forces, the forces conditioning his fate. His characters themselves are always aware of this. Henchard is obsessed by his hatred of Farfrae: Bathsheba looks on Troy as the author of her misfortunes. But from the point of view from which Hardy surveys their stories, Bathsheba and Henchard are seen to be under a delusion. For those whom they think their enemies are as much as themselves puppets in the hands of Fate.

By Fate Hardy means all those powers and factors which are beyond the power of man to control. All those conditions and circumstances over which man has no control and which play in important role in his life constitute Fate. They include man’s heredity, parentage, his place of birth, the socio-economic position of his parents and his chance, meetings with many persons. Hardy’s God is malignant and vengeful. God employs Fate and chance as two powerful whips to as human beings with.

Human beings are mere toys in the hands of blind Fate. They wage a heroic struggle against it but they always fall down.
The importance that fate assumes in the novels of Hardy is entirely in keeping with his philosophy of life.

Fate works in various ways. It takes the form of heredity and impulses in man. Hardy is fond of tracing the heredity of a character. He does so in the case of Tess, Eustacia, Troy and many others. It is a fate that determines the nature of a person. Eustacia is impulsive and gloomy. This is not her seeking. This is in her nature. She cannot alter it. Oak is sincere but tactless in dealing with his love. He realizes it but cannot help it. Tess is a pure woman and suffers a spiritual conflict. More often than not Fate assumes the form of love in Wessex novels. According to Hardy only love can give us happiness in life. But even love generally leads to tragic consequences. The workings of love are erratic. Two persons of dissimilar nature are drawn together but soon they find themselves in grief. If Eustacia had loved Wildeve and Thomasin loved Clym the tragedy of *The Return of the Native* would have been avoided.

Fate also appears in external forms. Generally it assumes three forms: (i) nature (ii) circumstances, and (iii) chance. Henchard’s hopes of a good harvest are ruined by bad weather. The sultry heat of Egdon kills Mrs. Yeobright and precipitates the tragedy in *The Return of the Native*.

But very Commonly Fate appears as Chance in the novels of Hardy. Tess is forced to go to Mrs. D'Urbervilles because the horse dies accidentally and this sets the tragedy of her life in motion. Oak’s sheep are killed by chance and he has to give up the hope of marrying Bathsheba. When
Mrs. Yeobright goes to call on Clym, Wildeve happens to be present there by chance and this brings about the tragic crisis in *The Return of the Native*. In this way chance plays an important role in almost all his novels.

We may not take some examples to illustrate the working of Fate and chance in *The Return of the Native*. It is fate that brings Clym back to his native country. He came back with high aims and ambitions to serve the natives by educating them, but Fate willed otherwise, and all his plans ended in frustration. Again it was fate that united him with Eustacia and not with Thomasin. If Clym had married Thomasin in place of Eustacia, there would have been no tragedy in the life of Clym or even Eustacia.

Chance incidents also happen in the same erratic way. A very striking chance occurs when Eustacia neglects to go to the door to open it when Mrs. Yeobright knocks at Clym’s house, where she has gone to reconcile with her son. If Eustacia had opened the door, a very great tragedy might have been averted. The poor old woman, broken in heart, goes back across the Heath and is stung by a poisonous serpent. This accidental death of Mrs. Yeobright finally leads to the final estrangement between Clym and Eustacia and the death of Eustacia.

In fact, a series of coincidences occur from the very beginning of the novel. The novel opens with coincidence of some irregularity in the marriage license for Wildeve and Thomasin. Further, the fact that Mrs. Yeobright hears of her son’s intention of marrying Eustacia on the very day
when clym had planned to bring her mother and Eustacia together, frustrates his plan and the two women never reconcile to the end. Later, when Mrs. Yeobright knocks at the door of Clym, he is found asleep and does not hear his mother’s knocking. The mother, however, believes that her son had intentionally ignored her knocking. Again, by coincidence, Clym stumbles across his dying mother on his way to visit her. Fate and chance frustrate the attempts of both the mother and the son to meet and get reconciled. Further in the story, Charley tries to surpise Eustacia by lighting a bonfire on the fifth of November, but she takes this light as a signal given by Wildeve to call her for a secret meeting with him over the Heath. This meeting brings about Wildeve’s offer of aid to Eustacia and results in their doom. On the very day Eustacia sets out to meet Wildeve, Clym sends her a letter asking her to return to him, but by chance the letter does not reach her. Clym, finally arrives too late to save Eustacia from drowning. All these coincidences prompted by fate and chance finally lead to the catastrophe. Fate and chance pursue human characters as a hunting dog would pursue his prey. Man is helplessly caught in the trap of fate and chance.

Fate is ultimately responsible for their quarrels and subsequent miseries. Unless they were destined to do so, they would not be in conflict with each other. Not that hardy refuses to make moral distinctions between his characters. On the contrary, his leading figures divide themselves into instruments for good and for evil. This line between them is determined by their attitude to themselves. All alike are striving for happiness: but whereas Eustacia or
Fitzpiers or Arabella strive with selfish passion, Gabriel and Tess and Giles are prepared to sacrifice their own happiness to ensure that of other people.

Forces of Fate, in Hardy’s novels, incarnate themselves in two forms— as chance and as love. Of these chance is the most typical, in no other novels does chance exercise such a conspicuous influence on the course of events. Hardy has been blamed for this; and no doubt, he does sometimes overdo it. But to condemn his use of chance altogether is to misunderstand his view of life. In life we witness a battle between Man and Destiny. Destiny is an inscrutable force: we do not understand its nature or its intentions. And we cannot, therefore, predict what it will do. In consequence, its acts always show themselves in the guise of inexplicable, unexpected blows of chance.

Hardy himself says about human destiny, “The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that rest for existence which was so intense in early civilization must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure. People already feel that a man who lives without disturbing a curve of feature, or seating a mark of mental concern anywhere upon himself, is too for removed from modern perceptiveness to a modern type.”

In Egdon Heath we find the direct expression of Hardy’s environment. Sometimes one gets the impression that Egdon Heath symbolises the inferior morality of the First Cause of Hardy’s universe.
Throughout the novel the spirit of the Heath works in the way in which it appeared to Clym:

“There was the imperturbable countenance of the Heath, which having defined the cataclysmal onsets of centuries reduced to significance by its seamed and antique features, the wildest turmoil of a single man.”²

It “gives the effect of timelessness in change which broods over human life and makes our destinies at once significant and futile, matters for tears, or for indifference.”³

Terror is aroused from a “sense of puny mortals acting out their little drama of a moment against boundless time.”⁴

Hardy expresses in a subtle manner the relationship of nature to Fate. Fate appeared in Greek tragedies like a character-hood winking, erring mortals and laughing upon them grimly. Hardy in a similar way shows Egdon Heath working his influence upon other characters. In the words of Professor Bonamy Dobree: “Without it not Eustacia Vye, nor the reddleman, nor Clym Yeobright, nor Thomasin, nor even deaf, grotesque old Grandfer Cantie would have been the same. In Hardy’s novels it may not be fate that is shown working through us, but it is certainly the earth working us, both the earth and ourselves being part of the expression of the Immanent Will or if you prefer, the blind creative principle.”⁵ Egdon is a character and a very important character in the novel.
It has a personality “neither ghastly, hateful nor ugly, neither common place unmeaning nor tame but slighted and enduring.” All other characters react to Heath.

Clym says, “I would rather live on these hills than anywhere else in the world” when everything is lost for him. He gets consolation in the imperturbable countenance of the Heath and preaches resignedly on it.

Eustacia’s reactions are different.

Egdon was her Hades. She says so many times, “It is a jail to me,” “It's my cross, my misery and will be my death; “The Heath is a cruel task master to me;” “Not you this place I live in has been my ruin.”

Egdon retaliates her behaviour and drowns her. Wildeve declares, “I abhor it too.” “God! How lonely it is! What are picturesque ravines and mists to us who see nothing else?” Egdon is cruel to him also.

Egdon seems helpful to the reddleman who has been described as the spirit of Egdon. Heath protects and rewards Thomasin because she is fond of it and her graceful movements resembled the movements of its feathered creatures. The attitude of Egdon towards Thomasin is beautifully described by Hardy. On the night nearing the end, “To her there were not as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain: Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever but impersonal open ground. At this time it was in her view a windy
wet place in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care and possibly catch cold.”

Heath appears to be sympathetic to Mrs. Yeobright.

When she returns broken and dejected, Egdon sends her the anodyne of death.

Everyone of the characters in this novel is consciously or unconsciously affected by the atmosphere of the Heath whether they love it or hate it. It is the symbol of circumstance of fate that laughs at the insignificance of human life and weaves a web of misery round men and women.

The tragedy of human life is due to the governance of human fate by a maligned and irrational power which is totally indifferent. Egdon Heath provides the adequate background for the characters in this novel to reach the tragic end. Its geographical and topographical features are fitted to create the tragic atmosphere. The whole action of the novel takes place in the small area of this desolate moorland. That there was the quality of “an apparent repose of incredible slowness” which made the inhabitants of Egdon meditative and thoughtful. Egdon may be the symbol of man’s collective unconscious also besides impersonating outer environment. It is full of mystery, monotony and tragedy. In creating such a background for the erring yet dignified mortals, Hardy tries to present environment in all its various aspects and facets.

Man’s life is shaped not only by heredity, fate and circumstances but also by its surroundings, leaving it to difficult events over which it can
exercise no control. The first chapter which presents Egdon Heath as the back
ground of the novel is “like the overture to a great opera prescribing the mood
which is to dominate throughout and introducing us to themes that will recur
again and again in the course of the performance.” The description of Heath is
vivid and poetic. The Heath dominates the novel and is the shaping force in the
lives of the various characters. In painting the landscape of the Heath, Hardy
exhausts all his ingenuity. Hardy’s descriptions have the charm of personified
concreteness. He was akin to the Pre-Raphaelites and his presentation of the
entire landscape in concrete sensuousness, thrills us. The scenery of Egdon
Heath is beautiful as well as awe-inspiring.

Hardy has pointed out how the Heath had defied all “attempts at
reclamation from waste, tillage, after holding on for a year or two had seceded
against despair, the funs and furze-tufts stubbornly reasserting themselves.”\textsuperscript{9}
Hardy’s beautiful description of the Heath is a peculiar blend of realism and
imagination.

In comparison to him, the other characters are mere sketches with
the possible exception of Elizabeth-Jane who can be shown to occupy a very
special place in the design of this novel. The sub-title of the novel has been
subject to controversy, for according to some critics, Farfrae too is a man of
character. Apparently, Henchard degrades himself whereas Farfrae is full of
appreciable qualities. But it is Henchard, not Farfrae, who is the centre of
attention throughout the novel. The crucial incident, the selling of Susan, begins
with Henchard. Farfrae comes quite late in the novel. It is Henchard’s character that determines the course of events. Henchard is certainly a man of character. He is always conscious and repentant of his sin. He has very strongly marked qualities. His downfall is largely the outcome of the malignant Fate.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* we notice that everything in it turns out at the wrong time. It is a mere chance that Henchard is a poor hay-trusser and in search of employment he happens to come down to the fair at Weydon. When He offers his wife Susan for sale, by chance Newson, the purchaser arrives. Newson too happens to be a sailor. Had he been a native, Henchard would have brought Susan back. Throughout the novel, the story takes various turns on account of chance happenings. In the novel, while character is certainly responsible to a large extent for the tragedy, but chance and coincidence operate as the decisive factors. This chance is also called fate. Hardy felt that an evil power ruled the universe, defeating every effort of man to better his fortune or to seek happiness. Susan’s sudden return after a period of eighteen years, Henchard’s discovery that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, Farfrae’s accidental meeting with Lucetta, the appearance of the furmity woman, the fluctuations of weather, Newson’s return- are some of the important coincidences that determine the course of events in the novel. In fact, in this novel, there is a very strong connection between Henchard’s character and his fate, and yet the element of chance and coincidence plays a very striking role.
The Mayor of Casterbridge gives the impression that human existence is a tragical rather than a comical thing and that moment of gaiety are but interludes and no part of the main drama of life. In the opinion of Hardy, “Happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain”. A struggle between men on the one hand, and on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent Fate, that is Hardy’s interpretation of human situation. Hardy found human beings as mere puppets in the hands of the omnipotent power. He saw in gods an goddesses a hierarchy of tyrants who hurled thunder-bolts on the poor race of man. When the secret of the real father of Elizabeth-Jane is revealed to Henchard thought Susan’s letter, he anguished thinks “that the concatenation of events this evening had produced was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him.”

All this gives an impression that Hardy’s view of life is pessimistic. Hardy’s heroes and heroines suffer violently, but these tragic characters are not ‘dead’ creatures. They do not suffer meekly and silently. They are far from being victims of depression. On the other hand, they give a royal battle to their unrelenting fate. Christopher Coney well expresses their Philosophy: “But there’s great strength in hope”. This is confirmed in this novel when Henchard declares triumphantly that “My punishment is not greater than I can bear.”

Hardy’s plots are mostly based on accidents, coincidences and unforeseen happenings. Hardy saw plenty of tragedy in the life of Wessex
people. He perceived a struggle between men on the one hand and, on the other, on omnipotent and indifferent Fate. Much of the life of man is based on the working of a blind mechanism. In *Tess*, Hardy writes, “In the ill-judged execution of well-judged plan of things, the call seldom produces the comer; the man to love rarely coincides with the hour of loving. Nature does not often say, ‘See! to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing or reply ‘Here’ to a body’s cry ‘where?’ till the hide and seek has become an irksome outworn game.”

Hardy consciously or unconsciously emphasizes this aspect which dominates all human actions. Generally, Hardy’s characters always intend well in their actions. They are not inherently malicious and wicked. If at all they go astray, the very next moment they repent. But their wishes and aspirations are too often flouted by some unseen power which impels them to do some right task in some wrong manner or to suffer some misfortune heaped up upon their heads.

Chance plays the most conspicuous role. Sometimes, Hardy is criticized for his excessive use of Chance or Fate in his novels. But it should not be forgotten that we do find actual role of Chance in our life. We always witness a tug-of-war between man and destiny. “Destiny is an inscrutable force we do not understand its nature. And we cannot, therefore predict what it will do. In consequence it always shows itself in the guise of inexplicable, unexpected blows of Chance.”
The Mayor of Casterbridge is a chain of chance happenings. From the very beginning we notice that everything in it turns out at the wrong time. It is a mere chance that Henchard is a poor hay-trusser and in search of employment he happens to come down to the fair at Weydon. His wife Susan, who is fed up of his drunken habits, leads him to the tent of a furmity-seller. When he offers Susan for sale, by chance Newson, the purchaser, arrives. Newson too happens to be a sailor. Had he been a native, Henchard would have brought Susan back.

The major incident of chance in the novel concerns Henchard’s relationship with Farfrae. Henchard implores Farfrae to stay in Casterbridge, and it is this same Farfrae who says to capture Henchard’s business, Henchard’s lover, Henchard’s daughter, even Henchard’s title. Similarly, just as Henchard begins to love Elizabeth-Jane, he discovers that she is another man’s daughter. Again, Farfrae comes to Lucetta’s house to court Elizabeth-Jane but remains to marry Lucetta. Lucetta writes a letter to Henchard, but he fails to meet her at the right moment. Henchard does Lucetta a great and kindly favour when he agrees to return her letters, but it is this act that destroys Lucetta.

The story of the sale of Susan is suddenly disclosed by the old woman whose case Henchard hears as a magistrate. The revelation pours a malicious disaster upon him. Again, Henchard stakes his entire fortune on the prophecy of the weather-prophet, but events turn the other way. When Henchard reconciles himself to Elizabeth-Jane and finds solace in her loving
company, Newson re-appears to claim his daughter. Newson’s arrival completes the doom of Henchard. And lastly, Henchard comes with a present to attend the marriage of Elizabeth, but he is not able to see her and returns as the most dejected and broken person.

All these incidents are manifestations of some unforeseen power over which Henchard, and human beings in general, have got no control. Though it is largely Henchard’s character that determines his destiny, but the chain of Fate or chance is too hard for him to break and this adamantine chain thwarts all his desires and efforts and leaves him a mere cripple. In fact, Hardy’s scheme, Fate or Chance plays hide and seek with the characters. Farfrae also speaks of the role of Fate. Hardy rightly said, “When two persons make a programme, Fate is the invisible third partner.”

A thorough study of the novel reveals that Henchard is largely the architect of his own destiny. Henchard is depicted throughout the novel as a child-like primitive. He possesses an impulsive nature untempered by reason; and when he is disappointed, he is quick to take offence and seek revenge. His behaviour of being under the influence of alcohol is further evidence of his primitive nature. He is like the savage who is not allowed to drink the white man’s liquor lest he should return to his primitive ways; it is when he is drunk that he sells his wife. He is particularly susceptible to music. It is Farfrae’s musical ability that Henchard finds especially enchanting. In so far as
Henchard’s primitive qualities lead him to destruction this novel may be considered a testament to the notion that ‘character is fate’.

Henchard’s character determines his tragedy. His hasty actions and impulsive nature generate a series of misfortunes in his life resulting into his miserable death. Partly under the influence of liquor and partly under an impulse, Henchard sold his wife. It was a disgraceful act. No matter what the state of his mind at the time of the sale, the action in itself was one which cannot be condoned. It is true that an early marriage had proved a handicap to Henchard in the struggle to rise in life. But that does not extenuate his guilt in selling his wife. It is true that Henchard felt genuinely sorry for having subjected his wife to the humiliation of going away with another man and he even took a vow not to touch liquor for twenty-one years. But his feelings of repentance did not in any way alter the situation so far as the sale of Susan to the sailor Newson was concerned. Retribution overtakes Henchard long after the act of folly which he commits by selling his wife. For eighteen yeas this action of Henchard remains buried. And then, after eighteen years, he has to pay the penalty for his misdeed. Susan suddenly turns up when he is about to marry Lucetta. He suffers much torture on learning that Elizabeth-Jane is not his own daughter. Afterwards the furmity-woman discloses the secret which he had guarded for twenty years. This disclosure accelerates Henchard’s downfall. In other words, Henchard’s folly or blunder or misdeed in selling his wife brings in its wake a whole series of misfortunes, though a long time passes between the
committing of the folly and its punishment. What is to be noted is that Henchard’s own folly is responsible for much of his suffering though the suffering is much greater than his folly justifies.

Henchard is a man of strong passions likes and dislikes. He has peculiar prejudices, hatred and obstinacy. Farfrae catches his fancy all of a sudden and he becomes to fond of the Scotchman. Soon afterwards, however, Henchard’s attitude towards Farfrae undergoes a change. The Scotchman does nothing to offend or injure his employers. But Henchard is an impulsive and reckless man. His selling of his wife was due to this very trait of his character. Now he becomes jealous of Farfrae as suddenly as he had become fond of him. He terminates Farfrae’s services at the expiry of the original contract and starts a war against him. If Henchard had been a shrewd and sagacious man, he would never have alienated Farfrae. Henchard’s antagonism towards the Scotchman is quite uncalled for, and it is a direct consequence of his own temperament. He resolves to crush Farfrae when he discovers that Farfrae is not only his business-rival but also his rival in love. To a certain extent this reaction on Henchard’s part is natural. But to more certain, a more balanced and prudent man would have exercised restraint upon his feelings. Henchard, in a desperate effort to destroy Farfrae, enters into foolish and rash transactions and ruins himself.

Henchard shows an uncertain temper. His behaviour is unpredictable. When he loves, he loves intensely; when he hates, he hates
violently. When, after having told Elizabeth-Jane that she is his daughter and not Newson’s, he discovers from Susan’s letter that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson’s daughter after all, his attitude towards the girl undergoes a complete change. He suddenly becomes cold and indifferent towards her. In fact, she cannot understand the reason for the strange transformation in his attitude towards her. He now withdraws the ban which he had imposed upon Farfrae’s meeting with Elizabeth-Jane because now he would like to get rid of Elizabeth-Jane as soon as possible. Subsequently, after he has lost his status and his prosperity, he again becomes fond of Elizabeth-Jane, and now he becomes so deeply attached to the girl that she becomes indispensable to him. The thought of losing her now fills him with dismay and horror. It is this thought which makes him tell a lie to Newson and say that Elizabeth-Jane is dead. This lie subsequently turns Elizabeth-Jane against him, so that, when he comes to meet her on her wedding-day she treats him shabbily and he goes away utterly disappointed.

There are many other instances when his impulsive and uncertain moods lead him to disastrous consequences. On the occasion of the visit of the royal personage, he shows his impulsiveness. Farfrae is perfectly right in refusing to include Henchard among the persons who are to receive the royal visitor. But Henchard’s ego makes it necessary for him to assert himself. However, his effort to assert himself proves absolutely futile, and he is publicly disgraced by Farfrae who is not the Mayor of the town. But matters do not end there. Henchard wants to avenge the disgrace. He forces Farfrae to fight a sort
of duel with him, though at the last moment he relents towards his adversary and spares his life. The consequence of Henchard’s rashness on this occasion is that Farfrae refuses to believe him when he informs Farfrae that Lucetta is lying critically ill and that Farfrae’s presence is needed by her bed-side. Farfrae thinks that there is some sinister motive behind Henchard’s summons to him. Farfrae’s refusal to believe Henchard has a very depressing effect on Henchard. In this connection Hardy writes that “for this repentant sinner, at least, there was to be no joy in heaven.”

Though Henchard’s character is mainly responsible for his disaster, yet fate is not less responsible for it. His bad luck always pays a disastrous role in his life. His luck is seen in the form of coincidence, unforeseen circumstances and accidents. It is Henchard’s bad luck that after eighteen years Susan returns, and the irony is that she returns when he has decided to marry Lucetta. Susan keeps the identity of Elizabeth-Jane a secret from Henchard and this secret is out at a time when Henchard needs Elizabeth most. Henchard is also unlucky in his grain business. The weather-prophet comes in his life in the form of his bad luck. Then the furmity-woman appears once again in his life. It is also a manifestation of adverse fate of Henchard. If fate had been favourable to him this woman would have died already or she would not have come to Casterbridge at all. This woman’s disclosure of Henchard’s secret completes his doom. Newson’s return is yet another example of the working of Fate. It extinguishes the last hope of Henchard.
But in Tess Hardy has endeavoured to provide the element of terror, less in the substance of the story itself than in the background to it; which may be called argumentative, theological, dogmatic, and philosophical or what you will, but which is not intrinsic to the picture. In so far as it is not intrinsic, the book falls short of the highest standards. Judged by another famous theory of tragedy, the theory that tragedy lies, not in the conflict of right with wrong, but in the conflict of right with right, the same conclusion must be reached; for in Tess all Hardy’s powers are put forth to make us feel the right of one side only.

Hardy took his philosophy of the Immanent Will very seriously and undoubtedly saw Tess as the victim of ‘the President of the Immortals’. A pessimistic and determinist view of the world in which man is at the mercy of an unyielding outside Fate is the conscious philosophy behind the novel. The Sub-title ‘a pure woman’ is indicative of the kind of significance. Hardy gave to his story, and there is no doubt that this conscious philosophy affects the book, in general for the worse. It is responsible, for instance, for the ‘literary’ quality which mars the final sentence. It is responsible for our sense of loaded dice. And it is responsible ultimately for the psychological weakness, such as, the idealization of Tess, for the character is made too often to respond not to life but to Hardy’s philosophy.

And yet Tess survives Hardy’s philosophy. It survives because his imaginative understanding of the disintegration of the peasantry is more
powerful than the limiting tendencies of his conscious outlook. As a matter of fact I do not think we ought to sneer too securely at Hardy’s philosophy. No doubt it is, like Tolstoy’s, it emerges from a passionately honest attempt to grapple with real problems of quite overwhelming difficulty. Hardy at least did have a philosophy and there was more basis to his pessimism—the pessimism of the Wessex peasant who sees his world being destroyed—than can be laughed away with an easy gesture of contempt.

A struggle between man on the one hand and, on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent Fate—that is Hardy’s interpretation of the human situation. Like other dramas, this turns on a conflict; but the conflict is not, as in most novels, between one man and another, or between man and an institution. Man in Hardy’s books is ranged against impersonal forces. Not that his characters themselves are always aware of this. Henchard is obsessed by his hatred of Farfrae; Bathsheba looks on Troy as the author of her misfortunes. But from the point of vantage from which Hardy surveys their stories Bathsheba and Henchard are seen to be under a delusion. For those whom they think their enemies are as much as themselves puppets in the hand of Fate. Fate, not them, is ultimately responsible for their quarrels. unless they were destined to do so, they would not be in conflict with each other. Not that Hardy refuses to make moral distinctions between his characters. On the contrary, his leading figures divide themselves into instruments for good and instruments for evil. The line between them is determined by their attitude to themselves. All alike are
striving for happiness; but whereas Eustacia or Fitzpiers or Arabella strive with selfish passion, Gabriel and Tess and Giles are prepared to sacrifice their own happiness to ensure that of other people. This difference, however, in their characters does not affect the issue. That is in the hands of Fate. And indeed it is significant that Hardy-as a rule-emphasizes the fact that even those characters the world would call wicked are so much the creatures of circumstance that they are far more to be pitied than to be blamed. Henchard, for instance, seems, on the face of it, faulty enough-violent, vindictive and uncontrolled. From that first chapter in which he sells his wife at the Fair, until the end of the story, when he deliberately conceals from Elizabeth-Jane the news of her father’s arrival, lest she should wish to leave him, he acts in such a way as to justify an old-fashioned orthodox moralist in condemning him as the architect of his own misfortunes. But Hardy does not look at him in this way. Henchard, as he sees, him, is a pathetic figure, born with an unfortunate disposition but genuinely longing to do right, tortured by remorse when he does wrong, and always defeated by some unlucky stroke of Fate. Eustacia too-the gorgeous, tragic Eustacia of “The Return of the Native”-what desolation she brings on all around her in her unscrupulous fight for happiness! Yet Hardy does not represent her as hateful. An exotic orchid, planted by chance in the unfriendly northern moorland of Egdon, who can condemn her for snatching at every chance to achieve the sort of life in which alone her nature can find fulfillment? Who has no wish to make other people unhappy; she brushes aside anything
that impedes her way. Fate is her enemy. In a just vision of human life, all men alike are seen as brothers.

Fate is an abstraction, and in order that it may play an active part in a human drama. This necessity also determines the nature of Hardy’s drama. Hardy embodies Fate in various forms. Sometimes it appears as a natural force. Henchard’s plans for making himself rich are brought to nought by a bad harvest; the weather takes the part of Fate here. Sometimes it embodies itself as some innate weakness of character. Jude’s life is ruined because he has been endowed at birth, through not wish of his own, with an intensity of sexual temperament which he cannot control, and which is his undoing. Chiefly, however, the forces of Fate in hardy’s novels incarnate themselves in two guises—as chance, and as love. Of these, chance is the most typical. In no other novels does chance exercises such a conspicuous influence on the course of events. Hardy has been blamed for this: and no doubt he does sometimes overdo it. But to condemn his use of chance altogether is to misunderstand his view of life. We are witnessing a battle between man and Destiny. Destiny is an inscrutable force; we do not understand its nature or its intentions. And we cannot therefore predict what it will do. In consequence, its acts always show themselves in the guise of unexpected blows of chance. Mrs. Yeobright calls on a visit of reconciliation with her son at the one moment when, by an unlucky combination of circumstances, Eustacia, his wife, cannot admit her in consequence, she goes away to die, unreconciled with him. Hardy is out to show that Mrs. Yeobright
and Eustacia, in their struggle for happiness, are alike up against the process of the universal plan. Such apparent accidents are really as typical an expression of the nature of Fate as Mrs. Yeobright’s wish to make up her quarrel with her son is an expression of her nature.

Hardy tells us, there is discord in the nature of existence. Man is working to one end, Destiny to another. These ends may coincide or they may not. Either way, it is Destiny who decides what shall happen. Man cannot modify the will of Destiny. It is significant how many of Hardy’s plots turn on the revelation of a past action coming to light after being kept secret for some time. This happens in “A Pair of Blue Eyes”, “Far from the Madding Crowd”, “The Return of the Native”, “The Mayor of Casterbridge” and “Tess”. No doubt this was a common device in the stories were first invented. For by this means he can convey how the fate of his characters is predetermined by forces hidden from them. To the characters, the past may be dead; they may have put their past actions behind them. But they cannot escape their consequences. For the action has become a hostage which they have presented to Destiny and which Destiny may uses against them which it will use with a ruthless indifference to their feelings.

The happiness promised by love is the most universal symbol of this thirst that Hardy could have chosen. for every sort of human being in every sort of circumstance responds to the call of love; in love’s ecstasy they find an intimation of the happiness that they hope will free them from the burden of the
human lot. Alas, their hope is vain. For love, so far from being a benevolent spirit, consoling and helping man in his struggle with the inhuman forces controlling human existence, is itself a manifestation of these forces. Love, conceived by Hardy is “the Lord of terrible aspect” - a blind, irresistible power, bringing ruin in its train. His men and women would find it possible to walk the bleak road they might endure life fairly easily, even if they did not enjoy it, were it not for this storm which sweep them off their feet, only to fling them down again, broken and despairing. Even in “The Trumpet Major” or “Far from the Madding Crowd”, when love does achieve a happy fruition, it is shadowed with sadness. It is a minor key, twilight serenity, that closes the drama of Bathsheba and Gabriel; Anne and Bob Loveday may be happy, but their happiness is won at the expense of John, the noblest of the three. “Under the Greenwood Tree” is the only one of Hardy’s successful works in which the love story ends in unqualified sunshine and “Under the Green-wood Tree” is the light-weight among his masterpieces in all the other great works.

They gain in stature from this vaster significance which Hardy attaches to them. Indeed- and this is the final effect of his philosophy on his work-the angle from which he surveyed human life was such as to make his picture of it drawn on the grandest scale. We are shown life in its fundamental elements, as exemplified by simple, elemental characters, actuated by simple, elemental passions. What other exhibit man’s ultimate relation to Destiny? And the fact that they are seen in relation to ultimate Destiny gives them a gigantic
and universal character. Nor is the universality of this picture weakened by the fact that Hardy writes only of country people in nineteenth century Wessex. On the contrary, he preferred this setting because he thought that in such a society human existence appeared at its most elemental, with its naked structure unconcealed by the superficial trappings of more sophisticated modes of existence. Concentrated in this narrow, sequestered form of life, the basic facts of the human drama showed up at their strongest; undisturbed by other distractions, the basic human passions burned at their hot test.

“It was one of those sequestered spots,” he says, describing the hamlet of Hinxton, which is the centre of the tragical history “Woodlanders”,

“outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises, and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein.”

For all that Hardy makes such play with the local characteristics of his scene, yet always he penetrates beneath them to those universal facts of human existence. In spite of the loving exactitude he details the characteristic
features of Wessex life. He never lets us forget that this Wessex life is part of the life of the whole human race.

References

1. Preface to Far From the Madding Crowd.
2. The Return of the Native, p. 120
3. Ibid., p. 121
4. Ibid., p. 121
5. Bonamy Dobree, Thomas Hardy, p. 197.
7. Ibid., p. 126
8. Ibid., p. 127
10. The Mayor of Casterbridge, p. 131
11. Preface Tess
12. The Mayor of Casterbridge, p. 104
13. The Woodlanders, p. 205