Chapter - Four

Existentialism in The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess of The D’Urbervilles

Michael Henchard, aged 21, is a rugged hay-trusser. Along with his wife Susan and daughter Elizabeth-Jane, he is seen walking towards the village of Weydon-Priors in upper Wessex. Henchard, being unemployed at this time, is in search of a job. They arrive at a fair going on in the village. Entering a tent, he finds furmenty being sold by an old woman. He winks at her and she mixes some rum with furmity. Henchard drinks a few basins of the liquor which soon over-powers. He highly drunk, he begins complaining that he is not happy with his married life because he got married too early. Losing his sense, he offers his
wife Susan for auction to anyone who will buy her. By chance a young sailor Newson comes on the scene and offers five guineas to buy Susan. The woman warns her husband that she will really go away with Newson, if he were doing it in earns. Henchard is so drunk that the deal is finalised. The sailor Newson gives the amount and walks out of the tent with Susan and the child Elizabeth. Henchard fall asleep, deadly drunk.

On waking up the next morning, Henchard recalls the event of the last night. He earnestly repents for what he had done. He goes to the village chapel and takes a solemn oath that he will not touch any kind of liquor for a period of twenty-one years, being a year for every year that he has lived. He makes a hectic search for his wife and child but fails. Finally he decides to settle in the nearby town of Casterbridge. He informs the furmity woman before leaving Weydon-Priors.

After a gap of eighteen years, Susan, along with her daughter, returns to Weydon Priors, Newson being supposed to have died on the seas. Susan has no support now, so she is obliged to search out Henchard. She meets the old furmity-woman about the whereabouts of Henchard who had sold his wife eighteen years ago. The furmity woman recalls the event and tells Susan that the man had gone to Casterbridge. Susan has never told anything about her past history to Elizabeth-Jane. Nor has she told her anything about her relationship with Henchard. Elizabeth-Jane only knows that he is a distant relative Susan and Elizabeth-Jane travel to the town of Casterbridge in search of
Michael Henchard. Susan is highly astonished to know that Henchard is the mayor of the town and a rich corn merchant. When they reach the town, Henchard is attending an official banquet at the king’s Arms Hotel. Elizabeth-Jane learns from the people that the mayor does not drink liquor because of an oath taken by him eighteen years ago.

As the king’s Arms Hotel, an agitation against Henchard is seen for he has supplied bad wheat to the bakers of the town. When he is trying to satisfy the customers, he receives a note sent by a stranger, named Donald Farfrae. Farfrae has informed the mayor that he knows the method of improving bad wheat. After the banquet, Henchard goes to see Farfrae at the Three Mariners where he is staying. Henchard is highly impressed by Farfrae’s knowledge of agriculture and his personality. Henchard offers Farfrae an appointment as his manager which at first Farfrae declines but the next morning he agrees.

Susan and Elizabeth-Jane also stay at the Three Mariners for a night. Susan sends Elizabeth to Henchard with a message of her arrival. Henchard meets Susan at a secluded place. He assures her to make amends to Susan for his treatment towards her. It is decided that she should stay with Elizabeth in a cottage in the town, and he would pay a few visits to her as a suitor and then finally they would marry. In this way they would again be united and their past life would remain unrevealed. However, Henchard reveals his story to Farfrae who has by now earned Henchard’s confidence. He tells Farfrae that he had promised a New Jersey woman to marry but now his wife has
returned. Farfrae advises that he should accept his wife again to make amends for his mistake. Henchad, therefore, sends a letter through Farfrae to the New Jersey woman explaining the whole thing to her. After a few visits to Susan, Henchard marries her. Susan does not tell the reality of Elizabeth Jane, though Henchard is surprise to see the brown hair of the girl.

Henchard and Farfrae have become very intimate to each other. But some small things begin between them creating a rift in their relations. Farfrae becomes more and more popular on account of his amiable behaviour and pleasing personality. Henchard grows jealous of him. So he does not renew the contract with him. Farfrae begins his own independent corn business. This upsets Henchard a lot with the result that he treats Farfrae as his enemy. He even asks Elizabeth-Jane not to meet Farfrae.

Due to consistently deteriorating health Susan dies. She leaves a sealed letter meant to be opened by Henchard after the marriage of Elizabeth-Jane. Elizabeth-Jane considers herself as the daughter of Newson, but Henchard tries to convince that she is his daughter and not Newson’s. Therefore, she should change her name from Elizabeth-Jane Newson to Elizabeth-Jane Henchard. In order to show adequate documents as a proof, he makes a search of them in his bed-room. Instead of those documents, he happens to come across Susan’s sealed letter which he opens out of curiosity. The revelation comes as a great revelation shock. He learns that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson’s daughter. The springs of paternal feelings for the girl began to dry up. Henchard
now becomes indifferent to Elizabeth-Jane. There grows a gradual estrangement between the two.

The New Jersey lady Lucetta Templeman arrives at Casterbridge to stay there. Elizabeth-Jane happens to meet her near the grave of her mother. Lucetta tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is going to settle at High Place Hall and that she wants somebody to live with her in her house. In the meantime Farfrae has developed an amorous liking for Elizabeth-Jane. When she goes to stay with Lucetta, Farfrae becomes Henchard’s rival in love also. In the meantime, the old furmety woman appears in the town and discloses the past deed of Henchard. This disclosure creates a sensation and Henchard falls in the eyes of the town people. Lucetta hurridely marries Farfrae because she wants to avoid Henchard forever. This marriage disheartens Elizabeth-Jane, so she leaves Lucetta’s house.

The rivalry of Henchard with Farfrae proves more unfortunate for Henchard. In order to crush Farfrae, Henchard comes into fatal bargains. He is reduced to a state of pennilessness. His property and business is sold and the buyer is none other than Farfrae. Henchard has to work as a hay-trusser in the employment of Farfrae. Farfrae is elected the next mayor of the town. Henchard begins drinking again and vows to take revenge upon Farfrae.

During her intimacy with Henchard, Luccetta has written several love letters to him. Henchard decides to ruin Farfrae’s married life by disclosing these letters to him. He reads out the letters to Farfrae without naming the
writer. But finally he gives up the idea of disclosing the name. In response to an appeal of Lucetta, he decides to return all the letters to her. He hands over the packet to Joshua Jopp and asks him to give it to Lucetta. Jopp is a bad character and has a grudge against Henchard. So he opens the packet at the inn called Peter’s Finger before the notorious characters, who at once decide to arrange a Skimmington-ride. They arrange a procession in the streets of the town with effigies of Henchard and Lucetta bound together and placed upon a donkey. The procession passes by the house of Lucetta who looks upon it from her balcony, becomes nervous and ultimately dies.

Elizabeth-Jane again begins to live with Henchard. Henchard has now reconciled with her as she is his only comfort. He does not want to lose her at any cost. But as Fate would have it, at this time, Newson arrives in Casterbridge. He is not dead as believed. The news of his death was false. When he comes to Henchard in search of Elizabeth-Jane, Henchard sends him away saying that she is dead. Now Farfrae has also begun to approach Elizabeth-Jane. Newson once again returns as he has come to know that his daughter is alive. Henchard is highly frustrated.

The major subject of the great novels of Hardy is the tragedy of human life. A sombre and thoughtful person by temperament, Hardy could not remain blind to the woes and miseries of the people of his Wessex. In his early days, Hardy had a deep faith in the Bible and God but as he advanced in years, as G.K. Chesterton calls him, he became ‘a village atheist’. He was born and
brought up in rural surroundings. Like Wordsworth he fixed his artistic eye on the common peasant folks. It is this life that he portrays in his novels.

So far Hardy’s philosophy of life is concerned, Hardy was not a philosopher in the sense that Hegel or Kent were. He simply saw life and portrayed it in his novels within the framework of his own impressions. It may be noted that his artistic imagination responded naturally and instinctively to the sad, somber and gloomy impressions of life. Likewise Baker also believed. “Hardy had a grudge against the universe which he could not throw off, a feeling of resentment at injustices, and wanton cruelty which must have some objects on which to wreak itself. Assuredly, some power that hated good must be in the saddle thwarting every attempt of man to circumvent his fate. As seen by him it was a tragic theme.”¹ In fact Hardy cultivated a tragic view of life right from his childhood. As a boy, he was sensitive and tender-hearted. He was even pained to see the boughs lopped off the trees. His sensitive temperament was nurtured still more by the age in which he lived. It was an age in which the advancement of science and the Theory of Evolution of Darwin gave a jolt to the old existing religious faith. As a consequence of these two factors, the age witnessed a great doubt and positive disbelief in God. The degrading conditions in mills and factories seemed to augment the same conclusion. Thus, living in such an age, with his own sensitive temperament, Hardy developed a pessimistic attitude of life.
A minute study of Hardy’s tragic novels reveals that he is not a down right pessimist. No doubt, he has summed up his attitude in a single sentence that happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.’ Here it may be stressed that this attitude of Hardy was not an outcome of his stark pessimism, but it is his real observation of life. He could not be blind to the ills of life. He found the moments of laughter scattered only here and there in life. Laughter, he said, can only come through forgetfulness. The fact is that Hardy could not pose himself to be an optimist when he saw imperfection of things and found the world withing in pain and agony, tortures and sorrows. He observed a bitter struggle for existence, thwarted desires and undeserved sufferings. He also noticed that children were born where they were not wanted, where there was not dearth of them, thus adding to the general misery caused by poverty and augmenting the trails and troubles of unfortunate parents.

Apparently, The Mayor of Casterbridge gives the impression that human existence is a tragical rather than a comical thing and that moments of gaiety are but interludes and no part of the main drama of life. In life, it never rains but pours, says Henchard. All things here are in the process of decay. Hardy always thinks of man in relation to some unseen power that directs the activities of the mortals. He calls this power by various names, such as, Nature, Fate, Destiny, God, Chance and Environment. In Tess he declares: “The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess.” A struggle between man on one hand, and on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent Fate, that is
Hardy’s interpretation of human situation. The human beings are mere puppets in the hands of this omnipotent power. This led Hardy to believe at times that ‘God is not in heaven! All’s wrong with the world’. He saw in gods and goddesses a hierarchy of tyrants who hurled thunderbolts on the poor race of man. When the secret of the real father of Elizabeth-Jane is revealed to Henchard through Susan’s letter, Henchard anguishly thinks, “that the concatenation of events this evening had produced was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him.”

On account of his such notions, Hardy was sometimes called an athiest. But this is an extreme view. In fact, he had firm faith in the spiritual forces of Nature. He asked people to abide by the judgement of Nature and wisdom and not to stoop to the path of sin. Once he wrote: “What are my books but one plea against man’s in humanity to man, woman and the lower animals .... Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that man makes it much worse than it need be.” And this shows that he was a Melodist-One who believed in the doctrine that the world may be made better by human efforts.

Hardy is an existentialist. He is saved from being such a person by his grand conception and delineation of human feelings and intentions in his novels. His tragic characters are not ‘dead’ creatures. They do not suffer meekly and silently. But they are valiant in their freakish fight against destiny. What saves his novels from being cynical and depressing is the will of his characters
to gift against the buffets of fortune and the malignant display of indifferent fate. God or Destiny does not find it easy to crush his characters. They are always prepared to give a royal battle to the unrelenting fate. They may be crushed, they may be doomed to the end, but they do not give up resistance with circumstances. Christopher Coney well expresses their philosophy: “But there’s great strength in hope.”² This is confirmed in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when Henchard declares triumphantly that “my punishment is not greater than I can bear.”³

Hardy’s tragic concept truly reveals that his existentialism is always elevating and seldom depressing. Henchard meets his tragic end but his life, his misfortunes, and more than anything else, his valiant battle, do not depress the reader. On the other hand, he leaves upon us an impression of greatness of character. He speaks loudly that there is a charm in the struggle with the omnipotent power though the defeat is certainly of human beings. Hardy’s view of life, thus, may be called tragic rather than pessimistic. In this Hardy is very much like Shakespeare. His tragic concept is as noble, as elevating, and as cathartic, as that of Shakespeare. Henchard, Judge and Tess are made of the same stuff of which Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello are made. There is something heroic in their struggle which inspires us and moves us to vast pity and fear.
Tess Durbeyfield is the eldest child of the Durbeyfield family living in the village of Morlott. John Durbeyfield, the father, is a haggler by profession. He is a careless head of the family who loves drinking. Joan Durbeyfield, the mother, is a hard-working lady, always trying her best to see the family happy. The poverty of the family has deprived the children of schooling. Even Tess has been able to reach up to sixth standard. John Durbeyfield passes most of his time in drinking in a local inn. Like many other poor Wessex rustics, he too likes to forget drudgery of poverty and consequent worries and anxieties related to their families.

One evening in May, the local priest Parson Tringham informs John Durbeyfield that he is the last descendant of the noble and knightly family of d’Urbervilles, who once had their seat at Kingsbere and owned many of the fields and hills around. This news startles John Durbeyfield and like a noble knight, he hires a carriage to ride on, singing a ridiculous song about his knightly ancestry. He is noticed by the companions of Tess who are engaged in club-dancing on the village green. Tess who is happy in the company of fried grows anxious about the peculiar behaviour of her father. She soon hurries to the squalor and gloom of her home to find out what is the matter with her father.

Joan Durbeyfield is no less elated at the revolution. When Tess returns, her mother informs her that they have been found to be the greatest gentlefolk in the whole country. In the meantime Tess’s father has gone to the village inn to celebrate the news. Under the pretence of bringing him back her
mother also goes to the inn. Joan has started to imagine some grand schemes for the glorious future of their daughter, Tess. However, Tess has to go to the inn to bring her parents back. On the way back, her brother wants to send her to Trantridge to claim kinship with the rich Mrs. d'Urbervilles who lives with her son Alec d’Urbervilles at the big house at Trantridge. Mrs. Durbeyfield is ignorant of the fact that these d’Urbervilles are not the genuine d'Urbervilles. She however sends Tess to them in the hope of making a rich match there. Moreover, in an unexpected accident, the horse, named Prince, used by the family for haggling business, has died.

Faced with financial difficulties, Tess ultimately decides to go to Trantridge. When she reaches there she finds that Mrs. d’Urbervilles is an invalid woman and she has a son Alec who does not appear to her a good person. Anyhow, Tess is engaged to look after this family’s poultry. Also begins to take liberty with Tess and as she goes about her duty, he follows her about and pesters her with his live-making. One evening Tess falls into a quarrel with some drunken women when she is returning from Chase brought with a party of other field-folk. Alec comes to her rescue and carries her off on horseback into the woods. he puts her down and goes to find the right path which he has forgotten by accident or intentionally. In the meantime, being tired, Tess falls asleep. Soon Alec returns, and finding her sleeping, rapes her. Thus Tess loses her virginity. Horrified at this event, she leaves the place in spite of Alec’s persuasions not to leave.
On returning home Tess is rebuked by her mother. At home, she leads a very dull and rear life, living within the four walls of the house. In due course of time, she gives birth to a child who soon dies. She herself christens the child as Sorrow, the undesired, for the vicar refuses to christen him. After this tragic incident, Tess decides to go to some far-off place where her troubles may not be known to the world. Besides this she resolves to remain unmarried all her life.

With the help of a friend, Tess gets a job as a dairy maid at Talbothays dairy. In the idyllic atmosphere of the valley, Tess soon forgets her worries and it is here that she meets Angel Clare who is the son of the vicar of Emminster. Soon the two come closer. In the company of Angel Clare, Tess seems to have come into her own; Angel looks upon her as a symbol of pristine purity. Other girls at the dairy--Izz, Catty and Marian also love Angel, but Tess is the main object of his attention. He woes her relentlessly and proposes for marriage but Tess persistently refuses. However, finally, she yields and gives her assent to marry. But she wants to reveal her past to Angel before marriage. For this purpose, she writes a letter stating all that happened to her in the past and slips it into angel’s room. But as luck would have it, the letter slips under the carpet, and remains concealed. On the wedding day, she finds the letter but silently and sadly destroys it. The two are married. Angel takes Tess to an old farmhouse to spend their honey-moon. The house is incidentally dismal. The two life-size portraits of D'Urbervilles’ ancestors in the room frighten Tess.
During their first conversation after marriage, Angel recounts his story of his forty eight hour’s dissipation with a stranger in London. He asks Tess to be forgiven, which she does gladly. In her turn, Tess too, narrates her past to Angel. On hearing, Angel is shocked. His impression about Tess is totally changed. He is not ready to forgive her. Tess weeps bitterly and begs to be forgiven, but he refuses. One night he walks in his sleep, carries Tess in his arms, crosses a dangerous bridge, layers her in a coffin and then utters the words ‘Dead! Dead! dead’.4

After a few days Angel and Tess decide to separate for some time. Angel asks her not to come to him till he himself came to her, and to write to him only when she was in utter need. He also gives her fifty pounds for her immediate needs and advises her to contact his parents whenever she liked. Tess returns home and Angel sails for Brazil sometime later. Before leaving, he meets Izz and offers to take her along with him. But Izz tells him that Tess loves him with the depth of her heart, so Angel changes his mind and leaves alone.

Tess has to face her mother’s reproaches, for she had advised her not to disclose her past to anyone. Her father has doubts about her marriage. She is not able to bear the doubts of her father, so she gives half of her money to him and leaves the home a third time to try her luck elsewhere. She gets casual employment now and then in the summer, but with the coming of winter her difficulties increase. She has spent all her money, so she has to do the hardest work for her living. Her sense of self-respect forbids her from going to Angel’s
parents. She also does not write to Angel about her plight. Angel, on the other hand, is ill in Brazil. He is amazed at Tess’s long silence. He feels that she has forgotten him.

At the suggestion of Marian, Tess goes to Flintoomb Ash and gets an employment there. But here her employer is a hard taskmaster and has an old grudge against her. So he criticizes her for slow work. Here Marian tells Tess how Angel had asked Izz to accompany her to south America. This news saddens Tess all the more. So she decides to go to Emminster Vicarage to get Angel’s whereabouts. As she reaches the Vicarage, she finds that the family has gone to the church. While she is deciding what to do, Angel’s brothers appear and pass adverse remarks against her. This encounter frustrates her hopes and she leaves without meeting anyone.

When Tess is returning, she comes across Alec d’Urbervilles who has become a preacher. She tries to slip away, but he follows to overtake, her. He tells that he is making amends and insists on renewing old acquaintance with her. He is still charmed by her beauty. But she does not encourage. She returns to Flintcomb Ash and does not tell anyone about the result of her visit. Alec pays her several visits and offers to help her. He frankly admits that he is in love with her. Tess is troubled by Alec’s dogged persistence, so she writes a pathetic letter to Angel requesting him to come to her or to send for her.

Angel is now repentant. He is fed up of his wanderings, so he wants to return to England. He once confides his troubles to a companion
English-man who frankly tells him that Angel has acted wrongly towards Tess and suggests that he should go back to her and make amends. Angel still loves Tess. So he decides to go back to her. In the meantime, Tess’s mother falls sick. So Tess has to go home and look after her younger brothers and sisters. The mother recovers, but the father dies. The lease-holder deprives the family of their house and small farm. The family moves to Kingsbere where they camp near the tombs of their ancestors. Alec again appears and begins to take advantage of the family’s financial hardships. He offers to help the family, but Tess refuses. She finally writes to Angel. Izz and Marian also write to him to come at once and rescue Tess.

In the meantime, the pressures of the family compel Tess to surrender before Alec. Alec takes her to Sandbourne, a gay watering place. Angel returns but he is almost broken in body and soul. He learns that Tess is not staying with her mother. He sets out to search Tess. He goes to Flintcomb Ash from where he again comes to Marlott. He succeeds in getting the information that Tess is in Sandbourne. Angel reaches there by train. He learns from a postman that the d’Urbervilles lives at the Herons, a fashionable boarding house. Angel goes there but finds Tess in a very changed condition. Tess asks him to leave her alone. Angel goes out to wander hopelessly.

Soon after Angel’s departure, Tess begins to weep bitterly and accuses Alec of deceiving her. Alec speaks harshly to her. In a fit of anger and desperation, she kills Alec with a kitchen-knife. Soon she leaves the boarding
house and follows Angel. Breathless, she reaches him, and he supports her. She informs him that she has murdered the villain who had ruined their life. Angel consoles her and promises to protect her. Leaving the main road, they walk into the forest. In a secluded place they stay for five days in an unoccupied manor house. Anyhow, on the sixth day they have to come out and reach Stonehenge at midnight. Tess is much tired, so they take rest in an ancient heathen temple. Tess requests Angel to marry her sister Liza Lu if anything happens to her. Soon she falls asleep but wakes up the next morning to find policeman to arrest her. After a formal trial, Tess is sentenced to death on charge of murder. Thus ends the tragic story of Tess.

Hardy has dealt with this theme in a relevant social context. Tess suffers on account of her seduction. But she suffers more on account of the double social values. In fact, the theme of the novel is Hardy’s severe criticism of some of the contemporary social values of England. in the novel we notice Hardy’s serious concern over the double standards of sexual morality and the uprooting of the country people under the impact of industrialism.

In Tess Hardy wants to impress the need of a changed attitude towards sexual status of a woman, particularly an unmarried girl. Hardy attacks the convention of hating the victim of seduction. According to Hardy, the incident of the loss of Tess’s virginity offends our sense of order that ‘upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically as blank as snow, as yet there should have been traced such a coarse pattern!’ The misery in
Tess arises from narrow conventional views usurping the place of the one great law by which all others must be tested, the golden rule of love and happiness. The ordinances of society are administered with great neglect of this golden rule, in a rigid and unintelligent fashion. Law whether political or social requires to be framed with a view to order, but must be administered in the spirit of love, on the broader ground of how to afford the greatest happiness to the units of human society in their brief passage through the sorry world.”

Hardy’s main thesis is about the purity of a woman. Tess, who has committed an action which, from the strict conventional point of view of morals and religion, put her outside the pale of respectability, is put forward as ‘a pure woman, faithfully presented.’ There was a great deal more audacity in thus defining her in 1891 than there would be now, for public opinion has gradually become more liberal in matters of this nature. There is a growing tendency to demand equal standards of morality for men and women, and an increasing feeling that motherhood, lawful or unlawful is sacred and should be so recognized, if this is done without encouraging laxity and making whole-sale havoc among the very necessary and salutary social laws. But Hardy does not set out with the intention of asking forgiveness for Tess, and, as it were, smuggling her up the back-stairs to some heaven of the coldly virtuous. He is bolder than Hawthorne, and roundly implies that there is in her nothing to
forgive. There is a clash between social and natural law—or natural indifference and lawlessness.”

Hardy’s tragic conception also involves the idea of the governing power of the universe as something impersonal with no knowledge of men’s striving and no pity for his sufferings: ‘an unmaliced, unimpassioned, Nescient Will’ as he calls it in his great epic drama, the Dynasts. Such a philosophy may be called pessimistic, but it is not depressing. In fact, what saves Hardy from being pessimistic is his high and noble conception of human nature. As To transform this view of the universe from pessimism to tragedy, it is necessary to show that human beings can resist their destiny, if not physically, at any rate in the spirit. It is this resistance, this power of enduring the blows of fate, with courage never to submit or yield that is the essence of Hardy’s great novel. The reader is not left with a mood of disgust or depression, but rather one of admiration at the greatness and magnificence of human passion and human courage, and of awe at the insoluble mystery of human suffering.

Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles is generally called a great existential novel. Hardy is said to be an existentialist about the governance of the world. Early in life, he rejected Christian belief in a benevolent and omnipotent God. In Tess, he tells, “Justice was done and the President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess.” The whole span of Tess’s life is full of tortures which seem to be carried out by Fate or Destiny relentlessly. Hence Tess is regarded as a pessimistic novel through and through.
The most intense pathetic scenes are scattered all through the novel. The poverty of the Durbeyfield family with ‘half dozen little captives’, the unfortunate death of the Prince, Tess’s seduction, the death of the child ‘Sorrow’, Tess’s desertion by Angel, her hardships of the winter labour at Flintcomb-Ash farm, the persecutions of Farmer Groby, the adverse comments of Angel’s brothers and Tess’s unfortunate encounter with Alec, the convert-all these pathetic scenes follow one after the other. They evoke feelings of pity for the sufferer. These are all existential visions.

But more than pathetic scenes which give an impression of the novelist’s existential approach, the novel appears to be pessimistic because in it the heroine, Tess, frequently expresses pessimistic views on life. While riding with her younger brother on the wagon in the night, Tess tells him that they live on a ‘blighted star’. At the Talbothays dairy, Tess tells that it is a mishap to be alive. When Angel asks her why she looks misery-ridden, she tells him, “My life looks as if it had been wasted for want of chances. I feel what a nothing I am! I’m like the poor Queen of Sheba who live in the Bible There is no more spirit in me.” Throughout the novel, Tess expresses such gloomy ideas about life.

Then Hardy himself projects existential view through his comments on various situations and events. His comment on Tess’s situation during her first encounter with Alec shows the precariousness of existence. Hardy comments: “In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things
the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. Nature does not often say ‘Sell’ to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply ‘Hegel’ to a body’s cry of ‘where?’ till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, awkward game.” Hardy also asks an unsolved question about the unwanted social set-up; “why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thing, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order.” And finally, Hardy concludes the game of God with Tess: “The President of Immortals had ended his sport with Tess.” All such remarks of Hardy show that he is pessimistic about the governance of the universe.

But Hardy has existential approach towards human beings. His tragic novel *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* give an impression that the tragic heroes and heroines do not lack in the heroic courage to brave life with an indomitable spirit. Thus Hardy’s novels, particularly Tess, appear to be existential. The final impression left by the novel is that of power, insight, sympathy and hopefulness, Even though Tess dies in the end, there is an 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.”
The major subject of the great novels of Hardy is the tragedy of human life. A somber and thoughtful person by temperament, Hardy could not remain blind to the woes and miseries of the people of his Wessex. In his early days, Hardy had a deep faith in the Bible and God, but as he advanced in years, he became ‘a village atheist’. He was born and brought up in rural surroundings. Like Wordsworth he fixed his artistic eye on the common peasant folks. It is this life that he portrays in his novels.

So far Hardy’s philosophy of life is concerned, he was not a philosopher in the sense that Hegel or Kant were. He simply saw life and portrayed it in his novels within the framework of his own impressions. It may be noted that his artistic imagination responded naturally and instinctively to the sad, somber and gloomy impressions of life. The pilgrimage of Thomas Hardy has led us ever into deeper shadows. The journey we began with those jolly carol-singers under the greenwood tree has ended in this hopeless misery of Jude.” Hardy had a grudge against the universe which he could not throw off, a reeling from resentment at injustices and wanton cruelty which must have some objects on which to wreak itself. Assuredly, some power that hated good must be in the saddle thwarting every attempt of man to circumvent his fate. As seen by him it was a tragic theme. In fact Hardy cultivated a tragic view of life right from his childhood. As a boy, he was sensitive and tender-hearted. He was even pained to see the boughs lopped off the trees. His sensitive temperament was nurtured still more by the age in which he lived. It was an age in which the
advancement of science and the Theory of Evolution of Darwin gave a jolt to the old religious faith. In consequence of these two factors, the age witnessed doubt and positive disbelief in God. The degrading conditions in mills and factories seemed to augment the same conclusion. Thus, living in such an age, with his own sensitive temperament, Hardy developed a existential attitude to life.

He observed a bitter struggle for existence, thwarted desires and undeserved sufferings. He also noticed that children were born where they were not wanted, where there was no dearth of them, thus adding to the general misery caused by poverty and augmenting the trials and troubles of the unfortunate parents.

In all his major tragic novels, Hardy gives the impression that human existence is a tragical rather than a comical thing. Moments of gaiety are but interludes and no part of the main drama of life. Henchard says, in life it never rains but pours. This is true of Tess’s life also. All things here are in the process of decay. Hardy always thinks of man in relation to some unseen power that directs the activities of the mortals. He calls this power by various names, such as, Nature, Fater, Destiny, God, Chance and Environment. In Tess, he declares: “The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess.” A struggle between man on the one hand, and on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent Fate, that is Hardy’s interpretation of human situation. The human beings are mere puppets in the hands of this omnipotent power. This led Hardy
to believe at times that ‘God is not in heaven I All’s wrong with the world.” He saw in gods and goddesses a hierarchy of tyrants who hurled thunderbolts on the poor race of man.

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy gives the impression that human beings are helplessly struggling hard for existence but their hopes are thwarted by hostile powers. This is true, more particularly in the case of Tess. The first blow comes on Tess’s family in the form of the revelation made by Tringham. Every incident in the life of Tess takes place as if directed by some unseen indifferent power which takes a malicious delight in her sorrows and sufferings. Fate or Chance throws her into the trap of the unprincipled youth Alec. It is again Fate acting upon her when she is thrown into the company of Angel at Talbothays dairy. Action of Fate reaches its climax when her letter, written with all fair intentions, slips under Angel’s carpet instead of reaching his hands. The destitute condition of her family, her father’s death, her mother’s illness—all these throw her into the arms of Alec and when Angel returns, it is too late. Thus Tess’s life has been presented as a chain of woes and sufferings. In the end the President of the Immortals, i.e., God ends his malicious sport with poor Tess.

On account of his such notions, Hardy was sometimes called an atheist. But this is an extreme view. In fact, he had firm faith in the spiritual forces of Nature. He asked people to abide by the judgement of Nature and wisdom and not to stoop to the path of sin. Once he wrote: “What are my books
but one plea against man’s inhumanity to man, woman and the lower animals. Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that man makes it much worse than it need be.” And this shows that he was a Melodist—one who believed in the doctrine that the world may be made better by human efforts.

It may be stated that Hardy is not a downright pessimist. He is saved from being such a person by his grand conception and delineation of human feelings and intentions in his novels. His tragic characters are not ‘dead’ creatures. They do not suffer meekly and silently. But they are valiant in their freakish fight against destiny. What saves his novels from being cynical and depressing is the will of his characters to fight against the buffets of fortune and the malignant display of indifferent fate. God or Destiny does not find it easy to crush his characters. They are always prepared to give a royal battle to the unrelenting fate. They may be crushed, they may be doomed to the end, but they do not give up resistance with circumstances. This is confirmed in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* when Henchard declares triumphantly that “my punishment is not greater than I can bear.” In the same way, in spite of perpetual tragedy in her life, Tess dies happily. In her last moments, she expresses no remorse, but spiritual satisfaction. She says to Angel, “It is as it should be Angel, I am almost glad—yes glad. The happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough; and no I shall not live for you to despise me.”

Hardy’s tragic concept truly reveals that his existentialism is always elevating and seldom depressing. Hardy’s view of life, may be called
tragic and existentialist. In this Hardy is very much like Shakespeare. His tragic concept is as noble, as elevating, and as cathartic, as that of Shakespeare. Henchard, Jude and Tess are made of the same stuff of which *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* are made. There is something heroic in their struggle which inspires us and moves us to vast pity and fear.

The causes of Tess’s sufferings have ever been the points of much controversy ever since the publication of the novel. There are a number of critics who hold Tess, the heroine of the novel, wholly responsible for her tragedy. But this is not a just assessment. Before attempting to analyse the various factors behind Tess’s tragedy it is necessary to make it clear that Tess’s tragedy is not only physical and mental but spiritual as well. Therefore, her tragedy and its causes should be seen in all these aspects.

Among various causes of Tess’s sufferings, the most important is her sensitive nature. She is too sensitive a creature for the coarse environment in which she finds herself. Because she feels too much for the family, she is pushed to the arms of Alec, mainly due to her parents and the conditions in her home. Once again she goes to Alec and the reason is the same—her starving family. Then her tragedy is also due to the fact that she falls in love with a person whom she respects greatly but always considers unworthy of him. It is her sense of guilt and inferiority that prohibits her from unfolding her past to Angel. Her torture is really the intense suffering caused by her dilemma whether she should tell Angel about her past or not. But when Angel comes to know about the
mishap that had taken place in her life, he adopts a different view of her experience than his own. He adopts a double standard of social code. In fact, to a great extent, these double standards are responsible for Tess’s tragedy.

Ever since Tess came into contact with Angel, she had wanted to disclose her past before advancing further in her relations with him. However, after marriage, her disclosure becomes the cause of catastrophe. She appeals to Angel in most innocent words: “What have I done—what have I done! I have not told of anything that interferes with or belies my love for you. You don’t think I planned it, to you? It is in your own mind what you are angry at Angel; it is not in me. O, it is not in me, and I am not that deceitful woman you think me!” But Angel is blinded by the eye fold of society. Though a man of younger generation, he is not free from social narrowness. Hardy’s comment on this situation is noteworthy:

“But over them both there hung a deeper shade than the shade which Angel Clare perceived, namely, the shade of his own limitations. With all his attempted independence of judgement this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample produce of the last five and twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings. No prophet had told him, and he was not prophet enough to tell himself, that essentially this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Samuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency.”
In defense of Tess it is said that Tess’s affairs with Alec is an act of innocence and ignorance. At this time Tess was an innocent girl, ignorant of the dangers that lie in men folk. Besides this, she did not deliberately surrender to Alec. Alec took advantage of her helplessness. Moreover, it were her parents who, which a fond hope of marrying their daughter to a rich relative, forced her to go to the Alec family. Tess never had any liking for Alec. After the loss of her chastity, she was sincerely sorry for the accident and repented for it. She always chastised herself. Though impure in body, she remained pure in mind and spirit. Even her last surrender to Alec was not the result of her own will. She had to save her family from starvation. Besides this, she had suffered terribly from the side of Angel. Angel’s injustice towards her had created into her a rebellious sense. Alec had constantly poured into her ears the idea that her husband would never return, so her faith in Angel seemed to be shaken. Her sense of frustration, weariness and self-sacrifice—all these make her go finally to Alec. But as soon as her husband Angel returns, she atones for her sin by killing Alec.
References


2. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, p. 77


5. *Preface*.