



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Critical Discourse Analysis of the Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy  
(1840-1928)**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyze the multifaceted discourses offered by the Victorian poet, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) in his poetry. Thomas Hardy is not only a poet but also a novelist. Both in poetry and prose, he focuses on the sad plight of human being and his deplorable state in the universe. He also provides a panoramic point of view of common man's issues during the industrialization, urbanization, and Darwinian expression of rapidly changing Victorian society. Hardy focuses on the constant struggle between man and the universe and according to him eventually the insensitivity and indifference of universe wins. This is a qualitative research and Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to the selected poems of Thomas Hardy. The analysis of this research is to make the reader realize the significance of thematic structures and multidimensional discourses offered by the poet.

**KEYWORDS** Analysis, Discourse, Universe Thematic Structures, Victorian Society

**Introduction**

Thomas Hardy is one of the most significant representatives of the Victorian Era. He was born in 1840 at Higher Bockhampton (the Fictional Casterbridge). His father had a masonry business and his mother used to work as a cook. Thomas Hardy, from his early childhood, developed a taste for literary books. His mother had a major role in developing Hardy's interest in Literature as she herself was a keen reader. In 1862, Hardy moved to London and started working as an architect. He also began writing poetry though at that time it had been rejected by the publishers which had turned him into utter desolation. Hardy's very first novel *The poor Man and the Lady* was also rejected by the publishers. His first success as novelist is *Desperate Remedies* (1871) and this established him as a Victorian Novelist. Hardy's career can be divided into three different periods; the first phase is 1871-1896, in which he established himself as a novelist, and the second phase (1903-1908) is about his Poetic Drama, *The Dynasts* and in the third phase, his entire focus was on writing poetry (1908-1920). No matter which period the reader wants to explore, Hardy's major emphasis has been on fate, destiny, nature's cruelty, insensitivity, and man's helplessness in front of unseen forces. In this regard William J Long points out:

Hardy makes man an insignificant part of the world, struggling against powers greater than him, sometimes against systems which he cannot reach or influence, sometimes against a kind of grim world-spirit who delights in making human affairs go wrong. He therefore is hardly a realist, but then a man blinded by pessimism. (Long, 1998)

According to Long, Hardy presents man as something trivial in front of fate and destiny and his major emphasis is on pessimism and emptiness. Along with prose, Hardy's poetry also focuses on these themes to put forward his sinister expression towards life, society, and man. The purpose of this research is to explore and expose the distinct themes in the selected poems of Hardy and to analyze them while keeping in view the Critical Discourse Analysis. This research will also try to find out the diversity of themes in the language used by Hardy in his poetry.

## **Literature Review**

William Long's book, *English Literature: Its History and Significance* has been a good source to understand the different movements and ideas in the history of English Literature throughout the centuries. This book would help the reader to focus on certain thematic structures embedded in the texts of different English authors and those structures help the reader to find out their contributions towards English Literature. David Cecil's *Hardy the Novelist* throws light on the diverse aspects of Thomas Hardy as a writer. Cecil also puts forward the various characteristics of Hardy's approach towards society, ideology, religious beliefs, faiths, and rigidity. Cecil's point of view has been helpful to combine different perspectives of Hardy towards different layers of Victorian society. Michel Foucault's point of view in his book *Politics and the Study of Discourse* has been a helpful source in redefining and reexamining various themes and discourses rooted in Hardy's poetry. The definition of discourse is to explore and analyze the written or spoken texts to reveal the social, cultural, political, and psychological interpretations of the selected texts. Foucault's stance has been an effective tool in understanding the discourses defining the different strains of Hardy's poetry.

## **Material and Methods**

This is a qualitative research method and based on Critical Discourse Analysis while evaluating the selected poems of Thomas Hardy. Various papers and books have been consulted to explore and expose the different aspects of Hardy's poetic world.

## **Results and Discussion**

David Cecil puts forward this point:

The universe was a huge impersonal mechanism, directed by some automatic principle of life unknown, pursuing its mysterious end, utterly different to the feelings of mortals. Men would grow to care less for physical beauty; what was physical beauty but a mockery in a world wasting hourly to decay. (Cecil, 1993, p.24)

Cecil, in his book, *Hardy the Novelist*, focuses on Hardy's idea of fate, destiny and vulnerability of man. Hardy's emphasis is on the displacement of man and his essential failure to recognize himself in the society as he is left helpless and hapless. His fatalism plays a pivotal role in his writings. As Lear mentions in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606):

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods:  
They kill us for their sport.  
(Shakespeare, 1606, Act IV, Scene I, Lines 36-37)

The concept of fate and destiny is not new, it had been an important theme and point of view since the dawn of civilization. Whether its Greek Drama or Elizabethan Literature, individual bewildered attitude towards nature has always been a focal point of literature. Hardy's approach towards fate and destiny seems not different from his predecessors, yet he involves natural settings and insensitivity of nature in his writings to realize man's incomprehensible circumstances around him. In "To an Unborn Child", Hardy demonstrates the tragedy of a common man, and that tragic fate cannot be altered no matter how hard he works to change it.

To an Unborn Pauper Child

I

Breathe not, hid Heart cease silently,

And though thy birth-hour beckons thee,  
Sleep the long sleep:  
The Doomsters heap  
Travails and teens around us here,  
And Time-wraiths turn our song singings to fear.

II

Hark, how the peoples surge and sigh,  
And laughters fail, and greetings die:  
Hopes dwindle; yea,  
Faiths waste away,  
Affections and enthusiasms numb;  
Thou canst not mend these things if thou dost come. (Hardy, 1901, P.156)

Words like “faith”, “hope”, “greetings”, “travail”, and dwindling happiness used by Hardy shows the helplessness of man. According to him, affection and enthusiasm are just words, but they have nothing to do with human expression. The discourse in this poem demonstrates weaknesses of human perception in the merciless universe. Hardy’s discourse exposes the disconnection between the man and the universe. James Gee points out:

Discourses, then, are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific groups of people, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, ...Discourses are ... 'ways of being in the world'; they are 'forms of life' ... (Gee, 1996, p.viii)

According to Jee, discourses reveal the inner expressions of human thoughts; what an Individual wants to say and what he believes and what society forces him to believe. Gee uses the expression, ‘instantiations’ which means that one gives some idea to clarify the point of view and this point can be understood when emotions, expressions and certain circumstances need to be understood and analyzed. Hardy, in his poetry, not only puts forward the dichotomy between man and fate, man and nature or man and his free will but he also explores the conflict between man and society and man and religious beliefs. It seems Hardy, through his poetry, reveals the status of man in universe and also man’s failure to understand his capabilities. The diverse discourses of his poetry reveal the individual’s status as something fixed and confined to what society and the universe offer him. Hardy’s poem ‘The Man He Killed’ puts forward a discourse of the soldier who reveals the atmosphere of macabre and malaise in shallow slogans of patriotism:

"Had he and I but met  
By some old ancient inn,  
We should have sat us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin!  
"But ranged as infantry,  
And staring face to face,  
I shot at him as he at me,  
And killed him in his place.  
"I shot him dead because —  
Because he was my foe,  
Just so: my foe of course he was;  
That's clear enough; although  
"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,  
Off-hand like — just as I —  
Was out of work — had sold his traps —  
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
You shoot a fellow down  
You'd treat if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown." (Hardy,1902, p.127)

Hardy begins his poem not from the beginning but from the end. He expounds on the idea of what actually war is and how the fake slogan of patriotism makes common man's life miserable. Hardy transform something common in to special as the killing an enemy in the battlefield. Usually, the act of killing the enemy is considered a brave act, yet Hardy considers this an inhuman act of so-called humanity as if those two enemies meet somewhere else, they would become good friends. Stephen Levinson points out, '...as specifications of some basic unmarked communicative context, deviations from which however common are seen as special or marked' (Levinson,1979, p. 376). In this statement, Levinson's major focus is Herbert Paul Grice's (British Philosopher of Language) (1913-1988) general principles of conversation, yet this excerpt can be helpful to understand Hardy's point of view. 'The Man He Killed' exposes the terrifying presentation of war and indeterminacy of human life. The poem has been written in first person narration in which the speaker takes war as force that terminates humanity, love, and peacefulness. Hardy had had a strong abhorrence towards war. When the Boer War broke in 1899 which was fought between the British Empire and two Boer Republics, Hardy showed his disliking towards this outbreak. This is something important to note that Hardy was against war but once the war started in 1899, he did not express any view about it, as King and Morgan point out in their article, "Hardy and the Boer War: The Public Poet in Spite of Himself" (1979), "He deplored the outbreak of the war and its imperialist origins; yet once it was declared, he suppressed his misgivings and gritted his teeth..." (King& Morgan, 1979, p.68). According to King and Morgan, he was against war, but he could not say much once it got started, and he had to be quiet as at that time patriotic emotions knew no bound and British people started participating in war quite enthusiastically. Yet in one of his letters, Hardy mentions, "'civilized' nations have not learnt some more excellent and apostolic way of settling disputes than the old and barbarous one, after all these centuries" (Hardy, 1893, p.85). Hardy's discourse of war both in his poetry and in his letter demonstrates his reluctance towards war and this discourse also exposes his suppressed expression towards war hysteria at that time.

Hardy's themes of war, death, fate, and destiny seem interconnected, and they represent two folded expressions; one is man's helplessness in front of universe and the other one is his inability and failure to stop the catastrophe. In *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy points out, "Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (Hardy, 1886, p.320). According to Hardy, happiness is short lived, while pain and poignancy are the permanent forms of suffering in human life. Hardy's poetry also portrays him as quiet, detached, and alienated soul:

I am the one whom ringdoves see  
Through chinks in boughs  
When they do not rouse  
In sudden dread,  
But stay on cooing, as if they said:  
'Oh; it's only he.'

I am the passer when up-eared hares,  
Stirred as they eat  
The new-sprung wheat,  
Their munch resume  
As if they thought; 'He is one for whom  
Nobody cares.'( Hardy, p.137)

The discourse of Hardy's self-portrayal helps the reader to explore and expose the idea of wasted *self* (my italics) which addresses the miseries of man in the universe. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) makes this statement in on one of his books:

To determine, in its diverse dimensions, what the mode of existence of discourses and particularly of scientific discourses (their rules of formation, with their conditions, their dependencies, their transformations) must have been in Europe, since the seventeenth century, in order that the knowledge which is ours today could come to exist, and, more particularly, that knowledge which has taken as its domain this curious object which is man. (Foucault, 1991, p.70)

Hardy's discourses represent knowledge, expression, and human emotions that represent moral and spiritual loss of society and individual in particular. Foucault's concept of knowledge and power puts Hardy's poetry in a different frame which makes poetic exploration into multifaceted discourses. As Hardy in his poem, "To the Unborn Pauper Child":

Vain vow! No hint of mine may hence  
To theeward fly: to thy locked sense  
Explain none can  
Life's pending plan:  
Thou wilt thy ignorant entry make  
Though skies spout fire and blood and nations quake.  
Fain would I, dear, find some shut plot  
Of earth's wide wold for thee, where not  
One tear, one qualm,  
Should break the calm.  
But I am weak as thou and bare;  
No man can change the common lot to rare.( Hardy, 1901, p.156)

In this abovementioned poem, Hardy mentions the themes of tragedy, angst, ignorance, and poverty; there are not only themes but also the discourses of misery, pain, and agony. In this poem, he addresses the unborn child and warns him of the sufferings of life he would have once this child becomes part of this hostile world. In this regard, Hardy wrote a poem on his mother's death in which he does mourn over the death of her mother but at the same time he soothes himself by saying that she is in a better world now where she is far away from pain and miseries of this world. Hardy's discourse about death seems to be an escape from society as his spiritual self is in search of some better space. As in the poem, Hardy wrote for his mother, expounds a sorrow for the loss of a life but with a sense of contentment that individual would have after undergoing the hardships of life. The poem he wrote, at his mother's death, delineates these themes:

And yet we feel that something savours well;  
We note a numb relief withheld before;  
Our well-beloved is prisoner in the cell  
Of Time no more.  
We see by littles now the deft achievement  
Whereby she has escaped the Wrongers all,  
In view of which our momentary bereavement  
Outshapes but small. (Hardy, 1904, p.223)

As mentioned before, Hardy wrote this poem not only in the memory of his mother, but he also put forward various discourses through different themes. Rose points out:

What is possible in this space of contact, crossing over, assimilation, appropriation, juxtaposition, and fusion, has not been adequately explored; indeed, this space has no real

name. What we know is that there are numerous ragged zones of contact between peoples who hold incommensurable values and beliefs, traditions, and philosophies. (Rose, 1991, pp. 289–90)

Hardy's poetic expressions seem to focus on Rose's appropriation, juxtaposition and assimilation of themes and ideology based on his perceptions about life, fate, and destiny. The concept of space given by Rose also seems to be related to Hardy's approach towards a life hereafter. This also indicates his approach towards sad human predicament and individual's displacement in society. The Victorian era was the era of religious doubts due to Darwinism and development in both scientific and industrial fields and this had changed human perception towards existence, religion, fate, and society. This rapid change in society had dismantled beliefs, ideas, social rigidities, and religious fixities and this change in society turned circumstances to poignancy, frustration, pessimism, and alienation. In the below mentioned poem

I MARK the months in liveries dank and dry,  
The day-tides many-shaped and hued;  
I see the nightfall shades subtrude,  
And hear the monotonous hours clang negligently by.

...

In graveyard green, behind his monument  
To glimpse a phantom parent, friend,  
Wearing his smile, and "Not the end!"  
Outbreathing softly: that were blest enlightenment;...(Hardy,1898, p.234)

Social morbidity, desperation and melodramatic expression are quite evident in this poem, and these are not the themes only, they are the discourses that define human limits and strong human emotions. In this poem, Hardy seems to lament over what an individual has to face in his cumbersome existence. Hardy provides a psychological insight into the dark distress of human behavior. *The Convergence of Twain* (1915), the poem Hardy wrote at the sinking of Titanic (1912) puts forward the relationship between the two substances which are antithetical to each other; the sea and the Titanic. This controversial relationship focuses has been destructive to each other and this is something symbolic and macabre:

### **The Convergence of the Twain**

*(Lines on the loss of the "Titanic")*

I

In a solitude of the sea  
Deep from human vanity,  
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres  
Of her salamandrine fires,  
Cold currents thrid and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III

Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent  
The sea-worm crawls — grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed

To ravish the sensuous mind

Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind. (Hardy, 1915, p.230)

This poem puts side by side the solitude of sea and the disaster of Titanic and this also makes a comparison between man and the indifference of nature towards the individual's misery and the tragedy of life. Though this poem mourns over the disaster of Titanic, yet it also establishes an antagonistic relationship between the haplessness of man and the indifference of nature.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the poetry of Thomas Hardy to examine multifaceted social, psychological, and cultural expressions. Hardy's poetry has been analyzed keeping in view Critical Discourse Analysis to understand distinct literary interpretations that help the reader realize the expressions of life which are usually determined by the cruel and indifferent natural forces that transforms human existence into skepticism and agony.

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