

Sophy's Tragedy in *The Son's Veto*

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Abstract—Thomas Hardy was one of the greatest realistic writers and poets in Victorian age. *The Son's Veto* was his best short story. Throughout the short story Hardy showcased his ability to present tragedy with the brutal honesty of a modern writer. This paper mainly analyzes the personal factors from the perspective of the deficiencies of Sophy's characters and the social factors that lead to Sophy's tragedy.

Keywords—Victorian age; deficiencies; tragedy

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy was one of the greatest novelists and poets in Victorian age. Most of his novels had poignant plots and ended in tragedy. After the publication of several novels, he was even labeled as a pessimist by many critics, which was repeatedly denied by Hardy himself. Because, he believed that in the endless time and space human was so small and insignificant that they cannot go against the forces of heredity and environment. According to Hardy, the so-called pessimism actually aimed at exploring the reality and the presence of the term was just the first step to better people mentally and physically. If people wanted to improve the whole world, they had to reveal the ugliness and wickedness of it. In the late of the 19th century, under the patriarchal clan system, the progress and development of industrial civilization had damaged the traditional economy in rural areas, and the traditional farming and pastoral life of the lower working people was under threat. Maybe the tragic fate is irresistible, but it is the unreasonable social system that leads to the tragic ending of the characters. *The Son's Veto* was regarded as his best short story by Hardy, which was written in 1891 in London. It is the most powerful and bitter story about how the character deficiencies of the individual affected the ending of the story, how the individual struggled among different relationships and how the society affected what would have been a good relationship because of class distinction, prejudice and snobbery. Through *The Son's Veto*, the author gave us a good interpretation of the personal and social factors that contributed to Sophy's fate, and reproduced his unique thoughts.

II. INTRODUCTION TO *THE SON'S VETO*

The story in *The Son's Veto*, set in north Wessex, is about the tragic love story of humble Sophy. She worked as a parlour-maid at the vicar's house. When the pastor's wife died, Sophy found time to visit her family and met Sam, a gardener from the same village. Sam expressed his favor to

Sophy and proposed politely, hoping that she would quit her job, but she didn't have any comment. Later, they had a quarrel. So Sophy continued to work at the pastor's house. The vicar recovered from his illness under the careful care of Sophy. As luck would have it, one day Sophy fell down the stairs when serving a meal to the vicar and unfortunately was crippled. Out of pity the vicar married Sophy. By mistake, Sophy became one of the members of the high society. More than a decade later, the vicar died and left her a legacy. Even though she was well fed, she was not happy. Although she was in the upper class, her humble background showed all the features of the lower class, and she was not accepted by the upper class. Even her son Randolph despised her. By chance Sophy was reunited with her former lover Sam, who still asked Sophy to marry him. Sophy longed to live a happy life in the country with Sam, but she was afraid of her son's opposition. When she tried to tell her son, he was furious that she was going to marry a churl. As her son grew up, Sophy asked her son several times for the permission to marry Sam. But all were rejected by her son. Later, the son even forced Sophy to kneel down before the cross vowing to keep the festival for her husband. Sophy agreed with tears. Sophy had been in low spirits for a few years and eventually died. Sophy's tragic fate can not only be attributed to the weakness of Sophy's character, but also be attributed to the hierarchy of the society. On one hand, Sophy's irresolution to the proposal of Sam, and her acceptance of the vicar's proposal without a hesitation, that hasty attitude toward marriage was attributed to her own indecisive character, which was the direct cause for Sophy's tragic fate. On the other hand, through the event that Sophy married to the vicar, Hardy outlined the social hierarchy and traditional life in the Victorian era, which were the underlying reasons for Sophy's tragic fate. Those two conflicts are intertwined to drive the story forward.

III. PERSONAL FACTORS LEADING TO TRAGIC FATE

Hegel's tragic philosophy holds that the tragic conflict is ultimately the conflict in the human heart, which makes the characters in a dilemma and struggle. The inner struggle of the characters in the work reflects the tension of tragic conflict. The more painful the struggle is, the stronger the tension becomes.

In the novel, although Sophy has no educational backgrounds, she has "spotless character" which can be regarded as the passport of the Victorian society. Sophy is kind, patient, submitted, meek and considerate. However, there are some deficiencies in Sophy's characters, which are

fatal throughout her life. Toward the issue of her own marriage, on one hand, she is irresolute; on the other hand, she was in a hasty in making decisions. In the process of pursuing her own happiness, she is weak and behaves cowardly. Those flaws in her characters make her always in a conflicted struggle which heads for her tragic ending.

When Sam expressed his favor to Sophy, her attitude was equivocal, “presently his arm stole around her waist. She gently removed it; but he placed it there again, and she yielded the point”. When Sam promised to offer Sophy a home in the future, she said: “How can you be so fast! I’ve never even said I liked’ee”. She didn’t accept, nor did she refuse the proposal. Through the conversation between Sophy and the vicar, the author reveals to the reader that Sophy was in a state of struggling in two aspects. First, Sophy couldn’t make up her mind on the issue of marriage. When the vicar asked her whether she would like to marry to Sam, she said: “Not much.” But immediately, she said: “It would be a home for me.” So, for the sake of establishing a home, she would like to marry to Sam. Second, Sophy’s decision on whether to stay at the vicar’s home or not also reflects her inner struggle. When the vicar decided to cut down his establishment, at first Sophy told the vicar that she wished to leave him because of the proposal. But a day or two after, she changed her mind. She said “I don’t want to leave just yet, sir, if you don’t wish it. Sam and I have quarreled.” Actually the quarrel happened at the same day just after Sam’s proposal. So quarrel serves as an excuse for Sophy’s decision. Because in any times marriage was so important to women that they all wanted to meet their Mr. Right. For Sophy, Sam wasn’t the best choice. However, it is this decision that becomes the starting point of her tragic fate.

Then again, fate played another trick on Sophy. The vicar proposed to Sophy who at that time was crippled on his account. “Sophy did not exactly love him, but she had a respect for him which almost amounted to veneration.” This time Sophy still had her inner struggle. She knew she didn’t love the vicar, but “she hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august”. Out of the respect for the vicar, “she assented forthwith to be his wife”. Sophy had no idea of her own marriage, and she made hasty decisions without careful consideration, which implied the inevitable tragedy. At the very beginning the vicar and Sophy didn’t match very well. The vicar was described as “twenty years his Sophy’s senior”. If the vicar hadn’t been seized with a serious illness and had the same age as that of Sophy, perhaps Sophy would have been living a happy marital life till old age. Unfortunately, the vicar died of the illness and Sophy was left as a widow. Throughout Sophy’s life, the vicar’s death serves as the turning point of Sophy’s fate.

In the process of asking her son’s permission for marrying to Sam after the reunion, the weakness and compromise shown by Sophy were the most direct and fatal factors. It was this period of time that Sophy experienced the most intense inner struggle, which also brought to the readers the most dramatic tragic conflict. After two years of widowhood, the presence of Sam revived Sophy: “her cheeks were quite pink—almost beautiful. She had something to live for in addition to her son”. When Sam again gently proposed

to her, she answered: “yes, Sam. I long for home—our home! I should like to be there, and never leave it, and die there”. After several contacts with Sam, Sophy found that Sam still had feelings for her and would like to marry her. And she realized that in addition to her son, she had something to live for. Therefore, she consented without any hesitation. However, deeply in her thought, she was full of contradictions, because without the permission of her son, she couldn’t get married. Then she said: “that’s only a momentary feeling. I have a son, you know, a dear boy.” But the loneliness made Sophy want to pursue her own happiness. With the encouragement of Sam, she overcame her timidity and tried to show her son that she wanted to remarry. When her son learned that she was going to marry a churl, “the youth’s face remained fixed for a moment; then he flushed, leant on the table, and burst into passionate tears. The strong objection made Sophy miserable and guilty. When that summer Sam informed her of his obtaining of the shop and proposed again, Sophy told him to wait. It was not until the Christmas day that Sophy broached the matter again. But the son still objected the matter. “It was dropped for months; renewed again; abandoned after his repugnance; again attempted; and thus the gentle creature reasoned and pleaded till four or five long years had passed.” When her son was going to graduate from Oxford, Sophy opened the subject again. Her son showed a more manly anger and wouldn’t agree. He even took her mother before a little cross and altar and forced his mother to swear that she wouldn’t wed Sam without his consent. Sophy swore and fell into despair. However, the inner struggle never ended. When there was nobody near, she would murmur plaintively to herself and torturing herself by the question why she didn’t have the courage to rebel her son. Four years later, Sophy died.

In Sophy’s life, she was always in a conflicted state. In the face of Sam’s first proposal, she was indecisive and then promised to marry the vicar hastily. When she wanted to pursue her own happiness, she feared of her son’s opposition. Time and time again, her marriage was rejected by the son. The weakness and coward leads to her tragic fate.

IV. THE SOCIAL FACTORS LEADING TO THE TRAGEDY

Except for the personal factors of Sophy, Hardy also showed the readers the hierarchy and custom in Victorian age and revealed the root cause of Sophy’s tragedy. In the later years of the Victoria era, especially the last 30 years of the 19th century, the traditional moral system cannot keep pace with the development of the economy. The prosperity of the economy had promoted the liberation of people’s mind, while the old tradition constrained people’s behavior. So people of that time were living in a state of paradox. Even Hardy cannot escape from it. He was born into the working class until he married into the upper class, forgetting about his past because of the embarrassment it caused him. He was reluctant for his upper class acquaintances to know about his poor past. And he even didn’t invite his family to attend his wedding. Sophy was also an upper class woman with a lower class background who was used to the working class expectations and “not up to the standard of the upper class”. And the rigid social hierarchy was deeply rooted. There was

an unbridgeable gap between the working class and the upper class. She was caught between the society's boundaries.

First, by chance Sophy entered into the upper-class society through the marriage with the vicar. However Sophy can't fit in it. From the perspective of Mr. Twycott who represented the upper-class, he didn't accept Sophy as one of the members of the high society. Although he would like to get married with Sophy, the wedding ceremony "was a marriage-service at the communion-rails, which hardly a soul knew of". At that time, as a vicar from the upper-class who married to a working class woman would be despised and casted by his society. "Mr. Twycott knew perfectly well that he had committed social suicide by this step". So after their marriage, they moved to the South England where nobody could recognize them. Besides, although Sophy was his wife, in the management of his property he would rather trust the trustees rather than her. "She was left with no control over anything that had been her husband's beyond her modest personal income."

From the perspective of Sophy, even though temporarily she had become one of the members of the noble ladies by marriage, in nature she still belonged to the poor working class. "She still held confused ideas on the use of 'was' and 'were'" even if her husband had taken much trouble with her education. Her lack of education even did not earn a respect of the few acquaintances she made, let alone her son who was born to be an aristocracy. After the death of her husband, Sophy had nothing to do and began to think of her village, imagining how gladly to work in the fields. Watching those semirural people working even can soothe her depression and nervousness. "They had an interest, almost a charm for Sophy". The presence of Sam who represented for the working class even revived her. She herself admitted that "I am not a lady. I never shall be". She was lonely in her house, but the moment she spent with Sam made her happy. In fact, staying with the working people made her find her true self. Therefore she wanted to retreat from the high society and back to the place where she belonged to. Marriage had changed Sophy's social status, but it cannot change her defects in culture and education and her humble background.

Second, as the representative of the upper class, the son was hypocritical, cruel and cold. He despised the poor and even his mother. Though he was born in a good family, his mother's poor education state made him feel ashamed. He attended the public school and received the best education, but his classmate didn't regard him as the noble person. The more he wanted to be a gentleman, the worse he treated his mother. When Sophy made a grammar mistake, the son exclaimed with an impatient fastidiousness that was almost harsh. He showed no respect for his mother just because of her humble status and poor background. From the context, the readers can see that at the beginning Sophy's son didn't reject to her remarriage and he even though the idea was a reasonable one. But he hoped that his stepfather would be a gentleman who might have the ability to help him strengthen his status. When he heard the man Sophy was going to marry was from the lower society, he went into a paroxysm of rage: "I ashamed of you! It will ruin me! A miserable boor! A

churl! A clown! It will degrade me in the eyes of all the gentlemen of England!" When Sophy decided to give up her noble status and prepared to pursue her own happiness, for the sake of his own benefit and decency, her son cruelly destroyed Sophy's hope. Then Sophy was in a dilemma. She didn't belong to the upper class, nor did she belong to the working class. Therefore death was her fate. In the novel, the son's everlasting strong objection to her mother's remarrying to a working class people showed us there was an unbridgeable gap between the working class and the upper class. What the son really objected wasn't his mother's remarrying to a man but was her retreat to the lower society. It was this unfair social system that forced the son to give his veto time and time again.

V. CONCLUSION

Two aspects can be attributed to the tragic fate of Sophy. One is the personal factors; the other is the social factors. Sophy was irresolute, weak and coward. Those deficiencies in her characters led to her hasty decision on marrying to the vicar and having no courage to rebel her son's objection. If the personal factors were controlled by the individual, the tragedy would be avoided. But the hierarchy and the social system were out of control of the individual. The gap between two classes was unbridgeable. The tragic fate was inevitable. Although most of Hardy's novels have the tragic ending, he is not a pessimist. The aim of his tragic novel is to reveal the ugliness and wickedness of the old society and promote the emergence of the new world. Just as in the end of the novel, the son was described to be "as black as a cloud", which indicated the old unfair social system would vanish as a black cloud some day and the new age finally would come.

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