

## **Irony in The Mayor of Casterbridge: a Literary Pragmatic Study**

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Mayor of Casterbridge is often the subject of literary analysis. Few researchers have explored it by adopting pragmatic approaches. This paper first argues for an analysis of irony within the framework of speech act theory, holding that irony is a type of speech act with indirectness as its key feature and insincerity as its felicity condition. Then the verbal irony and the structural irony in The Mayor of Casterbridge are probed with an aim to offer a pragmatic tool for analysis and appreciation of literary works.*

**Keywords:** irony; speech act; The Mayor of Casterbridge

1. **Introduction.** *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is one of the most outstanding novels of Thomas Hardy. It is regarded as Hardy's greatest tragic novel about a man of character. There has been a constant interest in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in China from the literary perspective over the past two decades. According to the searching result of CNKI, there are over 1200 papers published about different aspects of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from various points of view. Among them, few researchers have explored this novel by adopting pragmatic approaches.

Briefly speaking, pragmatics relates to the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. The appearance and development of pragmatics and its application to literary criticism in the 1980s hasten the emergence of a new marginal discipline — literary pragmatics, in which speech act theory stands as a dominant theory applied to the analysis of a work of literature. According to T. A. van Dijk (1976: 37), there is a speaker-system (the author), a hearer-system (the reader/s) and a transmitted message (literary context) construed with the rules of a semiotic system. Such communication taking place between the author and the reader/s is generally considered as literary communication. Literary works are in fact written forms of communication, which can be viewed as speech acts or at least imitations of speech acts. R. D. Sell (1991) also holds the view that the writing and reading of literary texts are interactive (albeit not face-to-face, one-to-one, or even contemporaneous) communication processes. R. J. Watts in his *Cross-cultural Problems in the Perception of Literature* proposes that there are two methods— the

outward-looking approach and the inward-looking approach— touching upon the relationships between the linguistic structures of the literary text, the “users” of those texts, and the contexts in which the texts are produced and interpreted. The outward-looking approach, covering authors’ and readers’ sociocultural communication centering upon literary works, seeks to explore how different readings are arrived at through pragmatic processes of inference due to individual readers’ perception of and attitudes towards literature as a specific set of discourse types. The inward-looking approach to literary text studies such pragmatic phenomena in literary works as deixis, presupposition, implicature, speech acts, etc.. In this paper, I attempt to adopt the inward-looking approach to make an analysis of irony in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from the perspective of literary pragmatics.

**2. Feasibility of applying Speech Act Theory to fiction.** The basic principle of Speech Act Theory is that “speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior” (Searle, 1969: 12). In accordance with Austin, a speech act involves three kinds of act: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Locutionary act is the act of saying; Illocutionary act means in saying, the speaker is also performing an act with an intention, such as making an assertion, or a promise and the intention is the illocutionary force; perlocutionary act is bringing about of effects on the audience by means of saying. Namely, when people attempt to express themselves, they not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, but also perform actions via those utterances. The utterance of the expression “You are welcome.” is more than just a statement. It is also used to perform the act of acknowledging thanks.

According to Wallace Matin (2009: 182-183), Austin thinks that literary language is parasitic upon ordinary language and therefore literature can be conceived as an imitation of speech acts, ordinary uses of language; Richard Ohmann believes the writer puts out imitation speech acts as if they were being performed by someone; Mary Louise Pratt further holds that she sees no reason to claim that the literary works are imitations since the stories people tell in everyday life are similar in structure and purpose to those in “ great literature”. Fiction then can be taken as pretended speech acts or narrative speech acts. Van Dijk (1976) also suggests that “literature” itself be treated as a specific speech act with its own felicity conditions or appropriateness conditions. Literary works can be classified as “narrative” or “fictional” speech acts, lyrical speech acts, dramatic speech acts, etc. Therefore, fiction can be regarded as a one-sided conversation between author and reader. In this one-sided conversation, the author not only informs the reader/s “about a particular fictional world, but also needs to achieve a rapport with his readers, an identity of viewpoint whereby the contents of the fiction will be interpreted and evaluated in an appropriate way” (Leech & Short, 2001: 257). Sometimes the author conveys what he wants to say directly, but sometimes he does not. The author may convey his feeling, thoughts and opinions to his reader/s by means of the interaction of characters in dialogue, i.e. interchange between characters. Van Dijk uses a distinction between macro-speech acts and micro-speech acts to illustrate his theory. The former refers to macro conversations and communications taking place between the author and the reader/s of a certain literary work.

The latter indicates the exchanges among characters in a literary work, i.e. various dialogues among characters in the work. Having a good understanding of this one-sided conversation and the character-character conversations will be of great help for us to interpret the novel we read.

By treating novels as speech acts of a certain type that occur in a speech situation of a certain type and that presuppose certain knowledge shared by the participants, a speech act approach to fiction is surely helpful for us to discover and dwell on the implicit meanings in novels.

**3. Irony and speech act.** According to Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th edition, irony is a figure of speech in which what is stated is not what is meant. The word has its root in Greek comedy and derives from *Eiron*, meaning “dissembler”, who characteristically spoke in understatement and pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon* — the self-deceiving and stupid braggart (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 165). Or put differently, irony refers to a contradiction or incongruity between appearance/expectation and reality. The user of irony usually assumes that his reader or listener understands the hidden meaning of his statement.

As Zen (2004) has suggested in his paper, the study of irony has been a continuous concern since the sixties of 20th century in non- linguistic domain and linguistics, and different hypotheses have been proposed, such as Muecke’s Trichotomy of irony, Booth’s Dichotomy of irony, Fish’s Dynamic Interpretation of irony, M. Roy’s semantic study of irony and Wilson & Sperber’s pragmatic study of irony. Generally speaking, there are three types of irony: verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony. Abrams and Harpham (2009: 165) defines verbal irony as a statement in which the meaning that a speaker employs is sharply different from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed, namely, the contrast between what is said and what is intended. Dramatic irony refers to the difference between what the characters believe to be true and the facts that the reader/ audience knows. It is a literary effect achieved by having the reader know beforehand more about the situation, truth or end than the character himself. In fiction, the most common type of irony used is situational irony: the discrepancy between what actually happens and what is expected in a certain situation. This type of irony is more effective than verbal irony and dramatic irony since it often arises from the circumstances and events of a story. In fiction, verbal irony often appears in the micro-structure, i.e. the interchange and conversation among characters. Dramatic irony and situational irony usually permeate through the macro-structure of the fiction and it requires the reader’s shrewdness to recognize these two types of irony as well as the dramatic effects achieved by them.

The ironic force of a remark is often signaled by exaggeration or understatement, which makes it difficult for the hearer to interpret the remark at its face value (Leech, 1983: 143). Since irony is a figurative way of expressing purposes in a roundabout way, surely there is a mismatch between the literal meaning and the implied meaning when irony occurs. And indirectness will be a characteristic irony bears. Gibbs & Colston (2007: 375) believe that the speaker’s communicative choice in uttering an irony is linked with the empathetic involvement and the context; the speaker can adjust the level of emphasis of the ironic

comment according to intensity with which he/she means to affect his/ her interlocutor. So, intention is another character that irony has. In pragmatics we are interested in intentional indirectness (Thomas, 2010: 120), therefore, irony, as an intentional way of saying something while meaning the opposite, also falls into the scope of pragmatics.

Often there are cases in which the speaker may utter a sentence and mean the literal meaning of the sentence, and meanwhile mean another illocution with a different propositional content. According to Searle, indirect speech acts are speech acts “in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another” (He, 2003: 286), that is, indirect speech acts are in fact illocutionary acts achieved in indirect ways. Judging from this point of view, it is evident that indirectness is definitely the basic characteristic of indirect speech acts. Then can we say that irony is a type of indirect speech act? Seale (2005: 113) points out that there is a radical difference between indirect speech acts and irony and metaphor. In the indirect speech act, the speaker means what he says and even, the speaker means something more. Sentence meaning is part of utterance meaning, but it does not exhaust utterance meaning. While the mechanism by which irony works is that the utterance, if taken literally, is obviously inappropriate to the situation. The hearer has to re-interpret it as meaning the opposite of its literal meaning. So, indirectness of irony does not necessarily means irony is a type of indirect speech act. However, as has been mentioned above, fiction can be viewed as pretended speech act; Searle also believes that the author of fiction pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences. Surely, irony, as a technique of expressing the author’s or characters’ attitudes, used by the author in his communication with the reader can be a type of pretended speech act with indirectness as its key feature.

According to Austin and Seale, the successful performance of a speech act must meet a set of felicity conditions, among which sincerity condition forms a necessary condition in producing any speech act. It requires that the utterances the speaker produces be in absolute conformity with the speaker’s intentions. Irony boasts its own felicity conditions as well. Nevertheless, it is the insincerity that works in irony because the proposition expressed via irony is usually opposite to the intention of the speaker. In Van Dijk’s (1976) point of view, a successful irony depends mainly on the condition of insincerity.

For this reason, therefore, irony can be regarded as a special speech act with indirectness as its character and insincerity as a felicity condition. Ironic speech acts are often used to help to convey speaker’s communicative purposes under given circumstances. In analyzing the irony in fiction, we will understand the implications conveyed by the author better.

**4. Irony in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.** “There are innumerable instances of irony in fiction that are not especially characteristic of any fictional genre” (D. C. Muecke, 1982: 85). In a novel, for fictional purposes, irony is considered as the “secret communion” between author and reader. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it is a world that seems guided by the “scheme[s] of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing” human beings. Henchard, “the man of character” whose story the subtitle announces, shoulders the burden of his own mistakes and bears the storm of an unfortunate fate, refusing to compromise with the

unknown sinister forces. He cannot avoid his inevitable tragic fate, and that's what makes him one of the most outstanding literary figures. In the novel, fate is the natural forces against which Henchard endeavors to fight all his life. Usually, this fate works through two channels: coincidence and irony. Coincidence or chance brings unexpected characters: Farfrae and Lucetta come to Casterbridge, yet their arrivals directly lead to the ruin of Henchard's lives. Irony, however, works upon people who stay there, making the best-prepared plans go awry and bringing about the final death of Henchard. Hardy uses irony as an important means to help to develop the plot. Irony may arise from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view. The final ruin of Henchard lies just in his contrastive values with other characters and the development of modernist forms. Irony in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* manifests itself in each single sentence, or extends over the micro and macro structural level of whole novel. Irony in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is not as clear as that in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is more subtle. Yet it does exist in the verbal communication among the characters, and in the plot woven by Hardy, namely, the communication between Hardy and his readers. Hardy uses the verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony artfully in the novel for his characters and readers to understand the concealed meaning behind the sentences. In the following part, we'll have a pragmatic overview of the irony in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

4.1. **Verbal irony.** An illocutionary act always carries with it an illocutionary force, which means the speaker's real intention expressed through the utterance. As a special illocutionary act, irony carries the ironic illocutionary force as well. Let's take a look at a typical example of verbal irony from the novel:

**Example:** In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when Henchard announces his bankruptcy, he is in the same situation as he was twenty-one years ago. But Farfrae still continues his climb to power. Farfrae purchases Henchard's house and furniture, and even takes away Henchard's woman— Lucetta. Yet he remains kind to Henchard. He offers a job in his company to Henchard. To make a living, Henchard accepts it. One day, when Lucetta stumbles into the barn where Henchard is working, Henchard greets her in an ironic servility.

*Henchard, with withering humility of demeanour, touched the brim of his hat to her as Whittle and the rest had done, to which she breathed a dead-alive "Good afternoon."*

*"I beg your pardon, ma'am?" said Henchard, as if he had not heard.*

*"I said Good afternoon," she faltered.*

*"Oh yes—good afternoon, ma'am," he replied, touching his hat again. "I am glad to see you, ma'am." Lucetta looked embarrassed, and Henchard continued: "For we humble workmen here feel it a great honour that a lady should look in and take an interest in us."*

Judging from this conversation, it is apparent that Lucetta has sensed Henchard's ironic attitude toward her. Verbal irony follows the cooperative principle in conversation. The inference of verbal irony usually involves Grice's principle of conversational implicature as Grice states that the use of irony in conversation violates the maxim of quality. Still, there are two important conditions that verbal ironic speech act must meet, i.e. speaker's intention and mutual knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Two conditions must be met for a successful communication of verbal irony: the speaker must intentionally produce the ironic statement to the listener; the speaker and the listener must share common factual background information with each other. For example, if someone utters a sentence "She's really a good friend." as an irony, the speaker must have an intention to show to the listener the opposite meaning "She's really not a good friend.", and the listener must know that the woman being mentioned has done something harmful to the speaker. If the speaker has no opposite intention and the listener knows nothing about the background information, the verbal irony may fail. In fiction, "verbal irony depends on knowledge of fictional speaker's ironic intention, which is shared both by the speaker and the reader" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 166). In the above example, Lucetta has to come to Casterbridge with the intention to marry Henchard, but she falls in love with Farfrae and they get married secretly. Henchard is so enraged at Lucetta's betrayal of his love. Therefore, he has no intention to upgrade Lucetta. Lucetta shares the same background information with Henchard and she knows that Henchard is so arrogant that he will never downgrade himself to upgrade others and he is actually not so pleased to meet her. As a result of her inference, she knows that Henchard is ironic to her. As a reader, we can also conclude that the illocutionary force of Henchard's uttering the last sentence is to express his irony against Lucetta's emotional betrayal of him.

Irony, as a more effective and forceful speech act with indirectness than direct speech acts, is actually a matter of perceived and real attitudes and values of the speaker. According to the analysis of inferring process, it is obvious that ironic speech acts produce greater psychological effects on the part of the hearer than speech acts expressed in direct ways. Writers often use it as an effective way to strengthen the force of what is expressed. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ironic speech acts mainly take place between Henchard and Lucetta, and rarely between other characters. Lucetta, a woman whom Henchard meets, courts, and proposes to marry, lives recklessly according to her passions and suffers for it. Before arriving at Casterbridge, Lucetta becomes involved in a scandalously indiscreet affair with Henchard that makes her the pariah of Jersey. Having been bequeathed a fortune, she comes to Casterbridge to marry Henchard in the knowledge of Susan's death. She, however, becomes enamored with Farfrae. They fall in love with each other and finally get married. And Henchard, feeling he has been deprived of everything he owes by Farfrae, harbors hatred against Farfare and Lucetta. Ironic remarks can sometimes be found in his conversations with Lucetta. He employs the most sarcastic words to taunt Lucetta, such as "we of the lower classes know nothing of the gay leisure that such as you enjoy", which reflects his great bitterness about the quick change in Farfrae's fortunes and the rapidly shifting affections of Lucetta.

4.2. **Structural irony.** In addition to the verbal ironic speech acts occurring between Henchard and Lucetta, Hardy's dramatic and situational ironic speech acts could also be found in the whole structure of the story in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

As has been stated, dramatic irony and situational irony usually occur in the macro communication between the author and the reader/s. It can be subsumed under structural irony, which means "the author introduces a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009: 166). Structural irony is a type of irony developed through the author's narrative structure. This kind of ironic speech act exists merely between Hardy and his readers. In structural irony, some element of the work's structure or form invites the readers to probe beneath surface statements, that is, structural irony depends on the readers to speculate the author's or the narrator's real ironic intention.

Reading through *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we can perceive that Hardy's fabulous irony mainly lies in the main structure and the plot weaving of the whole story. Though particularly rich in descriptions of natural environment, the novel still presents to us a panorama of men and women of distinguishing character. A series of coincidences comes upon those characters and changes their life completely in an unpredictable way. The irony of fate works upon everyone related to the life of Henchard, making us feel in the plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* a mysterious but irresistible power lying behind the beautifully observed quotidian and asserting itself against the will of the protagonist in such a way as to imply a dramatic if uneven contest. The contradictions of plot arrangement form the foundation of the irony in the novel. Now, let's acquire a deep understanding of various characters by surveying the structural irony.

### **Example 1: Michael Henchard**

Since the return of Susan and Elizabeth-Jane eighteen years after his auction of his wife, life seems to be a satire upon Henchard. Despite his heroic resolution to fight against the mysterious natural and social forces that have been haunting on him, he is not likely to avoid his tragic destiny. Everything goes awry in all his choices and all his plans though he always persistently attempts to right the wrong he has done. After Susan's death and Farfrae's estrangement, a deep loneliness is felt again by Henchard. Elizabeth-Jane becomes the only one to whom he could seek warmth to fill in his empty heart. He then tries the risk of telling Elizabeth-Jane that he is her real father.

*"Don't cry---don't cry," said Henchard, with vehement pathos, "I can't bear it, I won't bear it. I am your father; why should you cry? Am I so dreadful, so hateful to 'ee? Don't take against me, Elizabeth-Jane!" he cried, grasping her wet hand, "Don't take against me--- though I was a drinking man once, and used your mother roughly--- I'll be kinder to you than he was! I'll do anything, if you will only look upon me as your father!"*

*Chapter XIX p.123*

Henchard's self-assertion in this quotation shows that there is in fact a concealed sense of

insecurity in him. This insecurity agitates him and makes him desirous of real companionship. His quick acquaintance with and passion for Farfrae and the calculated plans for renewing the relationships with Susan are the consequences of this sense of insecurity. Therefore, gaining the love of Elizabeth-Jane now is actually also his need to satisfy this sense of insecurity. But things do not happen as he wishes. When he eventually convinces Elizabeth-Jane to believe he is her real father, he, at the same time, discovers to his great surprise from the letter Susan leaves him that Elizabeth-Jane is Newson's daughter. This is the last straw.

*His lip twitched, and he seemed to compress his frame, as if to bear better. His usual habit was not to consider whether destiny were hard upon him or not—the shape of his ideas in cases of affliction being simply a moody “I am to suffer I perceive,”— “This much scouraging, then, is it, for me.” But now through his passionate head there stormed this thought—that the blasting disclosure was what he had deserved.*

*Chapter XIX p.126*

Hardy delivers to readers the most painful irony here. Though Hardy creates him as a violent, demanding, self-centered character, Henchard is presented here in such way that we feel sympathy for him because we experience his joy of making Elizabeth-Jane his daughter, followed quickly by the defeat the letter symbolizes, all through his eyes. It seems a great irony for him to know that he does not have a child in the world. He suffers too much for his wrong doing in the past. If he had not been so insistent on making Elizabeth-Jane his daughter, he would not have felt such a crushing blow when he learned the truth. If he had not been so impulsive and rash to tell Elizabeth-Jane his past history and searched the drawer for papers, he could have missed the letter and saved himself from such great pain. The nature is so cruel to bring such an ironical torture for him to suffer from.

The other most striking irony we feel for Henchard is in his will in the last chapter of the novel. Remorseful for what he has done to Elizabeth-Jane whom he truly wants to love, Henchard goes back to Casterbridge to Elizabeth's wedding to ask for her forgiveness. Elizabeth-Jane, however, refuses to forgive him, so he walks away as she wishes it. A month later, feeling pity for her step-father, Elizabeth-Jane asks his husband Farfrae to help her find Henchard. When they finally find Henchard in a cottage, he has died, leaving a will that is penciled as follows:

*“MICHAEL HENCHARD's Will.*

*“That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.*

*“& that I be not bury'd in consecrated ground.*

*“& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.*

*“& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.*

*“& that no murners walk behind me at my funeral.*

*“& no flours be planted on my grave.*

*“& that no man remember me.*



*“to this I put my name.*

*“Michael Henchard.”  
Chapter XLV p.333*

The irony of “willing” his self-obliteration is powerful, complex, and inescapable. Henchard’s last words are that his name shall be obliterated in conformity with his will, i.e. he wishes no one remember his name after his death. Hardy delivers the most bitter structural irony here when we consider how important Henchard’s name has been to him during his lifetime. After his abominable sale of his wife and baby daughter, he wakes from his drunken stupor, yet the foremost thing he wonders is that whether he has told his name to anyone who was at the Fair last night.

*“Did I tell my name to anybody last night, or didn’t I tell my name?” he said to himself; and at last concluded that he did not.*

*Chapter II p.18*

Though eighteen years pass without any description about how he has climbed from hay-trusser to the mayor of Casterbridge, we, nevertheless, can read between the lines how he labors to protect his good name and reputation during those eighteen years, and especially after Susan and Elizabeth-Jane come to Casterbridge to look for him. Even when the furmity woman has disclosed his shameful past, he still struggles to convince the people in Casterbridge that he is an honest man with a worthy name. However, the whole world seems to work against Henchard. His name is shattered with his personal downfall and so by a wonderful and moving irony, Henchard effects in death what he always fell short of in life--- the dominance of his name.

### **Example 2: Donald Farfrae**

Farfrae is a character from a mid-Victorian novel whose moderate demands, quiet self-interest, refusal of excess, and emotional shallowness all operate within the text as a commentary on Henchard’s way of thinking. When Farfrae comes to Casterbridge living in the Three Mariners, he joins the people who gathered there, and at the request of the tradesman, he sings a beautiful Scottish song, full of pathos.

*“It’s hame, and it’s hame, hame fain would I be,  
O hame, hame, hame to my ain countree!....”*

*Chapter VIII p.52*

While the villagers there are in the mood for his sad and sweet song, he announces that he is going to America, and echoes with a developing realist preoccupation with dilettantism. Then at the end of the story, when Henchard arrives at the wedding feast as an uninvited guest, he hears in the street Farfrae’s voice coming from his former house and now Farfrae’s house, “giving strong expression to a song of his dear native country that he loved so well as never to have revisited it.” And yet here is Henchard, actually “revisiting” his home, although he has intended to flee it forever. Farfrae, when talking about his

hometown, he is emotional yet he never intends to go back to his hometown. This forms a sharp irony between the character of Farfrae and that of Henchard. Of course Henchard is impulsive and impetuous, but he has a strong feeling towards people he loves. He treats Farfrae passionately as his brother and entrusts his secrecy to Farfrae. Farfrae, however, like Hardy presents us at the end of his story surprisingly:

*....had never so passionately liked Henchard as Henchard had like him, he had, on the other hand, never so passionately hated in the same direction as his former friend had done.*

Chapter XLV p. 329

In his calm, measured thinking, Farfrae is a model man of science, and Hardy depicts him with the stereotypical strengths and weaknesses of such people. He possesses an intellectual competence so unrivaled that it passes for charisma, but throughout the novel he remains emotionally distant. Although he wins the favor of the townspeople with his highly successful day of celebration, Farfrae fails to feel any emotion too deeply, whether it is happiness inspired by his carnival or sorrow at the death of his first wife, Lucetta. In this respect as well he stands in bold ironic contrast to Henchard, whose depth of feeling is so profound that it ultimately dooms him.

### **Example 3: Elizabeth-Jane**

We have mentioned that Elizabeth-Jane proves to be a kind, simple girl. She undergoes a drastic transformation over the course of the novel, even though the novel does not focus on her as much as it does on other characters. She has great capacity to suffer and sacrifice. Though suffering from an arbitrary fate that uncannily destroys people's happiness and security, she does not fight back but meekly accepts her fate without any complaint. She is reconciled to whatever happens around her. Yet she is the only one in the novel who eventually has got everything destined to belong to her. Her triumph illustrates Hardy's philosophy presented in the novel— "that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.", and only those who live in peace and tranquility could get good results. In spite of Hardy's appreciative attitude towards Elizabeth-Jane, Hardy does not depict the girl as an ideal female character. Hardy still applies a bit of irony to Elizabeth-Jane's character. When Elizabeth-Jane arrives at Casterbridge in search of Henchard with her mother Susan, she is an uneducated girl with some vanity. At the time of Susan's asking the furmity woman for Henchard's information, she tries to keep her mother away from the furmity tents by saying:

*"Don't speak to her— it isn't respectable!"*

Chapter III p. 23

From the previous knowledge of Susan and Newson, we learn that Elizabeth-Jane actually comes from the same improper conditions, with her working-class parents. Moreover, at the belief that "we must be respectable", Elizabeth-Jane insists that they stay at the fancy inn the Three Mariners. Because they cannot afford such a fine room,

Elizabeth-Jane decides to sacrifice her dignity to offer her services in the disreputable job of a serving-maid in order to save money for her mother. Yet this forms an irony with her former behavior. And the more important, this fact is ironic because it comes to haunt the girl all the time, and it turns out later that the townspeople still see Elizabeth-Jane as a maid despite her efforts to dress like a lady, read voraciously and expunge rustic country dialect from her speech.

There are still some other ironic contrasts that can be located in the novel, but we just name a few major examples here. As is often the case, irony is a combination of words that conflicts with our expectations. It is this contradiction that helps to develop the plot of the novel and to catch the readers' interest in reading the novel. It does play an irreplaceable role in interpreting the characters in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

5. **Conclusion.** In this paper I have attempted to expound on the irony in fiction within the framework of Speech Act Theory. Currently there is an inevitable trend that linguistic theories will be more and more widely used to analyze and appreciate literary works in future. Pragmatic theories that focus on the study of relating utterance meaning to users and contexts will offer a powerful tool for this trend.

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