The Art of Survival: Exploring Resilience in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall

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Abstract

This study focuses on the psychological complexities of resilience in Thomas Cromwell, the central character of Mantel's historical fiction Wolf Hall (2009). Set against Tudor England's volatile political and religious climate, the novel examines Cromwell's rise from the blacksmith's son to Henry VIII's most trusted advisor. This study exemplifies Cromwell's journey and the interplay between personal loss, adaptability, and emotional fortitude. By navigating power dynamics, betrayals, and shifting allegiances, Cromwell survives and thrives in a world dominated by hierarchical structures and moral ambiguities. Employing a psychological viewpoint, this argument explores how Mantel's use of interior monologues and close third-person narration provides insights into Cromwell's emotional struggles and adversity. This paper situates his resilience within broader contemporary discussions of human psychology, emphasising how Mantel reinterprets historical narratives to reflect modern understandings of survival, identity, and agency. Additionally, this study highlights how Wolf Hall transcends its historical setting to offer a timeless understanding of the human capacity for reinvention and endurance. Through Cromwell's character, Mantel crafts a narrative that challenges the conventional portrayals of historical figures, offering a profound and empathetic exploration of resilience that resonates with the contemporary world.
Keywords: Resilience, Psychological Complexity, New Historicism, Historical Fiction, Survival.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Art of Survival: Exploring Resilience in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall

The themes of survival and resilience have been prominent in the literature for centuries. Works such as Beowulf and Chaucer's narratives and contemporary novels often depict protagonists navigating unstable systems and shifting their allegiance to survive. Shakespeare's Richard II (1595) exemplifies how political survival frequently demands manipulation and the erosion of honour. Authors like Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Fyodor Dostoevsky depict characters enduring societal oppression and moral dilemmas, emerging fortified through resilience. In Les Misérables (1862), Jean Valjean attains redemption, whereas in Great Expectations (1861), Pip achieves personal development. Contemporary writers, such as Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner (2003) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006), continue this tradition by portraying individuals navigating warfare, displacement, and identity crises.

Autobiographical works such as Elie Wiesel's Night (1960) and Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) reveal personal resilience in the face of trauma and systemic oppression. In historical fiction, authors such as Hilary Mantel in the Wolf Hall trilogy and Margaret Atwood in The Handmaid's Tale (1985) explore resilience within the context of political intrigues and oppressive regimes. Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall (2009) also examines the complexities of survival and resilience through the life of Thomas Cromwell, an individual who navigates the unstable political landscape of Tudor England; as Christopher Morris notes in The Tuders (1955), "The government certainly was weak, except during the later years of the Yorkists; there were administrative breakdowns and considerable miscarriages of justice, since judges and juries were often corrupted or intimidated" (41). In the novel, Mantel explores the themes of power, loyalty, and identity, depicting how individuals adapt, persevere, and flourish under extreme circumstances. Through

Cromwell's journey, Mantel illustrates how resilience encompasses physical endurance and emotional and intellectual fortitude in the face of betrayal, ambition, and shifting allegiance. Her portrayal of Cromwell reshaped the contemporary understanding of his life and role in Tudor's history. In the preface of The Rise of Thomas Cromwell (2015), Michael Everett acknowledges Mantel's influence on the modern understanding of the Tudor period, primarily through her portrayal of Cromwell in Wolf Hall. "Thomas Cromwell has become rather fashionable in recent years, thanks in no small part to the novels of Hilary Mantel." (1) [1-3] Mantel's work popularised Thomas Cromwell as a central figure in Tudor's history. Thomas Cromwell, a blacksmith's son, rises to power in Henry VIII's volatile court, exemplifying political precariousness. Stephen Greenblatt, in his review of the novel Wolf Hall, observes thus; Not that Thomas Cromwell came from an illustrious family; quite the contrary, as the novel makes clear. The son of an abusive, alcoholic blacksmith, Thomas rose to become, for eight crucial years in the 1530s, the most powerful political figure in Henry VIII's England, orchestrating the King's break with Rome, the dissolution of monasteries, and the execution for treason of Sir Thomas More, Bishop John Fisher, the Carthusian monks, and many others. You cannot make a Reformation without breaking eggs. (New York Review, Greenblatt) Despite his humble origins, Cromwell's exceptional political resilience parallels his survival tactics, wherein the maintenance of power frequently requires the compromise of personal ethics and the adoption of ruthless strategies. Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell aligns with Greenblatt's analysis of the fragility of power, emphasising how political survival necessitates the manipulation of rules, rapid adaptation, and exploitation of opportunities. Cromwell's ascent begins in his childhood when he faces the harsh realities of a lower-class life. Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996) explores how trauma shapes memory and identity, themes resonating with Cromwell's survival and resilience in Wolf Hall. Caruth posits that trauma is not fully comprehended initially but resurfaces through repetition and displacement, mirroring Cromwell's navigation of Tudor England's treacherous political landscape by adapting to past losses and betrayals (179-180). His survival is not merely due to his political acumen but also his capacity to process personal trauma, such as losing his wife and children, without being immobilised. His father, a blacksmith, is abusive, and his family life is marked by adversity, as shown in the novel's opening lines, where his father severely beats him: "So now get up.' Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen, knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard. His head turns sideways; his eyes are turned towards the gate as if someone might arrive to help him out. One blow, properly placed, could kill him now" (3). Cromwell's early hardships shaped his resilient attitude and strategic thinking. At a young age, Cromwell leaves his home. Before returning to the UK, Cromwell travelled to Europe and worked as a mercenary and legal practitioner. His initial political venture stemmed from his association with Cardinal Wolsey, Henry VIII's principal advisor. This early alliance demonstrates Cromwell's survival instinct, as he recognises Wolsey's political influence and uses it for his advancement. A critical juncture occurs when Cardinal Wolsey falls out of favour of King Henry VIII. Cromwell's political survival hinges on his ability to dissociate himself from Wolsey's downfall while positioning himself as a loyal servant of the crown. This pivotal moment is vividly illustrated when Wolsey is dismissed as Lord Chancellor by the Duke of Norfolk and the Duke of Suffolk: "They arrived on a Sunday, two vengeful grandees: the Duke of Norfolk a bright-eyed hawk, and the Duke of Suffolk, just as keen. They told the cardinal he was dismissed as Lord Chancellor and demanded that he hand over the Great Seal of England. He, Cromwell, touched the cardinal's arm. A hurried conference" (47). This incident encapsulates Cromwell's key strength, recognising that a shift in loyalty is necessary for survival. His willingness to abandon Wolsey, a former mentor, shows his political shrewdness and capacity for self-preservation, even at the expense of personal relationships. Cromwell is the architect of Henry's

divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn, precipitating his separation from the Catholic Church. This event marked a significant transition in British history, and this paradigm shift has been aptly captured in the words of Christopher Morris in The Tudors (1955), The Crown became sovereign in quite a new sense and might well have become absolute had it not proved necessary to make so much use of parliament and, thereby, to give parliament new powers, new experience, new confidence, and new prestige. The work of redistributing monastery land was used by Thomas Cromwell as a means for creating a really professional bureaucratic machine. (84) Cromwell risks compromising his moral and spiritual convictions regarding political expediency. [4-6] This transformation altered England's religious landscape and engendered political and cultural ramifications. Cromwell manipulates legal and parliamentary procedures to establish Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church of England, thus eliminating the papal authority. This manoeuvre secured his position in the king's favour and shifted religious and political power. His approach to governance has become a model for future states, demonstrating the potential for radical change through institutional means. However, the moral implications of these actions remain debatable. This moral ambiguity is most pronounced when Cromwell oversees the execution of his opponents. For instance, Cromwell oversees Thomas More's arrest and execution, whose integrity contrasts with Cromwell's pragmatism. Peter Iver Kaufman elucidates this in "Dis-Manteling More". This article examines Thomas More's motivations for becoming a chancellor and prosecuting heretics. Kaufman argued that More's actions were driven by the desire to protect the Catholic Church and true faith, not cruelty or fanaticism. This article illuminates More and Cromwell's different approaches to governance and religious reform, with More viewing the Catholic Church as a guarantor of individual integrity and state stability (165-193). More's refusal to acknowledge Henry as the head of the Church led to his execution. While these events do not harden Cromwell, his willingness to set aside personal loyalty and embrace ruthless actions demonstrates his survival instinct. Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell's internal conflict–balancing duty and moral convictions–reflects the moral ambiguity explored in Art and Morality by Jose Luis Bermudes and Sebastian Gardener, demonstrating that resilience in power can involve challenging compromises and complex ethical decisions. In this context, the "attractiveness of a particular way of living one's life" (2) becomes central, especially in Cromwell's case, where survival often necessitates transforming one's life by relinquishing prior allegiances. The acquaintance principle (is an idea from philosophy that suggests that when we judge something, we need to have direct, first-hand experience with it. In moral terms, the principle implies that to judge a person's life or actions ethically, we must understand them deeply, almost as if we've "met" or directly experienced their choices.) This case aligns with Cromwell's pragmatic approach to governance and his firsthand experience in navigating the complex political landscape of the Tudor Court, where shifting loyalty and moral compromises were necessary for survival. Similarly, Nora Hämäläinen's "Wolf Hall and Moral Personhood" explores the moral complexities of Thomas Cromwell and argues that Mantel's portrayal resists simplistic readings of Cromwell as either corrupt or lacking moral imagination. (197-198) Cromwell's political insight enabled him to foresee and influence power dynamics. A pragmatic assessment of the evolving political landscape drove his support for Anne's execution. Initially, Cromwell allied with Anne, recognising her influence over the king and the potential for career advancement. He was instrumental in Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne. However, as Henry's favour towards Anne diminished, Cromwell strategically distanced himself and aligned himself with her opponents. As Henry VIII's affection for Anne Boleyn waned, Cromwell swiftly identified this shift and took decisive action to preserve his position. He orchestrated Anne's downfall by collaborating with her adversaries and endorsing her execution, exemplifying the ethical complexities of Tudor's

politics. In this milieu, survival often necessitates decisions that are considered unethical in other contexts. This calculated realignment enabled Cromwell to retain his position and loyalty to the crown even at the expense of betraying his former ally. His behaviour was essential for endurance in a royal court where loyalty was fleeting and uncertain. Cromwell's skill in manoeuvring through these dangerous political circumstances and making tough choices when required highlights his tenacity and flexibility in a setting where fortunes could swiftly shift. Thus, Cromwell's ability to compartmentalise emotions and pursue political survival despite trauma demonstrates resilience; however, his conflict between duty and moral conviction adds complexity. Alongside Cromwell, Anne Boleyn's struggle for survival is characterised by ambition and the imperative to provide Henry with a male heir. Catherine of Aragon's survival is inextricably linked to her identity as a queen and her conviction in the legitimacy of her marriage. She resists Henry VIII's divorce, relying on her royal lineage and Catholic faith, as Barbara J. Harrison writes in the article "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England." A number of noblewomen openly opposed Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon: his sister Mary, Duchess of Suffolk, Elizabeth, Duchess of Norfolk, Gertrude, Marchioness of Exeter, Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, Mary, Lady Willoughby, and Anne, Lady Hussey. In January 1531, the Duchess of Norfolk wrote the queen that partisans of the divorce were attempting to persuade her to join their party, but that she would never desert her. Shortly thereafter, she was expelled from court 'because she spoke too freely. (276) Her unwavering support exemplifies the political influence of women in Tudor, England. Although Catherine could not alter her ultimate fate, Catherine's resilience and strategic alliances significantly impacted historical events. Catherine's resistance is not merely personal but inherently political, as she endeavours to maintain her status and secure her daughter's future. As Mantel elucidates, "Master Cromwell, I know, I have failed you. That is to say, I have failed your country, which by now is my country too. The king was a good

husband to me, but I could not do that which is most necessary for a wife to do" (453). Catherine's ultimate survival is unsuccessful despite her emotional and political resilience. Her inability to produce a male heir and refusal to make Henry's decisions rendered her position untenable. Her subsequent removal from court signified the termination of her political survival. Her struggle exemplifies the extensive measures taken by individuals within Henry's court to safeguard their positions and legacies, even when confronted with overwhelming opposition. [7-9] Cardinal Wolsey's character also exemplifies the precarious nature of survival in Tudor England. Their continued existence depends on the management of desires and maintenance of influence. As Henry's chief minister, Wolsey occupies a pivotal role; however, his failure to secure Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon initiates his downfall. "The cardinal says', Thomas, I sank to my knees and from that humble posture I tried to dissuade him. Majesty, I said, be guided by me. Nothing will ensue if you wish to be rid of your wife, but a great deal of trouble and expense" (25). The text highlights Wolsey's realisation that his survival is contingent upon satisfying Henry's demands for an annulment. In Wolf Hall, the survival of key historical figures was intricately shaped by personal ambitions and the broader historical, political and ideological forces of Tudor England. Through the lens of New Historicism and Michel Foucault's concepts of power and discipline, one can observe how their fates are inextricably linked to the social, religious, and political structures of the era. These theoretical frameworks enhance our comprehension of characters' struggles and elucidate the complex dynamics of power, survival, and agency in the context of English reform. New Historicism posits that literature is inseparable from the historical and social contexts in which it is created, viewing literary works as products of their time shaped by ideological, political, and cultural forces. In Wolf Hall, Mantel's portrayal of Thomas Cromwell illustrates how broader historical forces, such as the English Reformation, religious conflict, and dynastic concerns of the Tudor Monarchy, influence

individual survival. As Samuel Clowes Huneke observes in her "The Boston Review", For a long time, historians thought of Cromwell as a goon, Henry's henchman who battered down the doors of English monasteries and engineered executions of the king's enemies…But Mantel is not Hegel. This does not justice to her empathy. It is not only that she is arguing that the modern state emerged from the Tudor court, it is also that it emerged from the very particular constellation of individuals and their peculiar desires. (12) [10-12] Cromwell's ascent to power reflected this period's political and religious upheavals. His pragmatism, political acumen, and ability to navigate shifting alliances in court were inextricably linked to the ideological currents of the time, particularly the Reformation's challenge to the Catholic Church's authority. The dissolution of traditional Catholicism and the Church of England established a milieu where Cromwell could thrive by exploiting the changes to his advantage. His political success was inseparable from the religious and political shifts during this tumultuous period. The survival strategies of figures like Anne Boleyn, Cardinal Wolsey, and Thomas More are shaped by personal ambition, moral convictions, and ideological and power structures embedded within the Tudor court. Harpham's analysis of Foucault's influence on New Historicism, stressing ethical and power-driven dimensions of historical scholarship, provides a framework for understanding these figures' fates. Their actions and decisions, seen as responses to larger political and religious forces, reflect the inescapable influence of power in shaping survival and subjectivity within a historical context.

The analysis of Anne Boleyn's survival strategy, framed from a New Historicist point of view, aligns with Geoffrey Galt Harpham's paper "Foucault and the New Historicism". Harpham emphasises that ethical dimensions of historical scholarship are intertwined with power dynamics and the construction of subjectivity (373). Anne Boleyn's ascension to power within the Tudor court is shaped by personal ambitions and embedded in the historical and ideological context, particularly the religious and political transformations following Henry VIII's severance from Rome. Her survival is defined by her ability to navigate the gendered and patriarchal structures governing Tudor society, in which a woman's power is often tied to her relationship with men. As Harpham suggests, New Historicist scholars view history as an ascetic practice, a way to understand how scholars are shaped by larger cultural forces and ideological structures (375). Foucault's concept of power adds insight into this analysis, particularly in understanding how the Tudor Court functioned as a microcosm of broader societal power structures. Cromwell's role in orchestrating Anne's downfall exemplifies Foucault's notion of power as diffuse and pervasive: he manipulates court structures to secure his position while disposing of those out of favour with the king. As a potential mother to the heir, these dynamics control Anne's body, illustrating how power and discipline regulate individuals in society, particularly women. This perspective is linked to Harpham's discussion of Foucault's influence on New Historicism, in which power and resistance influence scholars' ethical self-fashioning. English Sweating Sickness has further demonstrated the fragility of human life during the Tudar Era. The disease, which sporadically affected Tudor England, is depicted with notable verisimilitude, reflecting the precariousness of power during Henry VIII's reign. As Paul R. Hunter observes in his paper "The English Sweating Sickness, with Particular Reference to the 1551 Outbreak in Chester", the illness was characterised by its rapid onset and significant mortality rate, affecting individuals across social strata, including members of the clergy and nobility. The novel successfully captures this widespread feeling of social unease. By mid-July the cardinal is making his preparations for the voyage across the Narrow Sea. The warm weather has brought sweating sickness to London, and the city is emptying. A few have gone down already and many more are imagining they have it, complaining of headaches and pains in their limbs…. This plague came to us in the year 1485, with the armies that brought us the first Henry Tudor. Now every few years it fills the graveyards. It kills in a day. Merry at breakfast, they say: dead by noon (89). Sweating sickness emerged

as a metaphor for the broader uncertainties of the era, wherein sudden deaths reflected the capriciousness of royal favour. Mantel's incorporation of illness as a motif emphasises the fragility of survival, which is contingent upon adaptability in both the health and political spheres. The interplay between historical epidemiology and narrative fiction elucidates how pandemics influence individual and collective consciousness. The narratives of prominent figures like Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII, Thomas More, Catherine of Aragon, and Cardinal Wolsey, coupled with the outbreak of the English Sweating Sickness, illuminate the harsh realities of existence within Henry VIII's court. These historical personages must navigate a treacherous political landscape in which survival hinges on flexibility, fidelity, and sometimes ethical concessions. Their tribulations exemplify the broader theme of political volatility in Tudor England, where power is fragile, allegiances fleet, and endurance often demands substantial personal or moral sacrifices. The novel demonstrates that survival encompasses more than mere perseverance; it involves adapting to shifting power dynamics and compromises that safeguard political standing at the expense of personal principles. Mantel's portrayal underscores the grim nature of Tudor's politics, where only those prepared to forsake their values, manipulate others, and traverse perilous circumstances can aspire to survive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the characters' fates are inextricably linked to the historical and ideological forces of the era, particularly the religious and political upheavals associated with the English Reformation. Cromwell's survival necessitated the navigation of fluctuating power dynamics and exploitation of the ideological currents prevalent during this period. Foucault's theoretical framework enhances this analysis by elucidating how power operates through political authority and regulating bodies, behaviours, and beliefs. The interplay between personal agency, historical context, and power dynamics emphasises the precariousness of survival in Tudor England, where broader social and ideological forces influence individual actions. Through these analytical frameworks, Wolf Hall commented on how individuals navigate complex power structures to ensure survival.

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