

Wolves in Wolf Hall: An Intersectional Study of Wolves and Humans in Wolf Hall Triptych*

¹**Sandhya Aduri**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Degree College, Puttur (Andhra Pradesh), India. Email: sandhya.aduri@gmail.com

²**Prof. G.M. Sundaravalli**, Department of English, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh), India. Email: miriam.sundaravalli@yahoo.co.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.2>

Abstract

The present paper is an earnest endeavor to explore the characteristics of wolf through an intersectional lens in the picture gallery of Characters in the Wolf Hall Triptych, the true to Life Trilogy that maps out the ascension of Thomas Cromwell from the humble origins to the Pinnacle of Power in the Henrician Court. The symbolism embedded in the title Wolf Hall is the most intriguing and recurring motif in the triptych. Albeit, its literal meaning refers to the name of the Seymour family estate, its figurative sense connotes the Latin adage "Homo homini lupus" meaning "man is wolf to man" indicating an arena governed by survival, power, predation, and political machinations. Lupine traits reverberate throughout the Trilogy. Although all the characters in the Triptych share the characteristics of wolf, the present study examines the narrative arc of the protagonist Thomas Cromwell as he is endowed with absolute lupine traits. Also, this paper seeks to analyse the impact of the intersectional factors, such as Power, Ambition, Political Machinations and Social Hierarchy comprehensively on character behaviours and relationships.

Keywords: Wolf Hall, Wolf Symbolism, Thomas Cromwell, Power, Political Machinations and Social Hierarchy

Introduction

Hilary Mantel's *The Wolf Hall Triptych*, subsuming *Wolf Hall* (Wolf 2009), *Bring up the Bodies* (Bring 2012), and *The Mirror and the Light* (Mirror 2020) is "a literary page-turner" (Timweed.net) that reinvigorates Tudor history through the eyes of Thomas Cromwell. Mantel has presented Wolf Hall as a wonderful picture gallery of wolves who have apparently donned the human bodies. Wolves are often viewed as the paragons for negative traits, shrewdness and cunningness. However, they possess the positive traits such as curiosity, endurance, loyalty, family, freedom, friendship, playfulness, protection, and teamwork (Stanton). These traits reverberate throughout the trilogy. Besides being served as the Triptych's titular echo, the metaphor of the wolf serves as a paragon of survival and political machinations in the Henrician court. Ostensibly, the Triptych is teeming with ravenous wolves for power. The appetite for power reverberates though out the trilogy. As defined in the Glossary of International Wolf Centre, Dominance Hierarchy denotes:

***Article History:** Full Article received on 30 May 2025. Review completed on 7 June 2025, approved on 11 June 2025

First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

A linear chain of command concept describing rank within a pack established through competition conflict. According to this model, the strongest male and female are the 'alphas', the second in rank are the 'betas', and the 'omega' wolves are the lowest ranking wolves, often having to beg for food and always losing fights.

The nexus of the characters in the trilogy is to gain power at any cost. Mantel portrays both Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn as Alpha political ravenous wolves and Thomas Cromwell as both political ravenous wolf and social wolf. Mantel's characters are perfect epitomes of distinct lupine traits, turning the Henrician court into a metaphorical wolf pack, where social hierarchy, loyalty, shrewdness, treachery and ruthlessness determine one's destiny. Apparently, drawing upon the Latin adage *homo homini lupus*, the present study explores how the Protagonist of the *Wolf Hall* triptych epitomizes absolute wolf-like characteristics to understand Mantel's Henrician Court.

Review of Literature

In *Wolf Hall* Trilogy, Hilary Mantel meticulously details the life of Thomas Cromwell, a paragon for "Renaissance man" (Borman. ch.1) in the 16th century British History. Thomas Cromwell is presented as a secondary figure to Cardinal Wolsey, an antagonist to Thomas More by Shakespeare in *Henry VIII* and Robert Bolt in *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) respectively. Contrary to their portrayals, Mantel presents him as a man of vision and virtues who has become an instrument in the hands of Henry VIII by compromising his ideals. In these two portrayals, he is a flat character, whereas in Mantel's portrayal, he is a three-dimensional round character. Upon receiving the scathing criticism of glorifying the notorious villain in the Tudor history, Mantel remarks, "It wasn't that I wanted to rehabilitate him. I do not own a priory clinic for the dead." (Mantel, *How I Came to Write Wolf Hall*). Lacking factual underpinnings for Thomas Cromwell's early life gives Hilary Mantel ample scope to invent his childhood. Above all, Mantel's portrait of Thomas Cromwell is historically well-grounded (Smith 2016) and profoundly human.

Thomas Cromwell

Hilary Mantel delineates Thomas Cromwell (Cromwell) as the three-dimensional character teeming with the traits of both political ravenous wolf and social wolf. His ascent from a scratch of being "a blacksmith's son" (Mantel. *Mirror* 4) to the architect of becoming the second man in England (*Mirror* 15) is central to Mantel's Triptych. He has been painted as a quintessential wolf endowed with both positive and negative traits. In the first instalment of the Triptych *Wolf Hall*, Mantel introduces Thomas Cromwell to the readers as a Putney boy of around 15 who is being brutally injured by his father mercilessly and lying on the cobbles of the yard with blood all over his face. Mantel writes, "Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard" (*Wolf* 3). However, the reason for being beaten up remains an enigma as there is no clue given except his sister Kat's expression of doubt whether he involves in any fighting. Soon after this incident, like a disperser in the wolf pack, Cromwell left his birthplace Putney and establishes himself as a self-made survivor by honing the survival skills at a tender age. While escaping from Putney, Cromwell resolves to reach France, believing he might find war there. He slips into a smuggler's ship and reaches Dover where he experiences periods of starvation lasting a day or more. "He does not eat for a day or so;" (*Wolf* 13) Nonetheless, he does not give up the hope of joining war. During this time, he encounters a man performing three-card stick at Dover and learns it at once by close observation (*Wolf* 14). Mantel notes: "Surprisingly, he finds he will leave Dover richer than he arrived" (*Wolf* 14). Young Cromwell is taken aback when low-landers take pity on him and condemn the cruel attitude of English towards their children. He exclaims, "Are there people in the world who are not cruel to their children" (*Wolf* 15). This shows how much trauma

young Cromwell has undergone at the hands of Walter Cromwell. Here, Mantel successfully fleshes out the childhood of Cromwell and evokes commiseration for the young Cromwell. After about a decade of peregrinating in France and Italy, Cromwell comes back to England in 1520s. Later in the novel, Cromwell introduces himself as a “ruffian” (MacCulloch 1) in his childhood to Dr. Cranmer. Apparently, Mantel presents young Thomas with the lupine traits of playfulness, adaptability, endurance and resilience.

By the time he returns to England in 1520s, he has tried his wings in a wide range of professions from a mercenary to an arbitrator. He studies Law (Gudala 41) and learns a memory system in Italy. Hilary notes: “In Italy, he learned a memory system, so he can remember everything; every stage of how he got here” (*Wolf* 156). Eventually, he marries Elizabeth Wykys (Liz), “one of the daughters of his master namely old wykys” (Gudala 41) and they have three children, George, Anne and Grace. Having undergone intense trauma as a child by his father, he is determined not to follow his father’s example. Instead, he aspires to be a good nurturing father like a protecting male Alpha wolf in the wolf family pack.

Mantel masterfully uses flashback technique to unravel the life journey of Thomas Cromwell. “His background as a blacksmith’s son is mentioned many times in the novel” (Mukul 91). This testifies the importance given to social hierarchy in the Henrician court. Sagacious Cromwell knows quite well that his life is in a constant peril ever since, he gets into the treacherous Tudor court. Nevertheless, his ambition to climb up the social ladder drives him to make his fortune in the very dangerous Tudor court. He is thoroughly versed in Greek, Latin and Italian. “He knows by heart the entire New Testament in Latin” (*Wolf* 31). Mantel paints Cromwell of 40s as the most-sought well-rounded individual emblematic of Renaissance ideals such as intellectual agility, adaptability, pragmatic thinking and mastery of many fields including poetry, law, finance and administration. Mantel notes: “He Can draft a contract, train a falcon, draw a map, stop a street fight, furnish a house and fix a jury” (*Wolf* 31).

Mantel depicts Cromwell as both a predator and protector. He is a ruthless predator for his rivals and a compassionate protector for his loved ones. He regards Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England, his first master as “a father and a friend” (*Wolf* 289). He learns the ropes of political machinations under him. Meanwhile, he is appointed to the King’s service and endowed the responsibility of “the King’s great matter” (Elton. ch.5). Following the fall of his master, Thomas Wolsey, the great Cardinal from the king’s grace, nearly all his allies, associates and beneficiaries abandon him except George Cavendish and Cromwell himself. Cromwell, who is at the threshold of his career in the Henrician court is warned repeatedly by many people to leave Wolsey, otherwise he has to end up in scratch where he started. Yet, being a strong-willed individual, he remains firmly by his fallen master’s side. The following Cromwell’s Interior Monologue reflects his unshakeable allegiance to Wolsey that leaves his position in the Henrician Court a real cliffhanger:

If he were to give himself a piece of advice for Christmas, he'd say, leave the cardinal now or you'll be out on the streets again with the three-card trick. But he only gives advice to those who are likely to take it (*Wolf* 170).

Further, to ensure his fallen master’s safety, Cromwell determines to remain at the Henrician Court. He witnesses how the gentry made the Cardinal butt of their jokes and construed to avenge them one day. In the course of time, he fulfils his vow by getting them executed on the trumped-up charges of adultery with the queen Anne Boleyn. Cromwell’s display of brinkmanship in bringing down Anne Boleyn testifies his shrewdness and what most of the historians believe ruthlessness. His unshaken allegiance to Cardinal Wolsey resonates with the deeply held pack bond of the wolves. Furthermore, Cromwell’s unconditional loyalty and unwavering allegiance to

his trusted friends is well- articulated in a letter to Thomas Cromwell by the Princess Mary, “You are my chief friend and sustainer. My very trust is in you” (*Mirror* 116).

Having witnessed the fall of Wolsey from the King's grace, Cromwell thinks of an alternative strategy to “the great matter of the King”. He doesn't want to pursue the king any more to get the papal consensus as he knows well that this equation failed Wolsey miserably and resulted in his ultimate death. Not only does he possess brute force but also the mental agility of the wolf. His ascent in the Henrician court symbolizes his adaptability and strategic acumen. Cromwell has masterfully maneuvered the church reforms that enabled England to break away from papal authority and recognize the king as the supreme head of both the Church and the state. Also, he paves the way for the creation of the church of England by tactfully injecting the following notion that it was his brother's will to see him as the supreme ruler of both the church and kingdom independent of Rome in the mind of Henry VIII when he was shell-shocked for having seen his dead brother in the dream:

Because now is the time to become the ruler you should be, and to be sole and supreme head of your kingdom. Ask Lady Anne, she will tell you. She will say the same. “She does,” the king admits. “She says we should no longer bow to Rome” (*Wolf* 277).

Mantel presents Cromwell as a paragon for male Alpha breeding wolf and his household as an ideal wolf pack. He loves his family and can do anything for the welfare of them. Likewise, his children also love him. The adoration of his children towards him is well-felt when Dr. Cranmer Says to him, “Your children love you” (*Wolf* 279). Cromwell is filled with pride and a quiet sense of achievement when king Henry lauds Cromwell's ideal parenting during a Jousting event. His son Gregory competes alongside the King and Henry Norris, chief of the King's Privy Chamber. The King remarks: “You turn out your boy beautifully, and your nephew Richard too. No nobleman could do more. They are a credit to your house” (*Bring* 194). His indispensable role as the protector of the family is conspicuously evident when his nephew Richard tells Dr. Cranmer, “We cannot do without the man in charge” (*Wolf* 279). He is painted as a loving husband and father. Unfortunately, Cromwell's euphoric feeling of family life with his amicable wife and innocent daughters doesn't last for long. His happiness has been taken away in the form of sweating sickness. In spite of having an ocean of sorrow, he never vents out his grief in the public and “admits for even a moment that sorrow has sapped his will” (*Wolf* 281) as Thomas More has done when his father was dead: “He died in my arms. More begins to cry” (*Wolf* 281).

After the death of his wife Liz, Cromwell suffers from overpowering feeling of guilt throughout his life for not being with his wife during her death bed. He has deep-seated grief for his lost loved ones under the veneer of his aggressive threatening facade.

Mantel with her story-telling skills, tactfully convinces the readers that it is only at the behest of capricious king Henry VIII, Cromwell has engineered the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn. This portrayal of Cromwell and the king Henry is further endorsed by Mathangi and Dr. Jayanthasri when they note: “The King seemed to possess no moral scruples and Cromwell, an ardent executor of the king's will, was looking for the ways and means to indict and not acquit her” (Mathangi and Dr. Jayanthasri 1203).

In the words of G.R. Elton, a historian: “Thomas More was very stubborn and rigid. Cromwell toiled many times to save his life, but he did not let Cromwell do that and More was finally executed” (Elton). Ostensibly, Mantel follows G.R. Elton in portraying Cromwell as the sharp-witted self-made man rather than a cold “Machiavellian schemer” (Borman) in the traditional portrayals. After the execution of Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell immensely grows in his power. Cromwell is appointed Master Secretary, and his impending ascent within the Henrician court is subtly foreshadowed in the very words spoken by Henry during their exchange: “You are

to be Master Secretary. Rewards Shall follow. I do not understand why I have not done this long ago" (*Wolf* 569). Cromwell ascends steadily through a series of increasingly powerful administrative and political ranks in the Henrician court. As Gudala notes, he is the "Master secretary, Master of Rolls, King's immediate councillor and also the chancellor of Cambridge University" (Gudala 138). Cromwell's unwavering loyalty towards king Henry, being his servant and friend is well- brought out when the King falls unconscious and presumably dead by all his subjects around him due to the jousting accident. It is Thomas Cromwell who senses his breath and rescues him. At such point, he tells Richard:

It was a bad moment for me. How many men can say, as I must, 'I am a man whose only friend is the King of England'? I have everything, you would think. And yet take Henry away and I have nothing (*Bring* 210).

Besides Loyalty, Mantel's Cromwell is endowed with the social responsibility of taking care of the poor and strays. His compassionate kindness and unconditional support to the needy is well-brought out on various occasions in the course of the Triptych: "At Austin Friars, he has beer and bread sent out to the men who stand at the gate" (*Wolf* 321). He gives shelter to the poor and strays. "Before spring comes, some of the poor men who stand at his gate find their way inside it" (*Wolf* 535). To provide permanent solution to the orphans, "he is bringing in a bill to the new parliament, to provide for the orphan boys of London. His idea is, look after the orphan boys, and they will look after the girls" (*Bring*). Mantel humanizes Cromwell through repeated acts of compassion and empathy. Cromwell's deep concern for the vulnerable and his commitment to social reform through his Pragmatic approach in the Tudor England reflects the protective instincts of a wolf guarding its pack.

Initially, Mantel maps the continuous rise of Thomas Cromwell in *The Mirror and the Light*. He is loyal to his trustworthy friends Thomas Wyatt, Chapuys, and Cranmer. He has amassed lots of wealth. Hilary's larger-than-life portrayal of the character Cromwell even in his 50s as the person with the "same small quick eyes, the same thickset imperturbable body, the same schedule" (*Mirror* 15), makes the reader awe-struck and endear Cromwell. "Though he is a commoner still, most would agree that he is the second man in England." (*Mirror* 15). Although Cromwell's origins are humble, he has climbed the apex position in England, next to the king with his steady loyalty, mental agility, strategic acumen. Also, he is the Earl of Essex now. The readers get enthralled to observe the roles being played by Cromwell in a day. He juggles many activities at a time with lots of precision. However arduous his work may be, he never shows any fatigue on his face.

Cromwell is the most sought-after person across England. According to his masters, he is able to solve a year's problem "in a day". Cromwell's impeccability in all aspects including execution of plans, arbitrating the disputes, speaking multiple languages makes the readers intrigued. Profoundly ruminative, Cromwell executes all his plans very wisely. The Reforms initiated by Cromwell led to the seismic shift in the religious, political and socio-Economic landscape of the Tudor England. Also, his sense of isolation gets heightened as he rises through the ranks. Mantel presents him as a conscience-stricken man teeming with the thoughts of guilt and repentance. On the contrary, Henry stays unrepentant for the brutal crimes he has committed and makes Cromwell accountable for all those heinous crimes. In the eyes of his subjects, Henry is an innocent king who acts according to Cromwell. He always gets them done by Cromwell. He makes sure to have high regard among the commoners by making Cromwell responsible for all the reforms being taken place in his arena which leads to the attribution of umpteen inhuman activities to Thomas Cromwell.

Further, dissolution of monasteries paves the way for the downfall of Cromwell. Consequently, there is a growing hatred among the common people against him as they don't want the king to have supremacy over the pope. They still strongly believe monks are endowed with divine powers. All people including privy chamber royals, gentry, and commoners start considering him a villain and heretic. People's vehement hatred towards Cromwell is evident in Dr. Cranmer's reporting of Lincolnshire rumours to the king Henry VIII, Where Cranmer stated that people want Cromwell to be beheaded as they firmly believe that the king is swayed by Cromwell and he makes the king a puppet to get consensus of his deeds. In parallel, Cromwell's appetite for power remains unslaked throughout the Triptych. His rise in power gradually turns him to be a supercilious person. His supercilious nature is well-brought out when he thinks about the king, as follows:

Henry hated both his wives at diverse times, but they spitefully lived on, until God put an end to one, the French executioner to the other. Henry could not wish them away for his power. Only I could do that. It is I who tell him who he can marry and whom, and who he can marry next, and who and how to kill (*Mirror*329).

Having been considered as Upstart in the Tudor Court by the Nobles, Thomas Cromwell is looked down upon for his humble origins and never gets the favour of them. Also, he knows well that his political rivals like the Duke of Norfolk and Suffolk can change the mind of the king against him at any point, and he is ready to face anything. Despite being circumspect in navigating the treacherous waters of Henry's court politics for the most of his life, the misfortune falls upon him due to the constant schemes of the gentry. In time, he loses the grace of Henry VIII. In spite of knowing that saying no to Henry VIII is jeopardising his life, Cromwell stays reluctant to get the annulment of King with Anne of Cleves as he believes in her as a faithful lady to the king. Immediately after the annulment of the marriage of Henry and Anne of Cleves, Cromwell becomes a prey to the political machinations of gentry and ironically, he has to pay a horrendous pay as the king is completely dissatisfied with the alliance. Thomas Cromwell was executed on 28 June 1540. The tragic abrupt end of Cromwell mirrors how the aristocratic community of 16th century want the poor to remain at the bottom of the heap by employing all the strategies not to let them become arriviste in their court.

Conclusion

Set in the 16th century England, The *Wolf Hall* Tryptic follows the life of Thomas Cromwell from scratch to the supreme position in the Henrician Court. The Tudor England is synonymous to the rampant religious upheaval, more importantly the complete delegation of ecclesiastical powers on the king is a powerhouse of power struggles, treachery and Betrayal. Mantel unearths the 16th century British History and brings forth the comprehensive personality of Thomas Cromwell before the reader. Mantel's portrayal hints that one has to be devious in order to raise in Henrician court and convinces the reader that there is nothing wrong on part of Thomas Cromwell in being the devious as the servant of Henry VIII, the most mercurial king. Mantel's Cromwell is an "unlikely hero" (Mathangi and Dr. Jayanthasri1198) who has revolutionised the socio, political and religious landscape of the Tudor England. Mantel's Henrician court is the one where loyalty is conditional, power is predatory, and survival like in a wolfpack depends on both cunning and strength.

Works Cited

Borman, Tracy. *Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2014.

- Bolt, Robert. *A Man for All Seasons*. Heinemann, 1960.
- Elton, G. R. *England Under the Tudors*. Routledge Classics, 2019.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1985.
- Gudala, Parimala. A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Thomas Cromwell's Character as Portrayed by Hilary Mantel. 2023. Andhra University, PhD dissertation.
- International Wolf Center. "Glossary." International Wolf Center, <https://wolf.org/wolf-info/basic-wolf-info/in-depth-resources/glossary/>.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life*. Viking, 2018.
- Mantel, Hilary. *Bring Up the Bodies*. Fourth Estate, 2012.
- . *The Mirror and the Light*. Fourth Estate, 2020.
- . *Wolf Hall*. Fourth Estate, 2009.
- . "How I Came to Write Wolf Hall." *The Guardian*, 7 Sept. 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/07/hilary-mantel-how-i-wrote-wolf-hall>.
- Mathangi, V., and Jayanthasri Balakrishnan. "Herstory in History – Women Characters in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies." *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2017, pp. 1198–1205.
- Mukul, Manasvinee. *History, Women, and Culture in Hilary Mantel's Fiction*. 2020. Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, School of Languages, PhD dissertation.
- Shakespeare, William, and John Fletcher. *Henry VIII*. Edited by Gordon McMullan, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2000.
- Smith, Phyllis T. "Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant." *Historical Novel Review*, no. 75, Feb. 2016, <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/thomas-cromwell-the-untold-story-of-henry-viiiis-most-faithful-servant/>.
- Stanton, Kristen. "Wolf Symbolism and Meaning and the Wolf Spirit Animal." *UniGuide*, 16 Aug. 2021, <https://www.uniguide.com/wolf-meaning-symbolism-spirit-animal-guide>.
- Weed, Tim. "Character Portraits in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall." *TimWeed.net*, 6 Sept. 2016, <https://timweed.net/character-portraits-in-hilary-mantels-wolf-hall/>.