

THOMAS HARDY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN  
AND HIS ENVIRONMENT

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND HIS ENVIRONMENT  
AS SEEN BY THOMAS HARDY  
IN HIS LEADING NOVELS

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: This thesis explores the relationship that Hardy establishes between the environment in Wessex and the people who lived there during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. It attempts to show the extent to which the environment influenced these people and the changes that occur in Hardy's attitude towards them as he developed as a novelist.

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## INTRODUCTION

The considerable body of critical work written about Thomas Hardy and his novels has tended to establish and confirm certain attitudes towards his novels, attitudes which I believe hinder to some extent a full appreciation of what he was attempting to do as a novelist. For by placing the emphasis upon what were, to Hardy, less important matters, the critics have caused readers to overlook his particular strengths. Thus, he has been criticised for being too pessimistic and for depending too much upon chance, both criticisms that obscure Hardy's real purpose.

The most commonly quoted example of his pessimism is the comment given to Elizabeth at the end of The Mayor of Casterbridge, "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain".<sup>1</sup>(p386) What is often overlooked is that this comment is qualified, for Elizabeth, who is now enjoying "unbroken tranquility" is just recalling what her "youth had seemed to teach".(p386) And this seems to be the point that Hardy wishes to make; his attitude is starkly realistic; he expects things to be difficult. But if the facts are faced, and if misfortunes are accepted as part of living, then the individual can find satisfaction in living. In a note written in 1902, Hardy describes this pessimism:

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<sup>1</sup>Page references to the novels being discussed will be given after each quotation. The edition used in each case is listed in the bibliography.

Pessimism (or rather what is called such) is, in brief, playing the sure game. You cannot lose at it; you may gain. It is the only view of life in which you can never be disappointed. Having reckoned what to do in the worst possible circumstances, when better arise, as they may, life becomes child's play.<sup>2</sup>

This apparently has been Elizabeth's experience.

Similarly misunderstood is Hardy's position on chance.

Frederick Karl comments, "chance becomes a universal symbol of Hardy's personal philosophy; what he calls chance is everything over which man has no control. Although man's will is not nullified by chance, neither can will itself overcome chance."<sup>3</sup> I do not agree with the last part of Karl's conclusion, for Hardy suggests through his characters that attitudes towards life are the deciding factors in what a person does with the chances that life offers him. Indeed much of the effectiveness of Hardy's novels depends upon how his characters react to chance, as I shall endeavour to show later in this study. Hardy suggests, in some notes made about fiction, that:

. . . a work of fiction should be a precise transcript of ordinary life. . . .

. . . human nature must never be made abnormal, which is introducing incredulity. The uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters; and the writer's art lies in shaping that uncommonness while disguising its unlikelihood, if it be unlikely.<sup>4</sup>

One of chance is his way of placing his characters in positions where they reveal their characters, their strengths and weaknesses to us, and therefore is an important technique in character revelation;

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<sup>2</sup> E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy (MacMillan, 1965), p.311.

<sup>3</sup> F. Karl, Modern British Fiction, ed. M. Schorer (Oxford University Press, 1961), p.11.

<sup>4</sup> E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, p.150.

its degree of probability should not obscure the more important consideration of how the individual handles the situation.

Roy Morrell, in a most informative discussion of this problem of chance, sums up the matter clearly. "It is a common criticism that Hardy's interest in chance led him to ignore character; but the truth is that he often defines character 'in terms of chance', in terms of man's ability to stamp a design upon the neutral chances that touch his life."<sup>5</sup> We shall see more precisely this relationship between the experiences of Hardy's characters and their responses to the chances that they face as we discuss his major novels in detail.

Although Hardy was not himself a great philosopher, he read widely, and showed considerable interest in the philosophical and psychological theories of his time, and there is no doubt that his readings influenced his treatment of his characters, for he refers to various philosophers in his novels and in his notes and comments. Morrell discusses at some length Hardy's indebtedness to the writings of Mill, and in particular, to his treatise "On Liberty". He comments, "Mill argues that a man is only partly limited by time and place: he is free to 'use and interpret experience in his own way'"(p93) adding, in a footnote, "Hardy underlined these words in his own copy."

Morrell goes on to suggest that Hardy's central concern was with the difficulties of man helping man 'to unify the moral lot', difficulties of overcoming prejudice, convention, inhibition or any

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<sup>5</sup> R. Morrell, Thomas Hardy, The Will and the Way (University of Malaya Press, 1965), p.55.

other of the barriers between individuals or groups that cause unnecessary suffering".(p29) But these concerns should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Hardy was most interested in the people whom he knew best and with whom he had the most in common -- the people of his native Wessex. It is these people whom we come to know most intimately in his novels and upon whom his creative powers are most successful. Hardy does not see them as particularly good or particularly bad; rather he tries to show us how their traditions, their conventions, and their way of life have affected them in the way that they respond to the inevitable 'chances' that life brings to them. His real concern for these people is amply shown in his essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer", and in the fact that he went back to Wessex to build his permanent home and that he continued to tour its countryside throughout his life.

Whether or not the people of Wessex lived as he saw them, he believed that they did and that they were that way because of their environment. In his essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer", written in 1882, when his series of novels was well under way, he observed that:

Drudgery in the slums and alleys of a city, too long pursued, and accompanied as it often is by indifferent health, may introduce a mood of despondency which is well nigh permanent; but the same degree of drudgery in the fields results at worst in a mood of painless passivity. A pure atmosphere and a pastoral environment are a very appreciable portion of the sustenance which tends to produce the sound mind and body, and, thus much sustenance is, at least, the labourer's birthright.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting his conclusion that this "sustenance" disciplined his

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<sup>6</sup> I. Howe, The Selected Writings of Thomas Hardy (Fawcett World Library, 1966), p.122.

people in such a way that they were able to face their vicissitudes with relative equanimity or at least with "painless passivity". Although they had inherited character traits that differentiated them, it gave to each of them a "sound mind" based upon certain traditional values and attitudes that, however much scoffed at today, produced a stability in their lives that the modern world seriously lacks.

Much has been written about Hardy's deep and lifelong involvement with that part of England which he calls Wessex -- his family's long association with the area, his own childhood there, and his sensitive and profound interest in the way of life of its people. This deep immersion in the Wessex countryside meant that he was also immersed in the traditions of its people, including the tales told wherever groups of villagers gathered together. Douglas Brown goes so far as to suggest that these experiences "do more than German philosophy to explain why Fate so dominates the stories as protagonist".<sup>7</sup> More significant, however, is the fact that it explains or offers a source for his highly imaginative situations, such as the gambling scene between Venn and Wildeve by glow-worm light. "Nobody but a countryman nurtured in the traditional arts of balladry could have invented it; and only an imaginative writer leaning back towards the conditions of life that once bred balladry and its audience could have composed the passage as Hardy has." (Brown, p111)

Hardy, writing in an age when didactic works were popular, saw the novel as having a significant moral purpose. He commented that

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<sup>7</sup>D. Brown, Thomas Hardy (Longmans, 1961), p. 111.

the novel should be "a lesson in life"<sup>8</sup> presented "under the guidance of a mind who sees further into life"(p142) than does the reader. Discussing further aspects of the novel, he continued:

Those on the other hand which impress the reader with the inevitableness of character and environment in working out destiny, whether that destiny be just or unjust, enviable or cruel, must have a sound effect, if not what is called a good effect, upon a healthy mind.(pp144-5)

If by "sound effect" he meant that the novel should make people pause and think about their traditional attitudes and actions, then his novels live up to this statement. The analysis of Hardy's work that follows suggests that he was convinced that the interaction between the people of his Wessex novels and their environment produced a type of character not only capable of having such a "sound effect" upon his readers, but also worth emulating, and if possible preserving.

The similarity between Hardy's and Shakespeare's rustics is obvious; and Hardy was an enthusiastic reader of Shakespeare as is revealed in Florence Emily Hardy's biography. However, it is dangerous to see in this more than the source of an idea or technique, for common to both writers is a remarkable sensitivity for the way these people think and act. As Brown observes, "Hardy's sense of the facts of village life is far more important than his concealed memories of Shakespeare's rustics".(p49) Unless Hardy really knew his rural Wessex he could never have given to these people the humanness, the vividness, and the fascination that he does, for the extraordinary thing is that some of these minor Wessex characters live for us more successfully than

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<sup>8</sup>I. Howe, The Selected Writings of Thomas Hardy, p. 141.

many of his major non-Wessex people.

The extent to which these various influences affected Hardy's novels is, of course, hard to measure, and the accuracy of the picture that he creates of Wessex in the middle nineteenth century impossible to establish today. However, his opinion was sufficiently well regarded that Rider Haggard quoted him as an authority upon the area. (Brown, p31) But, regardless of the accuracy of the picture created, Hardy's familiarity with Wessex made that country a logical choice as a background for his novels and, of much greater significance, his poet's insight enabled him to use these experiences in presenting to his readers a fascinating impression of a way of life that gave to its practitioners a meaningful existence. For although we may be interested in Hardy's philosophical ideas, he is weakest when he allows them to intrude upon his story; his greatness as a novelist rests, first, upon his remarkable sensitivity to the nuances of attitude and value developed through this rural way of life but largely lacking in urban communities and among more sophisticated people, and second, upon his commanding artistry in conveying these impressions to his readers.

If, in fact, Hardy's interests lay first with his people of Wessex but then with "man in relation to other men and women . . . to chance and time, nature and the universe; man conscious of the past and its traditions, yet adapting himself, with uneven success, to the present and the future", (Morrell, p58) then I believe that it is worth considering the relationship that he, consciously or unconsciously, reveals between this rural environment and the people who live there.



It is the purpose of the study that follows to consider this relationship at some length.

## CHAPTER ONE

Hardy withdrew his first novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, from publication on the advice of Meredith.<sup>1</sup> His second venture, Desperate Remedies (1871), received a more promising reception. But it was not until he turned to his rural workers, in Under the Greenwood Tree (1872) that he achieved substantial success. Yet, although in many ways a delightful book, Under the Greenwood Tree is too simple, too Arcadian, to be fully convincing; he describes idyllically the life that he knew as a child. It is very much the world that he describes later in "The Dorsetshire Labourer", where people developed a "painless passivity" but also a "sound mind" so that they could accept the vicissitudes of every day experiences with equanimity. It is a relatively sheltered world where the big problems are such matters as handling the new parson who will not allow the villagers to "have a bit o' peace", (p72) or young Dick Dewy's returning Fancy Day's handkerchief in such a way as will permit him to become a regular caller at her school. But, for all its apparent simplicity, it is not an easy life, for its people have to work long hours to provide for a minimal standard of living.

Hardy usually begins his novels by stressing the importance of the rural setting in influencing the characters in the story. Thus, the novel opens with a brief description of the rural surroundings that immediately suggests that these will be active participants in the action to follow:

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<sup>1</sup>F. E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, p.62.

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality. (p3)

As the novel develops we find that it centres on the regular pattern of life that the seasons of the year impose upon the residents of a rural community. Thus the love story that forms about half of the novel begins with a Christmas caroling, develops slowly through the following winter and spring, becomes intense with the heat of summer, then develops complications in the fall. This paralleling of certain aspects of the natural world with the action, noticeably contrived here, becomes an important and effective device in Hardy's later novels. Besides its deliberate reinforcement of the story, it is particularly significant in reminding us that we are all creatures of moods induced by our surroundings, and that the natural world is particularly effective in inducing or intensifying these moods.

In this novel we find that some use is made of such interaction to motivate, or to increase the motivation of individuals. Thus we are aware that Dick Dewy has fallen in love with Fancy Day, but we find that the coming of spring causes him to make a practice of going to Fancy's house until "he had almost trodden a little path under the fence where never a path was before".(p67) The weather also makes its contribution to the moods of Hardy's characters. One tempestuous afternoon, a while after Geoffrey Day has decisively rejected Dick as Fancy's suitor, we find Fancy walking home:

developing his art and something of the subtle nature of the interaction between man and his natural surroundings is lost.

Although such weaknesses reduce the stature of the novel, Under the Greenwood Tree does reveal Hardy's insight into and his great interest in the types of people whom we are to meet in the novels that follow -- people narrow in outlook and bound by superstition, yet with high standards of conduct resulting from the closeness of their relationship with nature and their fellow man and their fear of the larger world beyond. This in itself makes the novel valuable as a chronicle of an ancient rural culture that has now passed away, as well as its being a charming tale of young love in a rural setting.

The picture presented of these villagers as they go about their daily affairs is truly delightful. Thus, the parishioners feel that their late parson was an honourable man for he did not expect them in church if they "were all on-end for a jaunt or spree, or to bring the babies to be christened if they were inclined to squalling".(p72) They are continually concerned also that they not offend their "betters" such as the clergy, and such concern often leads to frantic and ludicrous efforts to observe proprieties. We find, for example, that as the quire go to visit Parson Maybold to protest their pending dismissal, Reuben Dewy is eager that they should make a good impression. Thus, as they shuffle along in single file, the tranter turns to them: "'Now keep step again, will ye? . . . It looks better, and more becomes the high class of arrant which has brought us here'".(p79) The result of their visit is only that their dismissal will be delayed; yet they are so full of praise for Maybold's civility towards them that one feels with them their own

temerity in daring to speak to the parson on such a matter.

Other amusing examples may be found in the novel; but in addition to the humour there is implicit in them the fact that the villagers' concern about proprieties curbs the excesses in which they are likely to indulge. They have not become demoralized by the anonymity and barrenness of the city. Like the rural people Gray describes in his "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard", their sheltered way of life "their crimes confined". It is a definite factor in their developing a stable and satisfying attitude towards life.

It is through his remarkable picture of the people who accept what life in Wessex offers them that we gain a picture of what has been lost with the passing of the old ways and some understanding of what it is that Hardy so much admires. Further, if we are to take seriously Hardy's comment about "the inevitableness of character and environment in working out destiny" and about the novel's being a "lesson in life"<sup>2</sup> as it is or could be lived by people, then it is his portrayal of people who grew up under the influence of his Wessex that must be our main concern. However, as significant as the sections of highly entertaining dialogue may be in understanding these people, the characterization in the novel remains comparatively shallow and static; we never come to know and understand Fancy Day and Dick Dewy as we do many of the protagonists of the later novels.

At the same time there are some aspects of the characterization

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<sup>2</sup>See page 5 of introduction to this thesis.

which can be seen further developed in the works that follow. Like most of Hardy's women, Fancy is vain; she is too much concerned about her appearance, and almost loses Dick because she is more interested in adjusting the fitting of a dress to wear to church than in going nutting with him. Later, attracted by the social prestige and the physical comforts that Parson Maybold can offer her, she rashly agrees to marry him, but fortunately realizes her mistake in time and tells Maybold that she is engaged to Dick. However, her vanity and fickleness, understandable in an attractive, well-educated young woman in her position, are not developed with the finesse that Hardy shows later in the characterization of such people as Bathsheba and Eustacia.

Perhaps her most important contribution thematically is that as a school teacher, she comes to the village with talents and experiences that threaten the security and the traditional way of life there. Her arrival provides the opportunity for the development of a sub-plot that forms roughly half the novel. Parson Maybold decides to replace the quire that has traditionally supplied the church music, with an organ played by Fancy. This change shatters the self-esteem of these worthy quire members and causes them to organize a petition to have the decision reversed. Thus in this early novel we find evidence of the disturbing influences that are about to destroy the old Wessex way of life.

Fancy's lover, Dick Dewy, is a pleasant young man, who provides a precedent for Hardy's lovers by being completely devoted to her. His artless courting of her and his many little jealousies provide a refreshing picture of what love could be like in this relatively uncorrupted community. Dick, upon one occasion, is prompted to say to her, "Why,

you make any one think that loving is a thing that can be done and undone, and put on and put off at a mere whim".(p125) For Dick, and for most of Hardy's male lovers that follow him, this is impossible.

It is this simple love affair, together with the wrangling of the quire that forms the body of the novel; there is little here to develop the powerful feelings and the desperate struggles against man and the natural world that we see in the novels that follow. Hardy, in a subtitle, described the work as "A rural painting of the Dutch school", and the novel has the detail and the craftsmanship that one would expect from such a description. But, also as one would expect, it tends to be just a portrait, charming, enjoyable, but lacking in depth and penetration, particularly when compared with the major novels that follow it.

Yet, Under the Greenwood Tree does prepare us for the later novels by indicating to us the concerns that are to engage Hardy in the ensuing years. For as he continues to portray unforgettable characters like Tranter Dewy he creates for us a community of people, most of whom have worked out a reasonably satisfying way to live despite or perhaps because of the limitations of their environment. At the same time such disruptions of his Wessex by influences from without as seen in the dismissal of the quire are to become more and more significant in his subsequent novels.

However Hardy was to write one more auspicious novel before he turned to the more sombre aspects of rural life. By the time that Hardy wrote Far From the Madding Crowd (1874) he had largely mastered

his craft but had not yet lost faith in the future of his Wessex. Thus, in what proved to be his first major novel, Hardy portrayed his rural world more felicitously than in any other of his novels. The book opens with a description of Gabriel Oak, but quickly moves, in the second chapter to a description of part of Oak's farm, Norcombe Hill:

one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil -- an ordinary specimen of those smoothly outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down. (p8)

It is significant that in this early novel the natural world has already taken on a permanence and an indestructibility that contrasts with man's fleeting presence here. At the same time, by implication, Oak's own durability is suggested. In the following pages, Hardy goes on to describe Oak's sympathetic care of his sheep, and then turns to his thoughts:

For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself. (pp13-14)

Thus we see Oak as a being standing alone in a universe in which man's place has been deliberately minimized.

In Under the Greenwood Tree we found the world of nature influencing the people in the story; here, although the general impression of the rural community is pleasant, we find that at times nature becomes a force with which man must contend, and we find that much of Oak's strength of character is developed through contention with it. It was



into a chalk pit cut out of the side of Norcombe Hill that most of Oak's sheep fell to their death, ending his first venture into farming; later, he struggles with fire and again with rain to save Bathsheba's ricks, and it is his timely action on another occasion that prevents her bloated sheep from dying.

But it is not just the natural world, it is the whole tradition and way of life of these rural people that is involved here, as Hardy makes clear in his description of the great barn that for "four centuries had neither proved to be founded on a mistake, inspired any hatred of its purpose, nor given rise to any reaction that had battered it down". (p165) Through his description of the barn, Hardy sums up his rural world, with its stability and permanence that gave to its people the qualities that endeared them to him. He speaks of "a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride, at the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up". (p165) But it also poses the problem that he was to face in his later novels: he continues, "In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity". (p166) As the "outsider" came to make himself more and more known, the rural worker found that he must contend with this futurity now -- and contend on the "outsider's" terms. "The permanence of the idea" had gone.

Like those in Under the Greenwood Tree, the rustic characters are an important part of the environment; they are again delightfully entertaining, but they are far more realistically presented and individualized. Some, like Coggan, are clearly more competent than others; some are honest; others, like Pennyways, dishonest; most are

ready to drink too much given the opportunity. But the picture is still generally sympathetic. As Virginia Woolf<sup>3</sup> says, "They drink by night and they plough the fields by day. They are eternal . . . . The peasants are the great sanctuary of sanity, the country the last stronghold of happiness. When they disappear there is no hope for the race".(p175) Her generalization is, of course, oversimplified, and her prediction that the disappearance of the peasantry would destroy the race has not materialized. Nevertheless, she sums up what appears to be Hardy's attitude towards his people. Certainly, although there are exceptions like Pennyways, many of them are basically unworldly, sincere, and generally trustworthy; willingness to sacrifice themselves in the interests of loved ones is common among them. Hardy's emphasis upon these characteristics suggests that he saw them as the chief virtues of rural people -- virtues that were endangered by the encroaching, more sophisticated urban world.

A study of Gabriel Oak supports this conclusion. Oak, at the beginning of Far From the Madding Crowd, has already proved his capability as a farmer by establishing himself as a sheep farmer in a small way. Shortly thereafter he loses the larger part of his flock through an accident and is forced to revert to being a hired man. Hardy then describes the change that his misfortune wrought in him:

He had passed through an ordeal of wretchedness which had given him more than it had taken away. He had sunk from his modest elevation as pastoral king into the very slime-pits of Siddim: but there was left to him a dignified calm he had never known before, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not.(p44)

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<sup>3</sup>Virginia Woolf, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy", A. Wright, ed., Victorian Literature (Oxford University Press, 1961.)

Here are the elements that Hardy feels build the characters that he admires; life for the agricultural worker is hard, but out of the suffering which he endures often comes a stronger man, able to go forward in "painless passivity". Oak, after his misfortune, is able to face the future without quailing; forced to go out to the annual hiring fair at Casterbridge, he first looks for a job as a bailiff, but when he fails to find such employment, he quickly changes his dress to that of a shepherd. Finding that even this fails, he decides to go on to a neighbouring hiring fair, all without bitter denunciation of his misfortunes.

Perhaps the most ennobling and yet most debilitating aspect of Oak is his selflessness. Hardy tells us "that among the multitude of interests by which he was surrounded, those which affected his personal well-being were not the most absorbing and important in his eyes".(p338) Although treated as an ordinary shepherd by Bathsheba, he supervises the entire farm, and its continuing successful operation is in a large measure the result of his efforts, as -- on one of the rare occasions on which he allows himself to get annoyed with her -- he tells her: "'You should be thankful to me for biding'", he retorts, "'I don't like to see your concerns going to ruin, as they must if you keep in this mind'".(p220) Bathsheba is wise enough to realize the truth of his assessment of her situation and to agree to his remaining on her farm.

However, this selflessness is not without qualification, for Oak has the initiative and determination to make something of himself. We have noted that at the beginning of the novel he had established

himself as a small sheep farmer. At the time mentioned above when he tells Bathsheba that he has stayed with her only so that he could protect her interests in the farm, he continues, "'Don't suppose I'm content to be a nobody. I was made for better things'". (p220)

And he proves his capability on at least three occasions as we have noted, saving her ricks first from fire and later from a severe rain storm, and saving her sheep bloated from eating clover. Shortly after being formally made bailiff of her farm he also takes over Boldwood's farm as bailiff on terms most advantageous to himself, for he is to receive a share in that farm's profits. By the conclusion of the novel he has taken over complete control of Boldwood's farm, and through his marriage to Bathsheba has become farmer of something like two thousand acres. Oak becomes, therefore, the only really successful hero in terms of material prosperity in Hardy's major novels, and his success is attributable to his perseverance and sincerity as well as to his obvious mental competence.

But what is disturbing about Oak is that whereas his capability as a farmer cannot be questioned, his slavish loyalty to Bathsheba has destroyed his initiative in dealing with her effectively. Despite the continual slights and insults that he receives from her he continues to serve her, and he rises angrily in her defense when she is criticized by her farm workers. And, although he speaks sharply to her when on several occasions he has felt that her conduct warranted it, he is so humble that he will not force himself upon her or trick her into marrying him as Troy does. At the time that he proposes to her at the beginning of the novel she tells him, "'It wouldn't do, Mr. Oak. I

want somebody to tame me; I am too independent";(p34) and at this time she is right. Without the maturity gained through her experiences with Troy and Boldwood she could never have been happy living with a man whose chief interest is her personal welfare, and Oak, without the confidence gained from his rising success as a farmer, would never have assumed sufficient mastery of their relationship to create a satisfying marriage.

It is significant that at the end of the novel it is Oak's decision to go away rather than have Bathsheba's name slanderously connected with his own that finally brings these two together, for despite the events of the past few years, Oak is still not prepared to force his attentions upon her. Fortunately for both of them Bathsheba is now thoroughly alarmed at the thought of losing Oak. Over the years, she realizes, he has been of inestimable help to her, and so she calls on him in an effort to dissuade him from leaving. During this crucial discussion, when he says to her, "'If only I knew one thing -- whether you would allow me to love you and win you, and marry you after all'", she replies with a comment that sums up Oak's major weakness: "'But you never will know . . . . Because you never ask.'"(p455)

Here, then, we can see in Oak's humility and selflessness before Bathsheba, however noble it may appear to be, the seed of the weakness that Hardy was to find crippling his Wessex countryside; for he shows us in later novels people who are much too self-effacing, much too ready to stand back and let others push forward, to survive in a world more and more dominated by "outsiders". In Oak, Hardy has created a strong character whose only major weakness is his slavish devotion to

Bathsheba; Oak's inherent strength of character, aided by patience and time, permits a satisfactory resolution of his difficulties, so that we may presume that he and Bathsheba live reasonably happily together. Later self-effacing heroes, lacking Oak's judgement and fortitude, are not as fortunate.

The situation with regard to Bathsheba Everdene is not as simple, she was born in a nearby country town and, even though she has a rather supercilious attitude towards the country people, she comes from the same rural traditions. Like Fancy Day, she is vain; Oak first sees her admiring herself while perched ignominiously on top of her belongings on a cart taking her to her aunt's farm. More important, she shows an irrationality and an impulsiveness that frequently get her into difficulties. Thus she runs after Oak when she discovers that her aunt has told him that she has many boyfriends and so there is not any hope for him; she sends Boldwood a Valentine's card as a joke; and she rushes off to warn Troy of danger from Boldwood only to return married to her soldier. As we have noted, it required the adventures at Weatherbury to chasten her sufficiently so that she could accept the kind of life that Oak and rural Wessex would offer. But without an inherent adaptability the experience would not have helped, as Hardy shows us with Eustacia.

Bathsheba's love for Troy is irrational, and she realizes this, even if only subconsciously, for she makes Liddy "solemnly swear . . . that he is not a fast man".(p224) When Liddy hesitates, knowing the truth about him, Bathsheba verbally assaults her for her lack of loyalty, rather than accept the obvious inference. As a result she will not

allow herself to see Troy as he really is until it is too late. As Hardy says of her, "Perhaps in no minor point does woman astonish her helpmate more than in the strange power she possesses of believing cajoleries that she knows to be false -- except, indeed, in that of being utterly sceptical on strictures that she knows to be true". Bathsheba's inconsistency is indicative of the struggle that is going on between her two selves. Hardy continues, "Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away".(p214) Thus it is that she breaks down completely when she realizes that Troy does not love her but rather Fanny, who is dead with his child.

Bathsheba, then, is one of Hardy's more complicated characters, experiencing a conflict between her strong inherent desires and equally strong moral convictions that are a reflection of her background in Wessex. For "her simple country nature, fed on old fashioned principles was troubled by that which would have troubled a woman of the world very little".(p337) Thus the influence of rural Wessex makes itself felt. Despite her feelings of superiority, she is bound by the same code that directs people like Oak, and the pressures of this tradition are sufficient to bring about a change in her attitude.

Consequently, despite or perhaps because of her capriciousness, Bathsheba is bothered by her Wessex conscience. Her sending a Valentine's card to Boldwood leaves her with an obligation that she is unable to ignore; she says to Oak: "'This is what I cannot get off my conscience -- that I once seriously injured him in sheer idleness.

If I had never played a trick upon him, he would never have wanted to marry me'". (p409) Therefore she is ready to marry him after she is reasonably sure that Troy is dead, not because she loves him, but because she feels a moral obligation to do so -- yet such is her nature that, as she tells Oak this, she is piqued by his failure to express an interest in marrying her himself!

At this point in his career as a novelist, Hardy is prepared to allow his hero and heroine to be reconciled when each has learned to modify his behaviour sufficiently to make such a reconciliation possible. Therefore, he finally brings Oak and Bathsheba together in a union of "good fellowship" which "is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes . . . . Where, however, happy circumstances permit its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death". (pp456-7) This happy union is possible because of the nature of rural life which permitted a complete sharing of their existence in an atmosphere conducive to satisfying human needs. It appears that, at least at the time when he wrote this novel, Hardy believed such a happy reconciliation to be possible in his rural Wessex, providing each is prepared to accept the limitations of the other. But there are no romantic illusions here; the limitations are implicit in the comments of the farm labourers in the concluding pages of the novel "Since 'tis as'tis, why, it might have been worse". (p464) It is conceivable that Hardy is implying that the marriage will not be happy. However, Hardy's own comments on his pessimism and Elizabeth Jane's concluding remarks in The Mayor of Casterbridge<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See introduction to this thesis page 1 and 2.



suggest to me that he is simply indicating once again his unromantic approach to marriage and life.

But despite the relatively happy ending to this novel, there are overtones of the influences that were beginning to destroy Hardy's Wessex. Through the introduction of Sergeant Troy, Hardy is able to show how vulnerable these rural people really are. Although Troy is a native of the area, his life has made him an alien, an interloper at Weatherbury. And like many of Hardy's other outsiders, Troy corrupts and destroys the people he comes in contact with, nearly bringing about the ruin of Bathsheba, and pushing Boldwood to the point where he murders him.

Troy's great weakness is that he is given only to the pleasure of the moment. "Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present".(p190) Because of his sensuality, he tends to fascinate the people with whom he comes in contact, mesmerising them with his sophistication. Thus as Hardy says of him, "He could in this way be one thing and seem another; for instance, he could speak of love and think of dinner; call on the husband to look at the wife; be eager to pay and intend to owe".(p192) He talks Bathsheba's farm hands into a drunken party so that only Oak is awake and sober enough to work at saving Bathsheba's ricks, still uncovered, from a violent rain storm. His flattering phrases and ingratiating manner with Bathsheba win her for him in a way that Oak's blunt sincerity never could; yet he has no real love for her as he reveals over the coffin of Fanny and her child, and his abortive efforts to plant flowers on Fanny's grave only confirm the instability of

his affections.

The problems created by the influence of people like Troy become increasingly important as Hardy progresses through his Wessex novels, for the attractions of the sensual way of life that such people represent seem very tempting at first but all too often lead only to suffering and heart break for those involved. This Bathsheba has to learn; and she is permitted to recover. Later Grace Melbury will undergo a similar experience with rather different results. Clym Yeobright comes to realize the emptiness of such a life but he fails to save Eustacia from its influence.

## CHAPTER II

The final impression made by Far From the Madding Crowd is that of a continuing rural tradition that, although far from tranquil, at least offers the possibility of a satisfying life for its people. It is, therefore, something of a shock to turn to The Return of the Native (1878), where we are given a picture of a formidable environment with which man is obliged to struggle if he wishes to survive. The importance that Hardy gives to the heath can be seen in his devoting the entire opening chapter to its description. Its mood was nearly always solemn, he tells us:

Only in summer days of highest feather did its mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. (p5)

We are given the impression that anyone who dares to ignore Egdon is taking grave risks, and are reminded of Emily Brontë's description of *Wuthering Heights*: "'Wuthering' being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather".<sup>1</sup> Egdon, too, exposes its inhabitants to stormy weather, and Hardy sees the heath as a hard task-master moulding its people into patterns of endurance.

But more than this, Egdon Heath is symbolic of all the forces that exert pressure on mankind. Hardy describes it as a "great inviolate

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<sup>1</sup> E. Brontë Wuthering Heights, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1959)

place"(p6) that "had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim . . . . The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained".(p7) Human life becomes insignificant against the heath and yet somehow ennobled by it; for the only successful way to live there appears to be to accept its rigours in "painless passivity". Certainly, any efforts by man to change it seem destined to fail.

It is against this sombre background that we first meet the people of Egdon, and it is apparent that Hardy means us to find a relationship between the environment and the people who live there and struggle with it. After describing the November fifth bonfire, he continues:

Moreover, to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against the fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. (pp17-18)

It is Hardy's conclusion, then, that this harsh environment generates in man the will to resist life's onslaughts. But despite the reference to Prometheus, it is not so much an open rebellion against the gods as a desperate desire to survive, as far as most people on Egdon are concerned: and these people through their desire to survive seem to have made a reasonable adjustment to the demands of the heath. It is only people like Wildeve and Eustacia Vye that make the struggle Promethean, for they expect that life should be entertaining for them and they refuse to accept it as it is. For if Egdon is a microcosm of life -- and Hardy's treatment of it implies this -- then a Promethean fate is all that they can expect.

Hardy's choice of Egdon, then, suggests that he is becoming more pessimistic about man's future; that he actually feels that the heath provides a reflection of the human condition he tells us himself, for he comments: "The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind".(p5) But this does not necessarily mean that the heath has to be unpleasant; rather, it suggests a Spartan approach to life, a willingness to accept hardship in return for the means of subsistence.

But such an environment also requires the respect of its inhabitants; for the heath is not harmful or unpleasant to those who live there providing that they are ready to accept and respect its ways. In fact, to some people it can be a source of inspiration, or at least, of satisfaction. Clym Yeobright, who is "permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odours" so that "he might be said to be its product", (p205) calls it "most exhilarating and strengthening and soothing".(p220) After spending five years in Paris he has returned, having decided that he "would rather live in these hills than anywhere else in the world".(p220)

Yeobright is, of course, an exception, for he is recognized as having unusual potential. But others can be found with similar feelings. Thomasin, who also has grown up on or near the heath, asked by Wildeve if she likes it, replies, "'I like what I was born near to; I admire its grim old face'".(p413) After Wildeve's death she is content to spend the rest of her life there until Venn persuades her to marry him.

For Diggory Venn, also, the heath holds no fears as he wanders back and forth across its face, watching over his beloved Thomasin. These are people attuned to the heath, who have arranged their lives according to its demands; they are also the people who manage to work out a way of life that gives them reasonable satisfaction.

But for those to whom the heath is not home, or who made no attempt to understand its ways, the heath does present a threatening face, for "to dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue".(p81) Yet even here the operative factor is willingness to adjust. "An environment which would have made a contented woman a poet, a suffering woman a devotee, a pious woman a psalmist, even a giddy woman thoughtful, made a rebellious woman saturnine".(p81) Eustacia is not prepared to adjust or accept, and thus it is that she finds Egdon "her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto".(p77) There is no way that she could ever be happy or satisfied on Egdon, for she has never developed the qualities of character necessary for the adjustment to living there. Prophetically, she remarks to Wildeve, "'Tis my cross, my misery, and will be my death!'"(p98) Wildeve, similarly restless and defiant, also finds the heath incompatible. "'God, how lonely it is!'"(p98) he exclaims, and continues, "'It seems impossible to do well here, unless one were a wild bird or a landscape painter.'"(p98)

Both Eustacia and Wildeve die because they cannot or will not adjust to the heath. But Hardy also suggests through the experiences of Clym that one must at least make some attempt to come to terms with

the environment, for Hardy sees the danger of forcing change upon a reluctant community. Clym, too, fails in his objective, -- although he is described as a product of Egdon Heath, and supposedly knows all its ways,-- because he comes back with the idea of changing it, of moulding its people to his conception of what they should be, and the heath is not ready for that change. "Yeobright", we are told, "might have been called unfortunate. The rural world was not ripe for him. A man should be only partially before his time".(p204) His efforts, as an itinerant preacher, to educate his rural people and to change their ways, although kindly received, largely fall upon deaf ears. This man, who appears to have much to offer, and who is last revealed to us, Christ-like, lecturing on the top of Rainbarrow, has actually achieved insignificance, while Egdon continues, retaining its ageless impassivity.

In contrast, it is people like Thomasin and Diggory Venn, people who accept their struggles and frustrations with something approaching equanimity, and who do not seek to change Egdon, who do achieve some measure of success and happiness; and although their marriage in the closing pages of the novel may be a contrivance to meet the wishes of his reading public, Hardy leaves us with the impression that their willingness to accept Egdon is the more sensible although less dramatic attitude towards life.

In addition to recording the importance of the environment in the development of character, Hardy also shows that it plays a significant part in influencing the daily actions of people, making possible or impossible certain responses and strengthening or weakening their

resolves. Thus he says of Clym, who has just realized Eustacia's complicity in his mother's death:

A consciousness of a vast impassivity in all which lay around him took possession even of Yeobright in his wild walk towards Aldersworth. He had once before felt in his own person this overpowering of the fervid by the inanimate; but then it had tended to enervate a passion far sweeter than that which at present pervaded him. (p385)

This "overpowering of the fervid by the inanimate" Hardy uses effectively in a number of his novels. We have noted suggestions of it in the behaviour of Dick and Fancy in Under the Greenwood Tree; by The Return of the Native it had become a factor in a number of crucial situations. Just before the preceding quotation, Clym having found out about Eustacia's involvement in his mother's death, we are told:

The strangest deeds were possible in his mood. But they were not possible to his situation. Instead of there being before him the pale face of Eustacia, and a masculine shape unknown, there was only the imperturbable countenance of the heath, which, having defied the cataclysmal onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man. (p384)

It is here that we can see the source of the "painless passivity" discussed earlier; the presence of imperturbable nature has a quietening effect upon the spirit of man, restraining him and making him more aware of his own insignificance. And although rebels such as Clym and Eustacia struggle on in defiance, such rural people as Thomasin and Venn find that their environment helps them to work through their problems with some equanimity.

But for the defiant, this overpowering can have the reverse effect, as Eustacia finds out on the night of her fatal flight from her father's house. The night becomes stormy, and the more distressed she



becomes the more the weather deteriorates, so that "never was harmony more perfect than that between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without".(p421) But the weather does more than create a reciprocal mood; it becomes a positive inducement to take violent action. "The wings of her soul were broken by the cruel obstructiveness of all about her."(p421) The decision to flee is hers, but the weather aggravates her plight and her feelings about that plight to the point where she plunges into the weir to her death. And this seems to be the only resolution possible for Eustacia, for her drives and desires are irreconcilable with the realities of living as found on the heath.

It is against this harsh background that Hardy develops a group of sharply differentiated characters; and consciously or unconsciously, he reveals to us how the heath has influenced their actions. In his introduction of Clym, Hardy takes pains to present him as a thoughtful man:

Without being thought-worn he yet had certain marks derived from a perception of his surroundings, such as are not unfrequently found on men at the end of the four or five years of endeavour which follow the close of placid pupilage. He already showed that thought is a disease of flesh.

As for his look, it was a natural cheerfulness striving against depression from without and not quite succeeding.(p162)

We have already noticed Hardy's description of Clym as "the product of the heath"; Clym has grown up there, but while he was a youth, his thoughtfulness had made him dissatisfied with the heath, and had driven him to seek his fortune elsewhere. Commenting later, he says, "'When I first got away from home I thought this place was not worth troubling about. I thought our life here was contemptible.'"(p201) But Yeobright's

experiences elsewhere have changed considerably his attitude towards life, showing him that much of what he had believed to be effective living was in fact a hollow sham. After five years working as a diamond merchant, he has thrown up his job and returned to his once despised homeland, telling his friends, "'I've come home because, all things considered, I can be a trifle less useless here than anywhere else'".(p201) Thus his thoughtfulness has brought him back with the realization that going away was not the solution, that his job was to do something about the situation at home.

Like many other thinking people, Clym tends to see things idealistically; he comes back to Egdon with the intention of starting a school to raise the level of education among his people, for:

Yeobright loved his kind. He had a conviction that the want of most men was knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom rather than affluence. He wished to raise the class at the expense of individuals rather than individuals at the expense of the class. What was more, he was ready at once to be the first unit sacrificed.(p203)

His intentions are admirable, but this is part of his problem -- he is too idealistic, too eager to help others to be successful. And although Clym's intentions are altruistic, they still represent an alteration in the life pattern of these rural people; and any alteration in their traditional way of life will be resisted by people who have lived the same way for generations. The barn, described in Far From the Madding Crowd, whose use has remained unchanged for four centuries, is both a symbol and an explanation of this resistance to change. Where a way of life has been satisfactory for centuries, the people involved are likely to be sufficiently satisfied with things as they are. At least

they are likely to be so alarmed at what change may do to them that they will not consider seriously the proposals that Clym presents. Thus, as Hardy tells us at the end of the novel, everybody listens to him, everybody is sympathetic, but few take serious note of what he says. The portrayal of Clym, then, shows not only Hardy's starkly realistic view of life but also his realization of the strength of the resistance to change that would become a complicating factor in the world of Wessex during the following years.

But Clym's failure appears insignificant beside that of Eustacia Vye, Hardy's closest approach to a Promethean figure. Yet although the contrast between her and Bathsheba Everdene at first appears vast, really it is a difference of degree rather than of kind. Eustacia is similarly wilful, looking for satisfactions in life that the ordinary daily routines will not fulfil. The big difference is that Eustacia fails to learn; she cannot adjust to the kind of life that she must experience because she refuses to accept its inevitability. She believes and expects that life will entertain her; she wants to be the center of attention. She asks of Wildeve, "'But do I desire unreasonably much in wanting what is called life -- music, poetry, passion, war'" (p.335). Unwittingly, she is expecting an outside stimulation to provide meaning to life; she never realizes that such stimulation has to come from an inner commitment. Unable and unwilling to accept anything less than such stimulation and finding that life refuses to give it to her, she blames fate for her misfortunes (p.353) rather than recognizing that the fault is hers. Thus her marriage proves to be a barren failure, and she flees from the heath to a fate that really offers the only solution to her dilemma, for she

knows that Wildeve's proffered help is no real answer. Her pride will never allow her to become a "kept woman", and she knows that Wildeve is inadequate as a lover.

In establishing her character, Hardy devotes an entire chapter to describing her as a goddess, and by doing this reveals, perhaps unconsciously, the weakness that is to destroy her. For she sees herself as a goddess and expects to be treated as such; we are told that "to be loved to madness-- such was her great desire", (p79) but "fidelity in love for fidelity's sake had less attraction for her than for most women". (p79) The loyalty and stability that is so important to such Wessex people as Clym and Thomasin and Venn is lacking in her; the moment, the transient pleasure, becomes the measure of life, in contrast with the enduring beliefs and relationships that grew out of the stability and the traditions of the Wessex people.

It is to be expected that such a person would blame fate, as a malignant outside influence, rather than herself for her unhappiness. It also follows the pattern developed by Hardy in that she has gained such tendencies from her experiences outside the limited rural Wessex that principally interested him. Her early life in Budmouth, the nearby resort town, where living for pleasure is possible for some people, has given Eustacia a false impression of what life really involves for the majority. Her "romantic recollections of sunny afternoons on an esplanade, with military bands, officers, and gallants around, stood like gilded letters upon the dark tablet of surrounding Egdon". (p78) These recollections, coupled with her innate selfishness, make any reconciliation with the heath impossible for her. But equally impossible for such

a person is a happy resolution of her conflict through a life away from the heath. Her death, and that of Wildeve, appear to be the only possible way to terminate such a struggle.

Yet such a resolution is not at all necessary, as the reddle man, Diggory Venn shows us. Wandering the heath, watching over the fortunes of his beloved Thomasin much as Oak watches over Bathsheba, although he too is the rejected lover, Venn reveals many of the characteristics that we found in the sheep farmer. Again we see a certain toughness in dealing with adversaries, such as the gambling adventure with Wildeve to regain what Venn believed were Thomasin's one hundred guineas. Before this we find him interfering between Eustacia and Wildeve in an effort to get Wildeve to go through with his marriage to Thomasin. Asked by Eustacia why he would do this, he says, "'I would sooner have married her myself . . . . But what I feel is that if she cannot be happy without him I will do my duty in helping to get him as a man ought.'"(p178)

About this Hardy himself comments:

What a strange sort of love, to be entirely free from that quality of selfishness which is frequently the chief constituent of the passion, and sometimes its only one! The reddleman's disinterestedness was so well deserving of respect that it overshot respect by being barely comprehended; and (Eustacia) almost thought it absurd.(p178)

This is the problem that increasingly concerns Hardy's characters; this disinterestedness is so barely comprehended that the outside world most often sees it as something to take advantage of, rather than something to respect. Eustacia's reaction reveals its essential vulnerability; without a certain amount of hardness and persistence, as seen in Oak and Venn, the lover is likely to suffer in vain. But it does

provide a fascinating commentary on Hardy's own attitude towards life and love, and, with the exception of Henchard, this undying devotion is the one common characteristic of all Hardy's leading heroes.

The Return of the Native reveals a Hardy largely concerned with man's external struggle with his environment. In his next major novel, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), he turns his attention inwards to consider the effect upon the individual of the clash between his various needs and the requirements of the society of which he is part. Although the background to The Mayor of Casterbridge centers on an urban community, the town's close association with its rural surroundings is quickly apparent; but just to make sure, Hardy tells us himself of its rural preoccupation:

Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life. . . . Even at the dinner parties of the professional families the subjects of discussion were corn, cattle-disease, sowing and reaping, fencing and planting. (p70)

And we soon find that we are dealing with the same types of rural characters and the same rural traditions of the earlier novels. It is significant that Henchard, an uneducated labourer, should be able to become mayor and the town's foremost merchant through sheer hard work and a blunt, forceful honesty; for until this time such qualities were sufficient in Wessex. And, for all their uncouth behaviour and lack of education, the people of Casterbridge are, like their rural neighbours, generally honest and sincere. Thus Hardy says of them:

Chicanery, subterfuge, had hardly a place in the streets of this honest borough to all appearances; and it was said that the lawyers in the Court House hard by occasionally threw in strong arguments for the other side out of pure generosity (though apparently by mischance) when advancing their own. (p70)

We will be doing Hardy a grave injustice, however, if we are to suggest that he sees all the residents of Casterbridge as good citizens. Jopp shows himself to be of dubious principles, and the whole business of the skimmity ride indicates the maliciousness of the underprivileged in the community. But this is the group that were disturbing Hardy-- a group containing men like Jopp, and growing in size through the displacement of the rural workers by the changes forced on them by the oncoming industrial revolution.

Henchard's rise to success is possible, Hardy realizes, within the traditions of the Wessex world; but his supplanting by Farfrae is also inevitable with the need for change in agricultural methods to keep pace with the industrial revolution. Farfrae represents a more efficient way to carry on business. He too is honest and hard working; when he first sets himself up in business in opposition to Henchard, he tries to avoid taking his old customers. But his business methods are calculating rather than emotional, and with his willingness to discard traditional ways, his knowledge of financial principles, and his practical rather than emotional attitude towards business transactions, he is able to operate with the necessary efficiency. The rough and ready agreements that Henchard made with customers and employees are abandoned; when Farfrae takes over Henchard's yard, he reduces the rate of pay but refrains from abusing his workers as Henchard had done. Without the inhibitions of prejudice, he introduces new farming equipment and encourages improved methods of farming in the district so that he soon becomes the foremost business man in Casterbridge.

Thus, in this novel Hardy comes face to face with this threat

to his old Wessex, for there is underlying this the realization that the Farfraes are necessary if Wessex is to survive at all. The cities are taking their toll and as such writers as Dr. Trevelyan<sup>2</sup> have pointed out, the future of Wessex is tied very closely to the industrial revolution that has turned England into a vast factory that needs to import raw materials, including food, as a form of payment for the manufactured goods being exported. Therefore, without, indeed, to a considerable extent even with a remarkable increase in the efficiency of farming methods, the Wessex farmers cannot cope with this competition from outside the country. And as it becomes more and more difficult for the farmer to make a living, so the lot of his worker deteriorates, undermining the entire fabric of this society. Dr. Trevelyan expresses concern over "the general divorce of Englishmen from life in contact with nature, which in all previous ages had helped to form the mind and the imagination of the island race"(p553) and concludes "The men of theory failed to perceive that agriculture is not merely one industry among many, but a way of life, unique and irreplaceable in its human and spiritual values".(p554) His comments express very well Hardy's own concern.

Thus it is not just the changing economic conditions that are the direct cause of Henchard's downfall, nor is it just the result of a malignant fate. Michael Henchard has the drive and determination to overcome early misfortune and rise to become mayor of Casterbridge, and

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<sup>2</sup>Dr. Trevelyan, English Social History (Longmans, 1946)



its leading merchant. Yet he is doomed because he is a product of an unsophisticated rural world, a world which has developed in him attitudes and prejudices that in the past were acceptable but that now make adaption to the new way of life almost impossible. Hardy quotes Novalis as saying "character is fate", (p131) and we must not forget that inevitably Henchard's character is the result of the values and the experiences of Wessex, and that his failures and his successes can be seen to stem, at least in part, from them.

First of all, Henchard finds himself constantly struggling to reconcile the demands of his own powerful drives and the code of acceptable behaviour of the society in which he lives, for his early life has developed in him an overpowering conscience which makes him suffer terribly if he feels that he has done wrong yet which, unfortunately, is seldom able to frustrate an even more powerful and amoral will that causes him to act in anti-social ways. Thus, being an ambitious man, he is dissatisfied with his early marriage, for it is hindering his advancement; therefore, at the beginning of the novel, while in a drunken stupor, he sells his wife to a sailor. When he is sober the following morning, his conscience causes him to feel so appalled at his action that he goes to a nearby church and solemnly vows not to drink for twenty-one years; then, after a fruitless search for his wife and daughter, he goes away to devote these years to making something of himself.

This pattern of impetuous action followed by relentless remorse continues for Henchard in his relationships with Farfrae, Lucetta, Newson, and Elizabeth-Jane, underscoring the importance that the values

of his society held for him. Above all, it emphasises his tremendous desire to behave honourably: he sells the watch that he has been allowed to keep at the time of his bankruptcy, and gives the money to one of his poorer creditors; he is ready to marry Lucetta to protect her honour; and he does remarry Susan in an attempt to atone for his past and help Elizabeth whom he believes to be his daughter. His sense of honour makes him humble when he is reminded of his errors; he makes no attempt to deny the charges of the old furmity woman when confronted by her while he is serving as a magistrate, but rather leaves the bench, saying "'And upon my soul, it does prove that I'm no better than she!'" (p230) When rebuffed by Elizabeth-Jane at her wedding to Farfrae he quietly goes away: "He had not expressed to her any regrets or excuses for what he had done in the past; but it was part of his nature to extenuate nothing, and to live on as one of his own worst accusers." (pp379-80)

This strong sense of honour forms the basis of his business transactions. He is blunt and forthright in his dealings with the public -- at times to the point of being offensive -- but his word is his bond; and bluster and bully as he does, he hates to see others suffer as a result of his actions. When he finds that Farfrae will not trust him on the night of the skimmity ride, "He cursed himself like a less scrupulous Job, as a vehement man will do when he loses self-respect, the last mental prop under poverty." (p330) He can force Whittle to go to work without his trousers as a punishment for being late -- a deed that shocks Farfrae's strict sense of decency -- yet keep the man's destitute mother in winter fuel at his own expense and so earn such respect that it is Whittle who stays with him at his death.

Although this strong sense of personal integrity, combined with his aggressive initiative, carries him to the top of Casterbridge society, it is not sufficient to keep him there. In this period of change, Hardy introduces an outsider with whom Henchard cannot contend successfully because his way of life is based upon traditional procedures and long held beliefs; and Henchard having lived all his life in Wessex, growing into and accepting its ways as right and normal, has become too narrow, too inflexible to adjust to changing times. He knows only one way to transact business, and lacking formal education, depends upon his memory and scraps of paper rather than proper business records.

But as we have noted Henchard's downfall is not just the result of the changing economic conditions. His very integrity becomes a vice, for, aware of his own honesty and capability, he has scant patience all too often with his customers who question his decisions, and so he frequently arouses their antagonism towards himself. Thus he is an easy adversary for Farfrae, who with his friendly manner and his business acumen readily wins the support of the local merchants and farmers. Hardy deliberately introduces Farfrae as an outsider, cool, unemotional, efficient, unbound by traditions, to supplant Henchard, for he knows that it is people like Farfrae who are taking over his Wessex. But Henchard remains the hero of the book, the man whom we admire because we see in him a humanness, a sensitive response to the moods generated in him by his experiences, and through these revelations we are permitted to share with him his gargantuan struggles to master himself, yet at the same time we feel that these struggles are not greatly dissimilar from our own.

As we have just noted, Hardy's intentions for Farfrae are quite different; he is looking for a person who will introduce new and alien ideas-- ideas that traditionalists like Henchard will automatically reject. In order for this person to have the required effect, Hardy must impose certain characteristics upon him rather than let the character develop freely through experiences in the novel. And by attributing to this person characteristics that are foreign to him, he manages to create something artificial. Thus, with Farfrae, Hardy fails by trying to make him too good and too successful to be convincing. He comments, "whether it were that his northern energy was an overmastering force among the easy-going Wessex worthies, or whether it was sheer luck, the fact remained that whatever he touched he prospered in".(p131) Through further comments he builds for us a righteous individual whose very goodness and correctness become offensive. At one point he notes that "Donald was always ready, and even anxious, to say a few friendly words"(p132) to Henchard after their quarrel and rupture; and there is something smug in his comment to customers of Henchard, "'I am sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot hurt the trade of a man who's been so kind to me'".(p131)

Such qualities of character are to be expected in the creation of a confident and self-righteous individual; however, Hardy really strains our credulity by making everything very easy for Farfrae. The man never stops to question his motives; he never wrestles with himself. Apparently, he is never faced with the emotional struggles that so often disturb Henchard --and us. Farfrae, then, remains an ideal rather than a real person, like a mythological figure sent to the rescue of a

decaying agricultural society. Records indicate that Scots farmers, like Farfrae, did in fact come to the aid of English farming, but the historical fact and the vibrant recreation of the fact remain different things.

Henchard dies, rejected by society, yet strongly rejecting it himself; Farfrae lives to mark the success of the new way of life. But we must not overlook that Hardy also includes the middle ground; Elizabeth-Jane forms part of a considerable group of Hardy's characters who live out their lives with quiet acceptance and so find some satisfaction. Thus it is that Hardy can say of her:

And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquility had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain. (pp385-6)

She patiently submits to the jealous whims of Henchard and even moves out of her home because he finds her presence offensive, yet later when he suffers financial reverses, she succours him, bringing him as close to real happiness as he comes during his life, until she discovers his duplicity over her father. It is interesting to notice that it is when Elizabeth-Jane has gained a respectable place in society as the beloved wife of the foremost local business man that she becomes sufficiently self-righteous to reject Henchard and so send him away to his death.

It is people like Elizabeth-Jane who appear willing to live up to the dictates of social conventions or the rigours of the natural world to whom Hardy permits some measure of comfort, but it is usually earned through suffering. As he wrote in 1886 "These venerable philosophers a real person, like a boy, is not a philosopher, but a person."

seem to start wrong; they cannot get away from a prepossession that the world must somehow have been made to be a comfortable place for man".<sup>3</sup> Hardy is seldom ready to let it be such a comfortable place, and usually, only then for those who are prepared to accept the world as it is.

The Mayor of Casterbridge, then, reveals a Hardy taking a closer look at the complexity of human motivation -- and suggesting that the causes of much of our unhappiness lie in the contradictions within ourselves. Henchard makes the worst of his situation; his responses to the chances that life brings to him lead to his complete alienation from society. But in each case alternatives were available; he just could not bring himself to pursue them. For example, he could have explained to Elizabeth-Jane why he acted as he did with her father. Instead he leaves her to find out from her father and so she gains the impression that Henchard was deliberately keeping them apart. His epitaph is both a condemnation of him and of a society that cannot communicate with him. He could never understand why he always failed; others could not understand his cantankerous nature.

Henchard, then, represents a significant change in approach for Hardy. For the first time we follow a person through his emotional struggles as he attempts to handle the problems that he faces. Previously we have seen less of this struggle going on. Oak, as his name implies, is calm and dependable; we never find him torn by emotional conflict. Bathsheba, with her capricious nature reveals more of her

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<sup>3</sup>F. E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, p. 179.

inner torment, particularly in her struggles with her conscience and her illogical defence of Troy, and therefore comes closer to Henchard. But she is finally able to resolve her conflicts. Eustacia, too, shows herself as torn by unresolved desires, but here we find a general sullen resentment towards her lot in life rather than an inner struggle arising from conflicting desires. Clym is more the misunderstood philosopher. It is only when we come to Henchard that we realise the irony and the terrible bitterness implicit in the failure of the individual to satisfactorily resolve the struggle between his own conflicting drives and the requirements of society.

However, through Elizabeth-Jane, Hardy does not allow us to lose sight of the fact that reconciliation is not only possible but may also bring a reasonable level of happiness in life.

### CHAPTER III

In The Return of the Native, the environment is a hard task master, but nevertheless one able to discipline its people into a reasonable acceptance of life's difficulties. By the time that Hardy writes The Woodlanders (1887) he has come to see a significant weakness in this willingness to accept what life has to offer. The Wessex countryside now tends to stifle rather than stimulate its inhabitants. Hardy had long recognized that an important factor in the development of his people is the comparative isolation of the village. He believes that "a natural tendency to evil, which develops to unlawful action when excited by contact with others like-minded, would often have remained latent amid the simple isolated experiences of a village life".<sup>1</sup> This isolation not only keeps the villager in ignorance of greater wickedness but also helps him to retain certain pagan beliefs that leave him fearful of offending supernatural forces. Thus Susan Nunsuch in The Return of the Native, alarmed that Eustacia may be the cause of her son's illness, sets out "To counteract the malign spell . . . with a ghastly invention of superstition . . . It was a practice well known on Egdon at that date, and one that is not quite extinct at the present day." (pp.422-3)

But this isolation, while perpetuating such superstitions and restricting the villager's knowledge of the outside world, gives to him

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<sup>1</sup>I. Howe, The Selected Writings of Thomas Hardy, p.137.



a greater involvement in his immediate surroundings, and a concern about and a knowledge of the behaviour and thoughts of his neighbours to a degree impossible in larger communities; and such awareness that others are continually observing and judging one's conduct has a salutary effect upon behaviour.

In the novels like Under the Greenwood Tree, Far From the Madding Crowd, and The Return of the Native we have seen the salutary effect of these influences upon the characters. But in The Woodlanders, Little Hintocks, a woodland community isolated by the railway which has passed it by, is doomed, for it cannot cope with the demands of the wider world that lies outside its borders. For, at this point in its development, the environment has become too confining, too restrictive for healthy growth. Hardy begins his novel by mentioning the "forsaken coachroad", and in this opening chapter establishes the idea of a debilitating isolation through his initial description of the community:

It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises and results in inferences wildly imaginative; yet where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely knit interdependence of the lives therein. (pp4-5)

This listlessness and tendency to meditate rather than act that Hardy sees in the people of Little Hintocks is reflected in the nature of the surrounding woodlands where, he tells us:

as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy strangled to death the promising sapling. (p59)

Later in the novel we find that old South has come to fear for his life because of the threatening presence of a towering tree outside of his bedroom window. The tree is cut down in an effort to relieve him of his illusion, but his discovery that it has gone brings about his death. Thus we see that the rural background is no longer just a source of strength for its people; rather it has a weakening influence, tending to suffocate and overwhelm those who live within its confines and are dependent upon it.

In the novel, the true woodlanders, Giles Winterborne and Marty South, are both heroes and failures, for their experiences of life there and the traditional attitudes of their community that they have absorbed, although helpful to past generations, have made them too passive, too self-denying to contend successfully with the harsher world outside of Wessex. Their vigour has been sucked out of them; their initiative strangled by these traditions so that their lives are made up of unfulfilled intentions. Giles loses his right to lifehood properties through the death of Marty's father, but more significantly, through the failure of Giles' father and then Giles to act decisively in taking the necessary legal action to secure the holdings in their name. It is appropriate, considering what is happening to this woodland community, that Giles should live to see his family home pulled down to make way for a straightening of the road; in a world where aggressiveness is paramount there is no room for Giles Winterborne. And although such a condemnation may also be a condemnation of our way of life, it does not alter the fact of his failure.

The weaknesses of the woodland environment are the reverse of

those of Egdon Heath; the woodlands lack the harshness of Egdon that tempered its people to endure. But, as in The Return of the Native, there is still much here that is truly ennobling, and the strengths of the woodlands have a real part to play in moulding the well-developed person. Thus Grace Melbury and Edred Fitzpiers acknowledge the influence of the Woodlands over them, and both are prepared at times to accept life in Little Hintocks -- provided certain conditions are met.

Fitzpiers, after meeting Grace in the idyllic woodland setting, thought of "sacrificing all practical aims to live in calm contentment here, and instead of going on elaborating new conceptions with infinite pains, to accept quiet domesticity according to oldest and homeliest notions".(p165) But like most of us, Fitzpiers is not properly attuned to "quiet domesticity" and, unable to resist the temptations presented by Felice Charmond, causes a scandal that cannot easily be outlived in such a community as Little Hintocks. Grace, retaining her early love of her native woodlands, and realizing that marriage to Fitzpiers will mean moving away, finds herself "craving, even to its defects and inconveniences, that homely sylvan life of her father which in the best probable succession of events would shortly be denied her".(p284) We are left with the feeling that their experiences in the woodlands will affect their lives rather as Wordsworth found that nature affected him, softening them and reassuring them and perhaps inspiring "little, nameless, unremembered, acts/of kindness and of love",<sup>2</sup> but that the restlessness imposed upon them by their other experiences and their innate

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<sup>2</sup>Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", 11.34-35.

characters would make real happiness here impossible. And we must not forget that neither is a true woodlander. Fitzpiers is not a native of the area; but rather is an alien influence that comes to disrupt the pattern of life there; Grace, although born and for many years brought up in the village, has also spent some time being educated in schools and among people with a broader background, and she finds returning to the confines of Little Hintocks a difficult adjustment. Such success as their marriage ultimately achieves appears to rest upon their having sufficient intellectual and social interests in common-- and they have learned these outside of the community-- rather than upon a harmony with the natural world around them at Little Hintocks.

The Woodlanders, then, reveals a Hardy posed with a problem, for as much as he loved his rural England he also recognized that it was increasingly vulnerable and that its values were being endangered by changes that were taking place across the country as a whole. The development of the railways, while breaking down the isolation in many areas and challenging the old values with temptations to live less disciplined lives, is exacerbating this isolation as we see in places like Little Hintocks, leaving its people less prepared to cope with such influences as Fitzpiers presented. Thus Tim Tang finds that the only way to get his Suke away from the temptations of Fitzpiers is to emigrate to New Zealand. Similarly, the pulling down of cottages and the consolidation of farms into larger units has led to a sense of insecurity not previously known to these country dwellers; and so we find people like Giles, lost and confused.

This sense of insecurity has a serious effect upon Wessex in

another way. Hardy realizes that "with the uncertainty of residence often came a laxer morality, and more cynical views of the duties of life", whereas "domestic stability is a factor in conduct which nothing else can equal".<sup>3</sup> He describes this lack of stability in *Little Hintocks* and shows its effects upon some of its people; and in his last two novels, he continues to explore these problems, for he realizes that they are seriously affecting the backbone of village life. The artisan and the better educated members of the community are the people most often displaced because of loss of livelihood property. He realizes these people are creating a group who are potentially dangerous, for "every one of these banished people imbibes a sworn enmity to the existing order of things, and not a few of them, far from becoming merely honest Radicals, degenerated into Anarchists, waiters on chance, to whom danger to the State, the town -- nay the street they live in, is a welcome opportunity".<sup>4</sup>

Hardy makes us aware therefore, that the environment involves more than the purely natural element, and that all too often it is the pressures and the prejudices of society that bend people into patterns of behaviour that their free natures would not support. Such pressure is not, of course, necessarily bad; but there are times when it stifles what is good and healthy in human nature. In his introduction to The Woodlanders, Carl J. Weber comments that Hardy:

comes to recognize, apparently for the first time -- he was then

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<sup>3</sup>I. Howe, The Selected Writings of Thomas Hardy, p.131.

<sup>4</sup>I. Howe, The Selected Writings of Thomas Hardy, p.137.

forty-six years old -- that man's unhappiness may be due, not to blind chance or a malign fate, not to tainted heredity or ingrained "character", but to the organization of society, to man-made laws and conventions. When Grace opens the prayer book and asks herself whether God really did join her and her husband together or whether it was her father's social ambitions and her own "recent off-handedness" with which "God" had nothing whatever to do -- when that point in Hardy's career as a novelist is reached, he is ready to shift his ground once again.<sup>5</sup>

Weber makes more out of Grace's comment than Hardy actually states; however he observes something that is too often overlooked in Hardy's work because critics focus upon Hardy's obvious interest in the effect of chance or fate upon our lives. Clearly, Hardy is aware, at least by the time of writing The Mayor of Casterbridge, that it is not so much what happens to us as how we treat what happens to us which determines our lives. And we have learned how to react from the experiences through which we have already lived -- experiences which include the effects of the social and traditional attitudes of our friends and neighbours. In The Woodlanders, we can see that these past experiences tend to have an inhibiting effect upon our present conduct, and the novel suggests that the wrong kind of environment can stifle human development.

Shortly, we shall look more closely at the character of Giles Winterbourne; it is worth noting here, however, that the way of life in Little Hintocks has left him and Marty South particularly vulnerable to the selfishness of Melbury, for Giles, in particular, has operated in a business "partnership based upon an unwritten code, by which each acted in the way he thought fair towards the other, on a give-and-take principle".(p26) Consequently, when it becomes necessary for him to

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<sup>5</sup> T. Hardy, The Woodlanders, (Harper Brothers, 1958), p.xii.

think of his own interests first he is ill-prepared to do so.

But this does not mean that Hardy's characters are merely puppets of their environment. One individual's reaction to a situation may be quite different from that of another. Fancy Day and Grace Melbury are both faced with the temptation to abandon their local boy friends for persons of higher social status; Fancy after a struggle, resists; Grace faced with greater pressure, gives way. But the difference results from, in part, the fact that they are different people. Both Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright are faced with much the same situation when Clym suffers severe eyestrain and is unable to continue his studies to be a teacher. In order to conserve their money, Clym decides to take up furze cutting, giving himself gaily and wholeheartedly to this occupation. Eustacia, upon discovering his gaiety, is bitterly disillusioned and threatens to leave him. Similarly, after Eustacia's fatal plunge into the weir, both Wildeve and Yeobright rush to her rescue; however, whereas Wildeve jumps in fully clothed and so drowns, Yeobright takes time to enter lower down and wade back to the deeper part until he too is swept off his feet. Much more calmly, Diggory Venn, upon arriving at the scene, paddles out on a board and succeeds in rescuing Yeobright and Wildeve, although it is too late in the latter's case to save his life. Each of these is faced by the same situation, but each behaves differently according to his inherent nature and to his emotional involvement.

It is clear, then, that Hardy is well aware of the importance of the inherent differences between people in determining what they will do in a given situation. Nevertheless, in The Woodlanders, he takes a very hard look at the effect of a languid environment upon the human

being in general. We have seen that people like Oak and Venn are able to prevent their devotion to a woman from destroying them. Giles Winterborne has many of the worthy attributes of both these men, but he is weaker than they in that he lacks the capacity to spring back as they do. Yet Giles is described as the embodiment of the natural world; we are told that "he looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother" (p246) and that Grace's "heart rose from its late sadness like a released bough; her senses revelled in the sudden lapses back to Nature unadorned". (p247) Giles' close association with nature is emphasised by his remarkable success as a tree planter; his entire life is built around the forest in which he lives. And he reveals the same weaknesses that Hardy attributes to this forest world -- "The Unfulfilled Intention" mentioned before becomes the dominating factor in Giles' life. Although deeply in love with Grace, he carefully avoids pressing his attentions on her, and faced by the competition of Fitzpiers, he quickly drops into the background. When Fitzpiers at one point in the novel quotes Schleiermacher as listing the four cardinal virtues as self-control, perseverance, wisdom and love, Grace thinks to herself that Winterbourne "had not much perseverance, though he had all the other three". (p167)

This lack of perseverance stems from his natural diffidence but it goes deeper than this, for whereas Oak and Venn manage to live effectively after suffering setbacks, Hardy makes it clear that the loss of Grace first and the financial setback second, bring about a complete degeneration in Giles. As Grace prepared for her wedding with Fitzpiers, Hardy tells us:

During these weeks Giles Winterborne was nowhere to be seen or



heard of . . . . People said that a certain laxity had crept into his life; that he had never gone near a church latterly, and had been sometimes seen on Sundays with unblackened boots, lying on his elbow under a tree, with a cynical gaze at surrounding objects. (p206)

To Giles, misfortunes, then, instead of providing a stimulus to renewed effort as they do to Oak, become an excuse for doing nothing. Except for a brief respite when it appears possible that Grace may obtain a divorce, Giles is unable to cope with this situation. His modesty precludes him from taking any advantage of Grace; even the kiss dared because he has been led to believe that she will be able to get a divorce and marry him is later a source of embarrassment to him when he finds out that the divorce cannot be. His crowning folly -- sleeping under a pile of hay out in the rain, although he knew that he was dangerously ill, rather than place Grace in a compromising position -- brings about his death.

But we cannot help admiring a man who, despite his own desperate physical condition, can think only of Grace's difficult position. Hardy comments, "If ever Winterborne's heart chafed his bosom it was at this sight of a perfectly defenseless creature conditioned by such harsh circumstances. He forgot his own agony in the satisfaction of having at least found her a shelter". (p366) But what is disturbing about this sacrifice, made because of a social convention, is that it is largely wasted, and surely such waste is to be deplored. His intentions are noble, but his achievement is negligible; in a matter of hours he is dead and in a matter of months he is largely forgotten by all except the girl whom he, in turn, has slighted during his life -- Marty South. Grace is, at first, greatly disturbed at his sacrifice for her honour,

and does suffer considerable remorse. But life goes on; eventually she becomes reconciled with Fitzpiers and moves away to join him in his medical practice in the midlands. Marty who loves Giles with the same selfless and hopeless devotion that he poured out to Grace, continues to visit his grave regularly, and there at the end of the book she says of Grace, "'she has forgot 'ee at last although it was for her you died . . . . But no! No, my love, I never can forget 'ee; for you was a good man and did good things.'" (p444)

With this epitaph Hardy apparently marks the end of people like Giles and Marty, for he has come to realize that as good and selfless as these people may be, they lack something vitally necessary in the changing world; and although, as we have seen, he has serious doubts whether it is a better world, he now realises that "painless passivity" and a "sound mind" are fine qualities for men who are merely slaves or servants, but the fuller life becoming available to them required more dynamic characteristics of its people. In the end then, Hardy's passive characters cannot find the way to a satisfying life because their world, the environment in which they have grown up and the values that have become part of it are passing away. Yet in the pathos of the ending to this novel we are left with the feeling that something of inestimable value has been lost.

The Woodlanders reveals this deterioration in the rural world much more decisively than Hardy's other novels. Winterborne's loss of his family home through its being a lifehood property is accentuated by its removal shortly afterwards in order to reduce a dangerous curve in the road. His financial collapse is a practical example of Hardy's

belief that the artisans were suffering as a result of the changing nature of the rural economy. We are abruptly reminded that in an industrially dominated society, practicality becomes predominant; sentimentality and tradition become dangerous weaknesses.

Grace Melbury's life reinforces this conclusion. When her step-mother comments that Grace will be happy with Giles for "'love will make up for his want of money. He adores the very ground she walks on'", her <sup>father</sup> husband quickly replies, "'Yes . . . , But since I have educated her so well, and so long, and so far above the level of the daughters here about, it is wasting her to give her to a man of no higher standing than he'".(p17) Thus, educated outside of Little Hintocks, she has become, her father believes, too good for its rustic people, and so a husband is found among the so called "better people", represented by the worldly Fitzpiers. But Fitzpiers, in practice, proves to be a much less worthy husband for her. Grace becomes aware of the anomaly of her position. When she opens her prayer book to review the marriage service she "wondered whether God really did join them together" (p428) thus implying that it was her father's social ambitions and her own willingness to accede to his wishes. Earlier in the novel Hardy comments:

Grace was borne along upon a stream of reasonings, arguments, and persuasions, supplemented, it must be added, by inclinations of her own at times. No woman is without aspirations, which may be innocent enough within limits; and Grace had been so trained socially, and educated intellectually, as to see clearly enough a pleasure in the position of wife to such a man as Fitzpiers.(p196)

Grace dutifully marries Fitzpiers only to discover that her new social position is a hollow sham; nevertheless, after a period of estrangement, she does finally rejoin her husband in his medical practice,

for this seems to her to be the only practical solution to her dilemma. The intruding urban way of life in this case, having destroyed the possibility of her fulfilment with Winterborne, now seems to offer the only hope for the future.

Yet Hardy continues to wish for a return to the old way of life and to feel that it has much to offer; he has Grace say:

'cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles.

Yes. I have never got any happiness outside Hintock that I know of, and I have suffered many a heartache at being sent away. O, the misery of those days when I got back to school and left you all here in the wood so happy!' (p267)

But as he also becomes more aware of the machinations with which these simple people must contend his attitude towards them changes. Discussing Grace's hoped for divorce, he comments:

To hear these two Arcadian innocents talk of imperial law would have made a humane person weep who should have known what a dangerous structure they were building up on their supposed knowledge. They remained in thought, like children in the presence of the incomprehensible. (p340)

And this Hardy knew to be the tragedy of this conflict between his Wessex people and the encroaching other world, for in no way could they become more than "Arcadian innocents" and retain their generous hearts, their honesty and their sincerity, and their relative peace of mind. Whatever improvement might be brought to their social and economic life, the destruction of the old values and attitudes is a heavy price to pay.

#### CHAPTER IV

This picture of a rural society that is degenerating under the influence of economic and social changes from without is continued in Hardy's next major and last great novel of rural Wessex--Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891). But here the rural environment takes on its most obvious role in influencing the moods and actions of its people. We are made to feel that the fertile Vale of Blackmoor is a warm and pleasant land protected from harsher associations by its bordering hills -- a land Hardy describes as a "broad rich mass of grass and trees mantling minor hills and dales within the major."(p10) We are then reminded of the correlation between nature and the people who live in close association with it, as Hardy proceeds to comment on the May-day dance, symbolic of innocence and fertility, and finally on Tess herself, "so modest, so expressive . . . so soft in her thin white gown".(p17)

It is the innocence and fertility that this protected valley made possible in its people that is its chief weakness. In Tess it contributed to the disastrous situation in which she finds herself with Alec d'Urberville, who is the product of a more worldly society. As she trudges homeward after her seduction, we are told that "she had learned that the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing . . . . Verily another girl than the simple one she had been at home was she who, bowed by thought, stood still here."(p96) If she had grown up in a less sheltered place she would have been better prepared to deal with the wiles of d'Urberville and less idealistic about the role she should

play as family supporter.

But despite her misfortunes, Tess finds that the influence of her homeland is still powerful. After the death of Sorrow, she remains quietly at home for some time; then "a particularly fine spring came around, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her, as it moved the wild animals, and made her passionate to go".(p126) Hardy reminds us unequivocally that at times in our lives we are inspired to do things by the world around us, gaining as Tess gained, a fresh zest for life simply because the world around us is bright and alive. Thus Tess comes to accept a job at Talbothays, arriving there "in good heart, and full of zest for life".(p135) The next few months prove to be an idyllic time for her, for:

Amid the oozing fatness and warm ferments of the From Vale, at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate. The ready bosoms existing there were impregnated by their surroundings. (p190)

The vividness of Hardy's description is such that we cannot fail to feel intensely Tess' new involvement in life, nor can we avoid the conclusion that Hardy deliberately sets out to show that the unfolding love between Tess and Angel is strongly stimulated by their situation -- regardless of the personal attractiveness of each -- that under such circumstances the result is unavoidable. For Tess is not alone in falling in love with Angel; Retty, Izz, and Marian all love him passionately and suffer terribly over her marriage to him. Because of her past conduct, Tess struggles not to give way to her desire to accept Angel's proposal, at least until she has told him of her secret;

resistance, however, proves to be in vain, her bosom is so "impregnated by [her] surroundings"(p190) that she finally agrees to marry him although she has failed to find a way of telling him her secret.

It is through his description of life at Talbothays that Hardy shows us that he believes his rural people, given the right circumstances, can be very happy, for it is here that Tess enjoys the happiest period of her life. Hardy tells us that "Tess had never in her recent life been so happy as she was now, possibly never would be so happy again. She was, for one thing, physically and mentally suited among these new surroundings".(p165) We are led to believe that, allowed to live out her life at a place like Talbothays, Tess would have managed to live as an effective and fulfilled person; it was the influences from outside this community that destroyed her because she could not learn how to handle them.

In this novel more than any of his other ones, Hardy openly uses the environment to reinforce the atmosphere. Not only does the environment take an active part in stimulating the relationship between Angel Clare and Tess; it also becomes a reflection of her state of mind and the situation in which she finds herself. Thus, the lushness of the Talbothays' pasture suggests the richness of the passion generated there between Clare and each of the dairy girls. Similarly, later in the novel, as Tess wanders about following her rejection by Angel, the countryside around Flintcomb Ash exacerbates her emotional torment through its utter barrenness and its "myriads of loose white flints in bulbous, cusped, and phallic shapes", (p363) as if the country were

*This ought to be footnoted: Dorothy Van Ghent!*

mocking the failure of her marriage. As one would expect, the people who live at Flintcomb Ash are also less pleasant than those whom we meet elsewhere, and it is here that Alec d'Urberville starts his campaign to win Tess back to him. But this deliberate paralleling and symbolic use of the setting should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the environment first of all contributes actively to Tess' happiness or unhappiness through its influence upon her thoughts and moods.

In a number of ways Tess is much more a victim of her environment than is Henchard. Hardy's description of her as a pure woman is of major significance for it emphasises this very point: Tess is in part the victim of her own fierce passions, but these in turn are modified by her early experiences, experiences that have inadequately prepared her for what is to happen. Essentially, then, Tess is destroyed, not so much by her passions as by her desire to be honest and sincere and considerate, first towards her own family and later towards other people such as Angel Clare. This desire gives to her, as a similar desire has given to Henchard, a powerful conscience, but she is also inclined to philosophise about life, as on one occasion when asked by her young brother whether this world is "a splendid one or a blighted one" she describes it as "a blighted one". (p34) She is, therefore, aware of the evil in the world; however, this awareness, rather than making her less concerned with right and wrong, causes her to suffer remorse more frequently from her imagined than from her real guilt, and consequently she is too ready to accept blame herself when things go wrong rather than apportion it among all the people who are involved.

In addition to her readiness to accept blame, Tess has a



generous heart and a loyalty to her family which cause her to see her role as family helper as the most important thing in her life. These basic feelings about life place Tess in many difficult situations; she goes to visit her "rich" relations, the d'Urbervilles, because she believes herself responsible for the loss of the family horse and she hates to see her family unhappy and further impoverished as a result of her mistake. Yet she never realizes that the real responsibility rests with her parents for making it necessary for a young girl to go in the first place. In agreeing to the d'Urberville visit, she says to her mother, "as I killed the horse, mother . . . I suppose I ought to do something"; (p40) and she continues to do "something" regardless of the hardship that results for her. Obligated to work at a menial occupation after Angel has left her, she still gives her family a large part of the slender supply of money he had given her; finally, it is the plight of her family, unable to find somewhere to live, following her father's death, that makes Tess agree to become the mistress of Alec d'Urberville.

This generosity and this guilt complex are **carried** over to her relationship with Angel Clare. She is loath to blame him for his heartless desertion of her. Plagued by d'Urberville and working for a cruel farmer under heartbreaking conditions, she still refuses to criticise Angel, but instead writes an impassioned plea to him: "'The punishment you have measured out to me is deserved-- I do know that -- well deserved -- and you are right and just to be angry with me. But, Angel, please, please, not to be just -- only a little kind to me, even if I do not deserve it!'" (p428) Yet she is writing this to a man who

has himself confessed to her an indiscretion if anything worse than hers, and neither of them can see the hypocrisy and the inconsistency in his rejection of her.

Tess' willingness to accept blame, coupled with her desire to help others, places her among the group of self-effacing characters that we have seen frequently in Wessex; but with it, in these later novels, comes a naïveté that makes such people particularly vulnerable. Like Giles and Marty South, Tess is not prepared for the duplicity of the outside world, and even her mother, who is more aware of such things, indulges in much wishful thinking rather than face reality. Under such circumstances, Tess' seduction is less surprising; she submits to Alec partly out of gratitude for what she has been led to believe is his timely rescue from the wrath of her fellow workers as they trudge homewards, partly because she is very tired and is hardly conscious of what is happening, and partly because, as she tells her mother, "'Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me!'" (p104) Her environment has taught her to be helpful and considerate; it has developed her passionate nature; but it has done little to prepare her for the evil that she must expect to meet in outsiders, for this reality of life is ignored by her people.

It would be inaccurate, however, to blame all of Tess' misfortunes on her environment, for her own passionate nature clearly plays a significant part. And although the rural setting at Talbothays reinforces her emotional response to Angel, her love for him is so intense and his own importunity so overwhelming that she agrees to marry him

before she can find an opportunity to tell him of her past, and so her weakness here, and the insistence of Angel contribute to her suffering later. But at the end of the novel it is the accumulation of frustrations together with her warped sense of blame and family loyalty that is the root cause of her murdering Alec. As she says to Angel:

'He has come between us and ruined us, and now he can never do it any more. I never loved him at all Angel, as I loved you . . . . Will you forgive me my sin against you now that I have killed him? I thought as I ran along that you would be sure to forgive me now that I have done that.' (pp491-2)

The pathos here lies in her naïve blindness that borders on insanity; she is so convinced of her injury to Angel that she believes this violent act can be an atonement for it, and she has become so emotionally disturbed by her conflicting desires to help her family and yet stay loyal to Angel that her judgement is grossly distorted. A broader experience of life may have helped her to see that Angel is at least as culpable through his unreasonable rejection of her as is Alec in his seduction of her, and that her selfless devotion to Angel and her family has been a significant factor in her destruction.

The result of the murder is, of course, her execution; but the reader is left to ponder Hardy's subtitle "a pure woman". Tess has been destroyed by the clash between differing ways of life, by people like Angel and Alec, who have brought ideas and values with which the world of Tess, her family, and her friends is unable, unprepared to cope.

Hardy's concentration upon Tess leaves him little opportunity to develop the other characters in such a convincing manner. It is to be expected that he would be less successful in his portrayal of secondary characters, but it is interesting to notice that his weakest

creations are usually people who are not properly products of the Wessex that he knew so well but rather are people used to present a point of view. Farfrae, for example, fails to come alive as a person because Hardy is busy making him perform a thematic role. It is also true that Hardy did not have the time to develop these lesser characters to the same degree that he does those central to the story, yet such people as Tranter Dewy, old Mr. Melbury, and Tess' father remain more vivid to us than do such people as Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville.

The woodenness of these two is even more marked than that of Farfrae. Each represents an influence from a world that is forcing change upon the agricultural community, and Hardy is so intent upon showing how this influence is affecting his unsophisticated rural labourers that he fails to give convincing life to these two men as he failed to do with Farfrae. Angel Clare is the more believable of the pair, perhaps because he comes closest to the rural people in his attempt to understand their ways. For he has rejected the church towards which his father had directed him because he could not honestly support "an untenable redemptive theolatriy".(p149) Like many of our young people today he feels the need to abandon traditional ways and he evinces "considerable indifference to social forms and observances";(p150) therefore he turns to farming as a way of gaining independence without sacrificing his desired intellectual freedom. Hardy allows the life on the farm to have a salutary effect on the young man. He tells us that "unexpectedly he began to like the outdoor life for its own sake . . . . Considering his position he became wonderfully free from the chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a

beneficent Power . . . ." (p152) As a result, "He grew away from old associations and saw something new in life and humanity". (p153)

As Angel becomes better adapted to this rural life, his personality comes through more convincingly, for Hardy can now find the empathy that he feels when he writes of the rural people. Thus he can have Angel respond to Tess: "'Tell me, tell me!'" he said, passionately clasping her, in forgetfulness of his curdy hands: 'do tell me that you won't belong to anybody but me!'" (p227) This contrasts sharply with the lame dialogue that Hardy constructs for Angel when he talks with his family, particularly his brothers. Speaking to one of them, he says:

'Now Felix, we are very good friends, you know; each of us treading our allotted circles; but if it comes to intellectual grasp, I think you, as a contented dogmatist, had better leave mine alone, and inquire what has become of yours.'" (p206)

But, in addition to his difficulty with creating viable dialogue for his more sophisticated characters, Hardy sets out to use Angel to present a philosophical argument in order to develop his theme and by so doing he loses in creativity. Hardy must show the difference between theory and practice: Angel's views are liberal; his performance remains conservative for he cannot shake the effects of his childhood. And it is of particular significance for this study that he should be so much the product of his own environment that he cannot live up to the beliefs that he thinks he supports. For if in fact people are products of their environments, then mere reading about and verbal acceptance of ideas contrary to their conventions and traditions will not necessarily produce a change in their conduct.

Even Angel's experience in the richly fertile valley of the

Froom is insufficient to change him inwardly. He tells Tess of his indiscretion with a woman in London and says of her impending confession, "'it can hardly be more serious'" (p286) yet the next day he states bitterly, "'it isn't a question of respectability, but one of principle!'" (p308) To her defense that her mother told her of worse cases where the husband has still found it possible to accept his wife, he replies, "'Different societies, different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things'" (p297) Thus, despite his apparent liberality and egalitarian ideas, his deeply felt social conventions blind his judgement at this crucial time. Unwittingly, he has his principles confused with social conventions and it required the suffering of almost intolerable hardship in the loneliness of the South American interior, climaxed by a discussion with a doomed man, to make Angel aware of the enormity of his mistake. To the "cosmopolitan mind" of this dying man, "such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale and mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve" (p434) Hardy continues that "The cursory remarks of the large-minded stranger . . . sublimated by his death, influenced Clare more than all the reasoned ethics of the philosophers"; (p435) he could have added that it requires the total experience of deprivation to clear Clare's mind of the clutter that his early experiences and his training in traditional values have built up in his mind.

Through Angel Clare, then, Hardy makes us aware of the crippling effect that our experiences and social conventions can have upon us; and

the example is well worth our remembering. Unfortunately, he does this at the expense of some credibility. But if he has difficulties with Angel, his creation of Alec is clearly intended to be artificial. Hardy's description of his dress immediately establishes him in the tradition of the stage villain: "a young man of three or four-and-twenty, with a cigar between his teeth; wearing a dandy cap, drab jacket, breeches of the same hue, white neckcloth, stick-up collar, and brown driving gloves".

(p59) But Alec's problems stem as much from having a different set of values as from being inherently evil; indeed, one could see him adjusting readily to the society we know today. It is obvious that he wants to seduce Tess and that initially he has no intention of marrying her; however, it is also clear, though seldom noted, that he does not abandon her; rather, it is she who rejects all offers of help from him. He reminds her as she works on the threshing machine at Flintcomb Ash, "Yet you most unjustly forget one thing, that I would have married you if you had not put it out of my power to do so. Did I not ask you flatly to be my wife -- hey?" (p423) And she is forced to agree that he is right. The problem is that each operates under a completely different set of principles, developed through their different environments, and the tragedy occurs, at least partly, as a result of the failure of each to understand the values and drives of the other.

The conflict between Tess and Alec d'Urberville, then, is a conflict between differing codes of conduct that are derived from differing traditions, traditions that are irreconcilable. Alec can say, early in the novel, "'I am ready to pay to the uttermost farthing'", (p98) and mean just that, and feel that he is being more than fair to



her. Conversely, Tess can say "'I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not -- I cannot! I should be your creature to go on doing that.'" (p98) There is no hope for a real reconciliation; only the desperate plight of Tess' family -- for the second time -- forces her unwillingly to turn to him, and then it leaves her so emotionally confused that she can murder him as an atonement.

Because the novel focuses our attention upon the damage that Alec does to Tess, we fail to notice that she has an equally disturbing effect upon him. The mere reappearance of Tess, as Alec preaches to the villagers, is sufficient to shake him visibly. "His fire, the tumultuous ring of his eloquence, seemed to go out of him. His lip struggled and trembled under the words that lay upon it; but deliver them it could not as long as she faced him". (pp390-1) He feels impelled to rush after her and to explain what has happened since they have last met, and as he goes off to his next speaking engagement, having talked to her, he is clearly still most perturbed. It is not surprising, therefore, that Alec appears shortly afterwards and offers to marry her, and upon her blunt refusal, finds that he can continue as a preacher no longer.

And Alec, in his own suffering over Tess, is keenly aware of her inconsistency. In one of the meetings which occur with some frequency from this time onwards, he says "'the fact is whatever your dear husband believed you accept, and whatever he rejected you reject, without the least inquiry or reasoning on your own part. That's just like you women. Your mind is enslaved to his.'" (p409) Alec, however, finds himself equally the slave of Tess, and despite her continual rejection



of him, he continues to pester her until, to meet the desperate needs of her family, she agrees to live with him. And although his importuning, with his appearance, first at the spring bonfire, surrounded by swirling smoke, and later, on the family tomb, takes on an infernal aura, his love for Tess does in fact appear to be sincere at this time, and his interest in her causes him to be of real assistance to her family, both at the beginning of the story, when he gives them a horse, and at the end, when he rescues them from Kingsmere. This is not to suggest that his assistance is disinterested but rather that he is prepared to do more for her and her family, if she will live with him, than is her beloved Angel who is supposedly a "better" person.

His scoffing rejection of the suggestion that Angel will one day return is, of course, indefensible; but in our condemnation of what he does to Tess we must not overlook that he is also the victim. His nature will not allow him to forget Tess, nor, when he finds her again, to accept continued separation, but he does help her and her family -- and he is murdered for his efforts, because the society from which Tess comes cannot accommodate itself to his.

Although the feeling of impending doom is less overt in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, than it is in The Woodlanders, the Durbeyfield family, improvident as they are, find that their difficulties are increased by the changing pattern of rural life. When the father dies, they lose their leasehold property, and find that obtaining other accommodation, since their ability to offer services in return is limited, is virtually impossible. We have noted that it is the disastrous situation in which they find themselves as a result of this that finally

convinces Tess that she must return to Alec d'Urberville for financial aid. Therefore, although the main focus of the story is clearly upon Tess' sexual misadventures, Hardy also implicates the demoralizing effects of the changes in the agricultural community as a factor in her destruction. Commenting about the Durbeyfield's forced removal from Marlott following their loss of their leasehold property, he discusses at some length the plight of such families and concludes:

These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositaries of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humourously designed by statisticians as 'the tendency of the rural population towards large towns', being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery. (p450)

The bitterness is obvious; the quotation is similar to the one quoted at the beginning of this study in that it reaffirms Hardy's real concern about the people of Wessex and the events that had by this time largely changed for ever the pleasant countryside with its relatively unsophisticated rural people. It is also significant that it is a paraphrase of a comment in "The Dorsetshire Labourer" (p136) for it indicates the strength of Hardy's convictions.

Hardy, then, clearly sees the rural world of old Wessex as a real force in making its people what they are, developing people with strong convictions, narrow views, and deep prejudices, but with considerable peace of mind, and it is the peace of mind that is important. But, although at first Hardy looks back nostalgically and therefore idealistically to the days and the ways of his childhood, he later comes to recognize that not all had been well in the past and that the ancient rural way of life had not successfully prepared its people for

contending with the fiercely competitive world that not only was developing around them but also and increasingly ~~was~~ forcing itself upon them. Therefore, unless they could find ways of adjusting to these changes they could not survive. The novel ends with Tess' being hanged for the murder of Alec; her attempt to resolve the conflict between the contrasting social influences within her environment had precipitated this disaster.

Yet, eventually, Hardy becomes reconciled to accepting that the changes do offer hope of an easier life for the agricultural labourer and his family, for the increased efficiency makes possible a reduction in the amount of work that he has to do while providing a means of increasing productivity and thus his income. He concludes:

New varieties of happiness evolve themselves like new varieties of plants and new charms may have arisen among the classes who have been driven to adopt the remedy of locomotion for the evils of oppression and poverty -- charms which compensate in some measure for the lost sense of home.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting that even then he qualifies his comment with the words "in some measure"; at the time that he wrote this, it was still very much a wish, for the agricultural community was experiencing and would continue to experience difficult years. What remains certain is that the source of the labourer's peace of mind, based upon the certainty of unchallenged traditions and long accepted routines has largely been destroyed, leaving behind a sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Whether the gain in material well being has been worth the sacrifice is an open question.

The importance of Thomas Hardy as a novelist rests in part upon

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<sup>1</sup> I. Howe, The Selected Writing of Thomas Hardy, p.131.



his fascinating accounts of life in rural Wessex, of the effect of this environment upon the behaviour of its people, and of the changes with which it was obliged to contend in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. We have seen that he is most successful when he is writing about the kind of people that he knew as a child, and that he is able to show a clear relationship between these people and their environment. It is, perhaps, not chance that in showing how the environment influenced them he also revealed how it had influenced himself, for his sympathies and interests obviously are centred on his homeland.

Through his novels Hardy reveals the importance of the environment in all its aspects in determining the attitudes of the people that live in Wessex. It also appears that he did not see man as doomed so much as forced to suffer in order to gain understanding of what life involved; those of his characters who from their experiences learn to come to terms with life in rural Wessex generally find something in it that is satisfying. However, this relatively happy resolution is less frequently found in his later novels, when the limitations of Wessex are becoming more obvious and the external pressures more crushing. Thus in novels like The Woodlanders "painless passivity" is no longer enough. In order to accommodate the demands of the new way of life, much of the tradition of Wessex and with it many of the qualities that make its people worthy of our esteem have to go, and Hardy shows us that we are the poorer for it.

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