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Representation of Nature in Hardy's Wessex Novels

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Abstract:

The novels of Thomas Hardy, set in the fictionalized rural landscape of Wessex, offer a captivating exploration of the multifaceted representation of nature. Hardy's Wessex is a vividly depicted region characterized by rolling hills, meandering rivers, and picturesque villages. It serves as a crucial setting, creating a sense of place that envelops the narratives. Nature in Hardy, however, is not static; it symbolizes the broader themes of life, death, and destiny. The changing seasons, storms, and natural disasters symbolize the cyclical nature of existence and the uncontrollable forces shaping human lives. It operates by its own rules, leading to tragedies that underscore its harsh unpredictability. This essay delves into Hardy's rich portrayal of nature in his Wessex novels, examining how it functions as more than mere backdrop, becoming a symbol, a force, and a reflection of the human condition. The essay also investigates how Hardy's portrayal of nature encapsulates a complex interplay of beauty, harshness, and indifference. It is a dynamic force, influencing characters and storylines, and offering profound insights into the human experience.

Key Words: Nature representation, rural tradition, symbolism, Thomas Hardy, Wessex novels.

Introduction: Thomas Hardy, the esteemed English novelist and poet of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is celebrated not only for his compelling narratives but also for his intricate and evocative portrayal of nature. Hardy's Wessex novels are a collection of works set in a fictionalized version of the rural English county of Wessex, which encompasses parts of southwestern England. Inspired from the name of one of the ancient Saxon kingdom of England, Hardy's Wessex is the most elaborate study of landscape in English literature. Hardy's portrayal of nature in his Wessex novels is characterized by its beauty, indifference, and its role as both a setting and a symbol. "If word picture could be hung on a wall, a great gallery could be filled with Hardy's nature picture." (Duffin: 127) Hardy had a complex and multifaceted perception of nature, portrayed vividly in his novels. Nature in Hardy's works is not merely a backdrop but an active and influential force, shaping the lives of his characters and serving as a powerful metaphor for the human condition.

Analysis: Nature assumes a central and intricately woven role in Thomas Hardy's Wessex

novels, offering a unique blend of expansiveness and intimacy that sets it apart. This fusion of qualities is exemplified in the passage that details Eustacia's solitary watch on the fifth of November:

“A tract of country unaltered from that sinister condition which made Caesar anxious every year to get clear of its glooms before the autumnal equinox, a kind of landscape and weather which leads travellers from the south to describe our island as Homer's Cimmerian land, was not, on the face of it, friendly to women.

It might reasonably have been supposed that she was listening to the wind, which rose somewhat as the night advanced, and laid hold of the attention. The wind - - - - - which continued as unbroken ever.” (The Return of the Native: 60-61)

This passage exemplifies an acute attention to the minutiae of rural landscapes, a level of detail that can only be achieved by someone intimately familiar with it since childhood. Only someone with such an intimate connection to the countryside would notice the distinct sound of the wind as it passes through hollows, heather, or over bare stones, let alone have the ability to differentiate between these sounds. Moreover, Hardy's sensory perception extends beyond his keen ear. A few pages later, he demonstrates an equally precise ability to discern the textural differences whether it be the feel to the foot of path, ferns, or heather. “To a walker”, he says, “practised in such places, the difference between impact on maiden herbage and on the crippled stalks of a slight footway, is perceptible through the thickest boot or shoe.” (The Return of the Native: 65) This specific detail, however, is subordinated to an overall picture. Hardy does not present the heath as if viewed through a microscope. Instead, his keen eye for specific facts seamlessly blends with his ability to capture the larger scene. In fact, some of his most unforgettable descriptions, such as that of Norcombe Hill, expand even further in scope. They reveal the subject's connection to the cosmic system, offering a perspective that is distinctively his own. This exceptional breadth of vision endows Hardy's portrayal of the natural world with a unique force.

Nature is ever present in Thomas Hardy's narratives. With the acute and discerning eye of an observer, he meticulously documents every facet of the natural world, approaching it with both attentive scrutiny and analytical enthusiasm. His sensitivity to the sounds of nature is finely tuned and refined, capturing the subtlest nuances. Hardy's perspective is all-encompassing, embracing not only the grandeur of the natural world but also the intricate details of its smaller inhabitants. His compassion extends even to the tiniest creatures; for instance, when he describes how, as frost sets in, “many a small bird went to bed supperless that night among the bare boughs” (Far from the Madding Crowd: 22). Similarly, with the arrival of spring, he notes how “birds began not to mind getting wet” (The Woodlanders:

134). While this may at times appear playful and humorous, Hardy's portrayal of the natural world often carries profound pathos. He reveals that the sorrows and struggles of the animal world are no less poignant than the human one.

Hardy's vision of nature dominates his scene. To him, nature symbolizes the impersonal forces of fate, against which he portrays mankind in constant conflict. In two of his novels, *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, the setting transcends its physical presence to represent the broader universe, while in rest of his successful works nature consistently holds a symbolic value. "Not a background, but an actor in the play, Nature is always present, the incarnation of a living force with a will and a purpose of its own, now and again taking an actual hand in the story." (Hasin: 5) Nature always moves on its appointed course-transitioning from the fading of winter to the blossoming of spring, again up-till golden hues of autumn, with a recurrent punctuality, all while being indifferent to whether Tess meets her tragic fate or Anne finds her true love. Occasionally, Nature's character appears to emerge, and with a single sweeping motion, it reminds us of the insignificance of the human characters:

"With these words Yeobright went forth from the little dwelling. The pupils of his eyes, fixed steadfastly on blankness, were vaguely lit with an icy shine; his mouth had passed into the phase more or less imaginatively rendered in studies of Oedipus. The strange deeds were possible to his mood. But they were not possible to his situation. Instead of their being before him the pale face of Eustacia, and a masculine shape unknown, there is only the imperturbable countenance of the heath, which having defied the cataclysmic onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man." (*The Return of the Native*: 329)

Nature assumes a significantly more prominent role in Thomas Hardy's novels than in the works of most other English novelists. It is not merely a backdrop but a prominent character. Sometimes, nature actively influences the course of events, while more frequently, it serves as a spiritual force, imbuing moods and shaping the dispositions of the characters. The huge bleak darkness of Egdon Heath dominates the lives of its inhabitants in *The Return of the Native*. It imparts its grandeur and melancholy to them, becoming an integral part of their existence. The solitary wistfulness of the woods in *The Woodlanders* sets the tone for the sentiments of the characters who dwell among them. As the title of the work suggests, the unique characteristic of the characters in Hardy's second novel lies in their idyllic existence under the canopy of the greenwood tree. Most of his vibrant characters are rooted in the countryside. They are farmers, shepherds, thatchers, and hedgers, rarely straying beyond the borders of their rural homes. Even those who venture out in pursuit of aspirations, like Clym or Jude seeking higher education, retain an indelible mark of their rural origins. Once removed from their native environment, they become outsiders. Infact, much of the conflict that drives Hardy's narratives revolves around the tension between rural circumstances and the yearnings of rural individuals for a more refined existence: Jude desires learning, Eustacia longs for the vibrancy and luxury of the

life in Paris, while Grace and Fancy hesitate to marry their rustic sweethearts due to their exposure to the allurements of the wider world.

Nature assumes diverse roles in Thomas Hardy's novels. It influences humanity in multifaceted ways. The impact of nature on Hardy's human characters is portrayed through a spectrum of emotions and actions. To grasp the self-sacrificing love exhibited by Mary South, one must acknowledge the enchantment of the brooding woods and the enduring magic of the silent trees whose life she intimately understood. Similarly, the strange, almost unearthly sensations experienced by Clara in the early morning in proximity to Tess, and the dull atmosphere while Gabriel Oak endeavors to save Bathsheba's crops from a fiery fate, exemplify the manner in which natural elements affect the characters' moods and, consequently, resonate with the readers. The profound influence of nature on human beings finds its most compelling illustrations in novels such as *The Woodlanders*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *The Return of the Native*.

Hardy's love for nature and the earth is profoundly personal and deeply rooted in his local connection. His love for the heaths and pastures of Wessex is a sentiment that is distinct from the transcendental reverence for nature often associated with Wordsworth. In contrast, Hardy's perspective carries an undertone of melancholy and inevitability. Unlike Wordsworth, who saw nature as part of a divine plan with a healing influence, Hardy found elements in nature that were harsh and antagonistic towards humanity, rather than guided by a benevolent purpose. While there is a certain pantheistic element in Hardy's worldview, an idea that all things are interconnected and share a common bond with the Earth, it does not lead to optimism or a belief in nature's inherent goodness. Unlike Wordsworth's mystical view of nature as an embodiment of a divine spirit that lives and moves through all things, Hardy's portrayal lacks this sense of a universal, benevolent presence. Instead, Hardy's nature is often portrayed as indifferent or even cruel, operating without regard for human concerns. There is a distinct absence of Wordsworthian mysticism in Hardy's depiction of nature. Mr. H. C. Duffin deals with the difference between these two great ones in nature lore by saying- "Hardy nowhere express the extreme inference 'that every flower enjoys the air it breaths'. For the definite formulation and acceptance of that faith perhaps the more transcendent vision of the poet is required." (Duffin: 56)

Hardy's approach to nature is marked by a realistic observation filled with darker and somber aspects which Wordsworth overlooked. Like many other nature enthusiasts, Hardy appreciates the tranquility of rural life, finding solace and beauty in the solitude of the countryside. He shares an admiration for the simple, rustic individuals living far from urban centers and perceives a profound connection between all living beings as part of a larger family originating from Mother Earth. But, as a keen observer of nature, Hardy doesn't shy away from highlighting the other aspects of nature- cruelty, indifference, and unpredictability. "On 'nature's holy plan' and on 'trailing cloud of glory' Hardy pours out his scorn. Nature is beautiful, yes, but she is the hapless instrument of blind law, and, as such, he is much convinced of her non-morality as Huxley was." (Grimsditch: 49) For

Hardy, Nature is the agent of cruelty and destruction, having no sympathy for human beings. He believed that nature's resourcefulness, beauty, charm, and bewitching power often lead to the detriment of humanity. Nature is apparently indifferent to human feelings and takes a sort of sinister delight in slaying innocent human beings. Edgong Heath, for instance, is portrayed as a terrible place where numerous lives meet with crushing adversity. The virginity of Tess is ravished by Alec in the very lap of nature, but there is a striking absence of any protest on nature's part, reinforcing Hardy's notion of nature's dispassionate stance toward human affairs. Hardy asks- "Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of chase. About them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess' guardian angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith?" (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: 79) To Hardy's, man is but one element within the vast tapestry of the natural world. Nature, in its grandeur, often appears indifferent to the ambitions of humans, pursuing its own course with scant regard for human endeavors. Within the literary realm of Hardy, nature emerges as a profound and all-encompassing presence. It emerges as a living force with its own intentions and purpose, sometimes actively intervening in the story, and at other times, assuming the role of a silent and ironic spectator of the human dramas unfolding upon its stage. In two of his notable works, "The Woodlanders and *The Return of the Native*, the setting becomes a representation of the entire universe, and this symbolic dimension is a thread woven through all his novels. Works like *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *The Woodlanders*, and *Far From the Madding Crowd* etc. bear the unmistakable imprint of Hardy's deep affection for nature, both in their titles and in the generous manner in which they fulfill the promises implicit in those titles. These novels seamlessly integrate the natural world into their narratives, establishing an emotional resonance between the natural surroundings and the unfolding events.

Hardy's talent for capturing atmospheric effects is another notable aspect of his writing. His skillful portrayal of nature's moods and nuances is executed with remarkable success, further enhancing the emotional depth and authenticity of his narratives. "No other novelist can render the sights and smells of the countryside with such evocative sensuousness, or surround daily tasks with such intimate tenderness. No one before Hardy had made the landscape part of the story." (Neill: 119) Hardy's Dorsetshire, for which he retained the old name of Wessex, is a land of memories, where the hills are crowned with Roman camps, and where barrows hide even more ancient remains. It is a very old pagan part of England:

"Civilisation was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of
vegetarian its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and
invariable garment of the particular formation. In its venerable one coat lay a
certain vein of satire on human vanity in cloths. (*The Return of the Native*:
14)

Nature consistently asserts its presence in Hardy's novels, at times wearing a stern, enigmatic smile, and at others, exuding an overt, foreboding demeanor. It extends far beyond the meager stretch of human existence, spanning epochs of time, rendering the

human dramas enacted before it as mere drops in the vast sea of history, and reducing them to a poignant insignificance, much like actors on a stage.

Through his profound familiarity with the intricacies of the natural world, Hardy achieves a remarkable feat. He employs a subtle and multifaceted style, alluding to various aspects of the countryside's existence in a manner that evokes a profound sense of its significance. Whether it's the unique character of damp and fragrant woods, the nuanced intonations of the wind, a harbinger of impending storms or peacefulness, the foreboding precursor of a tempest, or the ever-shifting spirit of the heath across day and night, Hardy's writing illuminates the mystic connection between toiling peasants and the very hills and valleys that envelop their lives, permeating their existence in a profound manner. With his intimate knowledge of natural phenomena, Hardy makes his readers feel, by his delicate and multifold allusiveness, the significance of the life of the countryside. The individuality of the damp and fragrant woods; the meaning of the wind's voice, whether for storm or tranquility; the pre monitor of the tempest; the spirit of the heath at every hour of the day and night; above all, the mystic relation between the toiling peasants and the hills and valleys where they live and move and have their being.

Conclusion: Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels provide a captivating and nuanced representation of nature that transcends the boundaries of mere backdrop and symbolism. Nature in these novels is a dynamic force that shapes the lives of the characters, reflecting both its sublime beauty and cruel indifference. Through Hardy's meticulous descriptions and thematic use of the natural world, readers are transported to the idyllic landscapes and harsh realities of rural England. Nature in Hardy's Wessex serves as a mirror to the human condition, a symbol of fate's inexorable march, and a backdrop against which timeless themes of love, loss, and resilience are explored. In these novels, nature becomes a character in its own right, influencing and echoing the trials and triumphs of humanity, making Hardy's Wessex an enduring testament to the enduring relationship between people and the natural world.

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