

## Region as a contested space in Hardy's novels

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### Abstract

The paper studies Thomas Hardy's delineation of the organic community of Wessex and the influence it has had on the inhabitants of the region in his novels. Consequentially the disruption of the native lives with their encounters with their city counterparts. It also examines the social and intellectual milieu which necessitated such portrayal of the life of the region in literature.

**Keywords:** region, regional novel, wessex, organic community, industrialization

### Introduction

In an attempt to trace the beginnings of the regional novel in English, the paper examines the novels of Thomas Hardy, who is an acclaimed regional novelist. Though the regional novel had its genesis in the post-industrial milieu, it acquired significant literary attention only after the publication of Hardy's writings. Phyllis Bentley in her critical work *The English Regional Novel* defines that a regional novel is one that depends on the region for its causality. In that sense Hardy is considered to have perfected the art of the regional novel with the portrayal of Wessex life and ethos. This paper focuses on Hardy's conceptualization of region and the varying implications it carries in the select novels. This paper takes up three of his early novels, *Under the Green Wood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native* for perusal and analysis. It aims at studying two important features pertaining to Hardy's novels. Firstly, it proposes to examine the context of the regional novel and, secondly, studies the polemics of the celebration of rural life in the form of an imagined land Wessex and its influence on the inhabitants.

### The Context of the English Regional Novel

Hardy's fiction is commonly reduced to a simple portrayal of rural England. In the regional novels, the life of the people represented an order and harmony which was absent in the immediate industrial cities. Hardy delineated rural life idealistically, though he was aware of the realities of the world. In a society which was heavily influenced by industrialization, literature responded to a desire to escape from its aftermath and therefore there is an idealization of the rural life in Hardy's novels. Hence, there is a need to study this sentimental and ideal account of the region with caution.

A survey of the regional novel informs us about the kind of the rural novel that came up in England. It is presented as something confined to a particular locality and for the most part to that locality's native inhabitants. Studies conducted in rural/regional writing in English Literature reveal the presence of regional writing even before Thomas Hardy. William Howitt, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell preceded Hardy and Arnold Bennett was his

contemporary novelist who wrote on the rural/regional life. The countryside in these early writings of William Howitt is portrayed as a picturesque background for the working community and the people who work on it are seen as naturally superior to those who are the products of Industrial Revolution. This heightened sense of the 'organic community' is reflected in literature with the onset of the industrial towns and cities and the consequential disruption of complacent notions of life.

The nostalgic allusion to the village or region in literature is directly related to the upsurge of Industrial Revolution and the consequent exodus of population to cities. From Oliver Goldsmith to the Romantic poets, the loss of the organic community, the loss of innocence is lamented. The overtly visible change in the countryside, after the Industrial Revolution, continued to be discussed in literature down the ages including the Victorian writers. The bewilderment caused by the industrially productive cities is evident in the writings of intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Hardy, and Charles Dickens. It is the wilderness of the city that augments the longing for the village. The deplorable human condition in the city is well analyzed in Carlyle's *The Condition of Working Class* in 1844. He writes:

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and all ranks crowding past each other...

The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together within a limited space... (qtd. in Raymond Williams 217)

The above passage encapsulates the intolerable suffocation and the 'unfeeling isolation' of cities which is a result of the intensive competition of city life. Struggle for existence seems to be the essence of city life. The chaotic situation of the cities and the pathetic human plight, perhaps make the novelists invoke the pristine environs of the village. One perceives a plea, in these writings against growing individualism and accumulation of wealth, power, and population in the cities.<sup>1</sup>

Among all these turbulent forces, 19<sup>th</sup> C British readership was looking forward to a change, an ambience uninfluenced

by these phenomena. Hardy created through his writings a space which was lost and for which there was a longing, nostalgia. Therefore, Hardy had to invent a 'culturally unconquered' image of a rural man who serves as a foil to the physically and emotionally disturbed Victorian man. With the publication of Thomas Hardy's writings, the region acquires many more colours and hues. The narrative that ultimately evolves, of the region, Wessex in Hardy's novels is that of a world that resists any kind of change to retain its moral superiority in a transitional period. Wessex in all its connotative and denotative meanings, represents an organic community. The ethos of Wessex is described in terms of its people, customs, traditions, and landscape derived from certain regions of Dorset. His interest in age-old customs and the knowledge of rural life is reflected in the novels. With this imaginary space, Hardy defined the scope of the novel of English regional novel.

In the novels, Wessex gradually gets to be identified with the psychology of the people. It serves more functions than as a mere geographical unit that actually existed in some part of England. As Allen and Schlereth observe in *Sense of Place* "regional consciousness is less a matter of geography than a state of mind. It is therefore possible to speak of "folk regions" as distinct from geographic or political regions." (74) By folk regions they mean a culture of a people rather than merely referring to a place. The "folk regions" of Hardy are definitely bound to project the psychology of a population living in a remote locale far away from the influence of a polluted industrial space. The next section explores how the tropes of the country and the city are played out in the lives of the characters of the select novels under study.

### Wessex and Its Inhabitants

Hardy's regional novel culminates in the encounters of the rural world with the industrial, modern and urban spaces. The novels under study record a gradual identification of the characters with the landscape. They show how Nature overpowers human beings and the manner in which it goads their destiny. These novels show the conflicting tendencies of rural life as well as a celebration of the pastoral life. Hardy shows the encounters of the urban and rural characters through a contrasting portrayal of educated urban men and women as opposed to the rustic characters, and in the introduction of railways, the harbingers of modern culture-- reaping machines, and of course industries on the rural belt. Hardy himself has described his conception of "modernity" in the "Preface" to the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He writes of how he "projected a 'series of novels' about a modern Wessex of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union work houses, Lucifer, matches, labourers who could read and write and National school children..." (Hardy, xxxix) However, Wessex life incorporates these modern changes also as described in *The Return of the Native*: "Reedlemen of the old school are now but seldom seen. Since the introduction of railways Wessex farmers have managed to do without these Mephistophelean visitants..." (Hardy 62) The metamorphosis of an old world after the encounter with modernity in the form of a faster pace of life gets reflected in the three novels.

The novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* initiates a discussion on varied themes like religion, education and class in a minor way and lays the foundation for its elaboration in the later novels. This being one of the early novels Hardy

betrays signs of immaturity in the treatment and characterization of the subject. Hardy's creative imagination around Wessex takes shape in the novel. The novel is treated more as a pastoral painting projecting a self-contained parish life. It does not have much to say about life on the land but projects as its theme the conflicts that arise between a city musician and the country choir group. Mellstock is a farming community in which none of the characters are farmers except Mr. Sharp. The entry of a new musician, Fancy, as a paragon of modern education and learning disturbs the 'self-contained' nature of the parish. The element of turbulence is resisted vehemently because of the change brought in by a woman who is superior to them in learning and knowledge. The organic community of Mellstock manifests itself in the descriptions of the landscape: "To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its choice as well as its future. 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 quivering; the beech rustles while its bows rise and fall..." (Hardy 11) The whole setting unfurls a vision that is fresh and unaffected by the influences of the city and its modernization. The peace and harmony of country life is perceived in the opening scene itself. The simplicity of mind and the simple concerns of life constitute the major subject matter of the novel.

The nature of the people is synonymous with the rhythms of Wessex: mild and sober, always looking forward to the process of growing up. Wessex takes its genesis and develops into a concrete entity along with Mellstock parish. A typical reception of a stranger in Mellstock explains the state of the Wessex countryside: "The gallery of Mellstock church had a status and sentiment of its own. A stranger there was regarded with a feeling altogether differing from that of the congregation below would bestow towards him. Banished from the nave as an intruder whom no originality could make interesting, he was received above all as a curiosity that no unfitness could render dull. The gallery too looked down upon and knew the habits of the nave to its remotest peculiarity, and had an extensive stock of exclusive information about it: whilst the nave knew nothing of the gallery folk as gallery folk, beyond their loud-sounding meanings and chest notes." (44) The passage illustrates the naive state of mind of the parishioners who don't look upon outsiders as anything beyond objects of curiosity. The use of terms like "originality" to refer to the native space and the reference to outsiders as "peculiar" indicates the pastoral ways of living entirely untouched by the civilization of the city. The slow pace of life and the pastoral atmosphere act as a foil to the overwhelming acceleration of industrial cities.

The introduction of a modern, learned music teacher to the church is seen as a deathblow to the old choir group. They have no finer means of encountering the "bitter weed" of modernity. When the vicar of Mellstock parish wishes to introduce a new singer, the old music group questions his authority, as that would be a threat to their own livelihood. The pragmatism that underscores the role of religion in these lives is remarkable. Religion *per se* doesn't seem to exist for them unless it extends itself as a means of providing livelihood. Religion becomes part of the choir group because they rely on it for their livelihood. The parishioners are not prepared to forgo everything in the name of God. The parish does not contain that section of

Population, which can leisurely take up religion as a pastime activity. Therefore, they rebel.

Fancy Day enters the community as a harbinger of modernity with her training as a teacher as well as a musician. She is responsible for the ousting of the church musicians and in a major way. The choir group in the church has no idea of any such training. In trying to superimpose the figure of Fancy on the parish, Hardy in a way exemplifies the inevitability of modernization even in supposedly remote areas. A discussion on the new musical instruments only succeeds in expressing their disgruntlement towards any such innovations. Mr. Spinks expresses his contempt for the new modes of musical instruments: "They should have stuck to strings as we did and kept out clarinets, and done away with serpents. If you'd thrive on musical religion, stick to strings, says I." (31) Modern instruments like clarinets are resented because that is something unheard of in the parish.

Fancy Day is agential in bringing the elements of modernity to the cultural backwaters of Mellstock parish. Hardy introduces the catalyst of disruption in the form of a woman. It is worth noting here that it is a woman who is pitted against the traditional society. With her entry, the issues that are at stake are not just those related to the livelihood of a set of musicians. It has to do with conflicting questions of a laid back life versus a fast growing industrial life. Fancy's presence in the novel functions as a reminder of the development of the world outside Mellstock parish. Once Fancy takes over as the church musician, members of the old team find themselves absolutely useless and out of job: "Having nothing to do with conducting service for almost the first time in their lives, they all felt awkward, out of place, abashed, inconvenienced by their hands. They stood and watched the curls of hair trailing down the back of the successful rival, and the waving of her feather as she swayed her head. After a few timid notes and uncertain touches, her playing became markedly correct. But whether from prejudice or unbiased judgment, the vulnerable body of musicians could not help thinking that the simpler notes they had been wont to bring forth were more in keeping with the simplicity of their old church than the crowded chords and interludes it was her pleasure to produce." (78)

For Fancy, church music is not a serious occupation. As Rueben says, "music is second to the woman..." (44) She plays music at the church as an activity that can be as casual as anything else, but for the musicians that's their only occupation. They composed every note each evening after spending much thought over it. They compose music with the rhythm of the rural life in it, their simplicity of life and thought. They feel so deprived of their livelihood that they fail to see the correctness or perfection of Fancy's music. Hardy shows a deep respect for the cultural life of the parish and a deep regret that choirs like this should have been abolished all over the country when he was young. Hardy portrays the musicians basically as poor men but as very Good at and devoted to their work which includes playing at weddings and parties as well as in church. In those days it was normal for such groups, rather than an organ, to provide church music.<sup>ii</sup>

In this novel Hardy resolves conflicts between the two worlds of life as represented by Fancy and the choir group, in Fancy's ultimate decision to marry Dicky Dewy, a member of the music group over Arthur Maybold. Fancy, a teacher by profession and the daughter of a timber merchant

forges all her chances of upward mobility in her marriage to Dicky. Though she initially entertains the idea of Mr. Maybold and Mr. Sharp, her final resolution is to choose the immature Dicky dramatizes Hardy's urge to keep the region far away from the footprints of the city.

The second novel under study *Far from the Madding Crowd* has a much more solid base in the region than the earlier novel. As Raymond Williams observes, "work enters Hardy's novels more decisively than in any English novelist of comparable importance." (qtd. in Gregor 55). Hardy's interest in agricultural conditions is reflected in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. His interest in such rural occupations as sheep farming, dairy farming and the timber industry is clear in the novel. The whole action centers on the life and work of Bathsheba's farm. The novel delineates the life of rural people, Bathsheba, Gabriel Oak and Boldwood.

Gabriel, the hero of the novel, has a deep understanding of nature which helps him emerge the most admirable character in the novel. We see him nursing the newborn lambs, and telling the time of night from the position of stars. Later when the sheep under his care is struck down by disease, he is the only one who knows how to cure them, and when a whole harvest is threatened by rain, he saves it by working in the rain entirely by himself. Gabriel Oak's struggle and association with the land are the main theme of the novel. He starts out as a farmer but by an unfortunate turn of luck he loses his farm and offers himself as a bailiff. Oak's lamentations testify to the precarious conditions, which any farmer has to go through: "All the savings of a frugal life had been dispersed at a blow; his hopes of being an independent farmer were laid low-- possibly forever." (Hardy 41) From the status of an independent farmer, he becomes a tramp in the streets. Oak goes to the market and offers himself as a labourer at the fair.

The character of Gabriel Oak is not projected just as that of a skillful farmer but is upheld as morally stronger and superior to most other outsiders. Like Dicky Dewy of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Oak is a product of Wessex who epitomizes Egdon Heath in its versatility. Oak is earthy, enduring and persistent. He complements Bathsheba's efforts at farming at various stages of her life. By some stroke of luck, Bathsheba inherits her uncle's farm, and by the same turn of fortune, Oak loses his farm and becomes a small servant in Bathsheba's farm. He proves to be the protecting angel of Bathsheba's life. Oak is in communion with the environment. He knows the vibration of the Heath. He brings back the distracted Bathsheba and Boldwood to their actual positions. Bathsheba neglects her farm because of her love for Sergeant Troy and Boldwood in his love for Bathsheba. Boldwood though an insider to the community moves out of the harmony of the ambience and neglects farming and himself. The conversation between Oak and Boldwood is interesting to note, as it draws attention to the contrasting attitudes of Boldwood and Oak. Gabriel Oak enquires,

'Your ricks are all covered before this time?'

'No.'

'At any rate, the large ones upon the stone saddles?'

'They are not.'

'Them under the hedge?'

'No. I forgot to tell the thatcher to set about it.' (301)

The total apathy with which Boldwood responds to Oak's concerns over his farm shows the intensity with which Oak

associates himself with farming and Boldwood's falling out of the pattern of typical Egdon life.

The relationship between Bathsheba and Francis Troy calls for analysis in this context as it is filled with discordant notes from the beginning. Francis Troy enters the community as an outsider through his marriage to Bathsheba. Troy's relationship to his environment is marked from the beginning with disaster. Jean R. Brooks rightly explains the relationship of Troy with the farming community: "The soldier is death to the farm. 'The Soldier's Joy' with which he profanes the harvest home, enforcing it with threats of dismissal, violates traditional customs and responsibilities and the spontaneity of rustic music, seen in its true function both at the shearing feast and Bathsheba's wedding to Oak." (Brooks 170) Troy marries Bathsheba and is constantly at loggerheads with everyone in the community. He is distanced from the community in two ways: firstly, his professional experience is not something that comes closer to anything that happens on the heath and secondly, he is an outsider. Troy nearly ruins Bathsheba's life, and incidentally her farm as well, before the story works itself out and she is left free to settle down with Gabriel.

The note of discord in the community life, which sets in with the entry of Francis Troy, comes to a halt with his death in the hands of Boldwood and brings back harmony to the environment. The same sort of harmony is visualized between Bathsheba and Oak after she falls out with Troy in the storm scene:

'Gabriel you are kinder than I deserve! I will stay and help you yet! Oh why are not some of the others here...' In the meantime, one of the grisly farms had alighted upon the point of Gabriel's rod, to run invisibly down it, down the chain, and into the earth. Gabriel was almost blinded and he could feel Bathsheba's warm arm tremble in his hand - a sensation novel and thrilling enough; but love, life, everything human seemed small and trifling in such close juxtaposition with an infuriated Universe. (Hardy 294)

Oak once again proves his affinity with his community in his fight against Nature. Bathsheba is treated as being influenced by the showiness of outside life, and as someone who is tempted to marry an outsider, Troy. Though she is not punished in the novel, Fanny is portrayed as the moral superior to Bathsheba. She wins the sympathy of men like Boldwood and Oak. Francis Troy who deserts Fanny for Bathsheba also regrets his mistake and admits to having really loved Fanny and not Bathsheba. Fanny and Oak are the representative species of the Heath. Fanny is dependent, docile and meek; most important of all, she attains motherhood before her death. Bathsheba on the other hand is quite outgoing, independent and individualistic. She finds her redemption in her return to Oak, by extension, to the Heath. Hardy projects the strength of rural values over urban values. Howard Bobb explains the dichotomy as, "At bottom Hardy's story juxtaposes two different worlds or modes of being, the natural against the civilized and it insists on the superiority of the former by identifying the natural as strong, enduring, self-contained, slow to change, sympathetic, while associating the civilized with weakness, facility, modernity, self-centredness." (qtd. in Gregor 163) Bathsheba Everdene and Fanny Day in their return to the region are redeemed of their cultured ways and they are finally accepted into the community. The countryside is seen as a natural habitat from the violent degeneration of

cities: a degeneration that can be exemplified in terms of the loss of moral "strength", "endurance" and "self-contentment".

Nature, in the novel *The Return of the Native*, complements the emotional range of the characters. It acquires a phenomenal proposition of exerting influence over the characters. People don't seem to function independently of the environment. Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright the central characters of the novel find the landscape insurmountable and therefore feel oppressed. The descriptions of the landscape form a central part of the novel. The Heath is a wasteland which Hardy himself calls, "a vast tract of unenclosed wild!" All the characters share certain features of the Heath as part of growing up in Egdon. Jean R. Brooks rightly observes that, "The six main characters take their key from Egdon. They all feel its pull through some affinity of temperament. Clym, Mrs. Yeobright and Diggory Venn share its look of isolation, Thomasin, Clym and Venn its endurance; Eustacia and Wildeve though they hate it share its primal vitality and indifference to others...their environment is one, in which change and chance, death and darkness, prevail and the overpowering of the fervid by the intimate is a recognized conclusion to human effort." (Brooks 177) Egdon cannot contain the over ambitious Eustacia and Wildeve and hence their premature death. Diggory and Thomasin are satisfied with the modest environs. The Heath does not offer too many options to individuals. One has to acquire the hues of the Heath if one wishes to be at peace with nature. The image of the 'organic community' is evoked repeatedly in the novel.

The unique characteristics of the Heath as different from any civilized space will make it conspicuous. A description from the novel *The Return of the Native* of the landscape with all its crudity and peculiarity will make it clear to us, how the Heath is also a rigid and enclosed space: "Here at least were intelligible facts regarding landscape - far-reaching proofs producing of genuine satisfaction...Civilization was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation...A person on the heath in the raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive." (Hardy 4)

The Heath demands assimilation over distinction, prefers anonymity to individuality. It proves the fact that individuals don't constitute a central part of the theme. The overwhelming presence of the landscape engulfs individual concerns. But both Eustacia and Clym set out to establish their individuality, which goes against the very grain of the Heath. Eustacia herself represents something of the wilderness of the Heath. The descriptions of Eustacia are similar to those of the Heath:

Eustacia Vye...she had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, That is those which make not quite a model woman... To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow; it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow. She had pagan eyes full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light as it came and went, and came again, was particularly hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; (53)

Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. Then it became the home of strange phantoms; and it was found to be hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster. (4)

The two passages sufficiently illustrate the primordial nature of Eustacia and the Heath. She is not a model woman; her ambitions are not those that befit a countrywoman. Thomasin is the model woman. She is a native of the Heath and is destined to marry a farmer. This model woman is at one with her surroundings:

To her they were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground. Her fears of the place were rational, her dislike of its worse moods reasonable. At this time it was in her view a windy, wet place, in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care, and possibly catch cold. (282)

Egdon in a way moulds the character of the people and those who reciprocate accordingly will survive, the others are cast out like Eustacia and Wildeva. Thomasin and Diggory are not dissatisfied with the Heath. They know the secrets and mysteries of the Heath; their aims are modest and their desires do not cross the boundaries of Egdon. Diggory is a reedleman, symbolizing the diminishing trade of the reedlemen of the old world. Eustacia decides to escape the influence of the Heath with the prospect of her marriage to Clym Yeobright. Her discontentment with the marriage emerges because of her unhappiness with the Heath. The dichotomy between her over-vaulting ambitions and the oppression of the Heath becomes too glaring and in the end, Eustacia gives into the power of Nature. In her marriage to Clym, Eustacia envisions a means of fulfilling her dreams.

The dichotomy between nature and culture acquires a visible manifestation in the desires and aspirations of both Clym and Eustacia. Both of them aspire for culture, civilization albeit their differences over the path to achieve it. Clym ventures to educate the people of Egdon Heath despite the known fact that "civilization was its enemy" (4). According to Eustacia, her wishes of attaining culture can be materialized only by escaping the impact of the Heath, because she knows the fact fully well that the Heath is impenetrable for civilization. Her dismissal of Clym's education project is a telling comment on her understanding of the Heath and also the superficial nature of his work: "He is an enthusiast about ideas and careless about outward things". (220) Clym's prolonged stay at Budmouth makes people inquisitive whereupon Clym is compelled to unfurl his future plan of action: "...I have come home; and this is how I mean to carry out my plan. I shall keep a school as near to Egdon as possible, so as to be able to walk over here and have a night school in my mother's house. But I must study a little at first, to get properly qualified." (135) Clym's enterprise though idealistic sounds superficial to anyone with some knowledge of rural pragmatics. He seldom gets an opportunity to express what exactly he needs for carrying out his mission. The contents of his abstract education scheme remain unknown till the end. Clym's lack of proper understanding of the Heath coupled with his mismatched marriage to Eustacia blur his vision of the future. Clym and

Eustacia imagine the wrong things in each other and try to arrive at a confluence of their ideas. For Eustacia, Clym stands for Paris and its extravagant life style and her view is that she can compel him to return to Paris and resume his old life as an artist. She is completely ignorant of the glossy life of Paris. Clym returns to Egdon not to celebrate a holiday but to emerge out of the frustrations of Paris life and he believes Egdon to be a natural means of salvation and Eustacia Vye a worthy companion, in his mission of civilization. The misguided marriage of Clym and Eustacia turns out to be disastrous for both of them. In a description of the Heath, Hardy warns the readers of the wild nature of the Heath: "to dwell upon the heath without studying its nature was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue." (57) Clym Yeobright has no clear-cut social position in Boudmouth and is therefore isolated from other people because, Hardy suggests, he is too far ahead of them. A civilizing enterprise like education always demands contact with the public and not intensive study of some obscure texts. Choosing Eustacia as his companion in the education programme and preferring exile to public life after his wedding are the fatal blunders. The incompatibility of his high intellectual plans with the banal realities of the heath leads to his subsequent failure.

Hardy primarily shows us two types of characters: the enduring, earthy, self-contained, the rebellious and the outgoing as part of the life on the Heath. The conflict of two ways of life are repeated in the novels in the introduction of outside elements like Fancy Day, Sergeant Troy, and Wildeva who are forced to live on the heath as opposed to Diggory Venn, Thomasin and Fanny Robin who naturally accept the way of life on the Heath. Region, is upheld as an unpolluted space and all other influences are shown as corrupting agents. In these novels there are a bunch of characters who fail, and they are those who cannot submit to the overwhelming influence of Nature. Hardy's region functions as a repository of all moral and ethical values and therefore any outside influence is treated as a corrupting agent. If we examine the female characters, Hardy's vision projects clear opposites. The strong individualistic central characters are pitted against the simple, unsophisticated women of the region. Bathsheba Everdene of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is projected as too individualistic in her manner from the beginning. She represents a depth in her personality that is singular and is not attained by Fanny Robin, 'the other' woman in her life. Fanny's belief in her life and the man she loves ultimately leads to her death. Her vulnerability, her submissive nature, wins her the sympathy of the men including Troy. In *The Return of the Native*, Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright are set against Thomasin and Diggory Venn to extend the complexity of the region. Those who accept the heath and understand its environs can live on it without much trouble. This stands valid for Thomasin and the reedleman Diggory Venn. This rural man, is actually very much like Gabriel Oak. He is naturally kind, faithful to the woman whom he loves even when there seems to be no hope of getting her and like Thomasin completely adapted to life on the heath. This seem to work for him before the end when all other ambitious characters are either broken in spirit or they die. Thomasin is also in tune with the harmony and peace of the heath as she is neither ambitious nor ever want to escape the impact of the Heath. Her simple idea of doing well--getting married gels well with the Egdon standards. Thomasin and Diggory are

upheld together to reflect the essence of life on Egdon Heath.

The encounters between old ways of life in Wessex and the modern ones ultimately result in proving the superiority of natural, pre-modern ways of life in Hardy's novels. While upholding the rural, there is already a sense of nostalgia expressed for a lost past which was even more pristine than the present rural or regional life which was getting slowly contaminated with the entry of the machinery of industrialization. The creation of an imagined space called Wessex, allowed Hardy to contemplate on the region not just as an experimental ground for a turbulent economic and social order as well as human relations, but it let him idealize the rural life for an urban readership. Thus it brings in complexity to the tone and tenor of the narrative of the region.

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<sup>i</sup> Ideas gathered from Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (St.Albans: Paladin, 1975).

<sup>ii</sup> See Norman Page, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

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