



Thomas Hardy's 'Wessex' as a symbol of the English Rural Ethos.

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David Cecil's illustration of Nature in Hardy's novels is perhaps the most accurate remark that Nature plays a role in Hardy's novels not equaled elsewhere. That Nature is not just a background in his drama but a leading character in it. In fact, 'Nature plays dominant role in Thomas Hardy's novels. It is omnipresent, Omni-potent and eminent. Its dynamic presence can very well be observed in its immediate and stellar dimensions. It symbolizes quiet happiness and somber sadness, smooth harmony and embittered misery in life, thus manifesting life-with all its glooms and glories. Its dimension is so vast that it embodies the whole cosmos. It is synonymous even to chance, fate and God. In Nature's vast panorama man appears as a pigmy and his Destiny embodying the universal design.

It is interesting to note this living presence of Nature on analytical pattern. At the outermost peripheral is prevalent Nature, unspecified in terms of place or time which touches these concrete details even at this perspective of Nature.

Wessex of Thomas Hardy stretches from the English Channel in the South, to Cornwall in the West and as far as Oxford to the North. It is this limited region which forms the scenic background to each of his "Wessex Novels". The same physical features hills, dales, rivers, pastures, meadows, Woodlands and heaths appear and reappear in all his works. This imparts to his works a kind of scenic continuity and a touch of realism difficult to match with in any fiction. Every event in his novels takes place within this locality. It is seldom that he stays out of it. The heart and centre of his Wessex is the country of Dorsetshire. It was here that he was born and bred up. He has immortalized the land of Wessex which is living and breathing reality in his novels.

Hardy's childhood was spent in a cottage in remote Wessex and that left its stamp. Rooted in the elemental substance of human life, warmed by the presence of nature, coloured by a folk tradition. Hardy's imagination learned to flourish with an unselfconscious strength and boldness impossible to one brought up in an urban industrial town.

Hardy uses Nature as an abstraction. Fate is an abstraction, another name of which in the context of the Wessex novels is either Chance or coincidence. All Hardy's characters, including him believes in these. These abstractions for them to play an effective part in human affairs are to be objectified in a particular form to be known as some natural forces which again range against mankind from which there is no evasion. Mankind, before these forces is no better than puppets. In fact the blind "Immanent Will" renders most of the activities and pains of men negative and ironical. Fate in "The Mayor of Casterbridge" for example expresses itself as hostile weather which to a considerable extent is Henchard's ruin. But more frequently Fate asserts itself as love. Bathsheba loves Troy to distraction which he does not deserve. This one could say is all part of fate. She finds herself out of balance because of this misplaced love. We have another instance of Fate assuming the role of love i.e. the time when Farfrae calls upon Elizabeth-Jane at High Place Hall in chapter 22 of The Mayor meets Lucetta. Love develops between the two, may be at the first sight. Lucetta looks very appealing at this point as she had been anxiously looking forward to see Henchard to call on her in reply to her notes to which she was rather addicted. But Fate has something different in store. Lucetta and Farfrae marry. After her death he marries Elizabeth-Jane, but no prolonged mourning, on his part, precedes the wedding. Elizabeth Jane who cannot be said to have entertained a feeling of great love for him, accepts him as she has become philosophical being tortured by chance and suffering and is now wise, well able to look on the world with a winning smile. In the case of Eustacia, love acts as Fate. Her marriage to Clym is fated and so is her tragic end. For all her sufferings, frustrations, disappointments and disillusionments she lays the fault upon the "shoulders of some indistinct Colossal Prince of the World who had framed her situation and ruled her lot"¹. It is Fate acting as love that makes Tess fall for Angel and in the process; she keeps back, fated as she is "the gloomy specters that would persist in their attempts to touch her"². At the close of the novel she becomes a murderess because of this love and is hanged for the offence. So, we find that it is love or Fate or Chance that bedevils the lives of the characters in Hardy's world.

Hardy treats Nature as the instrument of the first cause which in Philosophy would mean the original cause or creator of all. In Hardy's world it has direct reference to same forces of Nature- destructive, impersonal and relentless. Henchard's ruin is brought about when he attempts to seize on the chance to gamble with Nature directly. Egdon, its environment, more particularly it's imperturbably countenance³ is the agent of Eustacia's sorrow, frustration and untimely, unnatural death. Clym is a part of the Heath, and his marriage to her is, she reflects, like getting thistles for figs in a worldly sense⁴. One can easily see a note of pathos and a feeling of unfulfilled desires in the utterance. Tess loses her innocence feminine pride and treasure and changes from simple girl to complex woman⁵ as she has been ravished in the very bosom of Nature who may be said to have created a favourable situation for this act of ravishment by Alec and it is

precisely in this sense that Nature acts as the original cause, solely responsible for undoing things and writing death warrants for so many lives.

“In *Far From the Madding Crowd*” where nature exerts sufficient influence on human nature. Hardy does not seem to be quite content with just the mere scenic descriptions that he gives in the novel. He employs imagery on a greater scale to achieve his intended effects. A crop of similes and metaphors occurs in almost every page which shows sharp focus on characters, events and scenes. He uses a good deal of natural images through which he presents his characters, so sharply different from one another. Farmer Oak is “a river flowing rapidly under its ice”⁶. Bathsheba a ‘hawk’, a ‘Kingfisher’, a ‘sapling’⁷ and a ‘breeze’⁸. She pants like a ‘robin; her face a peony petal’⁹. She has been variously described with a purpose i.e. to show that she dominated the novel, at fascinating and complex, developing and changing as the novel progresses.

The natural imagery is used for another important reason yet to reflect mental condition of characters in the scenes abounding in imagery. Let us consider for example, the great storm scene which besides lending excitement to the action of the narrative, does throw light on the growing sense of crisis in Bathsheba, lightning and thunder crackle all around and intense darkness descends all of a sudden. In her bedroom to a shadow sweeps to and fro as the lit candle loses its light¹⁰. When the storm seems to subside, there comes a burst of light and a magnificent flash that spring from every direction like a dance of Death. All these could be interpreted as signs of an impending danger and despair for Bathsheba. The lightning flashes make her realize that she has made a blunder in marrying Troy. At one time in this scene, her rhythmical pant and frightened pulsations harmonize with the recurrent rustle of the sheaf beside her.

This chapter, among many others in the novel, focuses a lot of information on Hardy's view of Nature and its relation to man. It is during the storm scene that Oak and Bathsheba fall finally in love, though; hardly a word is exchanged between the two. The scene shows that men, women and the landscapes act and react upon one another; or else Oak and Bathsheba would not have come close to each other, the closeness culminating in their marriage at the end of the novel.

Also the scene when Oak surveys the Chalk-pit, on the further side of Norcombe Hill, is worth one's notice. The ewes lay dead and dying a heap of two hundred mangled carcasses¹¹. With their death all his hopes of being an independent farmer are almost totally gone. In fact the scene around the pit is in direct correspondence with the mental state of Oak: the pool by the outer margin of the pit ‘glittered like a dead man's eye’ and over it one could see the picture of the attenuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon nearing its dying day.

Then, again when Boldwood first emerges into the air after receiving the disturbed valentine, he is nervous, vacant and full of excitement. He finds the sunrise in keeping with his mood: 'the sun... burnt ray less... the whole effect resembled a sunset as childhood resembles age' and over the west hung the wasting moon like tarnished brass¹². But late spring enlivens his spirit; he is hopeful of Bathsheba and with the approach of summer his passion is in flood. The sight of Bathsheba's figure 'lights him up as the moon lights up a great tower'. And as he proceeds to the meadow where she is seen 'the ground', we are told, was melodious with ripples and the sky with larks¹³. The 'ripples', the larks are symbols of his happy state of mind, the happiness being born of her presence. It should be pointed out here that he is apparently invulnerable to feminine charms and wiles but now obsessed with the idea of possessing her fully, a slave that he is to an overmastering passion. He may be said to represent a selfish love in its most destructive form.

It is 'bounded on the South by the bold chalk ridge that embraces the prominences of Hambledon Hill, Bulbarrow, NettlecombTout, Dogbury, High Story and Bubb down.¹⁴ We got a detailed of Talbothays and Flintcomb-Ash where Tess goes driven by the needs of the hour. On her way to Talbothays, she has to pass through Stour Castle and journey over the uplands and lowlands of Egdon. Later, she reaches a summit from where she takes a view of the valley of the great dairies where milk and butter grow to rankness as the verdant place is so well watered by the river Var or Froom. All through the period of her stay at this place, the fertility of the region, the march of the seasons, especially the beauty of spring is minutely described and that also with repeated emphasis. There is no denying that we have an unrolling picture of the life of the farm as rich, lush and fascinating as to divide the interest even of so absorbing a human story.

Notes & References:

1. Hardy, Thomas: The Return of the Native, P. 306.
2. Hardy, Thomas: Tess of D'Urbervilles, P. 209.
3. Ibid, P. 332
4. Ibid, P. 290
5. Ibid, P. 105
6. Hardy, Thomas: Far From the Madding Crowd, Ch. 8.
7. Ibid, Ch. 3
8. Ibid, Ch. 12
9. Ibid, Ch. 4
10. Ibid, Ch. 37
11. Ibid, Ch. 5
12. Ibid. Ch. 14
13. Ibid, Ch. 18
14. Hardy, Thomas: Tess of D'Urbervilles, P. 7