



## The Agricultural Theme in the novels of Thomas Hardy

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**Abstract:** *Hardy was dismayed by the 'industrialization' and free trade of the 19th Century, which led to the decline of agriculture. This was the period when people were attracted towards the cities for education and enterprising endeavors.*

*The plight of the people, their dilemma and the national temperament, which was undergoing profound changes, find a vivid expression in the novels of Hardy. His protagonists are strong-willed countrymen - born and brought up in the natural surroundings. These simple village folks are encountered with men and women from the outside world who have access to better education and sophistication. The contact results in a kind of disturbance - their lifestyle, attitude and ways differ to a large extent. As the story advances, the theme of urban invasion on the country, its labor and people become more pronounced.*

**Key Words:** industrialization, agriculture, attracted, enterprising, endeavors, dilemma, temperament.

The agricultural tragedy of 1870-1902 has been largely the period of the composition of his novels. Hardy takes both its material and its vitality from the contemporary catastrophe. The novels I undertake for the study of the agricultural theme are *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Hardy's protagonist, Bathsheba finds herself insecure between the country life and the city milieu. In her voice, we sense the feelings and sentiments of country lass. The novel is a ballad tale of the country squire, the hench man and the gay soldier. There are many references to choral interludes of the fields. In the malthouse we come across rituals and activities of the countryside - the birth of calves and lambs, the seasons of the fair, the harvest, sheep washing, grinding, incising, shearing, hiving, and so on and so forth. These activities culminate in the binding and covering and thatching of ricks when there is a storm.

Villages are being destroyed and people are migrating to towns because "Dicky Hill's wooden cedar-house is pulled down" and the old well is "turned into a solid iron pump with a large stone through"

Inventions like the sheep-shearing scenes

give body to choric ruminations of the labourers. These in turn point out the wider implication of the agricultural skills and traditions in the moment of the precipitate decline of the agricultural society. The whole context also enables us to understand the meaning of the tale of Bathsheba's bitter choice - why she chooses the invading lover Troy and with him flees from the country to that city. The beguiling visitor from a foreign kingdom presides over the feast not to celebrate the harvest, his marriage with country girl and his usurpation of country life. During the feast, Oak finds Troy drinking brandy while the labourer take cider and ale. Long sanctioned customs are disregarded. As the story advances we see how the deception invades Troy, brings suffering to both Bathsheba and Fanna. Slowly Bathsheba discovers the full extent of her predicament. She turns to the country squire and then at last to the shepherd-farmer and she marries Oak. Though the form of this novel is pastoral, it narrates the story of ill-fated passions and randomness and fragility of human existence. Norman Page aptly comments:

"Far From the Madding Crowd is often classified as a pastoral novel, though it would probably be just as accurate to describe it as anti-pastoral."<sup>1</sup>

In *The Return of the Native*, the country environment is not attractive in the way that woods



and farmlands and hills and fields are. The heath is highly antagonistic to human society and human ways. The heath is introduced not as a discord to be borne with but as a conspiring element, permanently alongside farm and mill and dairy. In contrast to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where the storm was an episode, storm seems to be present throughout in this novel. There is a dramatic conflict between the agricultural community and the heath. The heath nourishes the very vitality and stability it would threaten to destroy, and the vitality and stability together penetrate the interchange of the voices from which the tale now emerges.

Venn, the Reddleman personifies the interplay between the ballad tale and the country environment that gives to Hardy's best novels their unique quality. He is like a chord modulating between the heath and the fable. Once Redd used to colour rural life challenging the dark countenance of the heath, but today, it's a dying craft. Venn is an apt projection of Hardy's feeling for the country where a man is dyed into a way of life that is fast disappearing. At times, we find a dream-like quality in him. But mostly Venn is the embodiment of passive firmness, self denying fidelity and patient watchfulness - the qualities which Hardy associates with the intimacies and the routines of agricultural life. On the one side is the Thomasin "all similes concerning her began and ended with birds" and on the other is Wildev, the ineffectual engineer, invading the country to become a publican. Clym who takes the native home from exile and Eustacia who seeks exile confusing that with home, stand between them. At the center of Clym and Eustacia is Mrs. Yeobright - a country woman upholding urban attitude whose true nature and effect she cannot perceive. Clym is the true representative of the novelist's strongest impulse in its simplest form: the return from town to country and the rejection of urban life. Clym's experience never really includes the town or the world of thought that menaces from beyond.

The next novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* acknowledges the bitter situation of agriculture in contemporary England. Henchard suffers defeat and passes and village rites pass with him: the tolling of bell, consecrated burial and the tending of the grave.

Casterbridge is the image of Dorchester, the nearby town of Hardy's youth and his presentation of it derives from local recollection, a turning from the precarious present back to a stable past. Henchard belongs to a labouring community no more sentimentalised than he is himself. And his story is a strong ironic conception and it enacts forcefully the tension between the old rural England and the new urban one. Farfrae is the invader, the stranger within the gates. The novelist regards him with detachment and some insight but as an alien. The continuous irony is a local manifestation of a general vigour. It is a tale of the struggle between the native countryman and the alien invader; of the defeat, of dull courage and traditional attitude by insight, craft and vicissitudes of nature; and of the persistence through that defeat of some deep layer of vitality in the country protagonist:

"Casterbridge was the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposite. Bees and butterflies in the cornfields at the top of the town; who desired to get the meads at the bottom, took no circuitous course but flew straight down High Street without any apparent consciousness that they were traversing strange latitudes." (Chapter 9)<sup>2</sup>

Casterbridge is the complement of the rural life around. The shops in Casterbridge are filled with implements of agriculture. "Scythes, reap-hooks, sheep shears, bill hooks, spades, mattocks, and hoes ironmongers, beehives, butterfirkins, churns, milking stools and pails, hay-rakes, field-flagons and seed lips at the cooper's, cast ropes and plough harness...".

This novel is an elaborate account of the situation that led to the repeal of the Corn Laws. The consequences of that repeal to Victorian agricultural life are the centre of this book as they provide the impulse that makes it what it is. The note sounded by that first voice is resumed in the quiet footnote of a later page: "these chimes like those many country churches, have been silenced for many years". Hardy's Casterbridge is mid nineteenth century Dorchester type town, "Casterbridge was in most respects but the pale, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life; different from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies



set down, like boulders on a plain, in a green world with which they have nothing in common". (Chapter 9)

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is again set in the years of the contemporary agricultural tragedy. The May Dance in the novel communicates a country mirth sustained by customary traditions and recognition of the seasonal rhythm then the appearances of the spurious country squire adds to the sense of jeopardy. The masquerader, the economic intruder, the representative of the processes at work destroying the basis of agricultural security, stands with spiritual intruder. Along side this image is a disclosure of the community's past which helps to define what Tess represents in the inswing tale as it sharpens the intrusive and invading quality invested in Alec d'Urbervilles. The preparation for later scenes as Tess harvesting at Marlott, Tess in the early dawn at Talbothayes is perfect. She is not only the pure woman, the country girl, but the agricultural community in its moment of ruin. The novel dramatizes the defeat of Tess by the economic and the spiritual invaders of the country life.

Another character Clare too is the impassive instrument of some will stemming from the disastrous life of the city. Flintcomb Ash reflects the new farming. Human threshers stand side by side with the invading threshing machines. Hardy also emphasises the less human quality of the life that has replaced the older life. Tess is powerless and passive caught by the machine's noise and motion "then the threshing machine started afresh: and emit the renewed rustle of the straw, Tess resumed her position by the buzzing drum as one in a dream, untying sheaf after sheaf in endless succession". Then Hardy talks of "the tired and sticky faces of the threshers" which means the weakening of human beings before the machine. Hardy describes Tess's predicament with the machine in these moving words:

"She was the only woman whose place was upon the machine so as to be shaken bodily by its spinning, and the decrease of the stack now separated her from Marian and Izz..."

The incessant quivering, in which every

fibre of her frame participated, had thrown her into a stupefied reverie, in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness. Jude the Obscure starts where the dispossessions and social ambitions of The Woodlanders, and the forced migration of Tess leads to and treats of unlocalised protagonists continually on the move. It's a novel of place names, changes, journeys, and homelessness. Jude takes the gifted and ambitious villager into the civic world. Its fable concerns itself with responsible married life and the breeding of the children. The opening book of the Jude is Hardy's finest narrative of the countryman's struggle towards the civic milieu. And the grave retrospective irony that pervades the opening owes its authority to the later memorable rendering of that milieu which is bewildering, tantalizing, frustrating, disappointing and in the end insupportable.

Thus we see that Hardy was concerned about the continuous decline of agriculture in his age. It resulted in decay of human values and the plight of simple countrymen. Industry was devouring green pastures while villagers were deserted in their own homes.

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