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# Regional Setting in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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**ABSTRACT:** Thomas Hardy is one of the great regional novelists. He has imparted global interest to a particular region. Hardy's novels generally called as the Wessex Novels, of which *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* are the most celebrated ones. These Wessex novels have recognized Hardy as a regional novelist. Thomas Hardy is one in every of the foremost celebrated regional novelists in English literature. Love is prolonged theme of Hardy's novels . The generic scenes of all his novels are situated in one particular region. He treats solely of its life its history and its geographics. He represented the imaginative world of Wessex—its geography, landscape, agricultural pursuits, folkways, of his main characters. As a novelist, his greatest strength lays in his peculiar depiction of Wessex—a fictitious region of England. He established the landscape by beautifully depicting the nature and environment of the particular land and the people therein, particularly highlighting the conflict between man and nature . The same physical features- hills and dales, rivers, pastures, meadows, woodland, and heaths etc. of this native land appear and reappear so prominently and vividly in Hardy's novels that they are called the Wessex Novels, of which *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Caster bridge*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* are the most celebrated ones. These Wessex novels have established Hardy at the height as a regional novelist .

**KEYWORDS:** Thomas Hardy, novels, regionalism, love, fictitious, native, imaginative, world, literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

The heart and centre of Hardy's Wessex is the country of Dorsetshire. It was here that he was born and bred up and it was here that he settled in after life. It was here that he produced the best of his works. He had acquired a thorough knowledge of this region. He was permeated with its scents and substances, with its scenes and sights. He has described the physical features of his Wessex with great accuracy and realism. He has expressed the very spirit of this locality in his works. He has immortalized the land of Wessex which is a living, breathing reality in his novel. That is why many a Hardy enthusiast and topographer has taken the imaginary for the real and has gone in search of various landmarks described in the Wessex novels. For example, the description of Casterbridge in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is so realistic that many have taken it to be an exact reproduction of the town of Dorset. Similarly, all visitors to the Hardy country have testified that the dreary and desolate atmosphere of *Flint Comb-Ash* farm in *Tess* is exactly the same as that of the real place. Dorsetshire and its neighbouring countries —the South-western part of England —are rich in historic associations. The Romans ruled it for a number of years and have left their monuments behind. Many other invading hoards came to it one after another. Race by race and tribe by tribe as they came and went they have left the traces of their arrival, which time has failed to obliterate. Hardy is fully alive to the historic character of the region that he has chosen as a background to his works. Every sod in Hardy's Wessex breathes history. He invokes history, even pre-history and geology, to cast over the land of Wessex a romantic glow. In the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, we are told that even if we dig a few feet we are sure to find some skeleton of Roman warrior, with its feet touching its abdomen and its vessels hurried near him. Such "Skellingtons" are a common sight for the Wessex farmers and urchins. Near Casterbridge there is the Roman ring or amphitheatre, the ancient relic of the Roman Empire, which no one likes to frequent out of fear of its bloody associations. In *Tess* we get the temple of Stonehenge which the ancients had built of placate the powers that be. Then there are the palaces of ancient Wessex families like that of the D'urbervilles, now in ruins and unfrequented but still important landmarks in Hardy's landscapes. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* we are given an account of the various races and tribes that came to Wessex from time to time. We are then taken into the realm of pre-history, and made to see with our mind's eyes the different animal species that have- successively stalked the land of Wessex. A similar condition of things obtains in all other Wessex works. The Wessex rustics are a superstitious lot.



Education as yet has not dispelled the darkness of ignorance from the land. In every town, there are conjurers and fortune-tellers.[1,2]

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, there is (the Conjuror Fall, the Weather-prophet, whom Henchard consults before making his rash purchases. When crossed in his luck, he feels that somebody must be melting his image made in wax to spell his ruin. Later on, the sight of his own effigy floating in the dark water of the river prevents him from committing suicide. In *The Return of the Native*, Susan Nunsuch burns a wax effigy of Eustacia whom she regards as a witch. There is also the superstition "no moon, no man." In *Tess of the D'urbeivilles*, we find that an evening crow is considered an ill-omen as it signifies pre-marital sex experience or the part of the bride. In this very novel, the cattle are supposed to withhold their yield on the arrival of a new hand and soften only when music is played to them. In the other works of Hardy also, we are told of one or the other of the Wessex superstitions. Such is Hardy's Wessex. He has immortalised it and put it on the world map. Hardy is a great Regional novelist because he has imparted universal interest to a particular region. The scenes of all his novel are laid in one particular region. He treats only of its life, its history and its geography. Still his novels are of interest even to those who have nothing to do with Wessex. This is so because he succeeded in universalising the regional and the topical. He concentrates on passions and emotions which are universal; they are the real themes of his novels.[3,4]

## II. DISCUSSION

If you have been inspired by the work of Thomas Hardy then it is most likely that you have been inquisitively drawn, like so many before you, to seek and experience the locations described in his novels, short stories and poems.

Thomas Hardy chose to set most of his work in an area he called 'Wessex', the name of one of the ancient Saxon kingdoms of England. The area covers mainly the South and West of the country. Here you can visit Hardy's fictional settings such as 'Christminster', the Oxford of today, or 'Melchester', which is Salisbury, with its famous cathedral spire.[5,6]

'South Wessex' has been closely identified with the county of Dorset and it is here that you find the very heart of Hardy Country. You can follow in the family's footsteps to the place of his birth at Bockhampton, or visit Max Gate where he wrote some of his greatest works. You can stroll, cycle or drive along highways and byways, footpaths and river walks, tracing the route of the 'Mellstock Quire' as in the novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*, climbing up to 'Rainbarrow' as Eustacia Vye did in *The Return of the Native*, or visiting 'Shaston', overlooking the Vale of Blackmoor, where Sue and Phillotson lived at Old-Grove Place in *Jude the Obscure*.

There are so many places that feature in Hardy's works that you could spend a week or more reading poems or passages from novels in exactly the places Hardy describes, and in fact many people do. Some of these sites are open to conjecture, but you can decide for yourself which spot Hardy is describing.[7,8]

As many people come from all over the world to experience the literature of Thomas Hardy and the landscape he describes, and few have as much time as they would perhaps wish, the Society has published tours and trails of the individual novels and poems with biographical detail. We hope these will assist your study or visit and help you to enjoy the Hardy experience to the full.

Whilst visiting you will find the heart of Hardy Country is itself very beautiful. A large part has been designated an Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The 95-mile stretch of coastline from Studland in Dorset to Exmouth in East Devon forms England's first Natural World Heritage Site. Along this coast is Hardy's 'Knollsea', 'Lulwind or Lulstead Cove', 'Budmouth', 'Gibraltar of Wessex' or 'The Isle of Slingers', 'Abbotsea' and 'Port Bredy'.[9,10]





Locations in Wessex, from *The Wessex of Thomas Hardy* by Bertram Windle, 1902, based on correspondence with Hardy

### III. RESULTS

It is rarely seen that a man of genius ties himself to his native place as closely as Hardy has done. What he has lost in variety of scenery, he has gained in accuracy of observation and sureness of touch. He was extremely successful in his observation of surrounding and reproducing it with his absolute imagination. Grim ditch observes that „Hardy’s power not only absorbs minute details and changes in the world around him, but links them up with human personality with consummate skill. His ears are open to every slight sound, he sees (and makes us see) every delicate shade of colour, and he constantly creates the illusion in the reader’s mind that he is in the actual spot described’. Hardy has the power of presenting beneath the familiar surface, and shows that in spite of his restricted field of observation human nature is not wanting in richness and variety. He presented the towns, villages, rivers, hills and valleys of his chosen region in a thinly veiled nomenclature, which any native of the place can identify with exactness. Thus, his Caster bridge is Dorchester, his Budmouth is Weymouth, his King’s Bere is Regis, his Wintoncester is Winchester, and so forth. Within this area every road is known to Hardy, every legend, every relic of antiquity, together with hosts of family histories and traditions. This is why Hardy’s novels are also known as Wessex novels. His range is limited within the four walls of his region, Wessex. In all his novels, the scenes and characters are taken from this region. Brought up in a peasant community, Hardy is superbly successful in drawing the portraits of the natives of Wessex with all their tests, habits, likes and dislikes, joys and miseries. Every event of his novel, therefore, takes place in this region. In fact Hardy’s soul and spirit got mingled with the soul and spirit of Wessex people. [11,12]

It is noted that Hardy’s art is mainly built as a result of his deep and sympathetic understanding of the short and simple annals of the poor Wessex people—farmer-labourers, hay-trousers, dairymaids and shepherdesses. As a regional novelist, the greatest strength of Hardy is his presentation of people and their customs dwelling in the region he selected. These people living in Wessex are soaked in tradition, the tradition of a primitive class rooted in the soil, which is their function to typify. One may in them find the spiritual history of countryside: Feudalism, Catholicism and Protestantism, law and education and tradition, changes in agriculture and commerce and tenure, in traffic and society and living, all these have worked a wrought upon these people. They are as eternal as the wood and field and heaths. It is observed that these folk display their thoughts and humours most rationally and richly, when their talk turns more upon the common emotions, birth and death, and two or three intermediate affairs of the moment. Their talk is shrewd, rude of an earthly and material savour. Hardy makes them talk in such a language as with a smattering of Wessex dialect. He makes his rustics speak in Wessex dialect because he thinks Wessex dialect is the passport to our intimacy with the Wessex folk. However, he makes but a sparing use of the local words of Wessex dialect because he properly understands that too much of these words or an exact phonograph of Wessex dialect will spoil his works. So he contrives to reconcile the demands of truth with those of art in a way which brings Wessex before our eyes and the echo of its



speech resounds in our ears. The Wessex folk are far from the madding crowd; away from the confused commerce of towns, and tumult and turmoil of modernization, in which nature plays a direct part with what influence upon soul and body. For crowds and multitudinous traffic, these men have innumerable society of natural things, trees and winds and waters; they find companionship in creatures of woodland and the fields; their hopes, fears, experiences, sciences, their faith and love, sorrow and hate, are nourished by the Mighty Mother Earth.[13,14]

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Thomas Hardy is famous for his novels of nineteenth century rural life. Rich in description and dialect, they are written museums of a vanished culture. Hardy set them in Wessex, an imaginary region mapped onto the geography of south and south-west England. Hardy was born in 1840 near Dorchester. The son of a stonemason, he was schooled locally. He played the fiddle well enough to perform at church services and local celebrations, and taught at the Sunday school. Hardy moved to London after becoming an architect but was inspired by the customs and traditions of the people and places he knew best. 1873 saw the publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy's first major success and his first novel set in Wessex.[15]

His stories now had a recognisable territory. He both borrowed and invented names for the towns, villages and countryside in which they were set. Hardy undertook extensive research and kept a number of notebooks. Among them was the 'Facts Notebook', started after his return to Dorset in 1883. In this he recorded snippets from the local newspaper which he turned into plots. Readers were fascinated by Wessex and guides to its literary landmarks soon appeared. This led to Hardy worrying that Wessex was interpreted too literally, and in the preface to the 1895 edition of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, he called it 'a merely realistic dream-country'. He was a storyteller, not a reporter or historian.[16,17]

Hardy's Wessex novels are examples of naturalism, a branch of realism influenced by scientific observation. Wessex is like a petri dish in which Hardy explores what it is to be human. However, even realist writers exaggerate and invent in order to keep their readers reading. Novels can only ever give us an impression of reality.[18]

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