

Hardy as a Regional Novelist

Hardy is undoubtedly a regional novelist. All his novels are studies of Wessex, in reality, Dorsetshire, where he was born and brought up and remained throughout his life. This area with its historical past and picturesque scenery fascinated the author so much that all his novels turned out to be the facsimile of his beloved Wessex. Hardy brought up in Edinburg and the country round it, is most creative when he writes about the people of this district. Joseph Conrad's most memorable figures are drawn from the sea men he lived amongst during the impressionable years of his early maturity. Hardy is no exception to this rule.

As a modern literary expression, the name Wessex was not coined by Hardy. William Barns had used it in its proper historical sense in 1844. Hardy's originality was in extending to the whole of south-west England, east of Tamer, and in popularising it into an everyday term. He had already embarked on the nomenclature that was to go with the Wessex conception. Indeed, the general reader today may be excused for thinking that he had never used anything else since even in 'Desperate Remedies', his first published novel, some of the 'tregulars' appear - Casterbridge, Knap Waterhouse, Bloodmouth Regis, Tol Church etc.

Hardy belonged to Dorchester and he wrote of that south. As a result of his very accurate and loving presentation of the area and its details, he has succeeded in building up, through his novels, an immortal region. Never has a region been so celebrated as in these books. He was the son of humble parents only just above the rank of labourers, and the first twenty years of his life was spent between the village of Bochampton, which was his home and the neighbouring town of Dorchester. Rural Dorset is a remote place and it was more remote in the early years of the 19th century than it is now. Feudal and sequestered, centring round church and village inn and square's manor house, its life, little changed by the changes of the great world - revolved in the same slow rhythm as for 100 years past. The same slow rhythm has been adopted by Hardy in delineating the life style of the people residing in sleepy, old villages, far removed from modern changes, involved in their own orb, detached from the outside world, in his Wessex novels. Their life had been a hard one. It was an agricultural life. Every one, except a clergyman and the schoolmaster, lived by the land. In clay-built-cramped cottages, man struggled year after year against wind and weather to support a wife and a family on seven shillings a week. The same laborious life, the same struggle is faced by his characters, when they fight against the unholy plan of the nature, bent on crushing them.

The celebrations like May-day dance in Tess, the customary rural ceremonies and merrymakings - the parties in the 'Woodlanders' and "Under the Green Wood Tree", the Sunburnt harvest home supper, with its song and cider drinking in "Far from the Madding Crowd", the fete and fair with its rural merry making and dancing in "Tess" and "The Mayor of Casterbridge", all drew the inspiration from customs and traditions as observed in Dorsetshire. Every evening, the community of the village would gather in the grey old churches, just as their ancestors had done before them, to hear their joys and sorrows sanctified in the sublime meditations of the prayer-book. It had its light relief too, home made traditional pleasures - harvest celebrations, Christmas gaieties, parties to celebrate births and marriages - where people

danced and sang ballads and drank cider and told stories. All this has been faithfully represented by him in his novels.

Real life had its drama too at Bochampton; strange, simple dramas arising from the narrow-poverty stricken circumstances in which its inhabitants lived. Lovers were parted; a young man in need of a livelihood would leave the place to seek his fortune else where; years later he would return to find his sweet heart married to another. In such a world, confined and elemental, passions grew in the obsessions. Men, brooding on the wrongs until they seemed intolerable, found vent for their emotions in crime. Then, by the stern laws of those days, the offenders would be hanged at Dorchester. He saw two hangings before he was 18. All these coloured his disposition pessimistic, which darkens the mood of his novels. 'Tess' is the depiction of the same drama which Hardy saw enacted on the stage of Wessex time and again. It is a story of poverty; of man as the victim of his adverse circumstances; of man surrendering before forces greater than him. The poverty of the life of Wessex and the adverse circumstances which they were forced to live out their life, has all been faithfully recorded by Hardy in the tragedy of Tess. The life of his village – unadorned, unidealized, naked to the core finds presentation, as in reality it was, in his novels.

The plots of Hardy's books are as much conditioned by his upbringing as are his settings and characters. His comedy turns on the genial, farcical humours of village life; his tragedy is village tragedy, composed of the drama of broken love and wronged girls, the feuds and the hangings which filled his early memories. The tragedy of Tess is also on the same lines. Tess, an innocent, ignorant village girl, brought to maturity and motherhood before her time by the seduction of Alec, a supposed relative, and also later on deserted by Angel Clare, the man who obsessed her thoughts and feelings and ultimately surrendering to the persistence of Alec to give food and shelter to her fatherless family, and then the ultimate tragedy- the returning of Angel and the futility of it, and stabbing of Alec in a fit of remorse, guilt and anger, and realization of her ultimate and inevitable loss, and in the climax her apprehension and hanging - a tragedy which he had seen oft repeated in the lives of exploited, down-trodden, tyrannised residents of Dorsetshire.

His most loving characters, moreover, are all natives of country-side and they are all drawn from real life people he had come across during his life in Wessex. Farmers and threshers, shepherds and hay-trussers, dairy-maids and hedgers- they are all those who comprised the village in which he lived. Tess, Michael Henchard, Clym Yeobright, Giles Winterborne - they are all rural to the very marrow of their bones, figures which dotted the Wessex landscape and therefore are the most convincing. In reality, the most convincing of his characters are the rustic characters, without whom the novels of Hardy would have suffered very much for the lack of country air which breathes through them.

Another effect of Hardy's environment was to turn his imagination towards the past. He was stirred primarily by the life he had known as a child, and of his most famous works, only 'Jude' and 'Tess' deal with the contemporary world of his mature years; the rest are set in world of his childhood. Wessex life was too unchanging, too uneventful for people to forget the past. And Wessex had played a large part in history. The man of the middle ages, had built churches there; the Elizabethan had erected sculptured manor houses; Cavalier and Round Head had fought in the fields and hidden in the woods. His books are resonant with echoes of an earlier age. The Caster - bridge, of which Henchard is the mayor, is ancient Casterbridge with its

gorgeous houses and gothic churches. Tess- we are not likely to forget, for ultimately it brought about her tragic end, the realization of it and persuasion of that realization- is a descendent of ancient family of D' Urbervilles.

Once Hardy had decided on his Wessex nomenclature, he kept to it. Many pseudonyms are straight-forward, either genuine archaic names. A. Roews says: "Hardy's Wessex does not consist merely of places. It consists of people and of names of living things, but so integral to, or atleast influenced by their environment that one is convinced they could not exist any where else." "Wedding's, funerals, broken betrothals, the problem of illegitimate baby, legends, Customs, men and women at work and at play, all have their place in Hardy's poetic record of the Wessex he knew." (Duffin)

But a change was taking place in Wessex- a change towards industrialization and modernism. More and more livestock farming was being substituted by Arable; the picture of dairy farming in Dorset as in 'Tess' is a true picture. The old agricultural England was disintegrating. Labour had become migratory. Mechanization was taking place. Motor car was no longer a novelty. Agricultural way of life had changed and there had been extensive mechanization as acknowledged by Hardy with the introduction of the threshing machine in 'Tess' and even the seed- drill in 'Mayor of Casterbridge'. The changing face of Wessex has been captured by Hardy beautifully with in the pages of his books.

Hardy was very sensitive responding precautiously to experience, and the life in which he grew up stamped itself so deeply on his imagination that when his faculties reached the creative stage of development, he conceived his picture of life in its terms. In spite of the loving exactitude with which he details the characteristic features of Wessex life, he never lets us forget that this wessex life is part of the life of the whole human race and inextricably connected with it. To quote R. A. Scott James: "the Wessex described by Hardy lives in the imagination more distinctly than any other region described by an English writer, perhaps any writer."