



## THOMAS HARDY'S TREATMENT OF NATURE: HIS ORIGINALITY

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### ABSTRACT

Hardy's treatment of Nature is multifarious and inclusive. He devotes much of his time to assigning Nature various parts, like an actor on stage, then he deftly weaves these parts in with the theme of his story. The use of Nature led Hardy to a technique that was distinctly of his own. In his artistic hands Nature took on more than the countenance of a decorative painting, though Nature is often colorful. It becomes a real force in the drama of man's brief stay on earth.

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### Hardy's Love of Nature: Provincial and Local

Hardy's love of nature is extremely provincial and local. Born and bred in that tract of South England which he called Wessex, he loved it all his life with the glow of a lover. He was permeated with its sights and sounds, with its odour and substances.

Hills, dales, heaths, rivers, meadows and woodlands of Wessex appear and reappear in one novel after another, and constitute at least one half of the charm of his works. He has intimate familiarity with his beloved Wessex and renders it with great fidelity. *It is not only a scenic background to his stories, but is almost an over-character dominating the course of action.* In *The Return of the Native*, for example, Egdon Heath is a super-character casting a shadow over the lives of all the characters and influencing the course of their lives at critical moments. It is seldom that he strays out of Wessex, and whenever he does so he makes a sorry hash of it. He is never at his best when out of Wessex.

### Does Not Spiritualize Nature

Moreover, in his love of Nature there is nothing mystic or transcendental as in that of Wordsworth. Though he habitually personifies nature-objects, he never believed that nature has a separate life, a soul, of her own. He loves nature for her beauty, and not for any mystic qualities that she might have. He does not worship her as a kind and benevolent goddess, watching benignly over those whose souls are in harmony with her own soul. He is too much of a realist to care for such romantic nonsense.

### His Love of Nature: Comprehensive and Unconventional

But in another respect, his love of nature is more comprehensive and thorough than that of any of the romantics. He loves and enjoys the conventional beauty of nature. The beauty of moonlit glades, hills and dales, the arrival of spring when a thousand flowers bloom and birds make sweet melody, the murmuring of rivers, the beauty of the sunset and the day dawn, all fire his soul, move him to ecstasy and inspire him to poetic descriptions. Beautiful nature passages, that bear

eloquent testimony to his love of conventional nature, are scattered all up and down his works. But he also finds beauty of a new kind in such desolate wastes as Egdon Heath. He finds haggard Egdon sublime and majestic and vexes lyrical in praise of its grandeur. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he finds an unconventional beauty of a tragic tone in desolate, forlorn tract of land called Cross in Hand. He has a special love for the bleak and barren, for the wild and the stormy. His love of the beautiful forms of nature, as well as of her uglier aspects, makes nature alternately lovely and sinister in his works.

#### **Love of Rustics and the Lower Creatures**

Thomas Hardy loves not only the scenes and sights of nature but also those who live in her midst. His characters are all drawn from among those who live and work in the lap of nature. His best characters are hay-trussers, dairymaids and men, woodcutters, furze-cutters, etc. He loves simple, elemental natures and portrays them with great effectiveness. Not only does he love the, "natural man", but also the lower creatures of nature, the humble brethren of man in nature's teeming family. He is one of the greatest animal lovers in English Literature. At every step in his works, he displays a close familiarity with their ways and habits. Some of his animal portraits —as the sheep dogs of Gabriel Oak —are among the immortal figures of literature. Whenever he sees an animal in suffering his heart goes out to it. His best characters are all born humanitarians. They are all great animal lovers. Tess, for example, never could bear to hurt a fly or a worm and the sight of a bird in a cage used often to make her cry. When she finds some pheasants suffering death agony, she is moved to tears and puts them out of their misery.

#### **Awareness of the Faults of Nature**

Thomas Hardy is both a poet and a scientist. As a poet, he loves the beauty of nature, but as a scientist he does not ignore her faults. He is conscious of the ephemeral nature of her beautiful shows. He enjoys the sweet music of birds, but also knows that it is short lived. The rose may be beautiful but it has a thorn which pricks the chin of his beautiful Tess. He knows that the serpent also hisses where the sweet birds sing. He gives us both the sides of the picture — the ugly as well as the

beautiful, the bright as well as the dark. He portrays nature completely.

#### **Nature Red in Tooth and Claw**

Contemporary science has also made him aware of the brutal struggle for existence that goes on everywhere within the apparent calm of nature. He finds nature rich with rapine, red in tooth and claw. Life lives upon life, the strong prey upon the weak, and he comes to the sorry conclusion that mutual butchery is the law of nature. There is no harmony in nature, but everywhere there is an internecine warfare. In disgust he turns from nature to his own kind, for there at least he finds "Life loyalties".

#### **Nature Indifferent to Human Lot**

Unlike Wordsworth, he fails to find any, "Holy plan" at work in nature. How can one talk of a holy plan of nature when there is lawlessness and warfare everywhere within her and when children after children are born to shiftless parents like the Durbeyfields? Why does nature bring out innocent children into this world, when she cannot provide for them? Nature is not benevolent or kind, but rather she is indifferent to human lot. Nature's indifference is again and again emphasized in the works of Hardy. Thus, Nature remains indifferent as the chastity of Tess is violated in her lap. She remains indifferent to this heinous crime and does nothing to protect her. Though the life of Tess has been ruined, but everything in nature goes on as usual. As hot anger burns in the heart of Hardy at the spectacle of Tess' suffering, he goes to the extent of calling nature, "shameful", "cruel", and "treacherous". It is nature's indifference which makes life a, "*strange orchestra of victim shriek and pain*".

#### **Nature Not a Suitable Norm: One Exception**

Hardy does not consider nature a suitable norm for human conduct. To follow her would be to ape her own brutality and lawlessness. He finds nature's teachings vile and sinister. There is no question of nature being our teacher or of our receiving from her both, "law and impulse." But he makes one notable exception. He advocates that our marriage laws should be based on the laws of nature, and an illegal surrender, at least when it is the result of force and treachery as in the case of

Tess, should not be regarded with disfavour, because it is not looked down upon in nature. Thus Tess is a pure woman, for she has broken no law known to nature but only a social law.

#### **Hardy as a Landscape-Painter**

Hardy's keen powers of observation and word painting make him a notable landscape-painter.

*"If word-pictures could be hung on walls", says Duffin, "Hardy's nature pieces would fill up an entire gallery".*

Hardy's nature descriptions are fresh and accurate. They are not bookish, but based on first hand observation of the facts and phenomena of nature. He observes everything, nothing escapes his eye, but he selects only those details as are likely to serve his purpose. Thus in his nature descriptions he combines imagination with realism, fact with fiction. By the careful selection and ordering of material he heightens the significant aspects of a scene and renders it with greater effectiveness.

#### **Methods of Landscape Painting**

This makes Hardy a notable landscape-painter. His methods of landscape painting are like those of a director of a modern movie. First, he gives us the broad outlines of a scene, and then moves the camera forward and gives us the details of the landscape. This combination of the methods of Wordsworth and Crabbe is best seen in the description of the valley of the; Great Dairies. As Tess arrives there, we are first given the bird's eye perspective of the scene and then the details. We are first told that the air was clear, ethereal and bracing, and that the waters of the river were clear and rapid. As Tess approaches nearer, we are even shown the large-veined udders of the cows that, 'hung ponderous as the sand-bags, the teats sticking out like the legs of a gipsy's crock; and, as each animal lingered for its turn to arrive, the milk fell in drops to the ground.' A similar method has been employed in painting the Vale of Blackmoor.

In certain respects Thomas Hardy has an advantage over the painter, who paints with the brush. A painter of landscapes can paint only what he sees; Thomas Hardy gives us also what he hears. Thus he even describes the sound of the juice running in the vein of plants and the stir of

germination in all nature, with the coming of spring. The varied, whispering sound made by heath bells and heard by Eustacia is the classic example of Hardy's powers of hearing sounds of nature, and of rendering them into words. Another thing: Hardy shows us things in motion which a painter of landscapes with the brush cannot do. There is nothing static in Hardy's landscapes. He shows things growing, moving and becoming different from what they are. Thus the change in the moods and aspects of Egdon Heath is carefully noted and described.

#### **Hardy's Landscapes: Subject to Human Moods**

Hardy's landscapes are always subjected to human moods and situations. Thus the landscape in *Tess* changes according to the fate of the heroine. As a happy, innocent maiden, we find her dancing happily on the village green. The scenic background (landscape) is idyllic. Then she rallies and passes some of the happiest days of her life at Talbothays. The landscape is beautiful, refreshing, in keeping with the happy love of Tess and Clare. As a deserted wife, we find her on the bleak and barren Flintcomb Ash farm. The nature-background is desolate and barren like Tess' own life.

#### **His Landscapes: Vast and Majestic**

Contemporary science has revealed to Hardy the vastness of nature both in time and space. Hardy's landscapes rest on geology. Even history and pre-history are invoked to cast over the land of Wessex a romantic glow. All Wessex is rich in historic associations. It abounds with relics of the past. Thus we are told that the Vale of Blackmoor is a historic district. The traces of its earlier conditions are to be found even now in the oak copses and irregular belts of timber that yet survive. The sky is then brought in to lend a touch of grandeur and majesty to the landscape. Human figures are then introduced and their insignificance in scheme of things is pointed out. In this way, Hardy constantly belittles humanity. We would quote only one example from *Tess of the D'urbervilles* to illustrate the point:

*"Every leaf of the vegetable having previously been consumed, the whole field was in colour a desolate drab: it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an*

*expanse of skin. The sky wore in another colour, the same likeness, a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and neither visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face without anything standing between them, but the two girls crawling over the surface of the fonner, like flies."*

A similar accuracy and vividness marks his painting of the storm scene in the *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and his description of Edgou Heath, a desolate waste, in *The Return of the Native*. "*Norcombe Hill by Night*" remains the most glorious example of Hardy's nature-painting by night. Even the sky and the stars are brought in to add majesty and splendour to the scene. Thomas Hardy is at his best when painting scenes of desolation or describing weather at its worst.

#### **Hardy's Nature Treatment: Revolutionary**

Thus Thomas Hardy's treatment of nature marks a complete break from the romantic tradition. It is as great a revolt as that of the romantics themselves against the nature-treatment of Pope and his school.

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