

EXPLORING HARDY'S WESSEX IN HIS NOVEL *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy first used the term "Wessex" to indicate the southwestern region of England in the 50th chapter of the serialized version of Far from the Madding Crowd. So strong was the impression which this semi-real, semi-mythical region left upon his readers that Hardy used it more and more frequently in all his future novels and stories. He incorporated allusions to Wessex, or to the fictional towns and villages of Wessex, into his revisions for new editions. For this reason, when we read Hardy's complete works, we get the sense of a fully laid-out plan of a fictional universe which was created as a whole, and into which the various characters and their stories merely had to be inserted. This paper will study Wessex from this point of view with special reference to The Return of the Native.

Key words: *Wessex, native, rural, modern, Egdon Heath, tradition.*

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Thomas Hardy writes about his creation of the world of Wessex in his 1895 preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* (written more than 20 years after the novel's publication). He had discovered something wonderful—that the region, the people, and the customs which he best knew were very little known (and therefore fascinating) to the world outside Dorset. He mentions in that preface that he needed a large canvas for his fictional world, but he also mentions that “the region designated was known but vaguely”; even educated people did not know where it was located. Hardy’s “poetry and novels are all rooted in Wessex, full of local colour”. From *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), almost all of Hardy’s novels take place in an imaginary Wessex: the valley of the River Piddle, Egdon Heath, Casterbridge, Blackfield Valley. They are set in both rural and urban spaces, with the former taking primacy over the latter. “Hardy revived the ancient name of Wessex to describe the southwestern region of England in which they are almost entirely set” (Williams 103).

In the Middle Ages, this area belonged to the Kingdom of Wessex. Hardy borrows this ancient name and chooses to rename his present-day Dorset as Wessex. The antique name then denotes a space which represents the stagnant nature of rural life, creating a crevice between urban modernity and rural tradition. Therefore, Wessex is a space full of symbolic meaning and specific social and cultural significance. This article focuses on the novel *The Return of the Native* (1878).

Hardy’s novel *The Return of the Native* takes place in this Egdon Heath, which is “an isolated, self-enclosed environment, where time itself is ambiguous” (Gatrell 45). Its by and large characteristics are austere, feral and transcendent, tedious and enormous, inexplicable, containing a prehistoric doggedness that is absolute and as lonesome as a

solitary loner, most outstandingly at night. Egdon has unusual appearances in different seasons. There are many distinguishing natural features here among which the most representative is wind, which gives Egdon Heath a pervasively sober, even destitute appearance.

Hardy describes Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* in these words: “...everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim” (10). The antique, everlasting and monotonous nature of Egdon is displayed here.

In his letters Hardy once wrote that the superstitious actions, traditions and customs in his novels can be taken as true records, and were not merely made up by him for the sake of the story. An example of the customs he describes can be found in *The Return of the Native*, where Hardy depicts in detail the practice of erecting pillars on May Day. This May Day festival attracts the local youth from miles around; women wrap specially erected pillars with various mountain flowers, and finally the local community erects a tall column to celebrate May Day. This column is supposed to exhibit the ecstasy and vivacity of the people living in Egdon. Therefore, Egdon Heath becomes a symbol for traditional England, maintaining many of its traditional customs in the face of the ongoing process of industrialization and urbanization. The carnival embodies a traditional local spirit, reproducing local rituals and customs which even still carry an ancient pagan spirit in them. Other traditions that are mentioned in *The Return of the Native* are the custom for the whole community to sing songs to a new couple, and to perform traditional nativity plays on Christmas Day.

There are numerous examples of this kind of beliefs in the heathfolks like the children regard the reddleman as a red ghost, Susan regards Eustacia as a witch, and when they both pray in church, Susan uses a needle to prick Eustacia. People believe the old saying “No moon, no man”, an expression that conveys the idea that a boy born at new moon will never grow to become a “real” man, meaning that when Christian is born he is seen as a “lost child” who will never possess any manhood and will never be able to satisfy any woman. These are just some examples to underline the fact that the unique customs of

the people of Wessex are inextricably linked to the local environment: local customs and the local space are inseparable. Another example of this is the fact that nearly everyone in Wessex does all travelling on foot. Eustacia, Clym, Miss Yeobright all transport themselves by walking; Miss Yeobright finally dies after being overwhelmed by the heat and an adder's bite during a long walk; This is in stark contrast with the middle-class Clare, an outside intruder who rents carriages to move around, or takes the train. When the locals walk, they regularly travel together with their peers. They don't have to talk with each other when they walk together: "contiguity amounts to a tacit conversation where, otherwise than in cities, such contiguity can be put an end to on the merest inclination, and where not to put an end to it is intercourse in itself" (15), showing the familiarity with each other within this close-knit community. It also is not uncommon to find people walking alone during the night, on a so-called "night tour", since only the locals know the winding roads well enough to traverse them at night.

In addition, the heathfolk are more dodgy and unimpeded because of their close association with the environment. Compared with the city dwellers, the way of life of the people on Egdon Heath is unambiguously rural. An example of this is how Eustacia's grandfather describes the lifestyle of Miss Yeobright's family: "They sit in the kitchen, drink mead and elder-wine, and sand the floor to keep it clean" (141). This rural community characterizes itself as modest and hard-working, enjoying a modest lifestyle as compared to the "exuberance" of the city. Moreover, the city dwellers are always punctual and are always running for time, whereas the heathfolk bear a laidback attitude with no particular respect for time.

In the intervening time, the particularity of Wessex is offered throughout the story in assessing it with other landmarks. Egdon Heath is compared with both Budmouth and Paris, at the time the most fashionable city on the continent. Budmouth is a superior seaside resort, representing a new, romantic space which largely bears brightness as well as chaos, which is a sharp contrast with the bleakness that represents Egdon, which symbolises the ancient and the traditional. Egdon is also quite different from Paris, a place which to most of the inhabitants of Egdon Heath only exists in their imagination. The heathfolk say that Clym "has settled in Paris. Manager to a diamond merchant" (128),

“Tis a blazing great business that he belongs to” (128), “A young and clever man was coming into that lonely heath from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from heaven” (130). Paris represents the centre of the world; it also represents fashion, money, wealth and status; conversely, Egdon symbolizes a backwater which is stuck in endless poverty and the paucity of modern sense pulls it over the mire. The close relationship among the heathfolk, the customs and the land is also translated into the structures of feeling of the characters populating Hardy’s Wessex. Miss Yeobright, for example, “had something of an estranged mien; the solitude exhaled from the heath was concentrated in this face that had risen from it” (40). Eustacia, Wildeve and Clym are all lonely and melancholy, similar to Miss Yeobright. Loneliness is endowed by the Heath, heathfolk and the Heath constitute a community. Grandfer Cantele, on the other hand, is a complete embodiment of fervour, high spirits, loves to join in the fun, likes to joke, takes things carelessly, and never feels lonely. After dancing at the bonfire ceremony, Fairway is arrogant, absurd, and full of vitality, similar to Grandfer Cantele. These two ways of feeling which coexists in Egdon, and it seems that they are not contradictory at all.

It is one example of the appearance of modernism in Wessex. Residents of Wessex appear very different and exhibit dissimilar temperaments at times, but most of them are an amalgam of the latest and the aged. The reddleman Diggory Venn’s job is to sell red clay to the peasants which they then use to dye sheep; it’s an old profession, yet almost extinct in Wessex. In the novel he is described as “...a curious, interesting, and nearly perished link between obsolete forms of life and those which generally prevail” (14). He lives on the road, and is called a ghost because of his appearance and his nomadic lifestyle. Yet, his temper is soft, he is smart and selfless, and he is not afraid of the others’ reluctance to accept him. He does not think Thomasin’s virtue is problematic because of her first unsuccessful marriage, and believes her to be a pure and innocent woman. Venn’s profession may be old, but his mind is open.

Similar to Venn, Eustacia is a woman with new thoughts and strong passionate feelings. She hopes that she can move to the city and pursue a life like a lady; in contrast to other

heathfolk, she longs for the lifestyle of the upper classes and is obsessed with this glamorous urban world. At the same time, she has strong self-esteem and possesses sovereignty, meaning that she has the strength of character to refuse a job proposed by Venn to be a rich woman's companion in Budmouth. She also dares to play a man's role in a masked play, regardless of the fact that this is frowned upon. She also is not afraid to put up strong resistance in the fact of her grandfather's lack of restraint. The old captain does not bind her very much, so the moral demands on her are relatively easy. Her views on love are also very modern: "Fidelity in love for fidelity's sake had less attraction for her than for most women; fidelity because of love's grip had much" (83). In terms of religion, her conceptions are not in line with tradition, and as a consequence they are not hypocritical but sincerely held: She often repeated her prayers; not at particular times, but, like the unaffectedly devout, when she desired to pray. Her prayer was always spontaneous, and often ran thus, "O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness; send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die" (83). In general, her thought is radical and she does not obey social convention. Her appearance resembles that of the ancients; she has an ancient appearance, but is ultra-modern in her thoughts. In the novel, Clym is also committed to education and comes across as the only educated person on Egdon Heath. In the beginning his intention is to propagate his learning and spread illumination in his age-old rural community through learning, aiming to improve the overall quality of heathfolk's ways of life. The education he admires has the aim to enable people to live a fuller and more cultured life, instead of just making a fortune, which is something which the locals find hard to believe. Later, he emphasizes in a conversation with Eustacia that he wants to clean away these cobwebs through education, which he believes can benefit local people a lot, his educational concept is more about wanting to integrate Egdon into the world, rather than focusing on the local. However, his educational career is not successful at first, because he suffers from some mysterious eye-related issues and thus can no longer be a traditional teacher. Eventually this results in him taking up open-air preaching, aiming to enlighten the local population but in a more down-to-earth manner, more attuned to local reality and changing the tone of his sermons depending on the different audiences before him. He preaches on ethically

unimpeachable topics, talking about the common views and behaviours of good people in the world and abandoning a doctrine or a comprehensive philosophical system, making his sermons more accessible to local people. So Clym's educational philosophy changes from integrating Egdon into the world to focusing on the local.

Thus, it may be possible to say that in Thomas Hardy's work Wessex is shaped through the description of both unique landscape features and traditional customs and ways of life in a vague contrast to urban life. It characterizes Wessex as a marginal rural region, which maintains an intimate relationship with nature, ancient history and traditional customs, but is at the same time left behind in the modernization going on in the cities. Because of this latter dividing line, Wessex also symbolizes relative poverty which seems to be never-ending. Nevertheless, the people of Wessex are portrayed as possessing a strong vitality, acting a lot freer than the urbanized middle classes in the city.

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