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The Functional Uniqueness of Wessex in the Works of Thomas Hardy

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Abstract

This article examines the literary and symbolic functions of Wessex in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Wessex, a fictionalized version of southwest England, serves both as a physical setting and a narrative device that shapes themes such as progress, sexuality, fate, and naturalism. The Wessex is single eyes, alone in the world, beautiful place and meaningful area which is not a surprise guest in the life of Thomas Hardy. The aim is to demonstrate the intrinsic value of this mythical region on Hardy's literary production and worldview.

Résumé

Cet article examine les fonctions littéraires et symboliques du Wessex dans les romans de Thomas Hardy. Le Wessex, une version romancée du sud-ouest de l'Angleterre, sert à la fois de cadre physique et de dispositif narratif qui façonne des thèmes tels que le progrès, la sexualité, le destin et le naturalisme. Le Wessex est un est un espace unique aux yeux, seul au monde, un endroit magnifique et une région significative qui n'est pas un invité surprise dans la vie de Thomas Hardy. Le but est de démontrer la valeur intrinsèque de cette région mythique sur la production littéraire et la vision du monde de Hardy.

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Introduction

When we hear someone says Wessex, we immediately imagine beautiful landscapes of the English countryside with hills and meadows in shades of green in summer or red and orange in winter. We see the coastline, the cliffs, the wind, and most English people think about Thomas Hardy when they hear of Wessex, soaking up the scenes from his novels. Indeed, Wessex is a reflection of Dorset which has already a whole set of pre-established, defined images that form part of a common imaginary. But where does this imagination come from? And how is it part of Thomas Hardy's life? To validate or refute our hypothesis, we'll see whether Thomas Hardy, as a writer, is a first guide to his region, helping to establish strong images. It is said that literature speaks for itself, and the writer is the first guide to his region, who establishes, and even imposes images through his writings.

Thomas Hardy is best described as a naturalist. His works dissect the customs, people, and contradictions of his time. Through vivid and sometimes disturbing portrayals, he offers powerful insights into Victorian society. He immerses us in his time by bearing witness to the social events he relates without disguising them completely. He gives us a true, albeit romanticized picture of his time, the people in his environment, customs, language, actions and landscapes, and thus becomes a painter, poet, cartoonist, storyteller, sociologist and, above all, a witness. He shows and highlights actions and ways of life. And his writings are precious reports of a bygone era, imagery mingled with romance, giving us the tone and taste of a bygone century.

It is important to know that writers, especially naturalists, create a base of images and social and ethnological data through their descriptions of lifestyles and landscapes. This is why Thomas Hardy, a specialist in landscape descriptions, is called a regionalist novelist. In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis disputed the value of Hardy's fiction and rejected it as part of the literary "canon" (Leavis 22). Many people have compared Thomas Hardy's analysis of the rural world with George Eliot's, drawing a parallel between their humanistic realism. He was criticized for his many departures from realism, with the artificiality and implausibility of his characters and situations, and above all for his immoderate taste for "fashionable pessimism" (Hutton 138). Wessex appears as an imaginary province where nature is preserved, in contrast to the great London of Victorian society, with its rise in industry and

technology. Thomas Hardy pays particular attention to the climate in order to show the beauty and harshness of 19th Century English nature, a land of tragic stories where the heroes, caught in a vice, all become victims of social convention and hypocrisy before meeting a tragic and brutal death (Thomas Hardy, the black eagle of English literature). The aim of our study is to address the presence of Wessex in Thomas Hardy's life, and the role and consequences of this presence on both his life and his work.

1. Theoretical Approaches

In our approach, several approaches are possible to study Thomas Hardy's work in the light of literary theory. Thomas Hardy's novels, particularly those set in Wessex, can be analyzed through the prism of realism and naturalism. His style, characterized by a cocktail of descriptive realism and fatalism, can be examined through theories of narrative, fate and the influence of the environment on characters.

Naturalism is a literary movement that, in the last decades of the 19th Century, sought to introduce the methods of the humanities and social sciences into fiction. The movement was partly created by Émile Zola. Naturalism continues and perpetuates this idea, but adds a physiological context and points to the fact that the environment in which the protagonist lives is one of the reasons for his or her behavior. This is what Thomas Hardy wanted to emphasize in his novels: he created characters who wanted a better life, but who, because of their environment, cannot and will never be able to achieve it. Hardy is associated with realism because of his meticulous depiction of rural and class life in Wessex. Considered a naturalist because of his exploration of the forces of nature and society that seem to weigh on his characters' fates. Hardy uses realism to criticize Victorian social and moral standards, while incorporating naturalistic elements to show the impact of fate and the environment.

To take the first step, we're going to use narratology as perceived by Gérard Genette, who, in the form of a typology of narrative, is seen by many specialists in the field as a reading device marking an important stage in the development of literary theory and discourse analysis. By making narrative voice the notion around which all other categories are articulated, the author makes the context of narrative production a fundamental datum. Genette defines narratology as the discipline that studies the internal mechanisms of a

narrative, itself made up of a narrated story.

According to Genette, then, a narrative cannot truly imitate reality; it is always a fictitious act of language, however realistic, originating from a narrative instance. "A narrative does not" represent "a story (real or fictional), it tells it, that is, it signifies it by means of language [...]. There is no room for imitation in narrative [...]" (29). Thus, between the two great traditional narrative modes of diegesis and mimesis, the narratologist advocates different degrees of diegesis (29) whereby the narrator is more or less involved in his narrative, and the latter leaves little or much room for the narrative act. Brievely speaking, According to Genette, narration always carries the mark of the narrator's perspective. Hardy's use of omniscient narration is a way to mediate Wessex as a constructed myth rather than an objective geography. But he insists in no case that the narrator is totally absent. Indeed, in the construction of the story and narration, Hardy uses omniscient narration to comment on the actions and reveal the characters' thoughts. Here, in the work, Hardy uses the Wessex landscape as a character in its own right, influencing the actions and emotions of the characters.

Thomas Hardy is an acerbic painter of the natural environment. He introduces naturalistic elements into his work through the depiction of characters struggling against a cruel fate and an oppressive environment. In this universe, he focuses on social and biological determinism, portraying individuals confronted by their passions and the forces of nature. Hardy portrays characters whose lives are shaped by external forces such as social environment, individual passions and chance. He explores how these factors influence their choices and destinies, often in tragic ways. In creating a coherent world, Thomas Hardy transforms Wessex into a coherent novelistic space where towns, villages and landscapes are named and recur, creating a sense of continuity and geographical identity in his works. Wessex becomes the setting for individual struggles and human tragedies where characters are confronted with their destiny, their passions and the social forces that overtake them. This region, with its distinctive atmosphere, influences Hardy's writing style, which is characterized by realism, a sense of the tragic and an empathetic view of rural life.

I- Introduction to Wessex

The heart and center of Thomas Hardy's Wessex is the country of Dorset.

This is where he was born and raised, and where he settled after life. This is where he produced his best work. Hardy's intimate familiarity with Dorset allowed him to infuse Wessex with both realism and poetic invention. He expressed the very spirit of this locality in his works. He has immortalized the land of Wessex as a living, breathing reality in his novel. For this reason, many Hardy enthusiasts and topographers have mistaken the imaginary for the real and gone in search of various landmarks described in the Wessex novels.

But that doesn't mean Hardy's works have the literal fidelity of a guidebook. We should not expect scientific accuracy from a writer of fiction. As Hardy himself points out, his Wessex is a part of real country and a part of dreamland. It's an intelligent blend of fact and fiction. The general characteristics and outlines remain the same as those of the real objects. The spirit of the place also remains the same. So, there's a lot of realism. But details are moved, altered or enlarged to suit the novelist's purpose. For example, the power of his imagination enabled the writer to magnify a small expanse to epic proportions and immortalize it in *The Return of the Native*. Similarly, he enlarged the little wood near its place of origin, and in The Woodlanders imparted to it a vast, grand grandeur totally lacking in the original. He had acquired a thorough knowledge of the area. He was imbued with its scents and substances, with its scenes and sites. He described the physical characteristics of his Wessex with great accuracy and realism. As Hardy himself points out, his Wessex is part read and part dreamland. Hardy is fully aware of the historical character of the region he has chosen as the backdrop for his works. Just as closely, Hardy is familiar with the life and customs of the rustic Wessex people.

Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a woman of the sea. The use of the local dialect, in which Hardy is well steeped, and through which all his characters express themselves, lends his works a touch of realism difficult to associate with any fiction. No aspect of Wessex life escapes Hardy's eye. Dancing, singing and drinking are his favorite pastimes.

1- Wessex life and customs

a- Cultural Practices

If Hardy seems to restrict the action and setting of the vast majority of his works to this region, he cannot be seen as merely a regional author. The author has chosen not to retain the names of the places his pen visits. But the

delimitation by these borders serves, as Hardy himself explains, an artistic purpose, since it offers all the coherence and universal force of a tragic scene, in the manner of the ancients:

> I considered that our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature found sufficient room for a large proportion of its action in an extent of their country not much larger than the half-dozen counties here reunited under the old name of Wessex, that the domestic emotions have throbbed in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and that, anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose. (Orel 45)

It is also the search for a universal scope that guides Thomas Hardy's relationship with history: how to inscribe the little story - at the same time local chronicle, tradition and story, story — in the big one, History, history, and how to make the two come together meet and feed each other. It is through concrete, physical inscription that makes this connection between story and history in Hardy, through the force and meaning of the historical trace.

b- Rural Superstition

Hardy's love of Wessex is expressed in all his works. Thus, Thomas Hardy is described as a regional writer, as are his works. Catex defines what is meant by a regional work in the following terms:

> The regional novel focuses on the life of a well-defined geographical area. Traditionally, the local is a small town or rural district rather than a large urban Centre like London or New-York (…). Regional novelists often compose cycles of works set in the same area. Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels (…), despite their fictitious names, are closely modelled on the reality of specific areas of England. **(**Catex, Gallimard, 1976)

The author has chosen not to retain the names of the places his pen visits, but any reader attentive to the realism and credibility of the information given in the text will have no difficulty in making comparisons and assessing the quality of the copy. Thomas Hardy is the man who made the plains of South-West England famous. The opening on the Wessex moors, the tangible presence of unaltered, pagan nature, a succession of seasons in an ancestral, elemental

landscape, this first glimpse of the native land, instantly evokes, not without paradox, the strange, sunny opening of The Glastonbury Enchantments, Powys's monstrous novel. Men, whose identities we do not yet know, walk in a setting that will be one of the book's main protagonists, a primitive, violent setting that drives, animates and governs passions.

Man is not a stranger to nature, he belongs to it, he is its emanation, anchored in this primary reality that is the place where he lives. Indeed, Wessex, the fictional setting of choice for Hardy's tragic novels, is a very rural place, similar to the one in which Hardy lived for most of his life. There generally conservative, citizens of the very traditional, agrarian community of Wessex are often irritated by and/or resistant to the changes imposed by industrialization, both for the visible damage done to nature and the rapid decline of the region's agrarian cultural values, notably the breakdown of long-standing social controls through a loosening in the community's formerly strict moral code. Rigid social norms that public opinion asserts are the only morally correct, socially acceptable course of personal action are a common feature of agrarian society.

Hence, A Social Critique, John Osborne, proposes a concrete explanation of the development and usefulness of such strict moral doctrines in maintaining patriarchal domination in non-urban areas, positing that these authoritarian social norms act: "In an agricultural community where the margin of subsistence is small, a strict code of morality must be applied; consequently, the purpose of sex is reproduction. This attitude was written into the canons of behavior of the great religions, themselves products of Life's agrarian way of life." The clash between new and old social norms, fueled by the contradictory beliefs behind these habitual patterns of behavior, liberated some humans (especially those who belonged at least partially to a dominant social group, such as women who had been married to men in positions of patriarchal authority), but also caused conflict for many and even led to death in some cases. The country underwent social upheaval during this Period and the dramatic changes to and/or eradication of many traditional aspects of English rural life had a perceptible ripple effect beyond the lives of those directly affected by specific events, and this meant that even relatively minor, localized social problems soon took their toll on virtually every group and individual in England. Such is country's forced evolution towards modernity.

Just as close, Hardy becomes familiar with the life and customs of the Wessex rustics. He knows every detail of the farmer's business, the wood cutter's, the hay cheat's, the cider maker's, the shepherd's, the jug maker's and the milkman's. This knowledge is not that of someone who has studied their lives apart, with a sense of superiority, but of someone who has lived with them and mixed with them on an equal footing as one of them. The characters in the Wessex novels are not drawn from the upper strata of society, from the lowest and humblest ranks of life. Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge is a digger. Clym also turns a hay trusser and a weasel cutter. Tess in Tess of the D'urbervilles is a dairy maid, Giles a damp cider-maker and pine-planter, and Marty South makes a living, revealing intimate details of their respective professions, skills and life's hardships.

He shows us the inherent nobility of their souls, their persistence and their struggle against overwhelming odds. They must wrest their humble livelihoods from nature and depend on its vagaries for their lives. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, we are told that the Wessex farmer often regards the weather god. As someone who is hostile to him, he bends over backwards to destroy him. In *Tess of the D'hubervilles*, we are taken to a dairy farm in the Valley of the Great Dinners and shown their day-to-day lives, and the intimate details of their profession are described with great accuracy. The use of the local dialect, in which Hardy is well steeped, and through which all his characters express themselves, lends his works a touch of realism difficult to associate with any fiction. Not only that, he also knows that the rustic Wessex suggests more through his movements than his speech. In a characteristic passage from The Mayor of Casterbridge, the various ways in which the rustic Wessex expresses himself are graphically and humorously described.

No aspect of Wessex life escapes Hardy's eye. Dancing, singing and drinking are their favorite pastimes. In the evening, or whenever they have leisure, they gather at an inn and spend their time drinking, singing or raging. For example, in The Mayor of Casterbridge, the rustics gather at The Three Mariners, drink like gossips and pass commentary on the day's events. They warmly appreciate Farfrae's song and call on him to repeat his performance. The village fairs are also a good source of entertainment for them. As the novel opens, we are given an account of the annual Weydon-Prior fair, where Henchard sells his wife in the forest seller's tent. We also get an account of such a fair in The Return of the Native, at which Eustacia dances with

Wildieve. Later, we get vivid accounts of the respective fairs organized by Farfrae and Henchard, leading to the latter's cancellation.

c- Industrial Disruption

Hardy's Wessex is an isolated country. Railroads and modern industrialization have yet to reach it. The rustic Wessex people live their own lives untouched by modernism. Many quaint customs and superstitions still persist. They are still fatalistic. Wessex rustics are a superstitious lot. Education has not yet dispelled the darkness of the land's ignorance. In every town, there are conjurers and runners. There's also the "no moon, no man" superstition; in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we find that a raven sighted in the evening is considered bad luck, as it signifies pre-marital sexual experience on the part of the bride. In the same novel, cattle are supposed to withhold their yield at the arrival of a new hand and give milk only when music is played for them. Hardy suspects the advance of modern civilization. Wessex is unaffected by this, but sophisticated city folk manage to disrupt the very tenor of the simple life of the Wessex people. Such is Hardy's Wessex. He immortalized it and put it on the world map.

The rustics are happy and content with their backwardness, poverty and shackles. The impact of modernism brings tragedy. Henchard would have prospered with its old unsystematic methods and crude, precise bookkeeping. But then Farfrae arrives on the scene. With his systematic business-like ways, with his newly fangled machines and with his polite manners, he pushes Henchard out of business as well as out of people's hearts. Likewise, sophisticated Luceta, with her refined manners and fashionable dresses, conquers Farfrae's heart and causes untold suffering to the simpler but distant Elizabeth-Jane. In Tess, it's the sophisticated, egocentric Angel Clare and Alec who are responsible for Tess's tragedy, a pure woman more sin than sinning. It's the same in all Hardy's other prose works. Such is Hardy's Wessex. He immortalized it and put it on the world map. Hardy is a great regional novelist because he has given universal interest to a particular region. The scenes of his entire novel are set in a particular region. He deals only with its life, history and geography. His novels are always of interest even to those who have nothing to do with Wessex. This is because he has succeeded in universalizing the regional and the topical. He focuses on universal passions and emotions; these are the true themes of his novels.

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II- Characterization of Thomas Hardy's Characters in the Wessex

1- The art of Wessex Characterization

Hardy's greatness in the field of characterization is beyond question. He is the creator of a large number of the undying figures of literature. The variety of his characters is immense and his command over human personality is extensive: Angel Clare, Clym Yeobright, Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterbourne, Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Tess, Eustacia, Bathseba, Elizabeth-Jane are only a few out of the many immortal personages of Hardy. Hardy's character gallery is diverse and textured, often revealing his sympathy for flawed yet resilient figures. Of course, in all novels as well as in all drama, the central action is the expression of the central character.

In Hardy, as in other novelists, the character develops through the stress of circumstance. Delicate decisive touches of portraiture, vivid descriptive phrases, phobic illuminations encountered and revealing comparisons, chance utterances of the man himself... etc. are the means Hardy uses to develop his characters and vivify their personalities. The very movements and gestures of his characters often reveal their characters. For example, Henchard's cynical, stubborn indigence is revealed at every turn and on the sole of every foot, even in the very folds behind his knees. His character is further developed through the use of numerous metaphors, scattered throughout the novel. Here are a few random examples: he loves and hates, "buffaloe faux". Emotion sweeps through him, "like a great tree". His personality, in addition to Farfrae's, is like the sun outside the moon. The groundwork of Hardy's power in character drawing lies in the varied and reiterated emphasis on important traits through delicate, incidental strokes and illuminating metaphors. In this way, gradually and imperceptibly, Thomas Hardy builds the personality of his protagonists.

The defining method of characterization is also used by him, but not so frequently. He used it, and with rare success, in the case of Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*. An entire chapter was devoted to visualizing her personality. Hardy gives her a more deliberate and thorough treatment than he would for any other character, either because he sees her as a rare and unique creature, or because the whole action of the novel depends on her personality. First, we get a succession of light touches in Hardy's usual way, then follows a full chapter of description, as wonderfully rich as if the splendor

and romance of "Boire à moi seulement avec tes yeux" should be extended over eight pages. Every sentence is salient and arresting and, as a result, the chapter must be read in its entirety to be truly appreciated. However, even in this case of description, Thomas Hardy does not give us, as an inferior artist would have done, a catalog of Eustacia's charms, her form and characteristics. Rather, Hardy tells us what she suggests and what she stands for.

Thus, her hair is not said to be black, but a whole winter doesn't contain enough darkness to form her shadow. Similarly, her movement suggests the ebb and flow of the sea, and her voice the viola. Clym Yeobright, too, in this novel, gets a long, steady treatment, but in his case, only two or three pages suffice. Another character who receives such treatment is Farmer Boldwood in Far from the Madding Crowd. Hardy knows that a man or woman cannot be precisely classified by "objects of figure and figure". He rarely describes a man or woman as a photograph, not even like common portrait painters, but as one who rises above the physical and tries to understand the spirit and soul of the person studied.

Thomas Hardy's characters are real, like life itself. They are like ordinary human beings subject to ordinary joys and sorrows and common human passions. He has neither angles nor gods. His characters are gems, but all flawed gems. They are all of the earth. Here and there, we find a character more perfect than others. Garbiel Oak in Far from the Madding Crowd bursts, almost reaches perfection. But such examples of perfection are few and far between. Just as Hardy has few perfect characters, so he has no presumed villains. Troy, Wildeve, Alec all have a sympathetic side to their nature. Even Arabella Donny isn't all bad, we just can't love her.

There are villains in Hardy's novels, but they also have good in them. The point is that he can't simply paint obnoxious people at full length, and that people don't feel deeply and know bigger problems than those involved in satisfying their own selfish desires. He can only completely draw people whose attitudes are of a sufficiently fine quality to make them understand the greatness of the problems in which they are involved. Hardy simply can't get into the hearts of these people. This is not to say that all his successful creatures are virtues. Henchard and Eustacia commit sins, but they do so in a great way. This great way is the expression of a passion for excessive mastery, not the calculated consequence of selfish lust.

What's more, they know they're doing wrong; they're torn with

conscience. As a result, we don't hate them. Hardy's characters are vivid, realistic; they are compounds of good and evil, like real human beings. What's more, they're neither realistic nor typical; they're also universal. Like a photographer. Hardy gives us an outside view of his creation in the case of his little rustic characters. They're realistic on their own, but a veil of romantic glamour is cast over them too. They are stripped of all the vulgarity and coarseness of real rural life, and in this way, they are idealized. Other character creators go below individual differences and qualities, classifying individuals and thus arriving at types. But such types do not give us a deep understanding of human nature; types are innumerable, and a type tells us nothing else. Some of Hardy's characters, such as Angel Clare, are simple types, which is why their appeal is limited. But Hardy's greatest characters, his most successful creations, are neither types nor individuals; they are universal. Each of them includes within itself the whole of human nature, and that's why they appeal to everyone and, once we've made their acquaintance, we can never forget them. In each of them, every Hardy reader recognizes something of himself. They are constructed from the elementary material common to all mankind. Tess, Jude, Henchard, Oak, Eustacia, Clym are universal, elemental characters, growing like granite mountains out of Hardy's pages. Women are more elemental than men, and Hardy's female characters are more effective and vivid.

The limitations of Hardy's art of characterization can now be noted. His imaginative range is extremely limited. Almost all his successful characters belong to Wessex and the lower strata of society. Every time he leaves Wessex, he makes an unpleasant mess of it. Great ladies and great men, people of the city, etc., are all outside Thomas Hardy's range. However, it can be emphasized in Hardy's defense that he deliberately chooses characters from the lowest ranks of society because, as he himself said, the conduct of the upper classes is controlled by convention and therefore real character is not seen. In the lower ranks of society, conduct or action is the real expression of character. He wanted to understand human nature, and he makes the simplest example of it.

In the same way that Thomas Hardy fails to portray upper-class men and women, he also fails to portray intellectuals. His intellectuals are selfish, courageous and contemptible. There is no generous impulse in them; they show the damaging effects of cold reason. The treatment of Clym, his wife

and his mother, is unwavering in its harshness. Clare fails Tess at the greatest crisis of her life because of her "hard logical deposit," and Henry Knight is an egotist. The Character and Environment Novels (also known as "The Wessex Novels") are tragic in conception. Hardy was the social critic. In his fiction, not only natural forces but also human society seem to have a tendency to crush the sensitive, imaginative individual. Society inflicts its gratuitous suffering by exercising superficial conventions and values, as well as by emphasizing the efficiency of age.

In Thomas Hardy's novels, time moves rhythmically, in seasons and ages, rather than mechanically, according to the watch and even the calendar. Hardy's attitudes towards women were complex because of his own experiences. Certainly, the latter stages of his marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford must have contributed much to his somewhat equivocal attitudes. On the one hand, Hardy praises female endurance, strength, passion and sensitivity; on the other, he portrays women as soft, vain creatures complicated by mercurial moods. Rarely do his minor female characters have either inner strength, spiritual power or physical beauty. He treats them with great irony.

Hardy's heroes, like Clym, Jude and Henchard, are able to actively fight against their destiny, form plans to oppose it, try to create a recognized place in the world. The women in her novels have no way out, and this makes their situation more tragic. They are limited to a very small number of easily identifiable social roles, and are always subject to the sexual domination and destruction of men. This situation leads us to her writing style, marked by tragedy and irony.

Conclusion

Thomas Hardy has written many novels, not the least of which are famous. A craftsman of nature, he invented a fictional region called Wessex, which serves as an inn, a 'holy' place where he can recharge his batteries. For Hady, there's no better place than Wessex. But the Wessex has its realities, just like Mother Nature. His novels always flee the capital of London to take place in the countryside, in an imaginary region, the Wessex, recognized as the mirror of his native Dorset. An avant-garde man, he is known for his highly modern treatment of the condition of women. His rejection of religion made him a sulphureous author who received little recognition during his lifetime, despite

the success of his books, which were sometimes sold under the table. All his novels are concerned with depicting the customs of country folk, through people subjected to implacable destiny. The author's long, uneventful life contrasts with that of his characters, always struggling against their passions and the mores that stand in their way. Hardy's Wessex is more than a setting; it is a philosophical and moral landscape where tragedy unfolds. His deep engagement with rural life allowed him to critique social change, gender roles, and industrial modernity through grounded, emotionally complex characters

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