

Character and Environment in Thomas Hardy's Fiction

Thomas Hardy was born in Upper Bockhampton, Dorset and lived within the county for much of his adult life. The local customs and specific geography typical to this part of England are woven into Hardy's narratives, and form an integral part of his work.

His novels are set within the semi-fictitious landscape of 'Wessex'. The reader can easily identify the scenery and towns described in the narrative located within the southwest of England, which incorporates Dorset and the surrounding counties. The specific sense of place detailed in Hardy's fiction is very important as it provides a realistic, countrified backdrop against which his many characters live out their lives and struggle against their circumstances. Hardy's intense study and accurate portrayal of nineteenth-century rural society in Dorset and surrounds - the 'Wessex' of his novels - presents a microcosm of human life through which Hardy intended to comment on the universal condition of human existence. [1]Map of locations in the "Wessex" of Thomas Hardy's novels[Public Domain], via Wikimedia CommonsCharacter and Environment However, in Hardy's fiction, the natural world is often described in great detail, rendering it more significant than a mere setting against which the narrative unfolds. Hardy establishes a reciprocal relationship between environment and character; an interaction which serves to demonstrate the changing position of humans in the post-Darwinian Victorian period. Hardy's narrative voice depicts the natural world in the same way the appearance of different individuals are described, and vice versa. This technique removes the sense of authority from human hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it.

For example, in *The Return of the Native* (1878), Egdon Heath is personified in the narrator's description: 'the face of the heath'. In a parallel characterisation which highlights the connection between the heath folk and their environment, the faces of certain individuals are portrayed in terms of the landscape. The words: 'pits', 'cavernous', and 'ravines', are used to depict the aged, wrinkled faces of some of the revellers around the Rainbarrow fire.

Personification is used in *The Woodlanders* (1887) to describe the vast woodland in which the village of Little Hintock is nestled. Mossy tree roots are 'like hands wearing green gloves', and, on certain trees, 'huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs'. Whilst following Grace and her father to the bark auction, Giles Winterborne hears the voice of the auctioneer through the woods. This voice is described as 'shouting intermittently in a sort of human bark'. The human voice is thus associated with the surrounding woodland and the bark covering the trees.

In his autobiography, Hardy identifies the important correlation between humans and their environment, highlighting the significance this interaction has in our understanding of the landscape. Hardy claims: 'an object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature. Hence clouds, mists, and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand'. Hardy thereby reveals an awareness of time and history, whilst underlining the significance of the human subject. He uses the metonym of corporeal fragments - the print of a hand - to represent the importance of

human existence in transforming landscapes, and it is by this transformation that meaning is imparted to nature.

Hardy's emphasis on environment demonstrates the influence of Darwinian theory. The role of fate and circumstance are important features of the plot, echoing the stress evolutionary ideas place upon chance, extinction, and survival. Darwin argued that natural selection is without intent. He claimed selection arose from variation in individual members of the species, incidentally sustained by the surrounding environment which favours certain traits and characteristics.

Darwin's emphasis upon the power of circumstance to alter the outcome of natural selection is evident in Hardy's fiction. Human forces are ultimately rendered inconsequential against the unseen powers that appear to govern their immediate environment. The final sentences of the penultimate chapter in *The Return of the Native*, in which Clym speaks to Diggory Venn about his feelings of responsibility for Eustacia's death, reveal the emphasis Hardy placed on chance, and show that human will is not free but restrained, governed by factors of coincidence and fate:

"But you can't charge yourself with crimes in that way," said Venn. "You may as well say that the parents be the cause of a murder by the child, for without the parents the child would never have been begot."

"Yes Venn, that is very true, but you don't know all the circumstances. If it had pleased God to put an end to me it would have been a good thing for all. But I am getting used to the horror of my existence'.

Hardy classified his novels into three groups; the biggest section named 'Novels of Character and Environment' includes the works discussed in this essay, plus some of Hardy's other major novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Hardy's classification clearly shows us the importance he placed upon the interaction between human life and immediate surroundings, and the role of environment in determining the lives of the characters that inhabit it.

See also:

[Thomas Hardy](#) [2], by Charlotte Barrett

For more on Darwin and Victorian Science, read the essay '[Science and Religion](#)'. [3]

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