

## Thomas Hardy: As Homilist on Change and on the Folk Passing in Wessex

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ABSTRACT: Thomas Hardy in the west of England in the later nineteenth century—like Henry Lawson in New South Wales at about the same time—wrote powerfully and passionately—to create a haunting image of his own ‘country’, its people’s lot, its harshness and the destructive changes to life away from the great metropolitan centre. He made his powerful distinction between the landowners and the labouring poor, as he told of the tragedies of ‘class’, and—indirectly—of the ambiguities so created/ experienced for his own life.

Equally crucial was the loss of identity-enforcing regional customs and value, his concern for individuality under threat, the ‘marriage’ choice-mobility’ issue, rural stoicism in impoverishment, the traditional role of music in the life of ‘Hodge’ the countryman, the (earlier) fears of invasion, and the consistent and total disregard for a woman’s feelings especially by her father. Above all, he succeeded in educating his urban readers as to the nature of his/their country folk.

As Henry Lawson through his poetry and stories helped to create the image of the ‘bush’ in the Australian psyche, so Thomas Hardy built into his urban middle-class readers a ‘brand’ of ‘Wessex’ to distinguish him from other Victorian writers. Lawson dealt with the harsh realities of life in the bush and in the cities amongst the poor. Hardy used his works to teach his readers about the difficulties of country life in Dorset, the most backward of the English counties.

There always seems to have been a distinction created between urban and rural dwellers. Words of negative connotation are used to describe people living in the country. City people were often referred to as ‘urbane’ yet the negative connotations of ‘bumpkins’, ‘heathens’ ‘villains’, ‘churls’ and ‘boors’ related to country-dwellers. Even today there is a negative attitude to ‘bogans’ in this country. In nineteenth century England this characteristic was compounded by the distinction between the landowners and the labouring poor. Thomas Hardy, a Dorset countryman, took objection to the term ‘Hodge’ being used to depict his fellow countrymen. This attitude is apparent in many of his short stories.

In his writings Hardy examined subversively these class divisions in English society. To achieve this purpose he merged an ideological discourse into his art to create an imaginative role for himself as rural historian of Wessex. He attempted to startle his readers from a complacent, stereotypical view of rural life, and to challenge their concepts of realism defined by notions of 'plausibility', 'probability', 'credibility', and 'naturalness'.

It is evident that Thomas Hardy often wrote to make social comment. His first, never-published novel, *The Poor Man And The Lady*, was an attack on the upper classes. He continued this critique of social class divisions in his later works, particularly in many of his short stories. He used his stories to articulate his own values, by making use of melodrama, history and the forces of 'Fate' and 'Time' to challenge and disturb the established ideologies, particularly that of the realistic story of the Nineteenth Century. In 1893 he noted to Florence Henniker, 'If you mean to make the world listen, you must say now what they will all be thinking and saying five and twenty years hence'.<sup>1</sup>

Just as Australia's Henry Lawson was shaped by his environment, so Hardy's subtle attack on his bourgeois readers' complacency seems to have developed from a complex view of his own situation within the social groups in which he moved. 'Class' was, and probably still is, an important social determinant in England. His family's own class position (the independent working class) and the social determinations which 'produced' him (the upper middle-class readers and the social literati with whom he later mingled) were shifting and complex. His situation as a writer was full of contradictions which were inseparable from his ambiguous relationship with his educated, middle-class, urban readership. In many of his stories, and in his biography he reflects the pressure and suppression of a keen class-consciousness which is closely connected in them, both in their actual production, and in their construction.

In the structured English social class of the nineteenth century Hardy came from the lower middle class. He was the son of an independent stonemason in a period where economic change was making such rural craftsmen redundant. His mother, despite her impoverished background, had social and intellectual pretensions and insisted on educating her children. Such insecurity tended to colour Hardy's thinking and writing. He gives considerable attention to class distinctions and tensions in the *Literary Notes*.<sup>2</sup> They are central to many tales which also dwell on the

<sup>1</sup> *One Rare Fair Woman: Thomas Hardy's Letters to Florence Henniker, 1893-1922*, ed. by E. Hardy, E. and F. B. Pinion (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by L. A. Björk (Goteburg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1974).

dispossession of the rural population. In his letter to Rider Haggard he says, of this displacement:

[t]he prime cause of the removal is unquestionably, insecurity of tenure. If they do not escape this in the towns it is not fraught with such trying consequences there as in a village, whence they may have to travel ten or twenty miles to find another house and other work.<sup>3</sup>

Again he refers to this effect in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* when he writes,

annual migrations from farm to farm were on the increase here. When Tess's mother<sup>4</sup> was a child the majority of field-folk about Marlott had remained all their lives on one farm, which had been the home also of their fathers and grandfathers.

Now, he continues in contrast,

a depopulation was going on. The village had formerly contained, side by side with the agricultural labourers, an interesting and better-informed class, ranking distinctly above the former... including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm-labourers; a set of people who owed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders... or copy-holders, or, occasionally, small freeholders. But as the long holdings fell in they were mostly pulled down... Cottagers who were not directly employed on the land were looked upon with disfavour, and the banishment of some starved the trade of others, who were thus obliged to follow. These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositories of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres.

Although the agricultural and industrial changes had traumatised rural England before Hardy began writing, one of his main concerns was 'the impact (even invasion) of the local by the cosmopolitan, and the subsequent effect of this upon regional customs and values.'<sup>5</sup> Such changes enabled Hardy to shape himself as the recorder of a disappearing history. Aspects of rural life—farming, lease-holding and copy-holding, marriage, railway journeys—symbolise the fundamental texture of Hardy's fictional world in nearly all the stories. Stories like 'The Three

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<sup>3</sup> Hardy, F. E., *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 313.

<sup>4</sup> Hardy is thought to have based his depiction of Mrs Durbeyfield on his own mother Jemima.

<sup>5</sup> Keith, W. J., 'A Regional Approach to Hardy's Fiction', in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by D. Kramer (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 36-49 (p. 38).

Strangers'.<sup>6</sup> most of the tales in 'A Few Crusted Characters',<sup>7</sup> 'Interlopers at the Knap'<sup>8</sup> and 'Destiny and a Blue Cloak'<sup>9</sup> provide humorous observations of rustic life, and are informed by its aspects. Each tale makes the reader aware of the grinding rural poverty, depopulation and a growing schism between life in country Dorset and the city which is a backdrop to Hardy's writing.<sup>10</sup> Behind these stories lurks the spectre of the Tolpuddle martyrs, also from Dorset, who became victims of a society dominated by landowners. While Hardy was writing some years later, the situation that prevailed when the Tolpuddle martyrs made news was still extant. Marx noted that,

The continuous superseding of the agricultural labourers, in spite of their diminishing number and the increasing mass of their products, gives birth to their pauperism. Their pauperism is ultimately a motive to their eviction and the chief source of their miserable housing which breaks down their last power of resistance, and makes them mere slaves of the land proprietors and the farmers. Thus the minimum of wages becomes a law of Nature to them.<sup>11</sup>

Dorset was changing as Hardy's autobiography notes with regret that 'the orally transmitted ditties of centuries [were] slain at a stroke by the London comic songs that were introduced'.<sup>12</sup> This was probably the same effect that the arrival of the cinema in the Twentieth Century had on killing off vaudeville theatres, or television and the DVD on the cinemas today.

In his daily walk to Dorchester, through a world of shepherds and ploughmen from a hamlet three miles off where modern improvements were still regarded as wonders, Hardy would have noted the changes. Throughout his literary life this contrasting rural/urban relationship was further intensified as he moved regularly between London and Dorchester. London made him aware of certain supercilious urban attitudes towards country people typified by the reference to 'Hodge' as

<sup>6</sup> Hardy, T., *Wessex Tales* (London: Heron Books, published by arrangement with Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Hardy, T., *Life's Little Ironies and A Few Crusted Characters* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Hardy, T., *Wessex Tales* (1979).

<sup>9</sup> 'Destiny and a Blue Cloak' was solicited by the *New York Times* and published in October 1874.

<sup>10</sup> See Williams, M., *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Marx, K. *Capital*, I, 692, quoted in G. Wotton, *Thomas Hardy: Towards a Materialist Criticism* (Goldenbridge, Ireland: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Hardy, F. E., (1972), *op. cit.* p. 20. When Hardy first started work as an architect's pupil in a county-town of assizes and aldermen, Dorchester was beginning to feel the revolutionary effects of railways and telegraphs and London daily newspapers. He saw rustic and borough doings in a peculiarly close juxtaposition.

his friend Leslie Stephen had tactlessly suggested.<sup>13</sup> In ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’ Hardy debunked the concept of ‘Hodge’ and explained to his urban readers the need to consider each person as an individual<sup>14</sup>. He attacked this absurd peasant stereotype of the Dorset workfolk through his stories. Even in the novels he continues to establish their individuality. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* he describes Clare’s experience with rural workfolk thus:

[the] conventional farm-folk of his imagination—personified by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge—were obliterated after a few days residence. At close quarters no Hodge was to be seen... The typical and unvarying Hodge ceased to exist. *He had been disintegrated into a number of varied fellow-creatures—beings of many minds, beings infinite in difference*,<sup>15</sup> some happy, many serene, a few depressed, one here and there bright even to genius, some stupid, others wanton, others austere; some mutely Miltonic, some potentially Cromwellian; into men who had private views of each other, as he had of his friends; who could applaud or condemn each other, amuse or sadden themselves by the contemplation of each other’s foibles or vices; men every one of whom walked in his own individual way the road to dusty death.<sup>16</sup>

This echoing of Gray’s *Elegy* clearly suggests that Hardy saw himself as a sort of rural historian who set out in his stories to fashion himself as one of these ‘depositories of village traditions’.

### *After the Enclosures*

Even prior to the coming of the railway, the enclosure movement had placed enormous pressure upon small holders and village craftsmen. Hardy records the effect of economic changes and fear of loss of tenure in ‘Netty Sargent’s Copyhold’,<sup>17</sup> ‘The Doctor’s Legend’<sup>18</sup> and ‘The Three Strangers’.<sup>19</sup>

As well as the resultant loss of displacement, many stories deal particularly with love frustrated by class distinction. Love tends to subvert barriers of class and Hardy used it as an ideology in the tales. In

<sup>13</sup> ‘you might write an exceedingly pleasant series of stories upon your special topic: I mean prose-idyll of country life—short sketches of Hodge & his ways, wh. Might be very attractive & would have a certain continuity, so as to make a volume or more at some future date.’ Leslie Stephen to Hardy, 19 Nov. 1880, (Dorset County Museum), quoted in Brady, K., *The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> *Longman’s Magazine*, July 1883.

<sup>15</sup> Italics are mine.

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, T., *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (London: Heron Books, 1970), pp. 151-152.

<sup>17</sup> Hardy, T., *Life’s Little Ironies and A Few Crusted Characters* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 252-258.

<sup>18</sup> An uncollected story that appeared on 26 March, 1891, in *The Independent*.

<sup>19</sup> Hardy, T., *Wessex Tales* (1991).

*Life* he recalls an ‘attachment that went deeper’ to Louisa, a well-to-do farmer’s daughter. She was purportedly warned against him and nothing came of Hardy’s romantic notions. That he remembered her in his biography and wrote three poems about her; the last, ‘Louisa in the Lane’, written not long before his death, suggests that her memory lingered still in his imagination. The slight to someone as sensitive as Hardy may have triggered his ‘poor man and the lady’ themes that figure in so much of his writing.

Hardy was always mindful of the middleclass reading market to which he catered and tried to challenge. He remained concerned with ‘rising in the world’ and the enlargement of marriage-choice which such social mobility produced. He showed that in Victorian England the crucial jump from working-class to middle-class could be achieved by education, but that the barriers were great and unfair. A reading of stories like ‘A Tragedy of Two Ambitions’<sup>20</sup> and ‘The Waiting Supper’<sup>21</sup> can detect this ideology. Yet Pamela Dalziel notes that,

Hardy’s consciousness of marketplace conditions tended to inhibit any direct outspokenness of social issues in his novels of 1870s and 1880s, but it is impossible, even so, to ignore the almost obsessive recurrence throughout his fiction of ‘the poor-man-and-the-lady’ motifs, situations, and plots—within all of which the conventional gender roles are liable to shifts and inversions of a sometimes surprising character.<sup>22</sup>

Hardy’s ironic dealing with the comedy of life as he saw it was radical. However, the stories of ‘Wessex’ are not ‘inescapably grim’, do not reflect a ‘pessimistic fatalism’, nor are their endings ‘boringly predictable’, as John Wain claims.<sup>23</sup> They reflect the difficulty of the countryside, the stoicism of the people and their ‘predictability’ is a way of alienating readers from the tale so that they might examine ‘the common lot’. Stories that end quite happily like ‘A Mere Interlude’,<sup>24</sup> and ‘The Three Strangers’ illustrate this point.

Hardy was aware of the market for his stories. In at least a third of his stories present the supernatural in one form or another. Using Gothic effects he re-constructs the macabre folk myths of the community and provides them with dramatic clothing to conceal their subversive meaning. He pandered to the Victorian readers desire for the supernatural and grotesque and the macabre. His most frequently anthologised tales

<sup>20</sup> Hardy, T., *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 77-108.

<sup>21</sup> Hardy, T., *A Changed Man, the Waiting Supper and Other Tales, concluding with The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid* (London: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 1-24.

<sup>22</sup> Dalziel, P., ‘Exploiting the ‘Poor Man’: The genesis of Hardy’s ‘Desperate Remedies’’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 94.2 (April, 1995), 220-233.

<sup>23</sup> *Selected Stories of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by J. Wain (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. xviii.

<sup>24</sup> Hardy, T., *A Changed Man*, pp. 265-306.

are those which had such qualities.<sup>25</sup> They provided entertainment to a predominantly middle-class audience which ‘liked to read of familiar settings transformed by a sudden eruption of crime, violence or the supernatural.’<sup>26</sup>

‘The Romantic Adventure of a Milkmaid’<sup>27</sup> is an example of a deliberately anti-realistic story which makes use of both the gothic melodrama and the supernatural. Yet, it has sufficient romantic qualities to make the bourgeois readers feel comfortable. The tale reveals humorous and romantic observations of rustic life and its imaginative qualities let Hardy hint at the underlying aspects of class distinction. Its unusual blend of naturalism and the supernaturally romantic captures accurate aspects of Dorset country life and makes use of the folk myths of Wessex. It implies that, because in rural areas little unusual ever happens, there is a tendency for people to concern themselves with the lives and doings of the more well-to-do as a means of breaking the monotony of day-to-day existence.

This story illustrates Hardy’s use of other elements of the whimsical humour of the folk story, and also lets Hardy make ironic comment on the patriarchal attitudes of society towards such relationships. Naturally Margery’s father considers the nobleman with his wealth to be a better prospect for his daughter. Margery’s choice, between the rich exotic outsider and her local lime-burner swain with his limited views of life, is crucial to the tale.

By counterpointing the fairy-tale qualities of the story with its examination of the need for security and trust in a successful marriage Hardy infiltrates some of his ideas, and documents some small changes occurring in the culture of the countryside as the modern world intruded into Wessex. Because the traditional dances that Margery knows are of little value at the society ball, the Baron has to teach her the polka. This might easily be an image of Wessex being changed by subtle outside influences. However, the tale is very like others of the local folk that are found in ‘A Few Crusted Characters’<sup>28</sup> and with the gentry found in *A Group of Noble Dames*. Other stories in which one can find the use of the supernatural include, ‘The Fiddler of the Reels’,<sup>29</sup> ‘What the Shepherd Saw’<sup>30</sup> and ‘The Withered Arm’.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Briggs, J., *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (Bristol, UK: Faber and Faber, 1977). Briggs argues that there was a demand for such supernatural stories towards the end of the nineteenth century, which, she says, was the high-water mark of the form.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-413.

<sup>28</sup> Hardy, T., *Life’s Little Ironies*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-185.

<sup>30</sup> Hardy, T., *A Changed Man*, pp. 187-213.

<sup>31</sup> Hardy, T., *Wessex Tales*, pp. 67-108.

Each story, however, Hardy argues, turns not on a supernatural situation, but on the irony of human existence. Each deals with the social and economic condition of its protagonists.

Hardy's knowledge of folklore, together with his familiarity of the particular circumstances in which many of the Wessex folk found themselves, is used to motivate the tales. The Gothic qualities reflect on modern situations. Even here Hardy maintains his dictum of the uncommonness being in the events. 'Netty Sargent's Copyhold'<sup>32</sup> is this kind of a 'grotesque' anecdote that deals with the fact of death and the needs of those living. The story turns upon the very real problem of Nineteenth century rural England. The custom of the renewal of the copyhold held upon 'lives' in the traditional way was a problem of the times. It even structures novels, like *The Woodlanders* and *Tess*. As with the other stories in this cycle, 'Netty Sargent's Copyhold' turns on the grimness of life's ironies 'the tides that toss the souls of men'. The suspense of its grotesque climax is underscored by the pointlessness of all Netty's desperation to marry. Hardy has indicated, through Netty's story, the dilemma of many country women—like Baptista Trewthen she has the choice between a loveless marriage and being homeless.

'The Fiddler of the Reels' also uses macabre qualities to document the impact of economic change upon the countryside is.<sup>33</sup> The story combines the extraordinary and supernatural with a naturalistic background. The narrator establishes this metaphor by saying,

[as] in a geological 'fault' we had presented to us a sudden bringing of ancient and modern into absolute contact, such as probably in no other single year since the Conquest was ever witnessed in this part of the country.<sup>34</sup>

The story counterpoints life in rural Wessex with the busy movement of life in London at Exhibition time. It is symbolic in that 'Mop' Ollamoor, a roving fiddler, represents the traditional life, while Ned Hipcroft exemplifies the modern, changing world, and Car'line Aspent is Wessex caught between the romantic past and the dependable present. Mop's mysteriousness stimulates the gossip and myths that provide Hardy with another 'traditional' tale as a vehicle for comment. We note the changes being wrought in country life. Ned's need to find regular employment in London reflects the rural depopulation of Wessex. His becoming an itinerant labourer further instances the uprooting of established village people by economic change. Again, the

<sup>32</sup> Hardy, T., *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 252-258.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-185.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.





*Statue of Thomas Hardy at  
Dorchester*



*St. Juliot*

‘uncommonness’ is restricted to the events. Car’line and Ned, as well as Mop, are all firmly grounded in the realistic re-creation of Wessex folk. Even the narrative technique with its references to the Great Exhibition, which was designed to show the world the grandeur of England’s industrial and social progress, all adds to the seeming authenticity of another of Hardy’s histories.

Similar notes of authenticity are found in Hardy’s grotesque, Gothic or supernatural tales, fundamentally because, as with any gossip or even the ballad-tale, they have their roots somewhere in fact. One Hardy family ‘tradition’, to be found in ‘The Duke’s Reappearance’<sup>35</sup> concerned the Duke of Monmouth who comes back to reclaim his possessions after he was supposed to have been executed. Despite its ‘superficial presentation of an ingenious plot’<sup>36</sup> Hardy used his historic material to create a story about another unusual visitant.

‘The Superstitious Man’s Tale’<sup>37</sup> notes a number of interesting death-omens and records some aspects of Dorset life that were passing away with time. The uncanny nature of the tale makes it one worth telling. Finally, in ‘The Grave by the Handpost’<sup>38</sup> Hardy tells a vivid tale with melodramatic irony dealing with a tragedy that develops from a misunderstanding and a very real superstition. Although seemingly

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<sup>35</sup> *A Changed Man*, pp. 255-264.

<sup>36</sup> Brady, K., p. 187.

<sup>37</sup> *Life’s Little Ironies*, pp. 216-220.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-144.

trivial, it allows Hardy to make comment on the strictness of some clergy and on the prevailing superstitions of the countryside.

'A Mere Interlude',<sup>39</sup> a 'modern' macabre tale that ends happily despite its use of a number of grim subversive elements<sup>40</sup> challenges the sentimental view of romantic love. It is a comedy of situation and of errors. Its title, first published as 'A Mere Incident' before being collected under its present name, suggests its disruptive nature. The change from 'incident' to 'interlude' gives the reader an insight into his thinking. 'Incident' posits a particularly mundane event, occasion or circumstance, while 'interlude', with its reference to a dramatic or mimic light or humorous representation, such as was introduced between the acts of long mystery-plays or moralities, carries with it the dramatic irony of the circumstance of the story. It relies upon the contrast and balance Hardy achieved between a very ordinary, discontented teacher, Baptista Trewthen, and the circumstances of her two marriages. It enables comment on the effect of teaching on individuals.<sup>41</sup> The 'interlude' is a hiatus of sexual excitement between the seriousness of her dislike of life as a teacher and the prospect of a sober life as a middle-class wife. The story considers the grotesque image of Baptista lying between her living and dead husbands which it understates with the comment that the honeymoon trip was 'something of a failure'.<sup>42</sup>

In his guise of rural historian, Hardy's recorded aspects of Dorset history. 'The Three Strangers' uses all the buoyant folk-humour of the prose-ballad to relate a potentially dreadful story. We can discern the nostalgia for a way of life that was rapidly passing. Hardy juxtaposes an image of the beginning of life against the grim possibility of death. The elegiac opening tone places the story in its historical and geographical context:

[a]mong the few features of agricultural England which retain an appearance but little modified by the lapse of centuries, may be reckoned the long, grassy and furry downs, coombs, or ewe-leases as they are called according to their kind, that fill a large area of certain counties in the south and south-west. If any mark of human occupation is met with hereon, it usually takes the form of a solitary cottage of some shepherd.<sup>43</sup>

The story dramatises the meeting of life and death at a christening party. This humour of the tale masks Hardy's observations on the hardships of the countryside. He carefully controls the symbolism in the story and blends it into the earthy, rustic background of the lively party

<sup>39</sup> *A Changed Man*, pp. 265-306.

<sup>40</sup> They are the only two of Hardy's short stories that end with a mutually happy marriage.

<sup>41</sup> This discourse also appears in *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *Jude the Obscure*.

<sup>42</sup> 'A Mere Interlude', *A Changed Man*, p. 294.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 306.

He dramatically and comically records an important rural event, a christening, which is interrupted by the three intruders. A leavening humour hides the grim reality of the problems that constantly lurk behind these seemingly jolly folk. Hardy contrasts the characters of the genial and recklessly hospitable shepherd and his equally frugal wife. She vainly schemes to mingle 'short dances with short periods of talk and singing'<sup>44</sup> to protect her stocks of food and drink, suggesting that there are more times of want than plenty in the lives of rural dwellers.

The comic quality of the characters very likely echoed the urban stereotypical image of 'Hodge'. It has qualities similar to those of Shakespeare's country bumpkins. Yet Hardy has captured the realistic note of petulance in the voice of the harassed part-time constable. Hardy has juxtaposed this 'satisfactory poetic image of life' with a certain grim reality to allow his readers to choose the particular discourse that suits them.

While Hardy's stories record aspects of class and articulate other ideologies, the reader can note the further depiction of images of village life that were rapidly being lost. Despite their many common qualities, the brief chronicles in 'A Few Crusted Characters'<sup>45</sup> illustrate both the variety of the life of 'Hodge' as well as the diversity of Hardy's plots. They represent, on the one hand, the full flavour of the folk humour of Hardy the balladeer and village chronicler and on the other they posit his disrupting ideology.

Each story naturally develops from its predecessor and is enclosed in a framework resembling a plot which is related to the figure of John Lackland, another 'returned native', seeking to recover the past. The symbolic naming indicates the way that change has led to rural depopulation with villagers being forced from the land. His questions prompt each of the travellers, in turn, to relate an anecdote reminiscing on local characters, their old neighbours, and of parochially important happenings that have passed in the thirty-five years of Lackland's absence. Each tale is perfectly unified within itself each complements the others in dealing with birth, marriage, love and hatred, happiness and sorrow, and eventually death in a Wessex village.

These simple and compact pieces are very much in contrast to those more complicated plots of Hardy's other stories. They construct a nostalgic feeling for the vitality of old Wessex and reach a climax with Lackland's realisation that those roots he looked forward to for years are enclosed only within the churchyard. The rural flavour of the stories of the lives and longings of humble people allows Hardy to examine the seeming deterministic effects of time and fate and mortality.

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<sup>44</sup> 'The Three Strangers', p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 189-259.

The continuity of the tales allows Hardy to assume the role of local historian. 'Old Andrey's Experience as a Musician' leads to the master-thatcher remembering a musical story about the village choir.<sup>46</sup> It is a story that would have been long-remembered in the rural community, and one that shows concern with the effect of change upon country traditions. Its subject—the last time that the Longpuddle band ever performed in the parish church—has some connection with Hardy's family and the events in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The tale removes much of the romantic view about the men. They are tired out with playing for dances night after night, after a day trying to earn a living and, they are often nearly frozen in the cold gallery during morning service. Their replacement by a dull barrel-organ allows Hardy to depict another instance of the 'progress' of the modern world overtaking the traditional aspects of village life.

The French Revolution and the subsequent possibility of a Napoleonic invasion of England through Dorset inspired a number of stories and the novel, *The Trumpet Major*. 'A Committee-Man of the 'Terror''<sup>47</sup> uses melodramatic, unusual and supernatural elements as Hardy re-constructs an historical incident as a tale. Despite the seeming implausibility of the events, he skilfully constructs an historical background both for his narrator and the events. The story contains many features that fit Hardy's criterion for a good story—that it must be memorable. This one is memorable enough for Mrs H-'s mother to recount the incident in the life of an acquaintance. It is memorable enough for Mrs H-, herself, to write it down and memorise it from her numerous re-tellings. And it is memorable enough for the writer to recount it for his readers. In this tale Hardy has used an old newspaper story to confront the nature of frustrated love, a major theme in Hardy's work.

Thwarted love is also dealt with in 'What the Shepherd Saw' a gruesome Christmas story. The setting of the shepherds 'abiding in the fields' creates a suspenseful air that deals with a death rather than a birth. Here is no story of peace and joy to the world, but one of murder and terror with many of the elements of the supernatural tale. The terrifying events that follow, overturn the comfortable view of shepherds and Christmas. Hardy gives his urban readers an insight into the harshness of rural conditions. The isolated field is a place of hard, cold and uncomfortable work, as well as the exploitation of child labour. The shepherd boy is overcome by the fear of the night and the fact that he becomes a witness to a rather gruesome murder committed by his lord, the Duke, who was 'Jove himself to the rural population, whom to offend was starvation, homelessness, and death, and whom to look at was to be

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<sup>46</sup> Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir, *Life's Little Ironies*, p. 230.

<sup>47</sup> *A Changed Man*, pp. 215-233.

mentally scathed and dumbfounded'.<sup>48</sup> The comment exposes the nature of rural social class positions exposing the urban reader the wide-ranging power wielded in the countryside by the squirearchy. Again Hardy constructs a folk-like tale to shake his readers from their conventional attitudes.

'The Doctor's Legend',<sup>49</sup> an unpublished story disruptively comments on the misuse of authority by the nobility.<sup>50</sup> Slighter stories involving macabre events like 'Master John Horseleigh, Knight',<sup>51</sup> 'The Duchess of Hamptonshire',<sup>52</sup> 'The Grave by the Handpost' and 'The Superstitious Man's Tale' all reflect aspects of Hardy's ideology. 'Master John Horseleigh, Knight' illustrates that it is not only the nobility that have a sense of family honour, while 'The Duchess of Hamptonshire' is a variation on the 'poor man and lady' theme where a girl's father makes her marry the noble rather than the impecunious curate. It reflects his views on both the social class difference and the disregard for women's feelings.

These then are a few of Hardy's neglected short stories whereby Hardy exercised his skills at story-telling. Through them he recorded aspects of his 'Wessex' that were changing. Moreover, they allowed him to educate his urban readers as to the nature of his country folk.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>49</sup> Published in *The Independent* in America on March 26, 1891.

<sup>50</sup> According to Haining, it was based on the life of a callous old squire, Joseph Damer of Came House near Dorchester. Haining suggests that it was not collected because 'Hardy feared the story could well offend the descendants of the Damer family who still lived in the area.' If this were true it would seem that the squirearchy still exerted undue influence on events even in Hardy's later life.

<sup>51</sup> *A Changed Man*, pp. 235-251.

<sup>52</sup> *A Group of Noble Dames*, pp. 191-206.

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