Tradition and Modernity in Thomas Hardy’s Wessex

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ABSTRACT
Nearly all of Hardy’s novels take place in Wessex: Egdon Heath, Casterbridge, Blackfield Valley. They are set in both rural and urban spaces, but the rural space is the most important. In his work the rural space is charged with symbolic meaning signifying specific social and cultural circumstances. Compared with other spaces, it is unique and described as marginal with its own specific customs and landscapes. However, the Wessex constructed by Hardy is not a closed, traditional rural space, but an open space which is constantly influenced by the outside world, which are urbanism and industrialism. It is continually undergoing new changes, adding to it both new aesthetic and modern connotations. In conclusion, Hardy shows us how modernism affects Wessex comprehensively, including production method, education, population change, structures of feeling, and the identity definition of people.

KEYWORDS
Thomas Hardy; Wessex; material space; structures of feeling; modernity and rurality

1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy’s “poetry and novels are all rooted in Wessex, full of local color” (Fei viii). 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 south-western 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 contemporary Dorset as Wessex. The ancient
name then denotes a space which represents the stagnant nature of rural life, creating a fissure between urban modernity and rural tradition. Therefore, Wessex is a space full of symbolic meaning and specific social and cultural significance. Compared with other spaces, it is unique and described as marginal with its own specific customs and landscapes, but also described as being influenced by modernism comprehensively. This article focuses on two novels: *Return of the Native* (1878) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), in which some of the essential attributes of Wessex are highlighted. In addition, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) will also be discussed briefly to strengthen the main argument.

2. The particularity of Wessex

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre once pointed out that “the initial basis or foundation of social space is nature – natural or physical space” (Lefebvre 402). When reading Hardy’s novels, what immediately is impressed upon the reader is the obvious couleur locale, the unique local features which shape the distinct landscape of Wessex. A good example of this is the dark and deserted Egdon Heath, where isolation and stagnation are embodied in a unique landscape.

Hardy’s 1878 novel *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 overall characteristics are bleak, wild and sublime, monotonous and vast, mysterious, containing an ancient persistence that is immutable and as lonely as a solitary recluse, most prominently at night. Egdon has different appearances in different seasons. There are many distinctive natural features here, among which the most representative is wind, which gives Egon Heath a pervasively solemn, even destitute appearance. A special breed of wild horses lives here, being of short stature but capable of enduring hardship.

The physical spaces in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* include Blackfield Valley, where Tess grows up, and the Grand Dairy Canyon and Flintcomb-Ash, where she later works. The land is fertile, covered in rich green grass and lush trees as in Blackfield Valley, or possessing an imposing freshwater lake as the one at Grand Dairy Canyon. This creates a large contrast between these places and Edgon Heath. In contrast, Flintcomb-Ash is a starve-acre place, where the climate is generally inhospitable: the earth has an ochre color and the air is dry and cold. It is desolate, cold and monotonous. There are few trees, no green pastures; the only vegetables capable of growing here are radishes.

Casterbridge, an outlying town in Wessex, is a combination of a village and a town, surrounded by trees. *Jude the Obscure* is the most special novel. The titles of the chapters are place names: Marygreen, Christminster, Melchester, Shaston and Aldbrickham. Together they form the spatial background of the story. After having been adopted by his aunt, Jude lives in Marygreen, located in the middle of a rolling plateau connected with the hills of North Wessex, with its many wheat fields.

Though there are different physical properties of Wessex in Hardy’s imaginary universe, they all have a long history. This is for example how Hardy describes Egdon Heath in *Return of the Native*: “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” (2005, Return of the Native 10). The ancient, eternal and unchanging nature of Egdon is displayed. Moreover, there are many ancient buildings described in Tess of the D’Urbervilles, such as the house of the D’Urbervilles where Tess and Clare spend their honeymoon, the monastery mill where Clare goes to receive technological training, and the old house that provides shelter for them when they flee later. Additionally, there are many Roman ruins in Casterbridge. The land is very old in Marygreen. Christminster is a traditional university town. Shaston is a city of dreams, with a glorious history, which has eventually turned into ruin. In conclusion, antiquity is a general and prominent feature of Wessex.

Analyzing the natural landscape is not enough, however, to capture the full extent of the characterization of Wessex in Hardy’s works. It is an inhabited universe with a long history, and in order for this to become fully clear it is necessary to also take account of the unique customs and the unique way of life of the inhabitants of the region, the “in-depth meticulous experience and experience of people’s living conditions, situations, behaviors, and social relationships” (Yan 87). This means that the traditional rituals and the native language/local dialects described in Hardy’s work are spatialized and belong to the area just as the natural environment does. In his letters Hardy once wrote that the superstitious acts and customs in his novels could be trusted as true records, and were not merely made up by him. An example of the customs he describes can be found in 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 demonstrate the joy and vitality of the people living in Egdon. Therefore Egton 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 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.

In Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Hardy describes in detail an old rural tradition that young people are allowed to have an intimate relationship once they get publicly engaged. In describing this custom, he also paints the stark contrast between the rural lower classes and an urbanizing middle class: Tess, who has grown up in the countryside, is not at all surprised that this custom exists, but Clare, who is born in the middle class, is initially shocked to hear of it. Another example is the fact that there are people in Wessex who still believe in the existence of ghosts and witches; these people also attach a great importance to ancient sayings and have a profoundly fatalistic look at life. When Tess and Clare leave the dairy on the afternoon of their wedding, the rooster crows, and people believe that this means a misfortune will befall them. Here superstition intersects with the fatalist outlook of the local population: several girls on the milking farm believe that they will never be able to compete with Tess in her beauty, which is something they haplessly and uncritically accept. Return of the Native is abound with examples of this: 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 and Tess all transport themselves by walking; Miss Yeobright finally dies after being overwhelmed by the heat and an adder’s bite during a long walk; Tess even sleeps in the woods by the roadside when she is travelling somewhere. 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” (Return of the Native 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. Strangers to the region instead get lost.

In addition, the heathfolk are more unscrupulous and unconstrained because of their close connection with nature. An example of this is when girls “drew onward to the spot where the cows were grazing in the further mead, the bevy advancing with the bold grace of wild animals – the reckless, unchastened motion of women accustomed to unlimited space” (2005, Tess of The D’Urbervilles 191). This natural life of the locals is also reflected in their religious attitudes. Given that their customs are more rooted in old folk belief, they rarely go to church: not even for Christmas! The only exception to this is weddings and funerals, which become venerable occasions given the large distance between the community and the closest church. This does not mean that religion does not play any role, but it is different: both superstition and religious sentiment are projected on the natural landscape in which they live.

Compared with people coming from the city, the way of life of the people on Egdon Heath is unambiguously rural. An example of this is how Eustacia’s grandfather describes the life style of Miss Yeobright’s family: “They sit in the kitchen, drink mead and elder-wine, and sand the floor to keep it clean” (Return of the Native 141). This rural community characterizes itself as modest and hard-working, enjoying a modest lifestyle as compared to the “exuberance” of the city. Additionally, the way in which time is experienced is very different from how it is experienced in the city. This rural population does not mind when someone is a few minutes late; this is in sharp contrast with life in the city, where precise time management is imperative for modern life to function.

Meanwhile, the particularity of Wessex is presented through comparison with other spaces. Egdon Heath is compared with both Budmouth and Paris, at the time the most fashionable city on the continent. Budmouth is a posh seaside resort, representing a new, romantic space whose overall aura is bright; this is in sharp contrast with the bleakness that characterizes Egdon, which represents the ancient and the traditional. Egton 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” (Return of the Native 128), “Tis a blazing great business that he belongs to” (Return of the Native 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” (Return of the Native 130). Paris represents the center of the world; it also represents fashion, money, wealth and status; conversely, Egdon symbolizes a backwater which is stuck in endless poverty.

In a preliminary conclusion, it is 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.

3. The characters in Wessex

The intimate link between the people, 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” (Return of the Native 40). There seems to be an intimate connection between the heathfolk and the Heath itself. 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 Cantle, on the other hand, is full of enthusiasm, exuberance, 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 Cantle. These two ways of feeling coexist in Egdon, and it seems that they are not contradictory at all.

Meanwhile, in Hardy’s works, the structure of feeling of the characters mostly means that they have different attitudes towards marriage and sexuality. Return of the Native, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure deal with both marital and extramarital sexual relations. An example of this is with the complicated relationship among Wildeve, Clym, Thomasin and Eustacia, which is similar to the relationship among Tess, Alec, Clare; Henchard, Faltrae, Lucetta; Jude, Arabella, Sue and Mr. Phillotson. Specifically, Tess is seduced by Alec before she marries Clare; they live together for a while. Later, when Clare leaves Tess to go to Brazil, Tess is forced by the financial situation of her family to move in with Alec again; this enforced cohabitation will eventually end when she kills him. Jude is tempted by Arabella and soon they get married. However, the marriage is a failure and Arabella leaves Jude later. Jude moves to Christminster afterwards and falls in love with his cousin Sue. Nonetheless, Sue was persuaded to marry Mr. Phillotson, Jude's former schoolteacher. Soon, however, she leaves him for Jude. But after suffering many tragedies with Jude, she finally comes back to her former husband. This complex emotional relationship reflects the fact that traditional religion and morality begin to lose their meaning and are also less of a binding force within the local community. It is one example of the appearance of modernism in Wessex.
The characters living in Wessex are widely different at times, but most of them are a mixture of the new and the old. 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” (Return of the Native 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 wishes. 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 autonomy, 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 face 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” (Return of the Native 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.” (Return of the Native 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 thinks modern thoughts.

Tess is also a combination of the new and the old. At first, after being deceived by her lover, she thinks of herself as a figure of guilt because she judges herself based on the prevailing social norms. She wants to keep away from other people by spending a lot of time wandering in the woods. After that, she gives birth to an illegitimate child. When she goes to work in a wheat field, she dares to nurse the child in public. Before the baby dies, she baptizes the child herself; after the child dies, she buries him in the cemetery and makes a cross by herself and inserts it into a baby’s grave. Because the priest refuses to preside over a Christian funeral for the baby, she says that she will not go to that church any more, a strong sign of her resistance to prevailing social norms. It also indicates that her religious views are starting to diverge from local orthodoxy. At the end of the novel she kills Alec, the culprit who has ruined her life. This murder constitutes her ultimate act of rebellion against social constraints. The identity of Tess is meaningful too; her father is a descendant of an ancient family, but her mother is a milking girl. She believes that she has inherited as much from her mother as she has from her father, with her beauty coming from her mother but her strong local
rootedness coming from her father. Meanwhile, because of her extraordinary experiences, she thinks that life appears to her as ferocious and cruel, and contains within her an imagination but also an eternal sadness that is very akin to many interpretations of a modern take on life.

Clare is another figure whom we ought to pay attention to, since he is a mixture of the new and the old too. He once had a dispute with his father, a pastor, because he read books that violated the doctrines of orthodox religion. He claimed that he would not like to be a pastor because he didn’t agree with the theory of redemption; then he also decided to give up on an opportunity to go to Cambridge. Later he begins to show indifference to social customs and etiquette, begins to look down upon differences in wealth and family background. The dairyman thinks he is a weirdo because he dares to resist any authority. He hates modern urban life because of the intimate relationship he established with the country in his youth, so he intends to work in agriculture. This choice is also a rebellion against his religious family; he prefers to live a life that is not distorted by doctrines and prejudice.

Although Clare opposes religious doctrines, social customs and authority, his tolerance reaches a limit when Tess confesses her relationship with Alec, which suggests he is still a slave to custom and tradition nevertheless. When he is in Brazil, he starts to doubt the old morals and starts to believe that they need to be adjusted. After his return, he tries to find Tess again, and doesn’t blame her even though she is again living with Alec. Even when she confesses her crime to him, namely the killing of Alec, he does not abandon her but instead joins her during her escape, irrespective of social norms and the law.

These protagonists are young people, who are undergoing significant changes in the way they see and perceive the world compared to the older generation. They are more independent, more individualistic, and attach far less value to traditional social norms. This is either thanks to the education they have received, or because of the influence of people who come from outside their rural community. More particularly, it is caused by the development of modernism.

4. The modern connotations of Wessex

Through the analysis of the changes of characters, it is possible to say that Wessex is not a closed and unchanging rural space, without being affected by the outside world. In the following, the modern connotations of Wessex will be the focus. The authorial voice of the narrator has a close connection to his characters. He – a mirror of Hardy – often makes comments on characters, traditional customs and education. By exploring these metatextual pieces of information, it is possible to grasp more of the connotations behind rural Wessex. At the same time, the novels are also related to the influence of capitalism on agricultural production and rural people’s way of life. As Raymond Williams puts it, “[Hardy’s] novels, increasingly, are concerned with change” (Williams 197). Wessex is an open, changing space, because, as David Harvey said, “There can be no politics of space independent of social relations. The latter give the former their social content and meaning” (Harvey 257). Only by admitting this, can we truly understand which kind of space Wessex is. Is it an old, backward, closed, unchanging, traditional rural society which is not affected by the external world, or an open space that is constantly influenced by the outside world and is undergoing
change under its influence? After answering this question, the question whether Hardy’s novels represent a conservative view of society or not can be answered.

After Tess has been let down, the by-standing narrator comments that her fictional world with traditional customs is “a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess’s fancy – a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she is terrified without reason. It is they that are out of harmony with the actual world, not she” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 97). A statement like this shows that Hardy insists to readers that Tess has done nothing wrong. In the late nineteenth century, the mainstream of English society did not accept that a woman who is seduced and then gives birth to an illegitimate child could be considered a “pure woman.” For this reason the novel was first rejected by the publisher. In response to this Hardy decided to censor parts of the novel, deleting several scenes. By 1912, the deleted parts were restored in the final version of the novel. Hardy’s attitude to Tess is also reflected in his assessment of Clare’s limitations: he “was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 284). It can be seen that Hardy to some extent is opposed to the traditional customs and social norms of mainstream society. He believes that the moral judgment of a woman cannot be based solely on what she did, but should also be based on her individuality and her psychological state of mind, so in this perspective he holds Tess to be pure, an assessment ahead of his time.

Hardy not only has some anti-traditional ideas regarding the relationship between men and women, he also opposes the conventional life of the middle class. An example of this can be found when Hardy writes from the perspective of a bystander about Clare’s two older brothers, saying they are “non-Evangelical, well-educated, hallmarked young men, correct to their remotest fibre; such unimpeachable models as are turned out yearly by the lathe of a systematic tuition” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 176). The middle-class, well-regulated, high-ranking, limited life is criticized by the author. He admires Tess and Clare’s natural, living and all-embracing lust for life. In addition, we can see from the text that Hardy does not fully agree with the requirements of religious and pastoral recommendations. An example of this is his portrayal of the priest who refuses to baptize Tess’ child: he is portrayed as distant, and the description seems to harbor significant reservations about this character. The novel also talks about some of the traditional rituals that Wessex preserved, which show the instinct of happy England, a strong vitality that is consistent with the spirit of Hellenic Paganism. Clare “had persistently elevated Hellenic Paganism at the expense of Christianity; yet in that civilization an illegal surrender was not certain disesteem” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 361). These two details seem to imply that Hardy tries to resist the rigid Christian norms in his contemporaneous British society, by countering it with an alleged antique Greek spiritual openness.

The author’s view of education is also worth paying attention to, because he writes novels as an educated local literate person, and education is an important subject in his novels. Furthermore, there is a close link between education and modernity. As written in the novel, with the world being industrialized and urbanized at a rapid pace, the heathfolk learn to sign up in the marriage register, and there are improvements made to local education – causing old habits and beliefs to fade away. Hardy expresses his own views with the help of one of the characters, Clare, who holds “that education had as yet but little affected the beats of emotion and impulse on which domestic happiness
depends” (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 183). Hardy opposes the education being given at the time because he believes that it could not directly affect the human mind, and could not penetrate deep enough into people’s emotional core.

In addition, Eustacia’s grandfather is opposed to education, who believes that it only does harm to send children to school. The heathfolk believe that Clym has a lot of strange notions because of his learning. This view is certainly not a view which Hardy seems to agree with. In the novel, Clym is also committed to education. Originally his intention is to disseminate his learning and spread enlightenment in his old community through education, aiming to improve the overall quality of heathfolk’s 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 there is something wrong with his eyes, he could no longer be a 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 impeccable topics, talking about the common views and behaviors 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. He fails with regard to the first, but succeeds when it comes to the latter.

Putting these details together, the novels’ view on education can be summarized as follows: They oppose mainstream British education by assuming that it cannot take a deep hold in people’s minds. Meanwhile, Hardy’s texts also object to the older generation in their complete denial of the value of education; but Hardy also disagrees with Clym’s original idea that education does not aim first of all to get people rich. The education he advocates is the moral and intellectual cultivation that can directly affect people’s personal development, which relates to people’s inner emotions and thoughts. At the same time, it must be realistic. People living in Wessex should first leave the poverty of rural life behind and learn to live an open, modern life. Once they have done this, they can go and seek the knowledge to change their life. In conclusion, people should first focus on local conditions before integrating the local into the world at large.

At the beginning of *Return of the Native*, “the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment” (2005 7), this shows that the author is concerned with social reality. The timeframe of the story is assumed to be between 1840 and 1850, a period in which capitalism is taking hold in England. In contrast, Egdon, which is located in the southwest of England, seems not to be part of this process. But some details in his later novels imply the presence of modernity nevertheless. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, for example, are set in a later timeframe, meaning that Wessex is now also experiencing the early stages of industrialization. Some new production methods have emerged in the countryside, namely mechanical production. Harvesting machines have already appeared.
In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard uses traditional methods to manage agriculture at Casterbridge and becomes the mayor relying on his diligence; but in the end, he is defeated by the Scotsman Farfrae, who masters using modern machines and capitalist methods of management. Scottish capitalism developed greatly during the Industrial Revolution, and Henchard’s defeat by a Scotsman demonstrates the defeat of traditional agriculture. Further, Farfrae becomes the mayor of Casterbridge finally, implying that capitalists get the ruling power.

Additionally, in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, the steam threshing-machine and the owner of it are described as follows:

He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun. He travelled with his engine from farm to farm, from county to county, for as yet the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex. He spoke in a strange northern accent, his thoughts being turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron charge; hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all; holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives, as if some ancient doom compelled him to wander here against his will in the service of his Plutonic master. (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 345–346)

The owner of this machine is indifferent to everything around him, and has no feelings for agriculture. When someone asks his name, his answer is “an engineer” without introducing himself by name, making himself an agent for modern technology rather than an individual. The author refers to the thresher as the Plutonic master, suggesting the fact that instead of people becoming the master of the machine, they are becoming its slave instead. Here Hardy foresees the relationship between human and machine in modern society: people are alienated, they don’t control machines, and instead machines control humans, making people indifferent to the outside world and others. In the phrase “some ancient doom compelled him” mentioned in this passage, in my opinion, the doom refers to the emergence and development of capitalism and modernization. The appearance of the machine represents a modern agricultural production method. Hardy does not seem to like it. He calls the machine an “insatiable swallower,” a “red tyrant” that makes workers very tired as it allows them almost no time to rest: “The incessant quivering in which every fibre of her frame participated had thrown her into a stupefied reverie, in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness” (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 353–354), “By degrees the freshest among them began to grow cadaverous and saucer-eyed” (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 354). The elderly recall traditional ways of agricultural production: for example using the flail to beat down the wheat, a process that is done entirely through manual labor. Although this process is a lot slower, they believe this to be the “proper” method, a way which is more subtle and attuned to the land. This detail implies a contrast between traditional agriculture and modern agriculture.

In addition, Hardy also describes a clash between the traditional rural life of Tepots and the modern life represented by the train: “Modern life stretched out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touched the native existences, and quickly withdrew its feeler again, as if what it touched had been uncongenial” (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 204), “No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl” (*Tess of the D’Urbervilles* 205). The unsophisticated Tess belongs to a traditional rural space, and this space is juxtaposed with the interference and speed of the train, which is typically representative of modernity. The two worlds seem to be incompatible. Tess represents nature,
as opposed to the artificial nature of a train, which represents technological advancement and modernity. Hardy also emphasizes the practical role of the train to the local population; for example, allowing fresh milk to be transported quickly so it does not become sour. At the same time, the train links city and country, but a huge gap remains between them:

“Londoners will drink it at their breakfasts to-morrow, won’t they?” she asked. “Strange people, that we have never seen.” “Noble men and noble women – ambassadors and centurions – ladies and tradeswomen – and babies who have never seen a cow.” “Who don’t know anything of us, and of where it comes from; or think how we two drove miles across the moor to-night in the rain that it might reach ’em in time.” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 205)

So although the two spaces are connected from the outside, their inhabitants don’t understand each other.

The development of capitalism has also brought about tremendous changes in the social categorization of the life of rural people: the workfolk have been renamed laborers. The former is a rural laborer’s name for himself, and the latter is a newly introduced word that comes with the massive process of industrialization. Meanwhile, the annual migration from one farm to another is becoming more and more popular. People used to work on one farm for a lifetime. Nowadays, they tend to move every year, showing that the life of rural people is becoming more and more unstable. In the meantime, the rural population has decreased. In the past, there were craftsmen, hawkers and other people in the countryside, whose life goals and life were very stable, but now their trade is no longer as popular thanks to an influx of cheaper industrial goods, meaning that their number has significantly decreased: “These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositaries of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres” (Tess of the D’Urbervilles 372). Their moving out makes it harder for rural traditions to be passed onto a new generation, which only exacerbates the decline of the village.

More specifically, Jude the Obscure shows the anxieties brought about by the shift in population from a rural to a predominantly urban one. Jude longs to escape from Marygreen and integrate into Christminster’s college life because Marygreen can never offer fulfillment to him. He is knowledgeable and proficient in Classical Greek and Latin. Nonetheless, he is rejected by the university for his poverty and low status. Later, he attempts to become a priest, but because of his relationship with Sue, he fails again. His efforts to redefine an individual identity end in failure. Finally, he chooses to return to Christminster in order to attend the Oxford anniversary celebrations. Since the joys of the others strongly reflect his frustration, he calls it Shame Day. He “becomes an exile from his rural roots, unable to define himself through an urban identity” (Salmons 109). His story shows us how modernism affects an individual’s definition of identity.

5. Conclusion

The questions posed earlier can be answered here. The Wessex constructed by Hardy is not a closed, traditional rural space, but forms instead an open space which is constantly influenced by the outside world and is undergoing several profound changes. It is industrializing and modernizing. These new changes are not only manifested in the introduction of capitalist agricultural production, but also in the increased mobility of the rural population, the decline in the rural population’s size, and the changes incurred
in people’s structures of feeling and psychology. So it is hard to call Hardy a conservative, as he has written extensively about these new changes and had the foresight to understand that the introduction of machines would lead to alienation and psychological distress and anxiety to modern people.

But at the same time, he also describes the traditional rituals of Wessex’s nature and vitality with empathy, and praises the natural spiritual power of the Greek-inspired hedonistic paganism. It seems that he wants to correct the neutral and inactive life of the British middle class by using the power of ancient traditions. When it comes to education, Hardy’s novels insist on focusing first on the specific conditions of the local population and then on the potential integration into the modern world. Without rejecting change, Hardy supports a re-evaluation of traditional life and customs in order to transform modern people’s lives. In conclusion, Hardy shows us how modernity comprehensively affects insular Wessex.

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