

Autobiographical element of Thomas Hardy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Abstract

Far from the madding crowd is among the early masterpieces of Thomas Hardy. His writing has used many elements from his lifetime. The novelist reflected his life in story, plot constructions, events in novel. He made uses of places and landscapes as a background of numerous minor characters from the Wessex peasantry. These humble characters are almost invariably treated in the light and playful manner and they constitute comic relief in what are generally sombre stories. It is the soil of Wessex which furnishes customs and beliefs used by Hardy in his novels. This paper elaborates the varied elements of Hardy's life reflected and we see that the use of Wessex makes *Far from the Madding Crowd* explicitly autobiographical.

Keywords: autobiographical, characters, plot, lifetime events, rustic, language, profession, personal

Introduction

Florence Emily Hardy has rightly discovered from Hardy's notebook entries the fact that his real experiences and autobiographical facts find reflection in the incidents and characters of the fourth published novel, *Far from the madding crowd*. She maintains that he had forethought to make it a pastoral novel. Michael Millgate also points out how the book contains several of his unforgettable experience of that period:

.....Hardy turned his full attention when, on 2 July 1873, he returned from Bath to Bockhampton - where 'nightingales sang in the garden and he still had the stimulus and sympathy of his mother's companionship'. He also had the not inconsiderable benefit of his mother's care and cooking.... Hardy especially treasured the association between Bockhampton and *Far from the Madding Crowd*... (152-153)

This novel was serialized in the monthly magazine, *The Cornhill*, in eleven instalments. It was tremendously appreciated by the readers and critics, and Hardy gained recognition as a vigorous exponent of the pastoral novel. H C Duffin aptly calls it Hardy's masterpiece. Norman Page also supports Duffin's comment:

...Hardy's portrayal of the emotional life at the mercy of economic circumstances derives some of its strength from his own experiences, though the theme is admittedly a dominant one in nineteenth century fiction [40].

Several critics point to the fact that Hardy had made extensive use of the autobiographical element in this novel. Though a pastoral novel, yet the personal life experiences and interest of Hardy finds an eloquent expression in it. F.B Pinion holds that Hardy's wife Emma gave the author the idea of the farmer heroine Bathsheba. To quote his words:

The novel idea of a woman farmer may have come from

Emma, who had been very interested in one, an old widow, in North Cornwall (109).

The richly varied scenes and sights of nature so marvellously and picturesquely painted in this novel have their roots in Wessex soil. Harassed by his own life agonies, Hardy painted in this novel humour born out of the ironies of life. In fact he was quick to churn out humour from even a dull and a dreary life. Speaking of his interest in Wessex life, Thomas Hardy, he writes in the introduction to the novel:

With his root deep in Wessex soil and with his particular genius he was richly endowed to become the chronicler of Wessex. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we are able to feel the living tissue of Dorset. Life in mid-nineteenth century, to witness the lives of its work-folk (as Hardy liked to call them) and to become aware of a whole area of country, of trees and fields, of buildings and villages, portrayed with a reality that we have never felt before [21].

Hardy presents in this novel the old-age folk and their old age traditions. He as a writer is governed by his personal observations much more than any other novelties of creative imagination. F.B Pinion rightly observes:

As *Far from the Madding crowd* was centered principally in the large parish of Puddle town, the weatherbury of the novel, Hardy spent much time there familiarizing himself with rural husbandry especially in sheep farming. He met relatives and their acquaintances, discovered much about the malt house, kept Uncle John Antell's father which used to stand almost opposite the home of Sparks family and heard anecdotes and sayings which he treasured for his fiction. (113-14).

Hardy classed this novel as belonging to the "Novels of character and Environment." The title of the novel illustrates the central idea of the novelist wishes to portray a life of serenity, quite away from the clumsy people's maddening

pursuits. Gray's *Elegy* had vibrated the chords of Hardy's heart and the title of this novel is taken from the first line of the *elegy*. The plot of the novel is elemental and has many of the things common with old time ballads he would have heard about or seen in his youth. The construction and presentation of the story is so perfect that it is compared with the works of Dickens. Each incident in the novel leads to the next in a way that they appear to be naturally coherent.

Hardy's tender emotions and sensitive feelings are very effectively revealed in the agony and irony of Fanny Robin. The irony is revealed when she failed to arrive in time on her wedding day. Her journey to Casterbridge Workhouse has been fraught with pathetic characters are fictional, only in names, but their hearts throb with Hardy's interest and observations. They have overwhelming resemblances with Hardy's personal experiences of rustic life. Gabriel Oak, the owner of a large herd and a small farm, is reduced to the humble position on the farm of Miss Bathsheba by a sheer stroke of bad luck. Farmer Boldwood, a farmer belongs to the society of aristocrats, also faces a similar ill-luck. Thirdly sergeant Troy, the illegitimate son of a French governess and Lord Severn, belongs to the middle class family. Thus the truth that Hardy had observed people of varied strata of society keenly is well brought home.

The novel is replete with the scenes of sights and nature. Hardy's fondness towards journeying, his skill in minute observation, his loving nature towards lower animals and abiding interest in architecture is usually reflected in novel.

We find a touch of grim humour in almost all of Hardy's novels. It is rustic humour consist in the speech of the villagers. Rustic characters- Joseph Poorgrass, Jan Coggan, the malt star. Henry Fray and others are profound source of humour. Each of these characters has certain unusual habits. Joseph Poorgrass, a shepherd on Bathsheba's farm has a weakness for drink and usually he gets the disease of 'multiplying eye'. His shyness imparts humour to his conversation. In the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* authored by Thomas Hardy is a slice of humour peculiarly branded to him:

'No-I've hardly looked at her at all.' Simpered Joseph....'
And when I seed her, 'twas nothing but blushes with me!
feller,' said Mr. Clark.
'Tis a curious nature for a man said Jan Coggan'. (98).

Henry Fray is a middle aged person. He is out with the world on account of his setbacks and alleges that the law of the world is bad. He is over conscious about the spelling and can brook no change what so ever. He would interrupt others or stop them to correct if there is any attempt at distorting the spelling in pronunciation. Mathew Moon, a labourer on Bathsheba's Farm is a stammering person and needs plenty of time to complete a sentence. While distributing the earnings to her workers, Bathsheba is amusedly constrained to wait for him to complete the volubility of his infinitesimal speech.

Abnormalities of speech, habit or manner give rise to rustic humour. The scene in *The Malthouse* where Joseph Poorgrass leaves the body of Fanny outside in winter night and sits down to drink with Jan coggan is crammed with ironical humour. The conversation of the rustics is the biggest source of plentiful humour in the novel.

A magnetos sympathy kindles Hardy's use of rustic humour. It is pure and variegated, closely linked with the lives of the rustic people. It is built upon oddities, not upon blemishes or blunders,

vices or vanities.

The pen portraits of the buildings and churches show Hardy's abiding personal interest in architecture. They are drawn with meticulous artistry. Particularly fascinating and truthful is the description of Weatherbury Farm which is very much similar to Weatherstone House and Puddletown Church. Architectural phraseology and terms as 'intervolve', 'O give work' and 'engrailed' present structural view of the buildings. Detailed account of structural intricacies of designs imparts a scientific accuracy to his descriptions of the buildings. John Summerson accepts Hardy's personal interest the description of places in far from the madding crowd is supported by Harold Orel:

Hardy's tells us great deal about homes and buildings in his novels; where Bathsheba lives is lovingly detailed, and so are Overcombe Hill, Knapwater House and Endlestow House. No reader who enjoyed *Far from the Madding Crowd* can soon forget Hardy's description of both the interior and external features of great Barn. Melbury's house, Oxwell Hall and Overcombe Mill.....'(19)

The description of the buildings in the novel is the fruits of Hardy's practical experiences. The architectural features of Bathsheba's House are Gothic Form and style:

Fluted pilasters, worked from the solid stone, decorated its front, and above the roof the chimneys were panelled or columnar, some coped gables and finials and like features still retaining traces of their Gothic extraction.(114)

The description of the building shows that the trend of Gothic architecture' basically characterized by the pointed arch and columns prevailed very much at that time. Gothic architecture covers the period in Western Europe from about the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. The Weatherbury Church described in the novel is similar to Puddletown church, which Hardy had seen in Bath.

The places of social gatherings like *Malthouse*, where the labourers of the village people meet and enjoy their drinks with their usual chats, is so personally described that it appears as if he was familiar with each nook and corner:

Warren's *Malthouse* was enclosed by an old wall in wrapped with ivy..... the walls on overhanging thatched roof sloped to a point in the centre, upon which rose a small wooden lantern, fitted with louver- boards on all the four sides, and from these openings a mist was dimly perceived to be escaping in to the night air.(93)

Description of such places like *Malt house Churches* and other show that Hardy repeatedly uses his personal experiences to sustain his creative art. Hardy travelled extensively and observed various places. The reality that the author travelled to different places, met different people and had firsthand knowledge of them is made explicit by Michael Millgate in these lines:

Writing to Stephen in 1874 of his desire to stay on Bockhampton until the novel was finished, he explained that his home was 'within a walk of the district in which

the incidents are supposed to occur the village of Puddletown is clearly intended – and that he found it a great advantage to be actually among the people described at the time of describing them...(114)

Personally visited Puddle town turns in the novel into the village of Weather bury, “quiet as the graveyard in its midst” and deserted by people in favour of town for the sake to employment. Thus it is right to conclude that Hardy’s use of architecture in his writings is positively of autobiographical interest.

No less important than human beings are the lower animals for which Hardy had nourished in his heart and intimate and emotional attachment. These animals lend variety and charm to this narrative. Hardy presents the domestic animals in a state of their companionship with human beings. If Gabriel’s overenthusiastic young dog is in harbinger of ill- luck, the other dog helps Fanny Robin in reaching Caster bridge House and is to her no less than a messenger of God. The dog comes to her succour when no soul is within sight to support her in her distressed condition. Hardy could not mention an animal without showing his intense personal sympathy and consequent understanding of its life and feeling. He knew the natural, instinctive behaviour of the animals. He describes Bathsheba’s cat.

Hardy’s greatness in the art of characterization can seldom be questioned. His fictional characters are very close to the realities of life. They are an imaginative rendering of his earlier experiences of country folk. Hardy’s female characters are more outstandingly volatile than male characters of this novel hold infinite attraction. The female figures show more solicitude than men. Bathsheba Everdene is Central female character of the novel. She is completely based on his personal interaction with Emma. He attempted something far from ambitious in Bathsheba’s character than anything he and attempted with the earlier heroines of his writings. Bathsheba is the first of a series of independent women, almost like Shakespeare’s heroines capable of talking a strong hold upon life and meeting men upon something like an equal footing. In Bathsheba he intended to create a person capable of employing shepherds, discharging dishonest bailiff making payment to the labourers in person appearing in the market to transact business with men, occupying the table at the harvest festival as patron of the feast. All these bold steps do add to build up a personality of unusual impressiveness. Nature has endowed her with rustic beauty, fondness for admiration, love of independence, not much of heart though, yet a lot brave spirit. The character of Bathsheba is also autobiographical in some respects. The Beauty of Bathsheba is described by Hardy as:

She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thought seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part vistas (39)

Far From the Madding Crowd is primarily a pastoral novel. Hardy’s keen interest and intense love for pastoral life and profession is well known. Sheep Rearing and Agricultural Farming is chiefly the job of males. Here Hardy seems to have digressed a bit and has involved Bathsheba, a Female figure in sheep-farming because of his own love for sheep farming. He has shown that his female characters are as capable as his male

characters in handling their professions. In the novel, Bathsheba after becoming the mistress of the farm proves as commanding and responsible as any male farmer. The obliquely points to the autobiographical tinge. His female characters are equally commanding is revealed in the following lines:

‘Now, before I begin, men,’ said Bathsheba, ‘I have two matters to speak of. The first is that the bailiff is dismissed for thieving and that I have formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with my own head and hands.(121)

Bathsheba is represented as pretty and vain. She plays fast and loose with poor Gabriel Oak. She blows hot and cold upon Farmer Bold wood. She flirts with Oak in the most heartless manner. She sends Bold wood a valentine with the word ‘Marry me’ on the seal. Her selfishness makes her wayward and inconsistent. She is fascinated by the swagger and flattery of Troy. Her behaviour, at the death of Troy seems to us more inexplicable. Thus we find that the character of Bathsheba appears much more autobiographical in the manner that she is an assimilation of the author’s interests and manners. Hardy writes that her aim was the inevitable result of that social rise that had advanced her from a cottage to large house and fields. The character of Gabriel oak is important because in the background of the novel he is present in some or the other way. He possesses several qualities which endear him to us and make us admire and respect him. The name of Gabriel Oak is most likely derived from oak tree. He characteristically combines in himself Hardy’s autobiographical interests. Gabriel is described as a hardworking, mirthful, responsible and devoted character. Hardy paints Gabriel Oak as a rural farmer:

...a young man of sound judgement, easy motions, proper dress and general good character. On Sundays he was a man of misty views...who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Loadicean neutrality which lay between the communion people of the parish and drunken section...(35)

Gabriel, indulging in the pleasant prospects of success as a sheep farmer, and even at one point expecting as ‘probable his marriage with Bathsheba, is ‘Knocked block.’ His young and enthusiastic dog brings about his undoing. At that time he feels that it was nice that he was not married to Bathsheba and had saved her from falling in poverty. Gabriel has deep interest in sheep farming. The people of nearby farms consider him to be a perfect farmer as he is able to cure the sheep easily and knows everything about agriculture. Hardy paints the character of Gabriel Oak with personal touches. Hardy’s notebook and diary entries show that he had a chance to work with his father on cider making farm. There he had different experiences which he exemplified through Gabriel oak. Hardy’s own experiences and observations of rural people and places make this tale much more autobiographical. Like Hardy, Gabriel Oak also has deep interest in flute playing. The rustics enjoying a chat at Malthouse as:

‘Neither drum nor Trumpet have I heard since Christmas,’ said Jan Coggan, ‘Come raise a tune, Master Oak.’

'That' I will,' said Gabriel, pulling out his flute and putting it together. (107)

His interest in music as well as his knowledge about the traditional music is fully highlighted. Dame Durden,' 'Jockey at fair', were some of the well known songs which were sung by people on festive occasions.

Hardy's characters are equally fond of travelling. Gabriel oak loss everything because of his ill-fate, he leaves his place and moves on to the other places in search of work. There at the Maltster house, Gabriele describes the tale of his travelling as follows:

I bode at Upper Longpuddle across there' (nodding to the north)' 'till I were eleven. I bode seven at Kingsbere (nodding to the east) 'where I took to malting. I went therefrom to Norcombe....Ah, I knowed that old place Norcombe...years afore you were thought of Master Oak.....(105-06)

The character of Gabriel Oak reveals many of the hidden aspects of Hardy's life. He is valuable hand in every moment of calamity besetting the village people. Oak saves Bathsheba's farm from fire by making all possible efforts. After this incident Gabriel gets a job on Bathsheba's sheep suffer from some serious ailment and operation is felt as the only way to restore them to health, it is Gabriel who dexterously carries out the operation on the whole unlucky lot:

'...Oh, What can I do!' said Bathsheba helplessly, "Sheep are such unfortunate animals!- there's always something happening to them! I never knew a flock pass a year without getting into some scrape a other.... we can't nor you neither. It must be done in a particular spot. If ye go to the right or left but an inch you stab the ewe and kill her. Not even a shepherd can do it, as a rule. (192).

For his devotion, hard work and dutifulness he is a rewarded with the status of a partner in Farmer Boldwood's farm, Furthermore, in the end, Gabriel Oak is successful in getting his love and is married to Bathsheba Everdene. Hardy's own life experiences are visible in Gabriel's trials and travails, making this pastoral novel autobiographical in nature. Here is Hardy himself in the role of Gabriel, attempting unawares self-satisfaction and fulfilment of his dormant desires.

Another impressive character in the novel is Farmer Boldwood who belongs to the aristocratic society of farmers. He is a very simple man, devoid of all emotion. He is considered to be a confirmed bachelor.' He heads a life of philosophical aloofness and keeps the common cult of joys any pleasures at bay. At last, Bathsheba succeeds in planting a sapling of love in the hard soil of his heart by sending him a valentine. When Boldwood sees Bathsheba in the Corn Market Place, it seems as if 'Adam had awakened from his deep sleep and behold! There was Eve.' But later on when Boldwood comes to know about the marriage of troy and Bathsheba, he is literally shocked. But as a balanced person he maintains his equipoise at the moment. But the hurt survives. Boldwood kills sergeant Troy and Bathsheba, he is literally shocked. But as a balanced person he maintains his equipoise at the moment. But the hurt survives; Boldwood kills sergeant Troy out of Jealousy and is punished by the law. Thus this character has been used by the writer to show a distinct type

of love too possessive and obsessive. In fact his love can be considered as madness or a malady of the soul. Boldwood represents a serious, gloomy and aristocratic temperament. Sergeant Troy and Boldwood, the main figures in the novel have been conceived and executed with great mastery. Troy represents the society of the reckless, selfish and wicked. He has been sergeant in the army. He is clever, fickle-minded, a cheat and trickster He is a flirt. This flirting nature is revealed in the novel at the first meeting of Troy and Bathsheba:

'Certainly miss, I am not of steel.' He added a sigh which had as much archness in it as a sign could possess without losing its nature altogether. 'I am thankful for beauty, even when it's thrown to me like a bone to a dog. These moments will be over too soon!(222).

Hardy makes use of Troy's swordsmanship such a scene in the novel as it has a moral and structural purpose. He wants to show that sword is not the remedy of everything. About the symbolic use and significance of this incident in the novel, R.P Draper in The Three Pastoral Novel writes:

'For those who delight in the mechanism of Freudian symbolism, Troy's sword has obvious implications and it is perhaps worth mentioning that in this novel we are to find that the flute is mightier than sword – and for that matter the short gun as well'.(143)

Hardy indicates clearly enough that Troy is ultimately the villain of the piece. His villainy can be concluded from the piece of conversation noted by Michael Millgate:

He welcomed me with one hand, holding back and barking "Troy" with the other. The dog's name I, of Course, had never heard till then, and said, 'That is the name of my wicked soldier-hero.' He answered caustically: 'I don't think Troy will hurt me at the coincidence, if your's doesn't.(157).

Troy is wicked and clever. He is at first, loves Fanny Robin, but does not marry her. After meeting Bathsheba, he deserts Fanny Robin and leaves her all alone to face the unkind world. He enjoys drinking and merry making and is involved in all sorts of distracting activities. Bathsheba discovers Troy-Fanny relationship only after her marriage with Troy, she finds Troy as a completely changed man after marriage. She enjoys drinking and merry-making.

In portraying the character of Troy, Hardy's intention is to show the evils prevailing in the urban society of that era. He has a different opinion about the city persons. He feels that the rustic and rural traditions move smoothly only till they are not fringed, upon by any outside element, bringing storm and havoc in the lives of the rustic people. These personal experiences are incorporated by Hardy in this novel. Troy's entry into Weatherbury village brings a host of problems in the lives of Boldwood, Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak.

Fanny Robin, a simple rustic girl, confronts ill-fate because of the machination of Troy. He is singularly responsible for the ruin of Fanny Robin and he is the cause of Farmer Boldwood's ill-fate. Boldwood is deprived of Bathsheba only because of Troy. Boldwood has passion to possess Bathsheba, but, when successful resorts to killing Troy. Thus the entry of Troy is

ominous for both Bathsheba and Boldwood. Hardy's conviction that the interaction with the outside world brings doom to the otherwise peaceful life of the rustics gives an impression of the rustic touch.

Another autobiographical character revealing Hardy's personal feelings and thoughts in the novel is Fanny Robin. Hardy in this novel embodies the realities of farming community. The novel comprises of the tragic life of Fanny Robin, a popular girl among the working community. She is very simple and innocent. In her innocence she fails in his wicked trick. It is her innocence which enables Troy to trap her first with her promise of marriage and later on by jilting her saying that she went to a wrong church. A single mistake ruins Fanny's life:

'O Frank – I made a mistake! – I thought that church with the spire was all saints,' and I was at the door at half past eleven to a minute as you said. I waited till a quarter to twelve, and found then that I was in All Souls'. But I wasn't much frightened, for I thought it could be to-morrow as well.'(165).

When Hardy was writing this instalment of the novel, he was in deep grief because he had heard the news of his best friend Horace Moule's death. Hardy's emotional grief is noted down by Florence Hardy in these words;

On the 24th he was shocked at hearing of the tragic death of his friend Horace Moule from whom he had parted cheerfully at Cambridge in June. The body was brought to be buried at Fordington, Dorchester, and Hardy attended the funeral. It was a matter of keen regret to him now, and for a long time after, that Moule and the woman to whom Hardy was warmly attached had never set eyes on each other; and that she should never make Moule's acquaintance or be his friend.'(96)

Hardy makes the imaginative sketch of Moule's tragic death by experimenting it on Fanny Robin. When Fanny Robin is promised by Troy to meet at Casterbridge House, it is really hard for her to reach there in the state of starvation and thirst. Hardy seems to have taken a clue from Shakespeare in writing the scene Fanny's tragic death which, by all means, appears to be real tragedy. Evidently Hardy conceived Fanny's character in moments of smouldering grief caused by the death of his friend. That soft little thing Fanny is the outcome of that emotional turmoil. Hardy recaptures unhappy personal experiences of married life with Emma when he comes to show the matrimonial relations between Bathsheba and Troy. Hardy's novel prove to be autobiographical by his profound use of nature. Hardy describes nature, with his intimate and heartfelt feelings of love and emotion, with a great deal of felicity, and is evidently very much at home among rural phenomenon.

The most genuine thing to our senses is a certain aroma of the meadows and lanes – a natural relish for harvesting and sheep-washing. Hardy has laid his scenes in the agricultural country. One cannot account for the beauty and the convincing air of nature that invests the action of Hardy's stories until one realises how most exclusively it takes place out of doors and how lately by night, under black and starry skies and with the utmost freedom of ventilation. In order to give us an impression of life of a shepherd, he brings with the hillside where his hut is

perched and the wind beating about the corners and playing its various tunes upon the trees, the grass, and fallen leaves. He sketches the scene as follows:

The thin grass, more or less coating the hill were touched by the wind in breezes of differing powers and almost of differing nature...human kind was to stand and listen and learn how the trees on the right and trees on left wailed or haunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir....(165).

The incident of 'Greenhill fair' makes this novel much more autobiographical. Hardy had many refreshing memories of such a fair which he had seen in Woodbury. Hardy had seen different types of people and things in that fair, which he describes in this novel. Florence Hardy writes:

While thus in the seclusion of Bockhampton, writing *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we find him on September 21, walking to Woodbury-Hill Fair, approximately described in the novel as Greenhill Fair (96).

Michael Millgate also agrees to this and says that the fictional Greenhill fair is based on Woodbury Hill Fair. Hardy must have viewed or heard about the lifestyle of unemployed people who could get work through such fairs. He describes the fair as:

At one end of the street stood from two or three hundred blithe and hearty labourers waiting upon Chance all men of the stamp to whom labour suggests nothing better than a renunciation of the same (173).

Such fictional events in the novel lead us to conclude that Hardy makes use of his intimately personal knowledge of nature while constructing his story.

One of the distinguishing features of the novel is that he pays more attention to time than ever before. His precision in regard to time is a proof that he must have been only too conscious of time factor. HC Duffin noted that Hardy paid more attention to time period for the first time in this novel. He keeps the record of every hour in the story, thereby lending an extra charm and conviction to the narrative. He keeps track of time listing months and the actions taking place at that time. All these things show that he made tremendous use of his personal interests and autobiographical facts and events.

Probably the word Wessex has been used for the first time in the novel. Hardy had an imaginative sketch of the region in his mind as he travelled far and within a particular geographical Wessex. Hardy observed Wessex as a complete place where he could find everything. His views in respect to Wessex are:

Hardy's Wessex has passed away as a result of a hundred years of change on a scale never before known. Hardy saw this change taking place and it is a recurring theme in his later novels, but far from the madding crowd is little touched by it, and by its picture of life is all the more valuable...(75)

The time at which Hardy started writing novels was the age of transition. Hardy was keenly aware of the changes creeping into the society and Wessex region because of transition. This has been shown in his novels by the interactions and reactions

nicely woven in the plots of the Wessex country life. Even modes of transport have been described by Hardy keeping in view the transitional phase.

Hardy made uses of places and landscapes as a background of numerous minor characters from the Wessex peasantry. These humble characters are almost invariably treated in the light and playful manner and they constitute comic relief in what are generally sombre stories. It is the soil of Wessex which furnishes customs and beliefs used by Hardy in his novels. Thus we see that the use of Wessex makes *Far from the Madding Crowd* explicitly autobiographical.

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