THE RUSTIC CHORUS IN THE NOVELS
OF THOMAS HARDY

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By
Ruth C. Plummer, A.B.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Thomas Hardy

Under the Greenwood Tree
Desperate Remedies
A Laodicean
Far From the Madding Crowd
The Mayor of Casterbridge
Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Two on a Tower
A Pair of Blue Eyes
The Woodlanders
The Hand of Ethelberta
The Trumpet Major
The Return of the Native
The Well-Beloved
Jude the Obscure
Wessex Tales

Samuel C. Chew

Thomas Hardy, Poet and Novelist

William Lyon Phelps

Essays on Modern Novelists

William Sharp

Papers Critical and Reminiscent

Ernest Brenneck

Life of Thomas Hardy

285190
The Peasants:

Philosophy of Life
General Characteristics
Occupations
Folk-customs
Festivities
Superstitions and Folk-lore
The Mellstock Choir -
    a Typical Picture
Place in Hardy's Art
THE RUSTIC CHORUS IN THE NOVELS
OF THOMAS HARDY

An ideal harmony of sentimentalism and realism
is rare and is attained perhaps only by the greatest of
our artists. Thomas Hardy is a realist; he dwells too
much on fact, on actuality. Life becomes drab, dark,
monotonous and the realist sees no visions and has no
dreams in which he can take refuge. It has been said
that life is made for tragedy and not for fun; this is
undoubtedly true of the life depicted by Hardy. Sorrow
is the rule and joy the exception.

To Hardy who grew up on the edge of the heath,
observed its people and imbibed its spirit, life is grim,
filled with the hardest of toil, tinged with superstition,
over-shadowed by tragedy, but lightened by the simplest
and most crude of country festivities and made tolerable
only through the ignorance of the people. This was the
life of the peasants of Wessex.

It is impossible to consider any of Hardy's
characters apart from his philosophy of life. His plots
are built up on it, his characters are developed from it,
and it is voiced even by the lowest and humblest of the
peasants. Elizabeth Jane, in The Mayor of Casterbridge,
shows the typical attitude toward life and its surround-
ings. — "that they were a tragical rather than a comical,
thing; that though one could be gay on occasion, moments of gayety were interludes, and no part of the actual drama......
Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honour of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness, even when the path was suddenly irradiated at some half-way point by daybeams rich as hers. But her strong sense that that neither she nor any human being deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more. And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquillity had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain."

Life to Hardy's people is as a thing thrust upon them, and they are its helpless captives, much like those six juvenile passengers in the Durbeyfield ship—"entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasure, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield house-
hold chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them—
six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield". Hardy scoffs at the idea of a holy plan of Nature and considers it all an "ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things" in which "Nature does not often say 'See!' to a poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply 'Here!' to a body's cry of 'Where?' till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game".*

As Tess explained to little Abraham, her brother, the stars are all worlds that seem like apples on "our stubbord tree". Most of them are splendid and sound, a few blighted, and we live on a blighted one. In this blight Hardy sees the inequality of lot, the heaping up of favors here, of contumely there, perpetual dilemmas, and a captious alternation of caresses and blows that we must endure. In this kind of a world Thomas Hardy casts his people.

To Marty South, the simple rustic, as she helped erect the young pines, their soft musical breathing typified her attitude toward life in general. "It seems to me," she said, "as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest just as we be."

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Mrs. Yeobright's philosophy of life is, "Cry about one thing in life, cry about all; one thread runs through the whole piece. And yet we say, 'a time to laugh!'" Thomasin Yeobright once believed that life could be "sweet and pretty" until she was disillusioned by Wildeve who assured her in word and deed that "real life is never at all like that".

Hardy finds no sentimentalism in either nature or life. "The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread." If the heath, that spot which was a near relation to or an installment of night itself, could thus add to the somberness of the universe, what would it not do to those small atoms of life__humanity__whose existence had been cast upon its surface? The brooding Titanic spirit of the heath enveloped them.

In contrast to the influence of the heath, however, we would expect an entirely different spirit in life against some of Hardy's exquisitely beautiful settings, but we do not find it. He attempts to justify himself by saying that "men have oftener suffered from the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged". This
is Hardy, the man who seems to be responsive to everything
that contributes to despair, to despondency, and to sor-
didness but fails to catch the note of uplift in the sheer
beauty of the world, that type of beauty which he rather
scornfully brands as orthodox, and describes as being
commonly called charming and fair. He states that "human
souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony
with external things wearing a somberness distasteful to
our race when it was young. The time seems near, if it
has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of
a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that
is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more think-
ing among mankind". If this should prove true, those of
us who are followers of Shelley and Keats, Coleridge and
Wordsworth, and the other worshippers of sheer beauty will
be relegated to the great mass of the unthinking.

We get Hardy's conception of the nature of man in
comparison with Egdon Heath. "It was at present a place
perfectly accordant with man's nature - neither ghastly,
hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor
tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal
singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monot-
ony.".

"The Return of the Native
Life as a whole in Hardy's novels was like the heather that he loved, vivid purple at the climax of its bloom but soon touched with that invidious brown that creeps into its shades. Below the surface, life was like the base of the Rings-Hill Speer where "below the level of their summits the masonry was lichen-stained and mildewed, for the sun never pierced that moaning cloud of blue-black vegetation. Pads of moss grew in the joints of the stone-work, and here and there shade-loving insects had engraved on the mortar patterns of no human style or meaning; but curious and suggestive. Above the trees the case was different: the pillar rose into the sky a bright and cheerful thing, unimpeded, clean, and flushed with the sunlight." And like this now and then we see life lifting its head into the sunshine.

Hardy is a true realist in that he reports faithfully the habits and manners of people with whom he is familiar, - the homely, unostentatious people of the heaths, the woods, the hills and valleys, and the villages of Wessex. He believes that "provincial towns trying to be lively are the dullest of dull things. Little towns are like little children in this respect, that they interest most when they are enacting native peculiarities unconscious of beholders. Discovering themselves to be watched they attempt to be entertaining by putting on an

*Two on a Tower
antic, and produce disagreeable caricatures which spoil them". Therefore he depicts the everyday life of these everyday people who "sit in the kitchen, drink mead and elder-wine, and sand the floor to keep it clean".

He presents these people in their own setting, showing their native peculiarities, picturing them at work and at play, giving their beliefs and superstitions, their customs and traditions, and revealing their philosophy of life. Hardy's transcripts of country life, his reproductions of the dialogue and characteristics of the peasantry are excellent in themselves.

They look upon life and make their own observations concerning men and their ways.

"'The fact is, ' said Reuben confidentially, "'tis how you take a man. Everybody must be managed. Queens must be managed; kings must be managed; for men want managing almost as much as women, and that's saying a good deal.'"

Some of their comments are pathetic and some humorous. Geoffrey Day remarks of wives that they "be such a provoking class o' society, because though they be never right, they be never more than half wrong". And when we catch

* Desperate Remedies
** The Return of the Native
*** Under the Greenwood Tree
snatches of conversation such as this between Spinks and the Tranter we know that though the peasants as a whole are un-educated, they are not lacking in intelligence and shrewdness. Spinks: "That man's silence is wonderful to listen to."
The Tranter: "There's so much sense in it. Every moment o' it is brimmen over wi' sound understanding".*

Hardy's people are the Durbeyfields, that shiftless, ne'er-do-well family - Mrs. Durbeyfield usually balanced on one foot beside a tub while the other was engaged in the business of rocking the cradle containing her youngest; Mr. Durbeyfield, a slack-twisted fellow who "had good strength to work at times but the times could not be relied on to coincide with the hours of requirement", and the seven, including the irony of Hope and Modesty, -- who were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship; Old Creedle and Grammer Oliver, Dairyman Tucker and his daughter Margery, Corporal Tullidge and Anthony Cripplestraw, Grandfer Cantle and Christian, Jopp who mingled with those shady characters of Mixen Lane, Joseph Poorgrass and Jan Coggan. Such people as these form the chorus of rustics that speculate upon life and death, and upon the possible chances of happiness.

* Under the Greenwood Tree
We see them as wayfarers plodding along the lonely roads; we see their dark figures silhouetted against a faint sky; we see them gathering furze-faggots and building their pyramids on the barrow; then sketched in the blaze of their own fires, "a whirling of dark shapes amid a boiling confusion of sparks, which leapt around the dancers as high as their waists"; we hear the scratching of the furze against their leggings as they thread their ways by those incipient paths through the heath in the dark, keeping to the track by the sense of touch in the feet which comes with years of night-rambling in little-trodden spots. We see them against a background, see their shadows dancing up and down in the jigging of the flames from a burning hay-rick; we see them gambling on the heath by the pale phosphoric light of the glow worms. We see them in their homes and at work in the woods and fields; we witness their festivities and hear their conversations; we listen to the very pulse of their life. These are the pictures that Hardy presents in a manner unequalled.

Forming the background of nearly all of Hardy's novels and some of the tales are the transcripts of country life, and the reproduction of the dialogue and characteristics of the half-pagan primitive peasantry among whom he grew up. Hardy loves the heaths and farms and woodlands, the customs and traditions and superstitions
of these people. This he presents with a certain homely charm, and the rustics form a chorus to the dramatic action of the leading characters.

"Danged if our country down here is worth singin' about like that," said the glazier in The Mayor of Casterbridge. "When you take away from among us the fools and the rogues, and the lamblings, and the wanton hussies, and the slatterns, and such like, there's o'ust few left to ornament a song with in Casterbridge, or the country round." And Christopher Coney supplements the characterization by saying, "We be bruckle folk here—the best o' us hardly honest sometimes, what with hard winters, and so many mouths to fill, and God a'mighty sending his little tatties so terrible small to fill 'em with. We don't think about flowers and fair faces, not we—except in the shape o' cauliflowers and pig's chaps". Yet Hardy, believing that "the impressionable peasant leads a larger, fuller, more dramatic life than the pachydermatous king,"* finds them worth writing about.

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk,
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

* Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Only thin smoke without flame
From the Heaps of couch grass:
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by;
War's annals will fade into night
Ere their story die. *

Into a background of woods and fields, orchards
and heath Hardy blends his characters until they become a
part of the landscape. The furse cutter becomes "a brown
spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and
nothing more"**. Simon Burden is merely an aged form of
the same colour as the road. Baymoss is a brown dot in
a field, "a moving figure whom it was as difficult to dis-
tinguish from the earth he trod as the caterpillar from
its leaf by reason of the excellent match between his
clothes and the clods". *** Bob Loveday, the sailor, be-
comes only a speck on the sea. And "looked at in a cer-
tain way, their lonely courses formed no detached design
at all, but were part of the pattern in the great web of
human doings then weaving in both hemispheres, from the
White Sea to Cape Horn", and yet Hardy has managed to

* In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"
** The Return of the Native
*** Two on a Tower
individualise many of these people of the soil. In "Tess" he remarks that these rustics are "beings of many minds, beings infinite in difference; some happy, many serene, a few depressed, one here or there bright even to genius, some stupid, others wanton, others, austere........ men every one of whom walked in his own individual way the road to dusty death".*

It is impossible to draw a distinct line between the peasants and the other characters. We see them occasionally struggling for enlargement, desiring to see, to hear, and to understand, to become something better. While the chorus of rustics forms the background, many of the principal characters are of the same class but have been elevated in varying degrees above their surroundings by finer sensibilities and education. This invariably involves them in tragedy. All of Hardy's finer creatures, the dreamers, are doomed to sorrow or destruction—Glym, Tess, Giles, Grace Melbury, Swithin, Jude. Those with more sensitive souls who are more capable of radiant happiness are the ones to whom it is denied.

The yokels are content because they have no aspirations; they accept the circumstances of life without question. They themselves discounted the value of education. In the words of old Creedle, "learning is better

* Tess of the D'Urbervilles
than houses and lands. But to keep a maid at school till she is taller out of her pattens than her mother was in 'em-'tis tempting Providence'. Grace Melbury bemoaned her own cultivation thinking that it had brought her only inconveniences and unhappiness. Fancy Day with merely a little education was struggling rather hopelessly against the traditions of her people. Captain Vye expresses his opinion of education to the peasants:

"Ah, there's too much of that sending to school in these days! It only does harm. Every gatepost and barn's door you come to is sure to have some bad word or other chalked upon it by the young rascals: A woman can hardly pass for shame sometimes. If they'd never been taught how to write they wouldn't have been able to scribble such villainy. Their fathers couldn't do it, and the country was all the better for it."

* The fact remains that in Hardy's novels the people who are happy are the ignorant who find contentment in accepting life as it is.

Hardy's rustics come shuffling and jostling (sometimes reduced to as refined a form as is compatible with the nature of shuffles and jostles) into the picture.

* The Return of the Native
Life stretches ahead of them carpeted with dust like that highroad into the village of Weydon Priors. For the most part they are indifferent to the strait-waistcoat of poverty that must be theirs, although Mrs. Durbeyfield said in her inimitable way, "'Tis well to be kin to a coach even if you don't ride in en". Their life and their comments on the broad general experiences of humanity furnish the humour and the comedy, although sometimes like many comical effects they are "not quite so comic after all";

Hardy's manner is to center his stories around some one occupation or trade. We have but to look in the shop windows to know the occupation of the people around Casterbridge.

"Scythes, read-hooks, sheep-shears, hooks, spades, mattocks, and hoes at the ironmonger's; beehives, butter-firkins, churns, milking stools and pails, hay-rakes, field-flagons, and seed-lips at the cooper's; cartropes and plough-harness at the saddler's; carts, wheelbarrows, and mill-gear at the wheelwright's and machinist's; horse-embroccations at the chemist's; at the glover's and leather-cutter's, hedging-gloves, thatcher's knee-caps, ploughman's
leggings, villager's pattens and clogs.**

On the heath is the furse-cutter who carries a leg of hook and leather gloves and whose are sheathed in the typical bulging leggings; the peat or turf-cutter who carries across his shoulder the singular heart-shaped spade used in that species of labor. Here too we get a picture of the reddeleman who supplied farmers with redding for their sheep. that blood-colored figure the pursuit of whose trade meant "periodical journeys to the pit whence the material was dug, a regular camping out from month to month except in the depth of winter, a peregrination among farms which could be counted by the hundred, and in spite of this Arab existence the preservation of that respectability which is insured by the never-failing production of a well-lined purse".**

The story of The Mayor of Casterbridge centers around the hay and grain trade. Far from the Madding Crowd is set amidst the activities of the shepherds,- lambing, sheep-washing, grinding the shears, the shearing of the sheep with the shearing supper following, and the unforgettable sheep fair. There are also a few incidental pictures of the straw-ricks and the mowers.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles depicts most vividly the life of the Great Dairies. We watch the milking, skimming,
churning, and cheese-making. In the latter part of the book we have the harsh pictures of swede-hacking, swede-trimming, reed-drawing, and threshing, and the Candelmas Fair where new engagements were entered into for the twelve months following the ensuing Lady-Day when the general annual migrations from farm to farm began.

Under the Greenwood Tree centers around the activities of the old string band composed of the tranter, the boot and shoe maker and other artisans of the village. The action of The Trumpet-Mayor moves in and around an old flour-mill. In the tale of The Distracted Preacher we see the inner workings of the smuggling trade. The background of The Woodlanders is life in the timber and orchard districts. There was the hollow-turner with his wares — wooden-bowls, dishes, epigots, spoons, cheese-vats, funnels, and so on; there were spar-makers, top and bottom sawyers, and itinerant journey-workers besides the timber-merchants themselves. Then there was the trade of the cider-maker, for around the Hintock villages was made the best cider and cider-wine in all Wessex.

These were the trades and this was the life of the Wessex peasants. They were close to the soil, almost a part of it.

Here in Wessex "the instincts of merry England lingered on with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of
the year were yet a reality".* With a certain degree of stolidity and with little enthusiasm and fervor but with an unquestioning loyalty to the custom and tradition of their people the lads of Egdon performed the Christmas mumming, and presented the play of Saint George and the Dragon, showing that this folk-custom was in the last stage of its survival. It was witnessed and received in the same spirit:

"The remainder of the play ended.... Nobody commented, any more than they would have commented on the fact of mushrooms coming in autumn or snowdrops in spring. They took the piece as phlegmatically as did the actors themselves. It was a phase of cheerfulness which was, as a matter of course, to be passed through every Christmas; and there was no more to be said".*

On the fifth of November we see the whole heath country alight by the blaze of the bonfires of Rainbarrow and the surrounding parishes and hamlets.

"It was as if these men and boys (the bonfire-makers) had suddenlydived into past ages, and fetched therefrom an hour and a deed which had before been familiar with this

* The Return of the Native
** The Return of the Native
spot. The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now. Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. Indeed it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.*

Another survival of the old folk customs is the skimmity ride to which there is a reference in The Return of the Native, and of which a full account is given in The Mayor of Casterbridge. As the landlady of Peter's Finger Inn in Mixen Lane explained concerning skimmity-riding, "'tis a' old foolish thing they do in these parts when a man's wife is ___well not too particularly his own". In this specific instance of the reproduction of this cruel custom effigies of the victims were placed on a donkey back to back with their elbows tied to one another's. These were paraded around the streets to the sound of rude

*The Return of the Native
music and the roar of sarcastic laughter.

Another interesting custom that we have recorded in both The Woodlanders and Under the Greenwood Tree is that of marching two and two around the parish or hamlet after a wedding.

Samuel C. Chew in his Bryn Mawr Notes on Thomas Hardy calls the wife-selling episode in The Mayor of Casterbridge "a barbarous relic of a less civilized age".

In The Return of the Native we have an account of the annual raffle promoted by a packman from a distant town, at which "every man puts in a shilling apiece and one wins a gown-piece for his wife or sweetheart if he's got one".

The club revel or club-walking as it was called, terminating in a dance on the village green in celebration of May Day still survived in Marlott. Here the women and girls, each dressed in a white gown and carrying in her right hand a peeled willow wand and in her left a bunch of white flowers, formed in a processional march of two and two round the parish and finally entered the allotted space where the dancing began.

On the margin of Egdon Heath in a lovely May sunset we see the young people from within a radius of a couple of miles gathered around the May-pole for their May-revel and dance, to the music of an enthusiastic brass band with
"apparently wind enough among its members to blow down a house". The May-pole itself is a picture; at the top were 
"crossed hoops decked with small flowers; beneath these 
came a milk-white zone of Maybloom; then a zone of bluebells, 
then of cowslips, then of lilacs, then of ragged-robin, 
daffodils, and so on, till the lowest stage was reached".*

The dance was a necessary adjunct to every festivi-

ity. Being naturally a primitive expression of joy, it 
finds a place in all of the revelry of the peasants. As 
Timothy Fairway said,

"You be bound to dance at Christmas be-
cause 'tis the time o' year; you must dance at 
weddings because 'tis the time o' life. At 
christenings folk will even smuggle in a reel or 
two, if 'tis no further on than the first or sec-
ond chiel. And this is not naming the songs 
you've got to sing.... For my part I like a good 
hearty funeral as well as anything. You've as 
splendid victuals and drink as at other parties, 
and even better. And it don't wear your legs to 
stumps in talking over a poor fellow's ways as 
it do to stand up in hornpipes.'

'Hire folks out of ten would own 'twas 
going too far to dance then, I suppose?' said 
Grandfer Cantle inquiringly.

* The Return of the Native
'Tis the only sort of party a staid man can feel safe at after the mug have been round a few times.'*

And although Fairway remarks that a "wedding at home means five and six-handed reels by the hour, and they do a man's legs no good when he's over forty", still when the Fifth-of-November bonfire had burned to ashes and the spirit of the festival was in his blood we see this same Timothy Fairway seizing the form of Susan Nunsuch, lifting her bodily from the ground and whisking her off towards the space where the fire had been kindled where he whirled her round and round in a mad dance, their feet stirring up the dying embers and "playing like drumsticks among the sparks".

"The vagary of Timothy Fairway was infectious. The turf-cutter seised old Olly Dowden, and, somewhat more gently, poussetted with her likewise. The young men were not slow to imitate the example of their elders, and seised the maids; Grandfather Cottle and his stick jigged in the form of a three-legged object among the rest........ The chief noises were women's shrill cries, men's laughter, Susan's stays and pattens, Olly Dowden's 'hem-hem-hem!' and the strumming of the wind upon the furze-bushes, which formed

*The Return of the Native
a kind of tune to the demoniac measure they trod".*

And such dances! Though the world beyond Wessex had moved on to the more graceful steps of the polka, the dances that the peasants enjoyed were the old country dances, reels and jigs. At the Yeomanry Ball at Castlebridge as given in the Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid they indulged in dances like the "New-rigged Ship" and "Fellow My Lover", "Haste to the Wedding" and the "College Hornpipe", the "Favorite Quickstep", and "Captain White's Dance". The names in themselves are suggestive of the nature of the dances. At the harvest supper and dance given by Sergeant Troy the most popular dance to the music produced by three fiddles and a tambourine was "The Soldier's Joy".

"As to the merits of "The Soldier's Joy", there cannot be, and never were, two opinions. It has been observed in the musical circles of Weatherbury and its vicinity that this melody, at the end of three-quarters of an hour of thunderous footing, still possesses more stimulative properties for the heel and toe than the majority of other dances at their first opening. "The Soldier's Joy" has, too, the additional charm, in being so admirably adapted to the tambourine aforesaid — no mean instru-

*The Return of the Native
ment in the hands of a performer who understands the proper convulsions, spasms, St. Vitus' dances, and fearful frenzies necessary when exhibiting its tones in their highest perfection."

Five country dances, including "Haste to the Wedding", two reels, and three fragments of hornpipes brought the guests at the wedding of Fancy Day and Dick Dewey to the time for supper. At the tranter's Christmas party described in Under the Greenwood Tree it was only with great difficulty that Old William refrained the young people from dancing until after midnight but, as Mrs. Penny remarked, "If you do have a party on Christmas-day-night, 'tis only fair and honourable to the Church o' England to have it a sit-still party".

"At five minutes to twelve the soft tuning was again heard in the back quarters; and when at length the clock had whizzed forth the last stroke, Dick appeared ready primed, 

The country dance called the 'Triumph, or Follow my Lover' was the figure with which they opened."

* Far from the Madding Crowd
**Under the Greenwood Tree
It was with great reluctance that any space was allotted to the gaffers and gammers whose dancing days were over, and it was most unwillingly that these older people admitted that they had reached that class.

There was scarcely a party or a wedding or a festivity of any kind that did not include the dance. The music was furnished by a few local musicians or by a band imported from some neighboring town. The serpent was the chief wind instrument played at these times but the tambourine seemed to be considered a great asset. The selections ranged from "Nancy's Fancy" to the celebrated "Devil's Dream", that one air "without any particular beginning, middle, or end, which perhaps, among all the dances which throng an inspired fiddler's fancy, best conveys the idea of the interminable".

The village picnic, or gypsying as they called it, at East Egdon gives a vivid picture of the natives of the heath in the heat of the spirit of revelry:

"The site chosen for the village festivity was one of the lawn-like cases which were occasionally, yet not often, met with on the plateaux of the heath district. The brakes of furze and fern terminated abruptly round the margin, and the grass was unbroken..... The lusty notes of the East Egdon band had directed her (Eustacia) unerringly, and she now
beheld the musicians themselves, sitting in a blue wagon with red wheels scrubbed as bright as new, and arched with sticks, to which boughs and flowers were tied. In front of this was the grand central dance of fifteen or twenty couples, flanked by minor dances of inferior individuals whose gyrations were not always in strict keeping with the tune.

"The young men wore blue and white rosettes, and with a flush on their faces footed it to the girls, who, with the excitement and the exercise, blushed deeper than the pink of their numerous ribbons. Fair ones with long curls, fair ones with short curls, fair ones with love-looks, fair ones with braids, flew round and round...... In the background was one happy man dancing by himself, with closed eyes, totally oblivious of all the rest......

"A whole village—full of sensuous emotion, scattered abroad all the year long, surged here in a focus for an hour. The forty hearts of those waving couples were beating as they had not done since, twelve months before, they had come together in similar jollity. For the time Paganism was revived in their hearts,
the pride of life was all in all, and they
adored none other than themselves."*

The final verdict of the peasants in regard to
dancing may be expressed in the words of Mr. Spinks.
"Dancing," he said, "is a most strengthening, livening,
and courting movement, 'specially with a little beverage
added! And dancing is good."**

If dancing were a natural expression of a rather
primitive people drink was an essential concomitant. ___
Drink was a necessity not only to the expression of joy
but to every emotion and to life itself. According to
the tranter, "a man's not himself till he is fortified
wi' a bit and a drop". As to sorrows, there were two
ways of getting rid of them: one by living them down,
the other by drowning them, but most of the peasants
chose the latter course.

On every occasion they had their drink, at
every festivity, and at none. We find it served at choir
practice; the charivari-ers at the home of Wildeve agree
that "there isn't a prettier drink under the sun", as
they pass around the beaker of mead; we see the maudlin
party of the soldiers with Festus Derriman where "they

*The Return of the Native
**Under the Greenwood Tree
were drinking, laughing, singing, thumping their fists on the tables, and enjoying themselves in the very perfection of confusion”; and we witness the debauchery of the rustic farmers under the influence of Sergeant Troy. It was the drink which they had that seemed to throw a “warm halo” over every occasion. It was a potent force. Geoffrey Day says of old Knoch, “the man’s not himself now; he’s in his morning frame of mind. When he’s had a gallon o’ cider or ale, or a pint of two of mead, the man’s well enough, and his manners be as good as anybody’s in the kingdom”. *

The malt - or ale houses were the meeting places of the villagers — where they exchanged news and philosophies. Very few who came to Warren’s Malthouse at Weatherbury could resist the God-forgive-me mug.

"which was a two-handled tall mug standing in the ashes, cracked and charred with heat; it was rather furred with extraneous matter about the outside, especially in the crevices of the handles, the innermost curves of which may not have seen daylight for several years by reason of this encrustation therein — formed of ashes accidentally wetted with cider and baked hard; but to the mind of any sensible

*Under the Greenwood Tree
drinker the cup was no worse for that, being incontestably clean on the inside and about the rim. It may be observed that such a class of mug is called a God-forgive-me in Weatherbury and its vicinity for uncertain reasons; probably because its size makes any given toper feel ashamed of himself when he sees its bottom in drinking it empty".*

It was at such a place as this alehouse that Old Joseph Poorglass usually acquired that affliction called a "multiplying eye". It was to the inner sanctuary of Rolliver's Inn where that head of the Durbyfield family took all of the sorrows and joys of his flock, there where people could reach that stage of mental comfort "wherein their souls seemed to expand beyond their skins, spreading their personalities warmly through the room".**

At Casterbridge there prevailed a convivial custom among the church-goers:

"On the afternoon of every Sunday a large contingent of the Casterbridge journeymen — steady church-goers and sedate characters — having attended service, filed from the church doors across the way to the Three Mariners Inn. The rear was usually brought up by the choir, with their

*Far from the Madding Crowd

**Far from the Madding Crowd
bass-violins, fiddles, and flutes under their arms.

"The great point, the point of honour, on these sacred occasions was for each man to strictly limit himself to half a pint of liquor".\(^*\)
The Casterbridge strong beer was renowned:

"It was of the most beautiful colour that the eye of an artist in beer could desire; full in body, yet brisk as a volcano; piquant, yet without a twang; luminous as an autumn sunset; free from streakiness of taste; but, finally, rather heady. The masses worshipped it, the minor gentry loved it more than wine, and by the most illustrious county families it was not despised."\(^{**}\)

Most of the men of Wessex seemed to know the merits of its liquor.

To this peasantry there still clung tenaciously the old superstitions and folk-lore, and although the education of the younger generation was tending to suppress this credulity, still it was by no means obliterated. The best known of these superstitions is the melting of a waxen image as a mode of revenge or a means of

\(^*\) The Mayor of Casterbridge
\(^{**}\) The Trumpet Major
getting rid of an enemy. The idea is used in The Return of the Native where Susan Nunsuch melts the image of Eustacia to counteract a malign spell which she imagined her to have been working.

"On a shelf over the pane was a smooth and solid yellow mass of a hemispherical form, consisting of beeswax.........Susan took down the lump, and, cutting off several thin slices, heaped them in an iron ladle, with which she returned to the living-room, and placed the vessel in the hot ashes of the fireplace. As soon as the wax had softened to the plasticity of dough she kneaded the pieces together. And now her face became more intent. She began moulding the wax; and it was evident from her manner of manipulation that she was endeavoring to give it some preconceived form. The form was human.

"By warming and kneading, cutting and twisting, dismembering and rejoining the incipient image she had in about a quarter of an hour produced a shape which tolerably well resembled a woman, and was about six inches high.........

"Susan held the object at arm's length
and contemplated it with a satisfaction in which there was no smile. To anybody acquainted with the inhabitants of Egdon Heath the image would have suggested Eustacia Yeobright.

"From her work-basket in the window-seat the woman took a paper of pins ...... These she began to thrust into the image in all directions, with apparently excruciating energy. Probably as many as fifty were thus inserted, some into the head of the wax model, some into the shoulders, some into the trunk, some upwards through the soles of the feet, till the figure was completely permeated with pins.

"She turned to the fire. It had been of turf; and though the high heap of ashes which turf fires produce was somewhat dark and dead on the outside, upon raking it abroad with the shovel the inside of the mass showed a glow of red heat. She took a few pieces of fresh turf from the chimney-corner and built them together upon which the fire brightened. Seizing with the tongs the image that she had made of Eustacia, she held it in the heat, and watched it as it began to waste slowly away. And while she stood thus engaged, there came from between her lips
a murmur of words.

"It was a strange jargon—the Lord's Prayer repeated backwards—the incantation usual in proceedings for obtaining unhallowed assistance against an enemy. Susan uttered the lugubrious discourse three times slowly and when it was completed the image has considerably diminished. As the wax dropped into the fire a long flame arose from the spot, and curling its tongue round the figure advanced still further into its substance. A pin occasionally dropped with the wax, and the embers heated it red as it lay."

A short time before this Susan Munro had pricked Miss Vye with a long "stocking-needle" to draw her blood and put an end to the suspected bewitching of Susan's children.

Witches and devils were commonly believed in by the Wessex rustics. Eustacia Vye was suspected of witchcraft simply because she was different, because she was "always up to some odd conceit or other"; The notoriety of Elizabeth Endorfield in Under the Greenwood Tree was founded on the following items of character:

*The Return of the Native*
"She was shrewd and penetrating; her house stood in a lonely place; she never went to church; she wore a red cloak; she always retained her bonnet indoors; and she had a pointed chin."

Fitspiers in The Woodlanders because of his laboratory experiments and superior intelligence was thought to have sold his soul to the devil. In "The Withered Arm", Gertrude Lodge's affliction is explained as a curse of her enemy, Rhoda Brooks, and Conjurer Trendle recommends as a cure that she lay the withered member across the neck of a man newly hanged to "turn the blood". It was the son of this same conjurer whom Dairyman Crick in Tess of the D'Urbervilles, considered consulting when the butter would not come. It was thought possible among the dairymen that the presence of some one in love might keep the butter from "coming".

When the cows do not give their milk abundantly, some one suggests that "'tis because there's a new hand come among us". A dairymaid states that she had been told that at such times the milk goes up into their horns. "Folks", said Farmer Crick, "we must lift up a stave or two—that's the only cure for it". And so "the band of milkers at this request burst into melody—in purely business-like tones..... the result, according to their own belief, being a decided improvement during the song's continuance". **

**Tess of the D'Urbervilles
Michael Henchard goes in June to consult an old man of curious repute to get the forecast of the weather for August. Acting upon his prophecy—"by the sun, moon, and stars, by the clouds, the winds, the trees, and grass, the candle-flame and swallows, the smell of the herbs; likewise by the cat's eyes, the ravens, the leeches, the spiders, and the dung-mixen, the last fortnight in August will be rain and tempest"—Henchard bought grain to fill his graneries to choking, although he declared that he didn't altogether believe in forecasts.

The Blackmoor Vale teemed with beliefs in "green-spangled fairies that 'wickered' at you as you passed" and with stories of witches that had been pricked and ducked.

In the house of the Durbeyfields was a copy of The Compleat Fortune-Teller, a thick volume, "so worn by pocketing that the margins had reached the edge of the type", and so potent was its influence considered that Mrs. Durbeyfield feared to leave it in the house over night and had it put in the wood-shed every evening.

Tess considers it an ill-omen when she pricks her chin on the thorn of a rose. The sound of a non-existent coach which could be heard only by one of the D'Urberville blood, was held to portend evil to the one

**The Mayor of Casterbridge**
who heard it. When the cock crowed three times as Tess and Clare Angel were departing after their wedding, it cast a gloom over the dairy people for an afternoon crow was a grim portent.

Conjurer Trendle in The Withered Arm shows Mrs. Lodge the likeness of her enemy by putting the white of an egg in a glass of water.

In Far From the Madding Crowd, Liddy persuades Bathsheba to endeavor to find out whom she was going to marry by means of the Bible and a Key. On Old Midsummer Eve the maidens of Little Hintock attempted by a nocturnal sowing of a handful of hemp-seed in the deeper recesses of the wood to get a glimpse of their future partners for life, and by some manner of hole-digging at twelve the next day they might hear their husbands' trades. The maids in Under the Greenwood Tree follow the directions in a witch's book in order to see their future husbands.

The slender wits of Christian Cantle are attributed to the fact that he was born when there was no moon, for as Mr. Fairway remarked, "'No moon, no man.' 'Tis one of the truest sayings ever spit out".*

Olym Yeobright thought he felt a premonition of disaster when he aimlessly took the path leading to the home of Susan Bunsuch which brought a revelation of such sorrow to him.

*The Return of the Native
In The Interlopers at the Knap we see the old custom of waking the bees by tapping their hives whenever a death occurred in the household, "under the belief that if this were not done the bees themselves would pine away and perish during the ensuing year".

Such smouldering beliefs as these were deeply imbedded in the minds of the people of Wessex.

The Mallstock Choir gives us an excellent picture of the typical Wessex peasant whose old rank was giving place to new and becoming a tradition. It is a detailed and humorous picture with a background of great charm and beauty. In the darkness of a lonely lane near Mallstock Cross where the path was hedged by dense copse-wood and the white stars shone through the silver and black-stemmed birches, the pale gray boughs of beech and the dark-creviced elm of the bordering woods we have gathering the chief portion of the Mallstock parish choir.

Dick Dewey, having escaped the bower of trees, could now be distinctly seen rising against the sky, "his profile appearing on the light background like the portrait of a gentleman in black cardboard. It assumed the form of a low-crowned hat, an ordinary-shaped nose, an ordinary chin, an ordinary neck, and ordinary shoulders. What he consisted of further down
was invisible from lack of sky low enough to picture him on.

"Shuffling, halting, irregular footsteps of various kinds were now heard, coming up the hill from the dark interior of the grove, and presently there emerged severally five men of different ages and gaits ..... They, too, had lost their rotundity with the daylight, and advanced against the sky in flat outlines, which suggested some processional design on Greek or Etruscan pottery. ..... 

"The first was a bowed and bent man, who carried a fiddle under his arm, and walked as if engaged in studying some subject connected with the surface of the road. He was Michael Mail, the man who had balloced to Dick.

"The next was Mr. Robert Penny, boot-and shoe-maker; a little man, who, though rather round-shouldered, walked as if that fact had not come to his own knowledge, moving on with his back very hollow and his face fixed on the north-east quarter of the heavens before him, so that his lower waistcoat-buttons came first, and then the remainder of his figure. His features were invisible; yet when he occasionally looked round,
two faint moons of light glistened for an instant from the precincts of his eyes, denoting that he wore spectacles of a circular form.

"The third was Elias Spinks, who walked perpendicularly and dramatically. The fourth outline was Joseph Bowman's, who had now no distinctive appearance beyond that of a human being. Finally came a weak lath-like form, trotting and stumbling along with one shoulder forward and his head inclined to the left, his arms dangling nervelessly in the wind as if they were empty sleeves. This was Thomas Leaf".

Homely men they were, all of them working villagers of the parish of Molland who perhaps little appreciated the beauties and wonders of the night, who were possibly not deeply impressed by the faint sound of the church-bells ringing a Christmas peal that came floating over upon the breeze from the direction of Longpuddle and Weatherbury parishes on the other side of the hills. Their hearts were not warmed with the spirit of Christmas. Life to them, even in its lighter aspects was too grim for an appreciation of the beauty of light and shadow, of soft tones, of stardust and the mystery of the Christ-life. Life was life — the mere living — and as they trudged on to Dick's house they talked not of Magi and stars but of tapping another barrel and of how much of drink a
men could consume before bedtime.

This was the Mollstock parish choir—homely figures against a beautiful background. And yet these common people, crude, unrefined, prosaic in themselves, formed a picture and made a poem, as the cider-mug was emptied for the ninth time, the music-books were arranged and the pieces finally decided upon, the old horn-lanterns put in order and candles cut into short lengths to fit the lanterns, and they set forth to sing the Christmas carols at every house in the parish of Mollstock.

"The older men and musicians wore thick coats, with stiff perpendicular collars, and coloured handkerchiefs wound round and round the neck till the end came to hand, over all which they just showed their ears and noses, like people looking over a wall. The remainder, stalwart ruddy men and boys, were dressed mainly in snow-white smock-frocks, embroidered upon the shoulders and breasts, in ornamental forms of hearts, diamonds, and zigzags.........

"Old William Dewey, with the violin-cello, played the bass; his grandson Dick played the treble violin; and Reuben and Michael Mail the tenor and second violins respectively. The singers consisted of four men and seven boys upon
whom devolved the task of carrying and attending to the lanterns, and holding the books open for the players.

"Just before the clock struck twelve they lighted the lanterns and started. The moon, in her third quarter, had risen since the snow-storm; but the dense accumulation of snow-cloud weakened her power to a faint twilight, which was rather pervasive of the landscape than traceable to the sky. The breeze had gone down, and the rustle of their feet and tones of their speech echoed with an alert rebound from every post, boundary-stone, and ancient wall they passed, even where the distance of the echo's origin was less than a few yards. Beyond their own slight noises nothing was to be heard save the occasional bark of foxes in the direction of Yalbury Wood, or the brush of a rabbit among the grass now and then, as it scampered out of their way."

This is the picture, a picture of an old order which was passing away. Such a picture can be made only by the humble, by those who live in simplicity, by such people as Millet saw and Breton. Such people unassumingly and unconsciously form the background of life and, graced

* Under the Greenwood Tree
by the hand of an artist, they are pictures; they become music and poetry. These were the old string-players who were being supplanted by a new order, by clar'nets— which Michael Mail says "be bad at all times", and Mr. Penny brands as "not made for the service of the Lord"— and serpents. However we are inclined to agree with Mr. Spinks that "strings be safe soul-lifters" and with William Dewey when he says that "nothing will spak to your heart wi' the sweetness o' the man of strings".

This was the old order. There they stood in the snow on Christmas-morn and having formed a semicircle, the boys opening the lanterns to get a clearer light and directing their rays on the books, they sang "Number seventy-eight".

"Then passed forth into the quiet night an ancient and time-worn hymn, embodying Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations down to the present characters who sang them out right earnestly:
Give thanks to God alway,
O thou Man:
Give thanks to God alway
With heart-most joy.
Give thanks to God alway
On this our joyful day:
Let all men sing and say,
Holy, Holy!"*

Joyce Kilmer speaks of Hardy's "lovely pictures of Wessex hills and valleys and its most unlovely pictures of Wessex men and women". These figures and the lives they lead, to some unlovely in themselves, are sketched against a lovely background. Like Gabriel Oak, we too have the feeling that there is some charm in this rustic life when we look upon the earth and sky and regard it as a work of art superlatively beautiful. We see Spring coming, Spring in Wessex—

"that point in the development of the seasons when country people go to bed among nearly naked trees, and awake next morning among green ones; when the landscape appears embarrassed with the sudden weight and brilliancy of its leaves; when the night-jar comes and strikes up for the summer his tune of one note; when the apple-trees have

*Under the Greenwood Tree
bloomed, and the roads and orchards become spotted with fallen petals; when the faces of the delicate flowers are darkened, and their heads weighed down by the throng of honey-bees, which increase in their humming till humming is too mild a term for the all-pervading sound; and when cuckoos, blackbirds, and sparrows, that have hitherto been merry and respectful neighbors, become noisy and persistent inmates.**

Nothing could be more lovely than the woodland district where people walked "noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots, whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days, and ran down their stems in green cascades"; and the cider country where "over the vale the air was blue as sapphire—such a blue as outside that apple-valley was never seen. Under the blue the orchards were in a blaze of bloom".**

What could be a more beautiful route for a wedding party than "now among dark perpendicular firs, like the shafted columns of a cathedral; now through a hazel copse, matted with primroses and wild hyacinths;

*Under the Greenwood Tree
**The Woodlanders
now under broad beeches in bright young leaves,...
into the high road over Yalbury Hill"!*

Such a description as this of the home of
Reuben Dewey at Mellstock might be given for a romantic
set in a modern cinema:

"It was a long low cottage with a
hipped roof of thatch, breaking up into the
eaves, a chimney standing in the middle of the
ridge and another at the further end. The
window shutters were not yet closed, and the
fire and candle-light within radiated forth
upon the thick bushes of box and laurestinus
growing in clumps outside, and upon the bare
boughs of several codlin-trees hanging about
in various distorted shapes, the result of
early training as espaliers combined with
careless climbing into their boughs in later
years. The walls of the dwelling were for the
most part covered with creepers, though these
were rather beaten back from the doorway—a
feature which was worn and scratched by much
passing in and out, giving it by day the ap-
pearance of an old keyhole."**

*Under the Greenwood Tree
** Under the Greenwood Tree
But within Hardy's low thatch-roofed, vine-covered cottage is the life of the Wessex downs, the life of Reuben Dewey, the tranter, with his wife and five children, which on this particular Christmas-Eve involved the tapping of a hogshead of cider. The candle-lighted room is filled with the crude jocularity of Reuben, the homely dialect of the common people of the moors, and their lusty singing of Christmas carols.

There comes to be a certain fascination in the life of these rustics. As Mrs. Malbury says in The Woodlanders, "things gradually get familiar, and stone floors seem not so very cold and hard, and the hooting of the owls not so very dreadful, and loneliness not so very lonely, after a while".

Perhaps some of Hardy's settings do deserve a more graceful story. We wonder how people could live in such atmospheres and not appreciate their beauty and reflect it in their lives. But the people remain the same, uncultured, crude, primitive, some slack-twisted and thin-witted, not as lovely as the landscapes but outgrowths of the soil and almost smelling of the earth. Herein lies the true art of Hardy, in the depiction of the life of these people of soil, and those novels such as A Laodicean, The Hand of Ethelberta, and Two on a Tower, that lack this fine background of people and place are his inferior works.
Hardy's plots are weakened by the excessive employment of coincidence and sensational events; his conversation, with the exception of that of the peasants sometimes becomes insipid and highly unnatural; his writings abound in crude or forced comparisons; and as a whole his works lack charm and sweetness. He seems to be interested more in what he has to say than in how he says it. The life of the Wessex farms and villages, however, Hardy paints with the hand of an artist who loves the subject of his work, but his people lack imagination and he leaves them entirely bereft of hope.

The moving sun-shapes on the spray,
The sparkles where the brook was flowing,
Pink faces, plightings, moonlit May,
These were the things we wished would stay;

But they were going.

Seasons of blankness as of snow,
The silent bleed of a world decaying,
The moan of multitudes in woe,
These were the things we wished would go;

But they were staying.*

This is life to Thomas Hardy, the realist.

*Going and Staying