

Thomas Hardy's treatment of Victorian cultural concepts in his poetry

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Abstract

The study intends to deal with Thomas Hardy's attitude towards Victorian cultural concepts in his poetry. Patriotic feelings, war God, love, prodigal child, nature, fidelity of animals, hope, and death are among the Victorian cultural concepts which are presented and parodied in Hardy's poems. He also ironically treats both rural and urban landscape images which were prevalent in the poetry of his time. The rural images including flowers, mountains, birds, sky, rivers, the sea, stars, are presented as observers of human pains and sufferings. The atmosphere of callousness and indifference is ruling over both rural and urban landscape images and man's sufferings seem not to matter in Hardy's poems at least as the poems in this study show. It should be noted that even in poems with rural images, the harsh and pessimistic tone of Hardy is striking and shadows the sympathy with rural simplicity. With urban life, Hardy is even less sympathetic.

Keywords: Irony, Parody, Poetry, Thomas Hardy, Victorian Cultural Concepts

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Introduction

Victorianism was quite pervasive in the era of Thomas Hardy and the poetry of his time reflected the cultural elements and motifs of Victorian times. However, there is a catch here as asserted by Marsden (2014) Victorian values are difficult to be generalized, because Victorian society was not a uniform world where all people thought and acted similarly. Rather, it was both rich and complex. Victorian and sentimental concepts such as the blessings of domestic affections, the piety of married love, in which a woman was almost a property of a man, modest and selfless angel in the house acting as the ornament of a man's house (Shastalo, 2018), punishments and repentance of sin, significance of piety and virtue, attempts to prevent and punish vice, immorality and dishonor (Himmelfarb, 1996), blessings of poor people, fidelity of dogs and pets, the virtues of nature and rural life in contrast with the tact and hypocrisy of urban civilization and images of flowers, the sun, moon, trees, lambs, birds, etc were abundant in Victorian poetry and also in romantic poetry which Hardy had probably read because romanticism presented itself in Victorian poetry as a number of Victorian poets were influenced by their romantic predecessors. Other Victorian values which held for both men and more specifically for women included innocence, modesty, obedience, softness, tenderness, and nobility. The beauty of a woman was not especially important. In line with his own mission or what Hardy defines as his duty as a poet he depicts Victorianism as an object of mockery because as a naturalist believing in the force of heredity and environment as manipulators of human destiny, he cannot accept the idealism of Victorian poetry (Siemens, 1977).

The present study enumerates a few prevalent Victorian cultural concepts, themes and images which have been reflected in the poetry of Hardy and attempts to display how differently they are treated from their usual presentations in Victorian poetry. We have just included poems of Thomas Hardy and where applicable, other related poets' works. We have not mentioned Victorian poets who have had positive attitude or negative attitude towards the above cultural values. Moreover, only a few of the most famous poems of Hardy have been selected for this study. Our main source for the poems of Hardy was Hardy & Gibson (1978). Other major works like Abrams (2006), Ferguson, Salter, & Stallworthy (2005), Abrams & Greenblatt (2000) were also used.

Victorian Cultural Values and Concepts

One of the most controversial concepts in Victorian poetry is the concept and definition of "nature". For some Victorian poets' nature or more specifically Nature was displayed as a source of inspiration and vision somehow similar to romantics, and for several of them nature was an object of description ... However, to display the relationship of nature in Thomas Hardy's poems with nature in Victorian poetry, a very brief explanation of Hardy's view of the universe, and of man's relation to nature and his standing in the universe can be illuminating. But more importantly is the meaning of nature for Hardy. Joseph Warren Beach (1966) asserts that nature in Thomas Hardy's poetry never begins with a capital N. and he vigorously refutes the benevolence of nature. Beach continues that in Hardy's poetry nature is neither benevolent nor malevolent, it is simply indifferent. Whereas, for the Victorians nature had the attributions of the religious or divine providence. Although nature had lost its appeal as a source of inspiration and vision for Hardy, it was still a source of mystery for him. In 1887 Hardy had commented "I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty but not as a Mystery" (Emily1962). Being mysterious, nature is difficult to be defined in Hardy; nevertheless, we can cautiously say that it is was different from the run of the mill romantic and Victorian nature poems. Simmions (1972) does not see Hardy's treatment of nature as mystery rather he believes that Hardy sought for the beauty of ugliness in nature. He depicts an ugly aspect of nature in the "Darkling Thrush" where the speaker of the poem pictures a very gloomy landscape and he himself seems to be infatuated with an aged, ugly thrush. While, the romantics and a number of lesser Victorian poets, according to Siemens (1972) sometimes apostrophized nature, Hardy hardly did it. He searched for an anti-romantic aesthetic of ugliness which he thought as a response to the ugly realities of a hostile post –Darwinian world. The romantic concept of the universe is religious and pantheistic (Joseph Warren Beach 1966). For Hardy nature is neither benevolent nor divine. If the vital force which works in nature is not divine, it can be concluded that the force in man is not divine either and this is how Hardy, to a great extent, perceives man in the universe and in relations to nature (Carolynn Wartes1978). Mohammed (2018) states that Hardy displays the naked condition of both nature and land and the place of man in the universe. For him nature and environment are similar. Hardy portrays nature as a setting which consciously or unconsciously has direct impact on man's life. Therefore, Nature is not a source of inspiration or vision as it is in romantic poetry and to some extent in Victorian poetry. In Hardy's "In a Wood" the trees are not providers of serenity and peace; they

follow the Darwinian pattern of struggle for life as they are portrayed like combatants similar to men who fight for existence.

Due to some advancements in science, Victorians were preoccupied with the concept of God and man's relation with God. Although a pessimistic agnostic (Jean R. Brooks 1971), Hardy was not an exception to this general rule of his time and he was also concerned with God issue and was under the influence of the science of Victorian era and his notions collided with Darwin. Denis Fong Tsembong (2016) believes that although an atheist, Hardy was occupied with the concept of God in his poems. In "Hap" accident, chance and time have replaced God who is surprisingly written with small "g" in this poem. Being ruled by chance and accidents, man for Hardy was not so much different from the other species and he attempted to present man as victim of heredity and environment which were embodied in chance and accident. Man in Hardy's poetry has to witness and suffer and both nature and "god" are quite indifferent to him. This perception of man and his conditions and position has influenced and shaped much of Hardy's poetry. Moreover, the virtues prescribed and practiced by Victorian poets who were themselves much influenced by romantic bards such as Wordsworth, and Coleridge, were not propagated by Hardy as Siemens (1972) aptly asserts the values of Victorian Christianity such as humbleness and modesty had no place in Hardy's poetry who had chosen to purge his work from the tact, hypocrisy and complacency of Victorian culture.

According to Siemens (1972), Hardy depicts ironically the usual sentimental clichés of his time which had been studded in the minds of the women of his age. The lovers in Hardy do not mind being separated. In fact, they regret unification. The house of the newly-wed is dark and lonesome and few people come there and the bride wishes to be back with her father. In "The Curate's Kindness" the husband is happy to be free from his married life which he sees as a chain. Hardy made fun of the album verses of his era. In other words, as Virginia Woolf (1954) stated Hardy's poems did not make proper wedding presents. In Hardy's "The Homecoming", his treatment of love, as a cultural concept, does not lead to shedding tears by female audience. In the "Dark-Eyed Gentlemen", the unchaste mother does not seem to be regretful of her illegitimate son and believes that the child brings no harm and sorrow. The intention of the poet is to portray the insignificance of adultery and the fact that the illegitimate son is no source of sorrow. In the "Ruined Maid" the woman who is not ruined yearns for all the good and beautiful things which the ruined one now possesses.

The story of the prodigal daughter or son which happened quite frequently in Victorian poetry was depicted ironically by Hardy. In "A Daughter Returns" we don't observe a repentant

weeping girl rather a girl who is still as innocent as before and at the same time still has brightness in her eyes. Siemens (1972) compares this poem with Tennyson's "Queen of the May" which was written only two years before Hardy's "Daughter Returns" and concludes that Hardy intended to parody the prodigal child which was a common theme of the Victorian time. Simmons sees the poem an attempt to make fun of Tennyson's poem. In "Cross-Currents" the speaker gives the agitated hopeless girl a common stereotype advice of the Victorian poets that in her abnormal relationship with her lover "Love will contrive a course" but the girl immediately responds that something might happen "Which robs that of its force". The girl has no faith in the power of love.

Death does not receive the usual sentimental response in Hardy's poetry and this callousness is not limited to married partners. A dead parent cannot expect to receive posthumous affections of her children or her relatives. Siemens states that even death of the husband does not receive the expected sentimental and Victorian response in Hardy's poems. In "Seen by The Waits" the woman is dancing in front of the mirror and does not care that her husband is dead. This poem belonging to Victorian era deals with the beliefs of Victorian time. The woman performs a solitary dance at night implying an attempt to get rid of social inhibitions and enjoying freedom. The ambiguous ending of the poem, without any explicit explanation for the woman's dance, brings a sense of mystery and leads the readers to speculate about the woman's motives and desires. In "Ah Are You digging on My Grave?" Among her speculations the woman guesses that the digger might be one of her relatives' planting flowers on her grave, but the digger assures her that her relatives have abandoned her saying that tending her grave does not make her alive. Moreover, she assumes that her husband might be digging on her grave to plant flowers but the digger assures her that he has married a rich woman and doesn't care where her grave is. Then she guesses that perhaps her enemy is upon her grave to do something wrong and the digger assures her that her enemy forgot her and she cares not where her grave is. Nursing the elderly parents is another motif of sentimental Victorian poetry rebuked by Hardy. In "The Orphaned Old Maid" The old single daughter laments spending her youth on a dying selfish father who did not let her marry and she says:

"But now father's gone, and I feel growing old,
And I'm lonely and poor in this house on the world,
And my sweetheart that was found a partner elsewhere,
And nobody flings me a thought or a care."

The old maid feels that she has been cheated of the pleasures of young age and her sweetheart is no longer available and the father has wasted her life. She sees herself lonely and poor in the parental house and no one thinks or cares about her.

Love does not receive the usual Victorian treatment in Hardy's poetry. In "I Said To Love", Hardy directly addresses love and dismisses the romantic associations and devices of love as if angrily he wants to prove that love is a lie. He says that love is not fair, it is not young, it doesn't have dove. Hardy suggests in this poem that falling in love happens out of immaturity because in youth the people invoke love to inflict agonies upon them. In this poem Hardy sees love an instigator of distress and sadness. "Love" is personified as an unkind man who showed him the positive sides of himself in the past. But now he has lost his wife, and love is giving him extreme agony and sadness. The speaker asks love to leave him at once and relieve his pain. Simions (1978) states that for Hardy exciting experiences fade away either by time or by knowledge and love may fade away by both. In "I Need not Go" an atmosphere of indifference pervades the whole poem about love. If the speaker delays and keeps the beloved waiting nothing important happens and he should not be chided. He may even finally decide not to go to the beloved at all.

Patriotic feelings and war are also depicted ironically by Hardy. In "The Man He Killed", the speaker uses a very colloquial language and employs slang expressions to refer to war. The irrationality of war is conveyed through this poem (Perrine, 1974). In the last stanza the speaker refers implicitly to the irrationality of war and justifies his failure for supplying a reason for killing his enemy by stating that war is "quaint and curious" because it makes you kill a person whom you could have been invited to a drink. The speaker of the poem states that he could have shared a drink with the man he killed if it were not for the war. He does not have any enmity with the man but he says that he was his foe but he cannot bring any reason why the man should be his foe. Hardy expresses the irrationality of war instead of discussing the patriotic feelings which were common in the Victorian era. "Drummer Hodge" is another war poem with a negative attitude towards war. A British soldier is dead in a foreign country and the poet laments his death and the fact that he will soon be forgotten and will change into a tree in a remote and strange land. Instead of talking about the young man's bravery in defending the interests of his nation, he pictures the soldier in a deplorable situation and displays the loss of human life for no acceptable reason.

Fidelity of animals which comes under the broad category of nature in romantic poetry and is observed in Victorian poetry is a concept which is parodied by Hardy. In "Ah, Are You Digging

on My Grave “, the theme of fidelity is put under question because the women in the grave is forsaken by her relatives, her loved one and even her enemy does not care where her grave is. In this misery, a glimpse of hope appears and the digger turns out to be the woman’s former pet “a little dog who still lives near”. However, the temporary comfort of the woman is shattered when the dog reveals his intention of burying a bone and the fact that he has forgotten her grave. In this poem, the last stanza is very important because it carries the whole burden of the poem’s intention and without this stanza the poem could have been an ordinary poem about the fidelity of pets.

Hope is another theme depicted ironically in Hardy’s poetry. “The Darkling Thrush” written on the last day of the nineteenth century is a poem in which Hardy reflects on the events of the nineteenth century, and his attitude to nature. He metaphorically shows the landscape as the corpse of the 19th century and on the last day of the 19th century he does not see any bright future for the coming century. The countryside is frozen, and the trees are crystallized in an icy, and unwelcoming landscape. Everything is dejected and gloomy and things move from dull and gloomy to total dismal. There seems to be no life whatsoever anywhere. At once a voice is heard singing from a death-bound, old, gray and gaunt thrush in whose voice there trembles a “hope” of which the speaker is not aware. Therefore, the messenger of hope is a dying bird whose song is not heard by anyone and there seems to be no reason for his joy and happiness. This fact that the ‘aged’ and ‘small’ thrush can sing a song full of ‘joy illimited’ shows a great contrast with the speaker’s lack of hope and joy. Although as Dennis Taylor (1966) asserts the ending of the poem is ambiguous and Hardy does not reveal explicitly the function of the bird as hopeful or hopeless like “every spirit upon earth”, the description of the bird makes us doubt his hopefulness. Hardy shows the bird as a male bird and refers to the bird as “he” which again shows lack of fertility and continued life.

Rural Victorian Images

Images of rural Victorian landscape are quite prevalent in Thomas Hardy’s poems perhaps due to his Wessex experience. Images of flowers, birds, sky, mountains, rivers, the sea, stars, etc. which shine in Victorian poetry also appear in Hardy’s poems though devoid of their romantic associations conveying a realistically gloomy outlook displaying the indifference of nature to man’s life. The pictures of the landscape bring no joy or vividness rather they are dejected and gloomy as in “the Darkling Thrush” in which we see “The bleak twigs overhead”. One of the

greatest achievements and legacies of the romantic poets for their Victorian decedents was the ability to find meanings in the landscape (Wimsatt, 1960). As asserted by Watson (1988) for the romantics and their Victorian followers' nature acted as a moral force, a support in troubles and a source of inspiration, vision, joy and blessings. Hardy's landscapes as asserted by, John Crowe Ransom (1960) are filled with images of neutral nature revealing resignation both in nature and in Hardy's own soul. In "The Darkling Thrush" the land is "shrunken hard and dry", and the twigs are "bleak" and the bird is "gaunt". In contrast with romantic poetry in which birds have access to realms unknown to man and can be symbols of transcendental beauty According to Simens, 1972, the birds in Hardy's poems do not possess any transcendental beauty rather they are victims of the manipulating forces such as time and environment because the thrush is both gaunt and old. Therefore, such a weak creature is so tired to have access to the Blessed Hope which Hardy does not see but the aged gaunt thrush is ironically aware of. It must also be noted that Hardy's birds are not decorating the landscapes and they are not even beautiful. In the "Darkling Thrush" the bird is in "blast-beruffled plume".

Another image prevalent in Victorian poetry is that of the moon which in Hardy doesn't serve to be the companion of lovers or the medium of their communications rather is treated sardonically. In "The Moon Looks In" the moon reads the mind of both the lover and the beloved and the beloved does not think about the lover rather she is thinking about all men. Therefore, the moon in his poetry is aware that the sentimental meditations of the lover are only self-deceptions because the mistress is thinking differently (Simons, 1972). This poem is from the perspective of the moon while shining through a window, observing a woman who is lost in thoughts and wishes. The woman is contemplating on an upcoming gathering and does not care about the moon that assumes the woman is thinking about it. This poem shows the detached conditions of man from nature. Instead of internal reflection, this poem coelenterates on external observations. Such moon is no companion of the lover and is not a Sidney's moon to climb up "the skies with sad steps" (Sonnet 31 by Sidney: Abrams & Greenblat: 2000) rather she is more similar to the "unruly sun" (The Sun Rising by John Donne: Abrams & Greenblat: 2000) of John Donne who made troubles to his love-making. In "Shut Out That Moon" Hardy chides the moon because she is responsible for deluding people and she must be barred so that the light of reality shines in which for Hardy is mostly dark and bitter. As Simmon asserts there is a sharp contrast between Hardy's moon and the moon of sentimental poetry which is a symbol of hope and inspiration. Hardy's moon gives no hopeful meditations and utters no comforting platitudes. In Hardy's "To The Moon", the conversation with the moon is fruitless because the moon only gives

ironic replies. The moon seems completely detached from the human life it has witnessed. The moon in this poem is a lonely and melancholic observer of human suffering. It has seen both growth and decay, the fall of nations, and sore things but for the moon it is all a show. The moon offers no solution except for the end of the show by God.

Trees, hills, birds, meadows are also shown not to be companions or friends for the speaker in Hardy's poems. In "In a wood", we observe the indifference of nature to man, the speaker goes to nature to find peace and grace but finds the trees in constant rivalry for survival with each other. The speaker turns to the trees for tranquility, calmness and to have a kind of Wordsworthian talk but he is frustrated and in the final stanza decides to turn to men rather than nature. Dennis Taylor (1996) sees the poem as a parody of Wordsworth's "Lines written in Early Spring". The hills, the tress, the meadows, the cuckoos are not seen or heard by the speaker in The Rambler. In the last stanza, the speaker admits that what he hears have no relations to the things around him. The impossibility of true and genuine communication between man and nature is amply displayed in the "Nature's Questioning" in the first stanza of which pool, field, flock and the lonely tree are likened to "chastened children sitting silent in a school" and in the last stanza the speaker admits that the gloom and pains persist while there is no answer from nature. In "From Her In The Country" the girl attempts to be infatuated by the beauty of flowers, woods, buds, birds, bushes and trees. But all her efforts are vain and she still yearns for urban life and the products of man rather than nature. She wishes for "city din and sin". Therefore, there is no power or charm in buds, bushes, trees and woods or birds to resist the charms of city life for the girl. In "The Milkmaid" in the beautiful scenery in which a maid is milking a cow and the river is beautifully passing, few visitors abide. The girl herself who is part of the natural scenery is not happy and it can be concluded that the rural nature is not happy either. The tear which the girl sheds is not for the loss of natural beauty by the passing of the train or its shriek it is out of her own misery and if her problems are solved she would not mind any change in nature or the landscape.

Urban Victorian Images

Hardy's treatment of urban Victorian images and places located in far-fetched places or the Eastern landscapes attracting tourists and adventurers is exemplary. Those places which are associated with mystery and fictitious romantic associations did not arouse the usual romantic response in Hardy. Siemens (1972) refers to the Mediterranean as one of these urban romantic

landscapes. References to the Mediterranean are abundant in romantic poetry. Shelly's reference in "Ode to west wind" is one example. Siemens cites Hardy's "Genoa and the Mediterranean" in which Hardy's description and the apostrophe to the place turn into an anti-climax. The reason might be sought in the fact that Hardy is more fascinated by the beauty of real ugliness than by the façade of emotionalism of false beauty. Compared to other poems of the time, this poem is conspicuous for its departure from traditional Victorian poems because it reveals the contrast between the city's old grandeur and the reality of its present time condition, the poem instigates a thought-provoking commentary on the transient nature of time and the changing nature of urban places.

Hardy's intention is to link his poems to reality and convey that reality to his reader. In "The Harbour Bridge" for instance, the harbor is engulfed in darkness and the bridge suggests the power of an urban landscape over the wretched lives of men and their wives for whose lives no one cares even stars. This poem displays the transient nature, isolation and the passage of life of people. Although the bridge implies connection, in this poem it only reveals the isolation of the individuals who pass it.

"And soon above, like lamps more opaline,
White stars ghost forth, that care not for men's wives,
Or any other lives".

"The Harbour Bridge" exemplifies the indifference of urban landscape to the misery of people surrounding it. Even stars which appear in romantic and Victorian poetry as emblems of love and romantic associations here are as callous as the lamps of the bridge. The setting of the poem is dusk and darkness looming over the bridge which is portrayed like a skeleton. The poem displays separation of men and women more generally husbands and wives and the Bridge which normally should unite the people only witnesses their separation. There is no love, no loyalty and no emotionalism. The practical woman presses to the shops and the husbands and wives "go different ways".

The urban images generally are not sympathetic to romantic concepts in Thomas Hardy. The young lover in "Love the Monopolist," is worried about his love affair which might be damaged when he is carried away by the train. He is dissatisfied with his girl who does not gaze at her and soon turns to others around her. The future of the travelling boy sitting in the third-class section of the train is uncertain in "Midnight on the Great Western", the lamp above the boy is "oily" and

its beams are sad. In general, the poem carries dislike for industrialization and urban life but it conveys an ironic treatment of romantic love as well because the girl seems to forget the boy and attends to people around her.

Conclusion

As a conclusion we may cautiously assert that Hardy's attitude towards the Victorian cultural concepts is not easy to categorize. For instance, nature in Hardy is difficult to be defined. Some critics see nature in Hardy as mysterious and some view it as ugly (Siemens,1972). Moreover, he refused to see nature as an embodiment of the paradise due to his atheist views in general.

Moreover, Hardy's treatment of landscape, rural settings and urban life are not always fixed and there are variations in his attitudes. Dennis Taylor (1996) quoting Hardy's statement that an artist has to either bring the work of his predecessors to completion or to denounce them (Hardy, Literary Notebooks, II.) asserts that Hardy brought the work of Wordsworth to a sort of exultation in language. However, when it comes to concepts and attitudes, although there are poems in Hardy which denounce urban life and cater towards romantic love of nature such as (*Dream of the City Shopwoman*), Hardy in general denounced most Victorian and romantic poems and their concepts. This denunciation does not mean that Hardy necessarily valued urban and city life over the rural life. "*In the City*" displays Hardy's dissatisfaction with the precision of the urban life which for him was fiendish. He even compares living in the city to acrobatic actions in a hostile environment (Florence Emily Hardy, 1962). This oscillation between city-life and rural tranquility both of which he rejected should not surprise us given the fact that he had the same attitude maintaining the comforting practices of the past and the modern science as Simions (1978) asserts Hardy was caught between the old creeds which he didn't embrace and the new science which produced sadness for him. It seems that Hardy was fascinated by the ancient London and he did not hold high opinions about industrialization of the city. However, in "*Lonely Days*" the life of the old woman was not brilliant even when she had not gone to the city. Everything about the woman was dull and lonely and only death did end her misery. The busy streets of the city did not stir the lady and in fact they made her sad.

Looking for categorical statements and coming to rigid conclusions are impossible in great works of literature and Hardy's is no exception, and the concluding poem is not set to be considered as a summery for Hardy's treatment of life but may help illuminate his position. In "Nothing Matters Much", the speaker of the poem serenely accepts the death of the sailor and asserts that this is not important if she does not have access to her grave. Having no book and no priest do not matter either. This indifferent outlook to the whole life is what characterizes most of Hardy's works which is certainly not in congruity with the romantic and Victorian involvement and missions which they defined for artists. Hardy conveys a feeling of apathy instead and we may also say that "Nothing Matters Much".

Finally, it must be noted that we attempted to classify Hardy's treatment of romantic concepts and romantic images when he parodied romanticism and brought examples to refer to concepts or images exclusively but in those poems which we have cited as parodying romantic concepts, parody of romantic images can be found and vice versa.

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