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## **Paganism and religious practices in the novels of Thomas Hardy: 1840-1928**

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### **Abstract**

Existence of a religion other than world religions. Beliefs and practices which were non-Christian in nature existed in the early years of England. Worshipping of nature and nature related objects by the heathens of Wessex region. The natives of Wessex believed in the witchcraft, ghosts, and omens of different kinds. Practicing rituals of bonfire, Maypolling, seasonal festivals and other ceremonies are the replica of paganism. The natives of the early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century practicing old fashioned customs and traditions of the Roman culture rather than Christian religion. Thomas Hardy has delineated those practices and beliefs which existed at the beginning of the Industrial revolution and the dawn of modern education in the interior part of England in his novels.

**Keywords:** Religions, religions, paganism, roman culture, industrial revolution

### **Introduction**

Thomas Hardy's novels *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* were published in 1878 and 1891 respectively and they were written in the background of the Wessex region of England. The Novelist in his novels portrayed the customs, practices which were pagan in nature or pre-Christian. The natives used to worship nature and the elemental forces of nature and they were an inseparable bond between the nature and the humans in the pre Christian life of the natives. The pagan culture of Christmas Mumming, ritual of bonfire, dancing and Maypolling were popular in the Wessex region. The early years of 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution and the modern education had not yet impacted the lives of the natives. They still believed in the old fashioned dogmas and superstitions and following them as part of their existence. Indeed pagan culture and practices dominated the life of the natives of the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

Hardy's novels depicted, "the rural dwellers who have no need for Christian rituals and doctrine, practicing merely a superficial Sunday observance, and their pragmatic, social values, epitomized by the rustics tacitly criticize more orthodox Christian doctrine". *The Return of the Native* was organized around annual folk festivals and customs which were pagan in nature. On one hand they were still under the impact of Roman culture and behaving as if they were pragmatist. On the other hand, following the practices of Christianity as if they were devoted followers of Christianity and attending Sunday prayers at the village churches. However, they were giving more importance to practices and customs of the old days than actual Christian religious doctrine.

Thomas Hardy portrayed picturesquely the unsophisticated faith of the rustics in omens, primitive superstitions and occult wisdoms. Among other practices of the pagan, the rustics were very much interested in enacting Christmas mumming without questioning the validity of such practices and beliefs. The life and death of Jesus Christ would be enacted in a series of scenes in the play. One could find how the play of Christmas mumming not only provided entertainment to the rustics but it also represented their faith and religious belief.

The natives of the Wessex region were the worshippers of nature and they had their own customs and beliefs which were adopted in their lives based on the rich experiences of their ancestors. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Angel Clare unlike his parents was a secular in spirit and action. His parents, including his brothers, were devout Christians. Instead of pursuing education in studying theology in universities, Angel left for Tolbooth to undergo training in dairy farming and in agriculture because of his love for native life.

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His father was a strict religious man and god-fearing and was a preacher in the parish. Angel Clare preferred paganism of country life to the study of theology or stick on to Christianity. He thought that if one wanted to have aesthetic sense of life one must go to the country side of England, because it was so simple but beautiful. The native life of Tolbothy was enveloped the beautiful nature. According to Angel Clare, "the country life was so noble in all respects that it might have resulted far better for mankind if Greece had been the source of the religion of modern civilization, and not of Palestine". This statement of Angel throws light on the impact of Greek and Roman culture on the lives of the people of Wessex region before they were converted into Christianity.

The description of Tess as "a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" clearly indicates the love, respect and intimate bond the natives of Wessex region, had with the elemental forces of nature and which were the symbolic features of pagan culture. One can find how most of the characters of Hardy's novels were pagan in nature and spirit rather than Christians in true sense. The character of Tess was the embodiment of pagan culture. The inseparable bond between Tess and Nature determines that she was not Christian but pagan. She was an innocent child of the soil and part of nature, which means that she was pagan in letter and spirit. Nature responds to the feelings of human beings, it reacts to the joys and sorrows of humans. Moreover, the pagan perception of nature as alive with meaning to humans can be a double-edged sword. Although at times nature seems to reinforce human joy, it can also intensify human sorrow. If Tess can feel on her way to Tolbothys that her hopes mingled with the sunshine in an ideal photosphere which surrounded her as she bounded along against the soft south wind. She heard a pleasant voice in every breeze and in every bird's note seemed to lurk joy. Thus most of the feelings of humans are associated with that of nature and in turn nature too has its influence on the minds and feelings of humans.

One could see two sets of religious beliefs on the natives of Wessex region as described in the novels of Hardy. First one was the influence of Greek and Roman culture which was represented through the Anglo-Saxon literature on the early settlers of England. This kind of religious belief and culture was there still prevailed in the rural areas of England till the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second but most powerful influence and belief was that of Christianity. The introduction of modern education, in course of time, responsible for the widespread conversion of the natives into Christianity. In *The Return of the Native*, the practice of Bonfire in Egdon Heath on 5<sup>th</sup> of November every year seemed to be the reflection of Pagan culture. The bonfire, festival of light, signifies the warding off darkness symbolic of warding off darkness in human life and prosperity. The bonfire was observed to mark the occasion of the origins of the fifth-of-November celebrations are thought to lie in the fires that were lit around this time of the year by Celtic and Anglo-Saxon pagans, to mark the onset of winter. Thus bonfire in rural England was celebrated as a form of folk-festival and as a part of pagan culture.

Another religious practice performed was Maypole or May festival in Egdon heath: "the pole lay with one end supported on a trestle, and women were engaged in wreathing it from the top downwards with wild flowers. The instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional

vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still; in this spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites". In the above lines the novelist himself has given us ample of information on the existing pagan culture and practices in the remote part of England even in the last part of nineteenth century. In *The Return of the Native*, Grandfer Cattle said to his fellows about the importance of dance and music. It was common among the rustics to dance on special events like religious festivities, weddings and other celebrations in the accompaniment of music. This kind of practices and celebrations of the rustics of Wessex reflected their folk culture as well as pagan culture.

### Conclusion

The people of Wessex had given more importance to dance and music than religious practices. In *The Return of the Native*, Eustacia after being left home despondent arrived at the outskirts of a village and beheld, "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 breathing 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. Even Eustacia danced with her former lover Wildeve. Thus the country dance of east Egdon was the representation of pagan culture.

Hardy's another novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* begins with the dance by the maids of Marlot on account of May festival on the green meadow. Thus there existed in the rural areas of England such practices and customs of pagan culture prior to the onset of Christianity. Each season of the year would begin with a festival or celebration one or the other kind in Wessex region which was not just a practice but reality in their lives and the rustics were still performing most of the customs of pagan culture.

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