

Hardy and dickens.
countryside verses
the city.



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Explore the significance of representations of the city and/or the countryside in two nineteenth-century novels. During the nineteenth century, many Victorians aspired towards a life in the city where the opportunities were abundant and wealth and success were the dominant prospects, whereas country life was regarded as laborious and limited. ' In the last twenty years before 1914, opportunities either to expand more rapidly or to give more attention to increasing the comfort and amenity of life' were becoming progressively more sought after, yet paradoxically city life was not always successful.

The countryside however, appears as an environment where although lacking in prosperity and eminence, its inhabitants are overall happier. This concept is particularly prevalent in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* which portray the hardships of working life in the city and the countryside. The predominant message attained from both novels is that although the city is esteemed to be a place where one can enjoy a materially enhanced and prosperous existence; the truth is that there is significantly more fulfilment in pastoral traditions and associations with the familiar, rural way of life.

Dickens' satirical bildungsroman *Great Expectations* depicts the changing attitudes of British society during the early nineteenth century, as wealth and prosperity was now not purely associated with familial relations and being born into nobility. ' Dickens tried so earnestly to give his story a social significance' and his social commentary accurately portrays the current truths of the Victorian society that he lived in. The possibility of acquiring the

noble and dignified status of the gentle folk was becoming achievable through inheritance and progression up the fortune ladder.

Although the class system and associated prejudices were still strongly intact; (Dickens was 'renowned for his portrayal of the class inequities') the leeway into the admission of the prestigious upper class was slowly expanding. The increasing 'growth of great staple industries' in London throughout the nineteenth century created many job opportunities and as these augmented over the years, so did the rise in personal capital.

The 'migration from the countryside to towns, where the increasing complexity of urban life was creating many possible employments,' meant the potential increase in personal revenue and thus affluence, resulting in improved social standing although this required consistent hard work over a long period of time. 'The rise of modern industry' also included 'the absolute decline of the rural population,' but that was not to take full effect until the end of the century.

When Estella's disdain for Pip gives him the realisation that he is 'in a low-lived, bad way'p54 due to his common appearance and way of life, in comparison to her life of richness and power, he becomes 'ashamed of home'p60 and desperate 'to be a gentleman. 'p105 The day that Mr Jaggers arrives at Pip's home to deliver the news that he will 'be brought up... as a young fellow of great expectations'p114 it suddenly seems that Pip's wishes are to be fulfilled; opportunities like these were hard to come by during the start of the nineteenth century.

At the turn of the century the idea that 'large "numbers" of working-class people were "continually advancing and bettering themselves" was not true, Dickens complained,' those who had the opportunity to brighten their horizons were a minority. Pip's sentiments that 'the light mists were solemnly rising, as if to show me the world'p132 reflects the wealth of prospects which his mysterious inheritance has provided him with.

However, Pip's rise to nobility does not supply him with any considerable satisfaction and his 'great expectations'p114 are in fact left unfulfilled by the end. Upon his arrival in London it becomes clear that this is not the place of dreams, a place that holds the resolution to all of one's problems, but a source of new setbacks. The first picture we have of London is 'ugly, crooked, narrow and dirty'p133 and it acts as a kind of forewarning to the misery that will ensue in Pip's city life.

In contrast to Dickens' portrayal of disagreeable London life, Hardy's country bubble in *Far from the Madding Crowd* depicts the last representation 'of old rural England' as peaceful and idyllic, reflecting 'timeless rural communities'p72 that were not yet corrupted by modernity. In contrast to 'the hot exhausted air, and... the dust and grit that lay thick on everything'p135 in the City, the first description of the countryside in Hardy's novel of the personified night sky is alluring; 'the twinkling of all the stars'p19 that 'seemed to be but throbs of one body, timed by a common pulse.'p19 'Hardy believed in the oneness in essence of nature and man' and this certainly comes through in his writing. The moment when Farmer Oak is 'standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight'p20 and notices the shooting stars in the universe, the supernatural and unearthly qualities of <https://assignbuster.com/hardy-and-dickens-countryside-verses-the-city/>

Hardy's pantheist beliefs become noticeable. As Oak stands far away from the busied 'civilised mankind'¹⁹ he is left to ponder over the magnificence of the stars and how 'the consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from a tiny human frame.'¹⁹ We become aware of the uplifting and liberating elements of the universe that are found in the countryside and the powers that they have on the mind; 'the impression of riding along'¹⁹ with stars in the solar system being 'vivid and abiding.'¹⁹ Hardy demonstrates that there is more to life than industrial labour and increasing wealth; the revitalizing qualities of the universe can be channelled through the open country and one can appreciate existence fully. When Hardy published *Far from the Madding Crowd* in the *Cornhill* magazine in 1874 many changes were occurring in the country.

Most significantly there was the increasing 'urbanisation of the population' and 'the evolution of the factory system' which led to the fall in 'the proportion of agriculture workers in the labour force... from 30 per cent or more in 1801-21 to around 9 per cent in 1891-1911' yet Hardy does not portray these revolutionary changes. Although by '1880 the majority of Britons lived in towns or cities' which was only some years after the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy doesn't choose to write about these changes.

In fact Hardy set his work in a kind of timeless rural period where there were no glimpses of industry taking over, but where the agricultural history and culture still remained without any disturbances. Indeed, although 'he was acutely conscious of the increasing split between rural and urban in his own age,' he deliberately chose to set 'much of his fiction' in 'the horizons and

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landscapes of a partly real, partly dream country' where he was not pressured into conveying the truth of changing culture and history but could hold onto romantic visions of the past.

Hardy 'inherited many of the traditional attitudes of the rural population, yet learnt to come to terms with the up-to-date intellectual controversies of the metropolis' and through this wide knowledge was able to faithfully portray the historical image of rural life without any modern intrusions. Hardy understood that his readers did not wish to identify with current changes in his novels. They were instead 'eager to explore his countryside,' being the fictional land of Wessex where all past traditions remained intact.

Hardy's Wessex 'grew to include two-thirds of southern England' and represented a wholesome, 'benevolent countryside' in which he sought the artistic opportunity to convey the real beauty of nature. He was considered as one of the great realists, effectively portraying 'one of the most powerful images of the Victorian countryside' often 'featuring rustic simplicity, sometimes in picturesque poverty, sometimes in virtuous and provident though rude comfort,' which proved to be the main attraction of his rural literature.

Readers have found Hardy's realistic novels comforting insofar as they portray a combination of real characters within a real, historical culture yet they do not confront the reader with the atrocities of the present. Far from the *Madding Crowd* specifically focuses on the intricacies of the human mind and relationships in the spheres of the past uncorrupted, uninhibited rural world. Despite being written many decades prior to Hardy, Great

Expectations follows the current issues in the early nineteenth century concerning the harsh changes in society that were actually occurring most prominently during Hardy's life.

Pip is desperate for wealth and respect and after the straightforward manual labour of Joe's iron works, Dickens shifts the scene to reveal the atrocities of modernity as Pip embarks on his journey to the city. Wemmick shows Pip the Newgate Prison; the 'jails were much neglected'p215, and Pip states 'a frowzy, ugly, disorderly, depressing scene it was.'p215 Indeed Pip is confronted with 'a sickening'p135 image of London, particularly when Mr Jaggers shows him the injustice of the gallows 'where people were publicly whipped'p135 and the 'Debtor's Door'p135 out of which people would be 'killed in a row.'p135 The harsh City has no mercy for those who offend the law- regardless of how small the crime. The rules were strict; up until '1869, the Habitual Criminals Act provided for a punishment of up to a year's imprisonment for those deemed to be "suspicious persons." Mr Jagger's stern, uptight behaviour effectively characterises the rigidity of the law and order. Indeed Pip's 'guardian threw his supplicant off with supreme indifference, and left him dancing on the pavement as if he were red-hot'p137- once a decision was made about the felons there was no changing it and they would subsequently disregard those in desperate need without morality.

The important people of the city are portrayed as disrespectful towards their inferiors. As Pip meets Mr Jagger's clerk he hopes he is not rudely interrupting, yet Dickens demonstrates that manners were not considered where inferiors are concerned; 'the clerk shoved this gentleman out with as

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little ceremony as I ever saw used. 'p134 He abuses his power and we see there is little humanity amongst the hierarchy of City officials. There is a sense that people were out for themselves in London, for the strict rules meant it was much easier to fail, many failures resulting in death.

Indeed, ' at the beginning of the century, capital punishment... featured predominantly, as threat as much as reality' therefore the stakes were much higher in the city; if one experienced failure, there was no easy way out. Conversely, there is a strong sense of community in Hardy's novel. We learn that Bathsheba's bailiff is let off for stealing; he is dismissed from his duties and his mistress promises ' not to persecute him' p72 on the condition that he confesses his wrongdoing. If this occurred in London, the Bailiff would have been sent to jail without a second thought.

Another instance of humanity is when Mr Boldwood is taken off the death sentence for shooting Sergeant Troy by his fellow countrymen, who write a petition to save him. Stating that Boldwood had a mind ' crazed with care and love' p358 and was therefore not of stable sentiments when he shot Troy, the Court decides to take pity on him and allows him to live on his case being ' regarded as a sheer outcome of madness. 'p358 This moral practice is reminiscent of the respect and humanity to which the country folk live by but of which the High Courts in London would take no pity. Dickens' satirises the ironic nature of British society in the nineteenth century through his depiction of the prosperous, yet inhumane city crowds. The idea that kind goodhearted people such as Herbert Pocket, with ' a natural incapacity to do anything secret and mean' p145 also means that they will ' never be successful or rich. 'p145 Indeed there are cracks in the class system, as we

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realise that Herbert marries and lives happily with his wife abroad despite his lack of financial growth or significant occupational success. While those 'great merchants'p153 who should be thriving on their success, are in fact lacking in happiness and appear to be 'out of spirits. p153 There is an incongruity here, as the idea that a rich life in the city is what promotes fulfilment is essentially wrong. Indeed both Hardy and Dickens advocate the purer form of happiness resulting from human relationships and peaceful surroundings that are uncorrupted by modernity. There is a strong sense of community and kinship in Weatherbury which upholds and strengthens the characters. Hardy illustrates how true camaraderie and good principles assist in creating a life of contentment. When Oak reveals to his fellow farm workers at the malt house: 'I've been in great trouble, neighbours...

I used not to be so poor as I be now,'p69 his poverty is not considered a greatly serious matter. Mark Clark tells him to 'Never mind, heart!... You should take it careless-like, shepherd'p69 for there is no need for anxiety over this kind of problem in the country, whereas the consequences of a loss of income in the city would be much more severe. (In fact, Dickens' own father was 'imprisoned' in the city 'for debt. ') With Gabriel's hard working ethics and strong loyalties, he is able to progress from being his mistress's shepherd and working as her inferior, to running the farm as husband and equal owner by the end.

However this was a long process, and although country life was not as rigid as in the city, there were a lot of hardships to endure, the natural disasters proving the most significant and unavoidable part. Gabriel notices that Bathsheba's ricks are on fire and knows that 'all would be lost'p51 if he does

not take the right action to put them out rapidly. When he successfully saves the barn, everyone at the scene is keen to tell Bathsheba about the 'bold shepherd... that have done the most good'p53 as his skills would be well-used on the farm.

Through Oak's innate knowledge of the natural world he is also able to save the farm from the storm that occurs later in the novel. He notices the preliminary signs, and understands that they are 'Nature's... way of hinting to him that he [i]s to prepare for foul weather. 'p229 Oak is described by Hardy as a moth 'who flitted and hovered'p141 and this profound connection to nature is important for he knows when to take vital measures to protect the farm, realising that otherwise 'a harvest atmosphere would be a bygone thing. p226 This is the main disadvantage of country life, as the natural disasters often have the potential to destroy livelihoods, yet through Oak we see that with diligence and hard work, one can still progress in the country with few disturbances. Indeed despite the setbacks of rural living, the society is strong and people live long, happy lives. Such is the case with the maltster who outlives everyone and is said to be 'Hundred and seventeen'p68 years old with his long generation of sons by his side too. Jan Coggan also recounts country life as 'Happy times! Heavenly times! p65 and there is no particular dislike of the country as Pip feels of the city. Wemmick is an interesting character in terms of representing the conflict between life in and out of the city as he takes on two roles, depending on which place he currently resides. Initially described as a 'dry man... with a square wooden face'p139 we learn that this is Wemmick's city persona: uptight and disciplined. Yet when he retreats to his home, the 'Castle' in Walworth, he

feels free to rid himself of the constraints of his official position back in the city and can assume a more natural, laidback and cheerful character.

He teaches Pip of the extreme difference between his workplace and home life; 'when I go into the office, I leave the Castle behind me'p171 and stresses the importance of his private life being kept that way so as to not ruin the illusion. Wemmick is free to be his true self at home yet the stressful business demands of his career in the city changes his demeanour as he returns and Pip notices how he becomes 'dryer and harder'p172 on returning to 'Little Britain.' The pressures of city life mould a person into a much narrower and un-wholesome version of what they were before.

As Wemmick leaves Mr Jaggers with Pip after dining out, he instantly becomes 'the right twin'p324 and all the associations with professionalism, restraint, Mr Jaggers firmness and 'the wrong twin had evaporated into the evening air.'p324 Wemmick needs this relief from the pressures and stress of the city. He takes on the business-man role as a way of surviving life in London but there is a sense that his life is only fulfilling when he has left work and can enjoy his home life where he is able to 'cut off the communication'p170 from the city.

Pip notices the palpable change in his character and upon watching him erect his 'Castle' flag, finds it 'pleasant to see the pride with which he hoisted it up and made it fast, smiling as he did so, with a relish and not merely mechanically'p170 as would be so if they were in London. Pip is not equipped to deal with City life and we see this in many ways. When Pip learns that Joe will be visiting him he is filled 'Not with pleasure,'p179 but '

disturbance'p179 and such a great sense of ' mortification'p179 of the idea that if he ' could have kept him away by paying money'p179 then he would have done so.

His sense of pride outweighs any other feelings of familial loyalty. He is so embarrassed by his brother in law's clothes and comportment when they are dining together that when his friend Herbert leaves at the end of the meal, he feels ' heartily glad'p183 to no longer have to endure the mortification of being associated with a common blacksmith. Pip's superiority complex is dislikeable and we feel empathy for Joe who realises their inequality since Pip has acquired his elevated status; ' You and me is not two figures to be together in London'p184 and needless to say Pip does not differ in thought.

Pip does not progress in London either; he was not born into a prosperous way of life and therefore has not developed any knowledge of how to conduct a mature and responsible existence. He is ignorant of how to use his unexpected wealth, his ' lavish habits'p224 have led not only to financial problems for himself, but have also ' corrupted the simplicity'p224 and ' disturbed [the] peace'p224 of the life of his co-lodger Herbert. Of course ' The gains in... social standing and the opportunities for particular forms of luxurious enjoyment' were the main attractions for those who sought affluence in the city.

Yet despite ' the potential profits' of wealth and stature being ' enormous... so, too, were the risks' and the damage was hard to repair. This is exactly what happens as Pip recounts that he ' began to contract a quantity of debt. 'p224 Without the help of Magwitch's monetary funds, Pip would have been

imprisoned for being unable to pay off his debts. This kind of instance does not occur in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Pip like most of Hardy's country folk, has not been educated and therefore cannot lead a steady life within the city's economy. The characters in Hardy's novel do not contract debt, but if they experience financial trouble then it is mostly due to unpreventable natural disasters. For example when Gabriel Oak's flock of sheep are lead off the precipice by his sheep dog and ' a heap of two hundred mangled carcasses... lay dead and dying'p44 this represents the end of his current labour and livelihood. He has not contracted debt yet similarly to Pip, his monetary means have vanished.

The ' melancholy'p141, ' dismal'141 London life starts to impinge upon Pip's conscience and he admits that ' so imperfect was this realisation of the first of my great expectations'p141 that through his disappointment we can see how the harsh reality of the City overshadows the glamorous image he had held in ignorance. In contrast to the peace and quiet of Weatherbury, there is also the danger that ' You may get cheated, robbed, and murdered, in London' p140 and Pip swiftly concludes ' that London was decidedly overrated. 'p142 In fact, Dickens presents the common truth of real city life as ' always more or less miserable. p226 The irony is that the successful city people were regarded by inferiors as the types that one aspired to and desired to gain equality with, yet Pip confides to the reader that ' There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeletal truth that we never did. 'p226 With money, respect, luxury and overall superiority it is striking to see that the people who have such things

are actually lacking in enjoyment of life, whereas often those who have far less, (such as those on Bathsheba's farm) live with ease and contentment.

When Pip retreats to his home on the marshes, the first description of ' the darkening garden, and the lane, and the stars that were coming out'p233 since his time in the city is symbolic of the pollution of factories and industrial developments. It represents the impression that nature is allowed to breathe away from the city, and in return, people are able to breathe with it. Human relationships are developed in Weatherbury and we witness the intensity of passions amongst the all-powerful natural world.

When Bathsheba and Gabriel are together amidst the storm we feel the passions of the couple together as Gabriel ' could feel Bathsheba's warm arm tremble in his hand'p237 and this instant connection to ' love, life, everything human'p237 which only seems ' small and trifling in... juxtaposition with an infuriated universe' p237 The power of the elements have a strong hold on man and with the couple's need of securing each other in the storm, we see the relationships that are formed and intensified through this struggle against the universe.

The connection that Hardy draws between man and space demonstrates the precariousness and fragility, yet omnipotent force that one must appreciate has the power to either support or destroy human life. Towards the end of Great Expectations Pip affirms ' It was an unhappy life that I lived,'314 a life with ' towering... anxieties'p314 which ' never disappeared'p314 from his view. Indeed he never gained any happiness whilst living in the city- he was '

pressed for money by more than one creditor'p314 and despite the rich life he led with his inheritance, he was never contented.

Ultimately the fact that his true love Estella married his cruel and deceitful enemy, Drummle, weighed down on his feelings and it appears neither money nor prestige brought him or Estella happiness. On returning however, Dickens' emphasis on the fresh summer landscape signifies the peace and purity that can be found out of the city; ' The June weather was delicious. The sky was blue, the larks were soaring high over the green corn, I thought all that countryside more beautiful and peaceful than I had ever known. 'p392 Pip did not appreciate the countryside when he was young for his priorities were concerned with his ambition.

Yet since he has experienced failure and real pain he can now truly value the importance of the non-judgemental, unrestricted simplicity of rural life. The contrast is furthered as Dickens describes the difference between Biddy who has stayed in the marsh country her whole life and ' looked so fresh and pleasant'p393, while Pip who has undergone stress and struggle in the city, ' looked so worn and white. 'p393 Their appearances clearly demonstrate the positive effects of peaceful normality in the marshes and the negative effects of changing modernity in the city.

It is true that similar to the livelihoods of those in Far from the Madding Crowd, Pip realises that ' the plain, honest, working life to which [he] was born, had nothing in it to be ashamed of, but offered [him] sufficient means of self-respect and happiness. 'p109 The only positive achievement of Pip's time in London was his opportunity to mature and appreciate the beauty of

his home and those that remain loyal to him. Hardy's statement that ' God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town'p138 is fitting with Pip's journey in

Great Expectations, and highlights the corruption that is more prominently found in the city. Although Dickens is not a rural writer like Hardy, he similarly advocates the redeeming power of the nature, especially through Pip's moral development at the end. Hardy portrays nature as exquisitely powerful; as the basis for all human development. Through life in the countryside, the connection to earth and the universe is so great that one can feel the energy of the natural world and contribute this passion and intensity to everyday life.

Human existence is then, more fulfilling in the countryside where the opportunity to experience a ' real' rustic way of life exceeds the ever increasing modernity and opportunities in the city. Bibliography Alexander, Anne, Thomas Hardy: The " dream-country" of his fiction (London: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), Ashworth, William, An Economic History of England, 1870-1939 (Oxon: Routledge, 1960) Bloom, Harold Mei Chin, Charles Dickens (Broomall: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003) Briggs, John, Crime and Punishment in England: an introductory history (New York: UCL Press, 1996) Grigg, David.

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