



Ain Shams University
Faculty of Education
Department of English

**Setting as Protagonist in
Thomas Hardy's Fiction: A Study of *The Return of the
Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the
D'Urbervilles***

A Thesis

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*To the blessed souls of my late father and
uncle Hosam.*

To my dearest mother.

*To my beloved husband and to my sons,
Kareem and Adham.*

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is considered as one of the most important English novelists, short story writers and poets of the Naturalist movement of the Victorian age. Many critics see him as a transitional writer whose art echoes the tradition of nineteenth-century fiction and paves the way for the advance of Modernism. This thesis aims at studying and analyzing setting as protagonist in Thomas Hardy's novels: *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). The fact that Thomas Hardy's setting is the central and most dominant narrative element in his fiction, and that all the other elements are shaped and coloured by Hardy's own vision of the setting, has stimulated the writer of this thesis to make a study and analysis of the centrality of the setting in his novels, particularly that this is a point that has not been dealt with or investigated before, though some critics have felt it and alluded to it in bits and pieces, but no thorough or detailed study has ever been made of it before.

The writer of this thesis deals with Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. These three novels have been regarded by critics as being among the most outstanding and popular of the works of Thomas Hardy. Also, these specific three novels can be used to reveal and investigate setting as protagonist in Hardy's fiction.

A theoretical background of the topic of the study is presented in the **First Chapter** to give the reader background information about Thomas Hardy and the different variables that have affected him both as a writer and as a human being, and that have shaped his vision of the setting.

The other chapters trace the major role played by the setting in shaping the whole narrative experience and vision of Hardy in *The Return*

of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess of the D'Urbervilles. **Chapter two** investigates the effect of the setting on the structure of the plot and the development of the course of events in a sample of important extracts from the three concerned novels.

Chapter Three presents an analysis of some extracts in which the main characters of the three novels are involved, to prove the great influence of the setting on the presentation of the characters and their development in these novels.

Chapter Four investigates the effect of the setting on the style and language in the three novels. A sample of passages, conversations and expressions is selected for the study and analysis to prove that the particular nature of the setting dictates the style of what is narrated in these novels.

The analysis of the extracts selected in the whole thesis has resulted in the general finding that the setting is the central and most dominant narrative element in Hardy's fiction. It is the real protagonist in *The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge and Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

Key Words:

- 1- Setting.
- 2- Protagonist.
- 3- Plot.
- 4- Characterization.
- 5- Style.

Preface

Setting as Protagonist in Thomas Hardy's Fiction: A Study of *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

The thesis is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. **The First Chapter** focuses on the theoretical concepts of the terms 'setting' and 'protagonist' as narrative elements. The chapter studies and reviews the biographical, intellectual, psychological and philosophical factors that have shaped Hardy's vision of the setting. The chapter also deals with what critics such as Dale Kramer, Geoffrey Harvey and Carl J. Weber have said about Thomas Hardy's literary achievements and his fascination by the setting of Wessex in his fiction. Some other critics have discussed how Hardy's personal life used to interfere in his works. They have paid much attention to his birthplace and the biographical elements with which the majority of his novels are saturated.

Owing to the importance of setting in fiction, this thesis explores the fictional world of Thomas Hardy in an attempt to prove the centrality of the setting in his art, and to prove that the setting is the central and most dominant narrative element in Hardy's fiction, and that all the other elements are shaped and coloured by the author's own vision of the setting. Hence, **Chapter Two** investigates the effect of the setting on the structure of the plot in Hardy's novels. Central extracts are selected from the three novels, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and are analyzed to show how the plot in each novel is contrived in a way that makes action correspond to the atmosphere of the setting and to show the effect of the setting on the plot and the development of events in each novel.

This chapter discusses how the plot is cleverly structured in a way that adds to the centrality of the setting in Hardy's three selected novels. The textual contribution of the setting to the structure of the plot in these works is thoroughly explained. The effectively functioning roles played by the setting in the development of the events are debated, and the discussion proves that Thomas Hardy's setting is so effective that it plays, metaphorically, the role of the protagonist in the selected literary texts. The chapter also explains that the movement of action is very slow in each novel because of the vivid presence of the setting. The action is dominated by the slow rhythm of the setting. The characters stop their action to contemplate the land surrounding them where a correspondence between man and setting is held.

Chapter Three discusses the influence of the setting on the presentation of the characters in the three novels. Central characters of *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are analyzed, so as to show the effect of the setting on their development. The chapter explains that the characters of the novels can be classified and evaluated according to the state of the setting. The destiny of the characters, in these novels, is clearly connected to the spirit of the setting, and the author sides with characters who submit to the power of the setting. Hardy's characters are depicted as a part of their surrounding setting, which mirrors their emotions, harmonizes with their moods and influences their behaviour, actions and attitudes.

This chapter is based on the firm contentment that the setting has a strong impact on the presentation of the main characters in Thomas Hardy's novels. It attempts a new reading, which refutes the traditional method of portraying characters. The mechanism of characters' revelation is going to be analyzed in the light of the role played by the setting as

both the narrator (Hardy uses setting to tell additional comment instead of further narrative intrusions) and the protagonist in the three selected novels. The chapter shows how the setting as an instrument of Fate could interact with the actions and the reactions of the characters. The destiny of the main characters is shaped dramatically by the power of the setting as a part of Fate, which can never be challenged.

Chapter Four presents a study of the effect of the setting on the style and language in the three novels, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Various passages, conversations and expressions are discussed through the analysis of the style in the three novels. The purpose is to show how the particular nature of the setting dictates the style of what is narrated. Hardy writes in terms of the setting using the rustic dialect, uses imagery taken from the landscape, gives his setting human attributes and uses the setting as a symbol in these novels.

This chapter discusses the interactive association between setting and style in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The effective dramatic contribution of the rural and rustic setting to the language and imagery used in the narration and the dialogues in these novels is going to be discoursed. The chapter proves that setting, for Thomas Hardy, is so highly suggestive and influential that it controls the whole technical atmosphere, through which the style is both directed and shaped. Hereby, the main concern is analyzing Hardy's use of the setting in his lexical choices and images in an attempt to form his literal intentions and conceptions in his narration and dialogues. The setting-style relationship is displayed and argued throughout the selected literary works.

The chapter also concentrates on the extent to which the setting denotes the choice and the meanings of the rural words, and on how the vivid presence of the setting dominates the rhythm of the images. Hardy's developed forms of narrative discourse, which are found in and highlight the relations between the individuals and their society and nature, are going to be explained thoroughly. Furthermore, both of Hardy's narrative discourse and poetic style are interacted figuratively to produce such literary masterpieces.

The thesis highlights the major role played by the setting in shaping the whole narrative experience and vision of Thomas Hardy. With reference to Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), the study proves that the setting can be described as the protagonist of the three works, and that the setting structures the plot, characterization and style in these works.

Finally, the **Conclusion** is a synthesis of the findings arrived at and conducted in the previous chapters of the thesis.

Chapter One

Chapter One
Setting as Protagonist in Thomas Hardy's
Fiction: A Theoretical Background

The nineteenth century witnessed some drastic changes that helped the art of novel to flourish. The development of the natural sciences, the industrial revolution, the French Revolution, the rise of the social sciences, the religious crisis, the Terror and the rise and fall of Napoleon were the most prominent of these changes. Touching on this idea, Walter Myers (1927: 22) believes that the shaping forces that affected the Victorian novel are:

First, a group of literary and artistic forces – naturalism, impressionism, symbolism, and expressionism – ; second, developments in biological science and related philosophy; third, developments in psychology.

Thus, the Victorian novel has been highly peculiar in form as well as in content. The literary imagination and vision of the nineteenth century literature in general and the art of fiction in particular have been shaped by these factors, that have consequently influenced the portrayal of character and the concept of the leading figure or the ‘protagonist’ in the Victorian novel. The pioneers of such a sort of novel are: Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen, George Meredith, The Brontë Sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy. Manifestations of the influence of these factors are traced in the works of these novelists. My main concern here is Thomas Hardy, particularly, setting as protagonist in his fiction.

One of the significant components of fiction in any literary work is characterization. Any novel or play has a main character around which

all incidents revolve, this main character is called protagonist. According to *The Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2001: 157), the term “protagonist” is defined as:

The chief character in a play or story. If the main plot centers on the career of a hero who opposes and overcomes a villain, the hero would be called the protagonist, the villain the antagonist. Protagonist is also used to mean a champion or chief advocate of a cause or movement, such as a protagonist of women’s rights.

In his book *Word Origins And How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone*, Anatoly Liberman (2005: 219) states that:

While protagonist in *Encyclopedia Britannica* is defined as the first or leading actor, in *Webster’s Dictionary*, it denotes “A person who backs a politician or a team etc. ...; or the principal character in a work of fiction.

The term ‘protagonist’ originated in ancient Greece and referred to the leader of a chorus. In Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005: 265), ‘protagonist’ is defined as follows:

... the ‘hero’ of a work. The word protagonist originated in ancient Greek drama and referred to the leader of a chorus. Soon the definition was changed to represent the first actor on stage. In some literature today it may be difficult to decide who is playing the role of the protagonist. For instance, in *Othello*, we could say that Iago is the protagonist because he was at the center of all of the play’s controversy. But even if he was a main character, was he the lead character? This ambiguity can lead to multiple interpretations of the same work and different ways of appreciating a single piece of literature.

In *Encyclopedia Encarta* (2009: 89) a protagonist in Greek drama denotes the main actor who interacts with the Chorus. Protagonist is

meant to denote a leading figure or main participant in an event such as a contest or a dispute. It also points to an advocate, a supporter of a political or social cause:

... it is the most important character in a novel, play, story, or other literary work; a main character in ancient Greek drama: the first actor who interacted with the chorus; a leading figure: a main participant in an event such as a contest or dispute; or a supporter: an important or influential supporter or advocate of something such as a political or social issue.

According to J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (1982: 537), 'protagonist is defined as:

The first actor in a play, thence the principal actor or character. In Greek tragedy, the playwright was limited to the protagonist (first actor), deuteragonist (second actor) and tritagonist (third actor). It is probable that in the first place Greek drama consisted of a Chorus and the leader of the Chorus. The protagonist has come to be the equivalent of the hero.

Finally, in *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (2010: 681), a protagonist is defined as the main character in a literary work or a leading actor in a movie or play. The word is also used to refer to a leading personality in real life such as a leader or someone who supports a cause:

... it is the principal character in a literary work; a leading actor, character, or participant in a literary work or real event; or a leader, proponent, or supporter of a cause.

However, in Thomas Hardy's fiction, the protagonist is neither a human being, nor a main character, but it is the setting of the story. Throughout the history of fiction, the protagonists are persons such as Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Maggie

Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, but in Hardy's fiction the protagonist is the setting of the novel. In Hardy's fiction, the setting and its main elements – the details and geography of the place, time period in history, social, cultural, moral and religious context – is not only the background against which action takes place, but also it plays the role of a protagonist in the incidents.

A number of literary definitions for the term “Setting” have stated that whenever the setting is employed in a narrative or dramatic work, it clearly means the location where events take place; the historical period of time and the social circumstances in which its action occurs.

According to M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “The setting of a narrative or dramatic work” is defined as (1981: 172):

the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs; the setting of an episode or scene within a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place. The general setting of *Macbeth*, for example, is medieval Scotland, and the setting for the scene in which Macbeth comes upon the witches is a blasted heath ... The physical setting, in writers like Poe, Hardy, and Faulkner, is an important element in generating the *atmosphere* of their works. The Greek term *opsis* (“scene”, or “spectacle”) is now occasionally used to denote the visible or picturable setting in any work of literature, including a lyric poem.

Abrams also states that the literary term “setting”, when applied to a theatrical work, is considered as a synonym of ‘décor’ and ‘mise en scène’, French terms which indicate the scenery and the properties and the furniture movable pieces on the stage. The term ‘mise en scène’ includes as well the way actors are positioned in a particular scene on the stage (Abrams, 1981: 172).