

A Paradoxical Pastoral Novel: On the Rural Writing in *Under the Greenwood Tree*¹

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Abstract: *Under the Greenwood Tree* is Thomas Hardy's first novel entirely focused on rural life, marking a shift towards rural writing in his literary career. This novel not only reflects his keen awareness of the literary market but also demonstrates his unique understanding of rural issues. It extensively employs pastoral elements in both its content and form, while also striving to truthfully depict the internal changes within rural society, thus skillfully balancing pastoral style with Victorian realism. However, Hardy's selective portrayal of rural internal changes and rustic characters in the novel indicates a stylistic paradox: while attempting to adhere to the pastoral style in handling rural subject matters, he shows an uncontrollable deviation from it. By analyzing Hardy's response to the literary market and his portrayal of rural society, this article explores Hardy's ambiguous writing stance in addressing rural themes and his complex attitude toward the rural–urban relationship during a period of social transformation, which constitute one of the core issues in his later rural-themed novels.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, the pastoral, rural writing

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Under the Greenwood Tree stands out among all of Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, not only because it is a charming “minor masterpiece” (Mallett xi), but also because of its rare light-hearted and cheerful pastoral tone, which is seldom found in his later works. This novel most clearly reflects Hardy's pastoral ideal and embodies his vision of a harmonious Wessex society (Nie 41). Although it is widely recognized as a pastoral novel, some scholars have noticed the instability of its pastoral style. For example, as Michael Millgate points out, this novel does not adhere to a single literary form and has an unconventional ending, so “it is necessary to acknowledge that if *Under the Greenwood Tree* is an idyll it is one in which, at the end, many things are less than idyllic” (53–54). Similarly, Stephen Regan regards this novel as a “darkening pastoral,” arguing that “the destructive effects of social class and class consciousness” and “a sharp-edged satirical

antagonism” embodied in this novel go beyond pastoral comedy (241).

While these studies highlight the conflict between pastoral style and Victorian realism, they do not address the underlying issue: this novel is still largely based on a rural–urban contrast that can be traced back to Hardy’s earliest novel writing. This contrastive perspective is reflected not only in the development of the plot but also in Hardy’s positioning when writing about rural life. The female protagonist Fancy’s “return” to the village and the arrival of the new parson Maybold suggest a rural–urban interaction, which triggers the internal changes of the rural society. The novel ingeniously combines the decline of the village choir with the romantic love story of the protagonists, presenting the changes within rural society through a romantic, pastoral lens. Focusing on the internal changes in rural society as depicted in the novel, this article explores Hardy’s use and transformation of the pastoral style from a rural–urban interaction perspective and examines how Hardy keeps a balance between pastoral style and realism, ultimately to reveal the ambiguous stance and the complex attitude he adopted when dealing with rural themes in his early works.

1. Hardy’s Turn to Rural Writing

For most readers, Hardy is best known for his rural-themed novels. However, in his early works, the importance of the city was at least as significant, if not more so, than that of the countryside. Hardy’s early career as novelist shows there was a turn towards rural writing which laid the foundation for his later rural-themed novels.

In the summer of 1867, 27-year-old Thomas Hardy returned to his hometown in the countryside of Dorchester, a small town in southern England. For the previous five years, he had been working in an architectural firm in London, and the stresses of city life had left him physically and mentally exhausted. His return to the countryside was meant to be a break, but it unexpectedly sparked his creative urges, marking the beginning of his career as a novelist:

He considered that he knew fairly well both West-country life in its less explored recesses, and the life of an isolated student cast upon the billows of London with no protection but his brains—the young man of whom it may be said more truly than perhaps of any, that “save his own soul he hath no star.” The two contrasting experiences seemed to afford him abundant materials out of which to evolve a striking socialistic novel—not that he mentally defined it as such, for the word had probably never, or scarcely ever, been heard of at that date. (Hardy, *Life and Work* 58)

As we can see, Hardy’s “contrasting experiences” of rural and urban life provided a foundational framework for the creation of his first novel. This novel, titled *The Poor Man and the Lady*, was never published, and its manuscript no longer exists. However, Hardy later claimed that the novel’s most important scene was set in London and that the novel contained very radical content, offering “a sweeping dramatic satire” of the various social classes at the time (62–63). A publisher had agreed to publish the novel under certain conditions, but the novelist George Meredith, after reading it, thought the satire was too harsh and would provoke criticism that might damage Hardy’s future as a writer. He advised Hardy to either rewrite the novel or start fresh with

a “more complicated” plot (64). Hardy accepted Meredith’s second suggestion and wrote a new novel, *Desperate Remedies*, published in 1871. This was Hardy’s first published novel, which combined both rural and urban settings with a complex and intricate plot, but the response it received was lukewarm. Hardy’s early works indicate that the countryside was not the dominant subject matter in his writing, and the city played just as important a role.

Unlike *The Poor Man and the Lady* and *Desperate Remedies*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy’s second published novel, deviates from the writing strategy of emphasizing both the urban and rural setting and instead strictly confines itself to ordinary country life, thus marking a shift in Hardy’s creative focus toward rural themes in his novels. The novel tells two intertwining stories set in a traditional rural society: the romance between the village boy Dick Dewy and the village schoolmistress Fancy Day, and the decline of the Mellstock choir. The village tranter Reuben Dewy and his family, who have been members of the village choir for three generations, are central to the story. Reuben’s son Dick falls in love with the new village schoolmistress, Fancy. Fancy, the daughter of the local wealthy woodsman Geoffrey Day, was well educated in town before returning to teach in Mellstock. Fancy is young, beautiful, and an excellent musician, attracting the attention of Dick, the rich farmer Shiner, and the new young parson Maybold. Under the new parson’s direction, Fancy ultimately replaces the ancient choir and takes charge of playing music in the church. In the end, Dick and Fancy’s love culminates in marriage.

The creation of *Under the Greenwood Tree* resulted from Hardy’s positive response to the literary market’s demands. In 1871, Hardy wrote to the Macmillan Publishing Company seeking to publish *Under the Greenwood Tree*. In this letter, he mentioned that many rural characters and scenes in *Desperate Remedies*, which he considered inconsequential, were well-received by critics, which inspired him to write *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and he even quoted in the letter the critics’ praises for his rural depiction (*Collected Letters* 11–12). In his autobiography, Hardy also revealed that the praise from the literary critic John Morley for the rural scenes in *The Poor Man and the Lady* led him to consider writing a novel focused on rural life (*Life and Work* 88). Therefore, it appears that through the creation of *The Poor Man and the Lady* and the publication of *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy became acutely aware of the literary market’s appetite for rural themes, thus shifting his focus toward rural writing. Shortly after *Under the Greenwood Tree* was published, a magazine commented: “Our readers may possibly remember, that while praising *Desperate Remedies* for many marks of ability, we especially commended it for its graphic pictures of rustic life somewhere in the West Country. Here the author is clearly on his own ground, and to this he has confined himself in the book before us” (Cox 15). This comment patronizingly affirmed Hardy’s compliance with the critics in adopting rural subjects for his writing, while also highlighting Victorian urban readers’ taste for “graphic pictures of rustic life.” Undoubtedly, *Under the Greenwood Tree* marked a successful creative shift, which established the rural theme as the primary direction in Hardy’s novel writing.

To some extent, *Under the Greenwood Tree* follows the pastoral style favored by urban readers by idealizing the countryside. The word “pastoral” originally referred to herding, and later specifically came to denote a literary genre that depicts rural life. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “pastoral” as a literature genre refers to a literary work that depicts country life or the life of shepherds, especially in an idealized and romantic way. The tradition of pastoral literature can be traced back to the ancient Greek poet Theocritus, whose *Idylls* is considered the earliest pastoral work. The Roman poet Virgil developed the pastoral tradition founded by Theocritus, and

his pastoral masterpiece, *The Eclogues*, created the famous pastoral image of “Arcadia.” Broadly speaking, pastoral literature can refer to “any literature that described the countryside in contrast to the court or the city. Theme rather than form came to define the pastoral mode” (Gifford 19). Many scholars have tried to define the pastoral, with emphasis on the contrasts. William Empson defines the pastoral style as “the process of putting the complex into the simple” (22). Harold E. Tolliver notes that the form of pastoral literature is based on a series of contrasts, such as the contrast between nature and society (*Pastoral Forms* 1–5). Among these scholars, Michael Squires perhaps gives the most detailed definition of the pastoral:

the genre of literature which idealizes country life through the sharp contrast between city and country, the implied withdrawal from a complex to a simple world, the urban awareness of rural life and the resulting tension between value systems, the intense nostalgia for a Golden-Age past, and the creation of a circumscribed and remote pastoral world characterized by harmony between man and nature and by an atmosphere of idyllic contentment—a world in which country life, stripped of its coarsest features, is made palatable to urban society. (“*Far from the Madding Crowd*” 303)

Generally, the pastoral is characterized by the contrast between the country and the city, the idealization of country life, and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Under the Greenwood Tree is a novel full of pastoral elements. Set in the picturesque and traditional village of Mellstock, whose archetype is based on the parish of Stinsford near Hardy’s hometown of Dorchester, the novel features an organic rural community centered around the Mellstock choir, vividly portraying ordinary rural characters and scenes of rural life. The comic love story between Dick and Fancy adds to the novel’s pastoral charm. The overall tone of the novel is fresh and cheerful, with none of Hardy’s later novels’ dark and melancholic mood. The harmonious relationship between humans and nature constitutes another major feature of the novel’s pastoral style. The novel opens with a depiction of trees on a winter night, situating the story within a specific natural setting and emphasizing the intimate connection between humans and the natural world. In the final chapter, the ancient tree that symbolizes prosperity and stability echoes the description of the trees at the beginning of the novel, also highlighting the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. The novel not only conforms to the pastoral mode in theme but also embodies pastoral characteristics in its structure, with its chapters arranged according to the cyclical progression of the four seasons. The decline of the village choir and the development of the love story between Dick and Fancy consistently correspond to the natural rhythm of winter, spring, summer, and autumn. More importantly, the novel embodies the core feature of the pastoral—the implied contrast between the city and the countryside—most notably manifested in the conflict between individual ideas and ancient rural customs.

With its title derived from Shakespeare’s distinctly pastoral play *As You Like It*, *Under the Greenwood Tree* is clearly tailored to the pastoral style. Hardy himself referred to this “short and quite rustic story” as an “idyll” (*Life and Work* 88), a word that is generally associated with the pastoral. His friend and mentor Horace Moule also described the novel as “the best prose idyll that we have seen for a long while past” (Cox 17), with “genuine air of the country breathing throughout it” (20). Hardy’s contemporary critics generally regarded it as a pastoral novel, with its models being the rural-themed novels of George Eliot and the French writer George Sand (Jones

151). Modern critics also acclaimed this novel as a pastoral one. For example, Michael Squires believes that “*Under the Greenwood Tree* is Hardy’s first pastoral novel, whose stylized perfection has made it a minor masterpiece in a neglected genre” (*Pastoral Novel* 124). R. P. Draper also regards *Under the Greenwood Tree* as one of Hardy’s three pastoral novels, arguing that it draws upon Shakespeare’s pastoral tradition (9–10).

The popularity of *Under the Greenwood Tree* is closely associated with the 19th-century British literary market’s taste for rural themes. The rapid urbanization and industrialization in 19th-century England gave rise to a wave of rural nostalgia. At that time, the idealization of the countryside in rural-themed works becomes a trend, which was “a product of and a reaction against the rise of the urban-industrial system” (Bunce 27). The idealized rural landscape “became as important as agricultural productivity and rural trade,” thus acquiring a commercial quality, and the urban middle class drove this trend of idealizing the countryside (28). However, in the mid-19th century, a major limitation of rural-themed novels was their lack of focus on ordinary rural folk. The typical “country-house novel” of the time focused on the adventures and love affairs of the landed gentry class who inhabited the local country house. In these novels the countryside was often depicted “as a picturesque background,” and the ordinary rural laborers were regarded as “natural inferiors who could be patronised” (M. Williams 50–51). It was not until the publication of Eliot’s work that this situation began to change, as her rural novels began to reflect “the emotions and working lives of ordinary country people” (68). Eliot’s early works such as *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, which focused on rural life, emphasized realistic portrayals of ordinary rural people and life, contributing to readers’ evolving tastes for rural writing. In *Adam Bede*, Eliot highly praised the Dutch school’s focus on portraying ordinary rural people, signaling the rise of a realist trend in rural writing. The subtitle of *Under the Greenwood Tree* as “A Rural Painting of Dutch School” aligns with this shift of rural realism. Hardy’s rural-themed novels, to some extent, continued the rural writing approach initiated by Eliot, with a focus on depicting ordinary rural life. This is one reason why many of Hardy’s contemporaries compared his novels to Eliot’s early works.

As Hardy’s first rural-themed novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* adheres to the pastoral style in many ways, with numerous pastoral elements: beautiful rural scenery, a harmonious rural choir, and the innocent love between country boy and girl. The title of the novel, as well as the symbolically significant tree at the end of the novel, further emphasizes the pastoral tone of the work. While the novel is mainly set in the countryside, it still maintains the rural–urban contrast perspective embodied in Hardy’s earlier work, showing his great concern with the rural–urban relationship. *Under the Greenwood Tree* is less about the pastoral nostalgia of traditional rural life and more about exploring the internal changes occurring within rural society. More importantly, it conveys the complex mindset of rural characters in the midst of these changes and even Hardy’s complicated attitude towards them.

2. The Internal Changes within Rural Society

Beneath its pastoral exterior, *Under the Greenwood Tree* focuses on the internal changes within a traditional rural society, reflecting Hardy’s complex attitude toward the changing rural–urban relationships during a period of social transformation. The novel tells two intertwined

stories: the decline of the choir tradition and the love story of Dick and Fancy. Through the themes of the “return of the native” and “cross-class love,” the novel explores the internal changes in rural society brought about by the interaction between city (town) and country. The decline of rural traditions reflects the changes in the rural social landscape during the Victorian era, while the twists in the romance highlight the shifts in individual consciousness. While Hardy’s early handling of rural themes followed the pastoral tradition, the novel also reflects a keen awareness of the rural social reality, showing at certain points an uncontrollable deviation from the pastoral.

The internal changes in rural society are first reflected in the decline of the Mellstock choir, a traditional rural community, which is a change driven by the new parson, Maybold. The decline of the Mellstock choir seems inevitable in a time of social change. The choir members realize that traditional stringed instruments in church performances are gradually being replaced by new instruments, and that choirs in nearby areas are also disappearing. The choir’s greatest crisis, however, lies in the fact that the well-educated young parson Maybold, who secretly admires Fancy, wants her piano solos to replace the choir’s performance. The Mellstock choir and the old rural traditions they represent are not given importance by the new parson. The choir members, realizing that they would eventually have to give way, attempt to negotiate with Maybold to request a delay in their departure. This negotiation can be seen as a symbolic confrontation between the old order represented by the choir and the new order represented by Maybold, though Hardy chooses to downplay this in a humorous and theatrical manner. The decline of the choir tradition conveys a subtle rural–urban relationship: Fancy, who returns to the village after receiving an urban education, and the city-influenced Parson Maybold, easily overthrow the old rural customs represented by the choir.

The internal changes in rural society are not only reflected in the shift of rural customs but also in the changes in individual consciousness reflected in the romance. Fancy, well-educated and experienced in the world, is dissatisfied with the idea of marrying an ordinary country boy like Dick. She also finds the rustic language and manners of the villagers distasteful. In fact, the biggest obstacle to Dick and Fancy’s love is the issue of class taste. Fancy’s father, the gamekeeper, sent her to town for a good education, hoping she would marry into the gentry class. Fancy absorbs the cultural ideas and tastes of the urban middle class, which makes her look down on the ordinary Dick and question the ancient rural customs. Her modern, urban cultural taste clashes with the traditional customs of Mellstock. Fancy’s strong consciousness of social class and propriety causes her to briefly betray Dick (but she soon corrects this mistake, thus avoiding a tragedy). She succumbs to the temptation of Parson Maybold’s proposal because he embodies the gentry class culture she yearns for. As she explains: “It is my nature—perhaps all women’s—to love refinement of mind and manners; but even more than this—to be ever fascinated with the idea of surroundings more elegant and pleasing than those which have been customary” (*Under the Greenwood Tree* 159). “Refinement of mind and manners” is an important mark of culture, especially urban culture, which is quite different from the customary life in the countryside. In this sense, Fancy describes her pursuit of culture as her own nature, implying a hidden dissatisfaction with the customary life in the village. Maybold, when proposing to Fancy, echoes this sentiment: “I see your great charm: I respect your natural talents, and the refinement they have brought into your nature—they are quite enough, and more than enough for me” (154). Beyond her beauty, Fancy’s charm largely lies in the “refinement” that education has given her. This is the reason why she is admired by Dick and Maybold alike.

The root of the internal changes in rural society lies in the changes in individual consciousness. Although Fancy's pursuit of urban culture is somewhat superficial and pretentious, it suggests that rural customs lack an inherent impetus that could offer spiritual fulfillment. As Toliver points out, the decline of the traditional rural society in this novel is "partly because it cannot survive critical examination and cannot satisfy the whole, intelligent man" ("Dance" 61). As a matter of fact, the narrator does not completely oppose Fancy's pursuit of upward social mobility. To some extent, although Fancy's class consciousness and her urban "culture" challenge the ancient rural customs of Mellstock, they also hint at the emergence of modern consciousness, bringing a breath of fresh life to this rural society. Dick's passionate pursuit of Fancy is not merely attributed to his admiration for her beauty but is deeply rooted in his hidden weariness of rural customs and his vague longing for modern life, which explains why he never complains about the disbanding of the village choir. In this sense, *Under the Greenwood Tree* implicitly suggests that urban culture is superior to rural culture, contradicting the core contrast of the pastoral genre, which generally elevates the countryside over the city. From another perspective, Fancy's modern values reflect a desire for progress. Her hidden dissatisfaction with love and marriage actually embodies the conflict between modern consciousness and customary life. In this sense, the novel appears to criticize Fancy's "vanity," but it does secretly affirm her desire for upward social mobility and her pursuit for a spiritually refined life. As Ralph Pite insightfully points out, "the values Hardy is often taken to oppose—mobility, cosmopolitanism, aspiration, progress—are being mutedly affirmed by the stories he tells. Localism (particularly delight in the simple life of pastoral England) is seen as at best paradoxical and at worst poisonous" (136).

The rural society in the novel is not a peaceful "Dutch landscape painting" but a society deeply connected to survival interests. Idyllic as the village seems to be, money and class still matter greatly. While Fancy and Dick's love is pure, it is not without complexities in terms of marriage. Fancy's father hopes she will marry into the gentry class, while Dick's merchant father also values Fancy's family financial advantage. Though the novel does not directly describe the hardships of rural labor, it subtly hints at the difficulties of rural life in certain details. For instance, the mother of choir member Thomas Leaf still has to work hard to earn a living; the gamekeeper has scars on his face that indicate the hardship of his work. Therefore, despite its strong pastoral atmosphere, the novel still reveals the harsh realities of rural society. As Penny Boumelha points out: "rural society, for Hardy, is just that: a society, in which exploitation, solidarity, and the struggle for survival are experienced quite as keenly as they are in urban settings" (131). In this regard, rural life is by no means peaceful and idyllic, but full of competitions and struggles; class and cultural awareness can provoke doubts about rural customary life, revealing hidden dissatisfaction with the status quo and shattering the illusion of pastoral idealism.

The novel maintains the integrity of the pastoral genre through the solidarity of the village community and through the harmony between humans and nature, while cleverly keeping the contradictions and conflicts triggered by internal changes in rural society within this pastoral framework, thus achieving a balance between realism and pastoral style. The rural society rooted in nature still shows great resilience in the face of contradictions and conflicts. This resilience finds expression in the novel's final chapter "Under the Greenwood Tree" that describes the wedding venue:

The point in Yalbury Wood which abutted on the end of Geoffrey Day's premises

was closed with an ancient tree, horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height. Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree, tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year, quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks, and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots. (173)

The broad shape of the ancient tree suggests inclusiveness, and words like “tribes,” “tufts,” and “families” all emphasize the importance of community. The tree brings together different species, such as birds, rabbits, fungi, and insects, creating a thriving small world of living creatures. Beneath the tree’s shade are not only these natural creatures but also the members of the rural community, especially the members of the disbanded choir, who are part of the rural wedding. In a sense, Dick and Fancy’s wedding is akin to the reproductive activities of the creatures under the tree, as both embody the continuity of life and the power of community. Rather than claiming that the greenwood tree “is transformed from a natural into a social symbol” (M. Williams 129), it is more accurate to say that the social ceremony of the wedding is symbolically incorporated into the natural system represented by the tree. The tree not only symbolizes the stability of rural society but also represents the harmony between humans and nature.

The novel closes with a “happy marriage,” but there is still an underlying unease, somehow suggesting the implacable conflicts between two ways of life. Fancy wants the wedding to be refined and up to her class tastes. She insists that family members and guests avoid using those ancient words which “sounded so very humiliating to persons of newer taste” and abandon rustic customs that have been discarded by “the better classes of society” (Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* 173). In the final scene, as the newlyweds drive off to their new home, Dick proudly praises Fancy for her “loyalty” and “honesty.” Just as Fancy feels somewhat embarrassed at this, the song of a nightingale suddenly fills the woods, interrupting their conversation. Nature intervenes in the couple’s world in a peculiar way, as suggested by the novel’s ending: “‘O, ’tis the nightingale,’ murmured she, and thought of a secret she would never tell” (177). Hardy ends the novel with a seemingly happy marriage, which is a “happy ending” that Victorian readers expect for a pastoral novel, but this ending also contains an irony: the husband remains unaware of his wife’s previous “betrayal,” while the wife secretly harbors dissatisfaction with her marriage. The novel’s ending suggests that marriage does not necessarily lead to a happy life but may be the beginning of trouble. This reveals a realist aspect, diverging from the overall pastoral tone of the novel. Hardy’s understanding of realism may be best expressed by the tranter Dewy’s remarks: “all true stories have a coarse touch or a bad moral, depend upon’t. If the story-tellers could ha’ got decency and good morals from true stories, who’d ha’ troubled to invent parables?” (54).

This novel shows that Hardy intentionally kept the realist elements within the framework of the pastoral genre, reflecting his tilt toward the pastoral style favored by the literary market of the time. The tree in the final chapter symbolizes the harmony between humans and nature, supporting the continuation of rural customs; Fancy, dissatisfied with the status quo, marries Dick and will integrate into rural traditions. The strong sense of community and harmony with nature keeps the social changes and emotional crises triggered by the interaction between town and country within the framework of pastoral narrative. Hardy adopts, in this novel, a dual perspective on the interaction between town and country: he wants to cater to urban readers by maintaining pastoral charm, while, from the perspective of a rural-born writer, he also tries to present a portrayal of real rural life and

the underlying shifts in individual consciousness. This dual approach maintains the balance between pastoral style and realism, and the tension between the two reflects Hardy's uncertain writing position when completely turning to rural themes for the first time in his novel writing.

3. Hardy's Ambiguous Position in Rural Writing

The analysis above suggests that *Under the Greenwood Tree* attempts to reconcile the tension between pastoral style and realism, a key issue in 19th-century British rural writing. Some critics point out that the pastoral style underwent a significant transformation during the Victorian period. Although traditional forms of the pastoral style were still heavily constrained in the Victorian era, "the old impulse can be seen to remain alive in a structure of feeling independent of its ancient properties"; this "renewal of pastoral impulse," combined with new materials and forms of expression, enabled the pastoral style to reveal changes in social life, which became a defining feature of Victorian idyllic novels (Hunter 3–4). Similarly, Squires believes that as a variation of traditional pastoral literature the pastoral novel is "a form which combines realism and pastoral impulse" (*Pastoral Novel* 2). Although traditional pastoral elements are no longer present in the pastoral novel, a pastoral feeling flows through it, blending with a realist depiction of rural life. Squires terms this combination of idealization and realism "sympathic realism," in which the portrayal of rural life is filled with sympathy, while also, to some extent, idealizing rural life, thereby maintaining the novel's pastoral atmosphere (16–17). In other words, Victorian rural writing underwent a fusion of pastoral style and realism: pastoral feelings are integrated into the partly realist representation of rural life.

In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, the attempt to merge realism and pastoral style is directly reflected in the novel's title. The full title is *Under the Greenwood Tree, or the Mellstock Quire: A Rural Painting of the Dutch School*. This complex title reflects Hardy's uncertain position as a writer when approaching rural themes: whether leaning toward the pastoral tradition or striving for a more realist portrayal. First, the main title clearly reflects a tendency toward the pastoral tradition, being derived from Act 2, Scene 5 of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Millgate points out the importance of *As You Like It* for the novel's pastoral style. He believes that the novel's ending, with its focus on the great tree and the nightingale's song, echoes *As You Like It*, thus placing the novel firmly within the framework of the pastoral style; and *As You Like It* was of great importance to Hardy's creative imagination, contributing to "his choice of a pastoral theme and treatment" (45–46).

If the main title suggests a pastoral style or rural nostalgia, the novel's subtitle, "A Rural Painting of the Dutch School," points directly to the novel's realist style. The Dutch School refers to the "Golden Age of Dutch Art" from the 1620s to the 1670s, known for its landscape, still life, and genre painting. Among these, genre painting, in particular, is focused on depicting the daily lives of ordinary country people, emphasizing the details of common things. Eliot, to some extent, reinforced the connection between Victorian literary realism and Dutch painting. Dutch painting, which focused on portraying ordinary people and ordinary things, was undervalued for a long time, but it aligned perfectly with Eliot's early realist literary views.² For Eliot, the value of this realism lay in its reflection of the emotions of everyday life, which could arouse empathy

in readers, fostering understanding and respect for the lives of ordinary people. Although Hardy strongly denied that his novels were modeled after Eliot's, her admiration for Dutch painting certainly helped shape the literary taste of the time, which would have influenced how readers evaluated Hardy's work (Yeazell 138).

However, in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, while Hardy emphasizes the portrayal of rural community like the Mellstock Quire and rural life scenes, his depiction lacks the detached and compassionate empathy which is characteristic of Eliot's novels, instead carrying a humorous, lively tone. In fact, Hardy, brought up in a small village, did not believe that Eliot truly understood rural characters: "she had never touched the life of the fields: her country-people having seemed to him, too, more like small townfolk than rustics" (*Life and Work* 100). Beneath his "rural painting of Dutch School," Hardy presents his own unique understanding of rural society and rural life. Hardy's distinctive view of rural life is evident in his portrayal of rural community. The rural community in *Under the Greenwood Tree* initiates a model that would become typical in Hardy's later novels; that is, a diverse range of rural characters form a socially cohesive group based on customary traditions, providing a resilient social foundation for the protagonists' love story. Members of the Mellstock Quire, such as the tranter Reuben Dewy, grandfather William, and the shoemaker Robert Penny, are each given distinct personalities. As Hardy points out in his essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer," rural people should not be stereotypically regarded as "dull, unvarying and joyless" "Hodges" but each person ought to be seen with his unique, individual traits (*Personal Writings* 170–171). However, these rustic characters are never portrayed merely as individuals but always as part of the community, embedded within the social web of rural society. This deep-rooted rural community enhances the rural atmosphere of the novel, as Virginia Woolf insightfully observes: "it is not the part of the peasants in the Wessex novels to stand out as individuals. They compose a pool of common wisdom, of common humour, a fund of perpetual life" (249).

Nevertheless, Hardy's portrayal of rural characters also reflects class considerations and shows a tendency to soften the harsh realities of rural society to cater to urban readers' idealized perceptions of the countryside. As Lawrence Jones points out, the pastoral style is generally seen as poetic, tending to highlight the beauty of rural life. Realism within the pastoral style is selective, "stripping country life of 'its coarsest features' to make it acceptable to urban readers" (153). While Dorset was one of the poorest and least industrialized counties in Victorian England (M. Williams 110), *Under the Greenwood Tree* carefully avoids depicting the poor rural laborers. Aside from the socially and mentally inept Thomas Leaf, the Mellstock Quire is made up mostly of the rural middle class, such as artisans and merchants, a class to which Hardy's father belonged. These well-selected rural characters, varying in age, personality, and occupation but sharing similar values, form the so-called "knowable community"—characters shaped in a way that is intelligible and relatable to the observer (R. Williams 164). The Mellstock Quire as a knowable community carries the ancient rural traditions, showing strong cohesion and becoming the soul of the rural society in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. It is the emphasis on community that weakens the latent class conflicts and survival crises within rural society.

However, this strategy of appealing to urban readers through the portrayal of rural characters created a dilemma for Hardy, and his conflicting position is most evident in his treatment of rural characters. In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, one of Hardy's main aims in depicting rural characters is to achieve a sense of humor. In his letter to Macmillan with a view to publishing this novel, Hardy mentions that 'it is entirely a story of rural life, and the attempt has been made to draw the

characters humorously, without caricature” (*Collected Letters* 11). Whether it is the choir members’ playful banter at gatherings or Dick’s funny actions in pursuing Fancy, the novel is full of humor. This humorous portrayal of rural characters is closely tied to class consciousness. For instance, when the choir negotiates with the new parson about the imminent crisis of the choir, Hardy presents the awkwardness and unease of the choir members in front of the parson in a dramatized, humorous way. The “confrontation” between the choir and the parson is not just a clash of old traditions and new ideas but also symbolizes a confrontation between the rural working class and the middle class. Through this humorous, slightly mocking depiction, Hardy subtly adopts a condescending attitude toward these rural characters. In other words, in this novel, Hardy portrays the rural characters from the perspective of an experienced urban writer, aiming to please urban readers. Hardy later recognized this flaw and lamented in his later years that the rural characters in *Under the Greenwood Tree* were “penned so lightly, even so farcially and flippantly at times,” and he attributed it to the particular literary circumstances of the time (*Under the Greenwood Tree* 4).

Hardy’s ambivalent attitudes toward rural characters in this novel can be traced to his writing position regarding rural subjects. As Raymond Williams points out, when dealing with rural themes, Hardy is “but an observer and chronicler, often again with uncertainty about his actual relation. Moreover he was not writing for them, but about them, to a mainly metropolitan and unconnected literary public” (200). This uncertain position is intimately linked to Hardy’s class background. On the one hand, Hardy did not come from a working-class rural background; his father was a relatively prosperous rural stonemason who employed a dozen workers, and Hardy’s family belonged to a “relatively independent, intermediate class” (Williams and Williams 32) in the village. In terms of education, Hardy received eight years of formal schooling, a level of education higher than most of his contemporaries (R. Williams 170). Hardy’s family and educational background meant that he had to view the countryside through two different lenses: the consciousness of rural tradition and the consciousness of a well-educated individual. As a result, he had to both cater to urban middle-class readers’ imagination of the countryside and, inevitably, present the reality of rural life. So, when it comes to his writing strategy in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy sticks to the pastoral tradition, demonstrating his keen awareness of a literary market dominated by urban readers, and at the same time he strives to present the internal problems of rural society, thus creating a tension between these two aspects that resulted in the unstable and paradoxical pastoral style of this early rural novel. This tension precisely reflects the complexity of Hardy’s attitudes toward rural–urban relations during a period of social transformation. For Hardy, who was familiar with both rural life and life in London, it was difficult to take an unequivocal position to handle the implied relationship between the country and the city in his first novel entirely focused on rural life.

This lighthearted and bright pastoral novel cleverly reveals the internal problems of rural society, such as the conflicts between individuals and community, the decline of rural customs, and class tensions. However, the strong sense of community and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature manage to alleviate these problems, allowing the novel to maintain a delicate, complete pastoral structure. The fusion and conflict of pastoral style and realism in the novel reflect Hardy’s uncertain position as a writer when approaching rural themes, as well as his complex attitude toward the rural–urban relationship in a period of social transformation. Although *Under the Greenwood Tree* is often considered one of Hardy’s lesser works, it is significant for his

later novels, as it introduces a rural community composed of characters with distinct personalities, providing a resilient social foundation for the novel's plot. The novel's latent realist elements, such as cross-class romance and the theme of returning home, which involve internal changes within rural society, also become prominent themes in Hardy's subsequent works. More importantly, the ambiguous writing position demonstrated in Hardy's handling of rural themes in *Under the Greenwood Tree* would have a significant bearing on his later rural-themed novels.

Notes

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2. In Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, George Eliot speaks highly of the realism of Dutch paintings: "It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions" (195).

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