CONCLUSION
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As a short story writer Thomas Hardy has a unique status. Although he wrote so many good short stories his merits as a short story writer have never been widely acclaimed. Critics have accused him of tedious self-duplication because he frequently repeated certain subjects, themes, patterns and techniques in his short stories. John Berryman said that Hardy "wrote one thousand pages of the worst short stories that the world has ever seen" and critics such as Canby, Dashiell and Bates cannot see any merit in Hardy's short stories because they do not conform in structure and economy of expression to the qualifications for a modern short story. Another complaint against Hardy's short stories is that "their matter does not dictate their form." However, this allegation as all the others is not true. Hardy considered form to be an important quality in any piece of writing. As he wrote in "The Profitable Reading of Fiction".

"to a masterpiece in story there appertains a beauty of shape, no less than to a masterpiece in pictorial or plastic art, capable of giving to the trained mind an equal pleasure. To recognise this quality clearly when present, the construction of the plot, or fable, as it used to be called, is to be more particularly observed than either in a reading for sentiment and opinions or in a reading merely to discover the fates of the main characters. For however real the persons, however profound, witty, or humorous the observations, as soon as the book comes to be regarded as an exemplification of the art of story telling, the story naturally takes
the first place and the example is not noteworthy as such unless the telling be artistically carried on".5

Hardy did have great concern for beauty of shape. Then why is it that critics have commented unfavourably on his attitude towards form? This discrepancy between the allegations of critics and Hardy's own ideas about beauty of shape may be the result of the definition that the term 'short story' has taken in recent times - of the importance of 'single effect'.6 When we read Hardy's short stories we must remember that Hardy was writing at a time when the short story was trying to establish itself as a literary form, when the influence of the fables, legends and ballads was still working on writers attempting to write short stories. Hardy's short stories may not conform to the form required of a modern short story but we must remember that "the best form is that which makes the most of its subject".7 In his short stories Hardy invented forms which were suitable for his subjects and these forms changed along with his material so that the methods used by him in WESSEX TALES, A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES and LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES differ significantly from one another.

If there are critics who have spoken against Hardy the short story writer there are also critics like Howe who have a good word for him. But Howe's attitude towards Hardy's short stories is rather condescending. Howe
says that Hardy has little to do with the main line of the modern short story and his work ought to be considered as an example of the older form, tale. A tale, according to Howe is "a more easy-paced and amiable mode of narrative". However, Hardy's shorter fictions are not tales in the conventional sense of the term for they are consciously crafted and modern. One of the characteristic of a tale is that it stops, starts up again and wanders, seemingly unconcerned with the effects of accumulation or foreshortening. Hardy's stories are longer than the conventional short stories but they are tightly controlled narratives and even if they digress occasionally these digressions are a part of the overall pattern of meaning.

A flaw which is often pointed out to undermine Hardy as a short story writer is his tedious tendency of self duplication, of the themetic sameness of his stories. It is true that Hardy in most of his stories repeats the themes of ambition, greed, sexual jealousy, love, courtship, unhappy marriages class difference and the difference between the rural and the urban ways of life. But then we must remember that the themes which Hardy so often deals with in his stories are all universal themes and no matter how one may want to avoid them there is no escape from them. But just because Hardy often repeats themes it does not mean that his stories are not entertaining and gripping.
In fact Hardy's repeated treatment of the same themes over and over again goes to show what a great writer he was. Although Hardy deals with the same theme story after story he has taken care, as we have seen in our discussion of his stories, to provide us with different situations and treated them variously. It is because of this that his stories warrant serious attention.

Another reason why people want to read more and more of Hardy's works is that they want to know more and more about Wessex and its people. In his short stories as in his novels Hardy presents a very descriptive and comprehensive picture of life in his native Dorset, which he called Wessex. Hardy scrupulously observed life and the actual particularities of rural life in England and he wrote about them. Each story embodies as we have seen his personal understanding of the local past and he communicates this vision by a narrative technique that makes it comprehensive to his non-native readers. In his short stories Hardy presents details of the social, economic and cultural diversity of Wessex life. Hardy does not preach or moralise, praise or condemn. He simply presents life as he sees it through the mouth of a narrator. He avoids social and philosophical generalisation. Hardy writes about all the Wessex people and within the forty odd short stories that he wrote he portrays a complex hierarchy from
the shepherds, artisans of "The Three Strangers" to the relatively wealthy tradesmen of "Fellow Townsmen" and "Interlopers at the Knap" to the aristocrats and gentry of A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES. And these people live the personal drama of their lives in Wessex. Wessex of the stories as Wessex of the novels is no fictional land. The places in which the events occur are actual places and when we observe each of these places closely we find that they vary surprisingly in their culture, agricultural economics, ways of life, moral points of view and language. Although Nature does not stand as an eternal presence in the stories as in the novels nevertheless it has an important role to play. The places in which the events occur do not exist simply as a setting but the place invariably carries a power of suggestion that links it with the events and the personalities of the story's characters.

Unlike longer forms of fiction, the short story does not allow a writer much space to develop his characters. It is therefore necessary that the writer establish the main traits of his principal characters as quickly and as economically as possible. Because he is bound by a limit of a several thousand words he cannot reveal any character completely. He must content himself with showing how one or two aspects of personality undergo change or only those aspects of the personality which are responsible for the precipitation of the events. This limitation of space in no
way hampered Hardy in the portrayal of his characters. With a few sure and swift strokes he draws his characters so as to make them appear as living breathing creatures. It is said of Hardy that he is better at portraying women characters than his men. But after reading his short stories we cannot judge either one way or the other. To us Lizzy, Sam Hobson, Mop Ollamoor, Carlile Aspent are all well drawn figures although two of these characters are male and two female. Hardy was good at portraying all character types starting from the perfect gentleman and the educated selfish gentleman to the wicked rake.

Hardy's style of writing has a distinctive characteristic. It is colloquial, fluent, simple and full of regional Wessex dialect. Nevertheless, no one should find any difficulty in reading Hardy's short stories. Hardy once wrote that in his works he wanted to show mainly the character of the speakers and only to give a general idea of their linguistic peculiarities. In a letter to the Spectator, 15th October 1881 he claimed that his method was that of "scrupulously preserving the local idiom, together with the words which have no synonyms among those in general use". Hardy knew the dialects of his native place well because as a child he had lived with the Dorset Labourers and tried to know them intimately. This he could only do after he had mastered their dialect.
Although a well educated man Hardy greatly believed in superstitions omens and predictions. He believed that in real life the true is often as inexplicable as the fictional. He never thought of superstition as a sign of ignorance. He once wrote "I believe (in the modern sense of the word) not only in the things Bergson believes in, but in spectres, mysterious voices, intuitions, omens, dreams, haunted places etc. etc." And because of this belief Hardy's stories are often unbelievable as a result of excessive supernatural touches. Although Hardy's short stories were the subject of adverse criticism he did not bother much about it because he believed that a writer had no right to write unless he had some really unusual tale to tell his readers. Hardy is not the only one during his times or our times to believe in such supernatural things. The belief that certain gifted individuals have special powers to see into the future and effect cures still persists and this belief does not persist only in the country areas.

Education is something which Hardy gave much thought to during his time and he nursed two strangely differing attitudes to education - education as a source of betterment and education as a source of discontent and personal bewilderment. These two different attitudes are shown in two stories - In "A Tradition of Two Ambitions"
Hardy shows education as a source of social advancement and somewhat differently in "The Son's Veto" he shows education as one of the forces that has divorced man from his village community and the intuitive knowledge gained from a life working on land.

Hardy was cynical in his attitude towards love, romance and marriage. In most of his short stories Hardy writes about love and unsuccessful marriage. It is only in "A Mere Interlude" that Hardy shows us signs of a marriage which could possibly end happily for the hero and the heroine. "The First Countess of Wessex" and "The Honourable Laura" in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES also have happy endings. The rest of the stories are all about the tragedy of marriage.

This cynical attitude of Hardy results from the fact that he often sees fate as playing cruel jests on mankind. The Gods are invariably malicious in Hardy. But the bitterness which develops in the characters of Hardy's novels is absent in the characters of the short stories. The characters in Hardy's short fiction accept all their misfortunes in their natural stride. They accept the fact that there is a power above them which thwarts their love, causes cruel coincidence or unhappy chance. This power is expressed in nature as much as in human affairs and nothing can be done about it. Because the characters in the short stories have accepted this fact they are not as depressed
as Jude gets when things do not go his way.

Most of Hardy’s stories have a distinctive speaker telling us the story. This narrator is often an elderly rustic who has good knowledge of the story he is narrating. He is often well acquainted with the social and geographical range of the events he is narrating. Most of the time the narrator has been in some way or the other connected with the events he is narrating. He either wants to put a wrong right or has himself gone through the events he is narrating. The stamp of his personality is often to be found in the narration as in the case of "A Few Crusted Characters" and A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES. Sometimes even as he is telling the story he gets nostalgic for old times. At other times he maintains an impersonal distance. At times the narrator is portrayed like the bards of ancient times, surrounded by an eager audience ready to listen to the story. Whatever the attitude that the narrator adopts one thing is certain - the reader is eager to listen to the unfolding of the story.

From all that we have discussed so far we find that there is very little justification in the allegations against Hardy’s stories. Critics who have made these allegations have approached the stories with a biased mind and have studied these stories as foreshadows or echo of his major and better work. It is true that all of Hardy’s short stories do not come up to the standard of his better novels
but this is no reason why we should overlook them. Some of them are immensely good pieces and the rest all deserve to be studied. Even if a person is not well acquainted with Hardy's novels he can get a very good and comprehensive picture of a fictional Wessex from the reading of these stories. The short stories of Hardy give us a good, imaginative history of Wessex and its people, of the myths, legends, faiths, beliefs and wisdom of the people of Wessex. They also give us a better understanding of Hardy the novelist and poet, who interprets us to ourselves.