The publication of *Wessex Tales* in 1888 is of great significance in Hardy's literary career. It is important not only because it proved that Hardy's short stories were beginning to be accepted and becoming popular but also because the publication of this volume represented "a step in his appropriation of Wessex as the exclusive precinct for his fiction". The name *Wessex* which Hardy was the first to use in fiction in his novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* was being taken up everywhere and Hardy thought that it would be a pity if he were "to lose the right to it for want of asserting it". By using Wessex as a title for the first time Hardy asserted his right to the name as an essential reference to his works. The publication of this volume and the way it was received further paved the way for the publication of the three other volumes of short stories - *A Group of Noble Dames*, *Life's Little Ironies* and *A Changed Man and Other Tales*.

The reasons why Hardy took the risk of collecting his short stories into a volume in a period when the short story as a literary genre was generally unpopular in England are many. By the end of 1887 Thomas Hardy with the publication of works like *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was able to hold his own in the world of fiction. This
sense of success finally gave him the necessary courage to overlook the Victorian prejudice in favour of the three volumes novel and to publish a volume of short stories as legitimate fictional work. Hardy wrote a letter to Macmillan suggesting that they publish a collection of his short stories. He recommended the project by saying that some “well-known critics have often advised me to reprint them, informing me that they are as good as anything I have written (however good that may be).” The well known critic mentioned here may be Leslie Stephen who had once written to Hardy suggesting “that you might write an exceedingly pleasant series of stories upon your special topic: I mean prose idyls of country life—short sketches of Hodge and his ways, which might be made very attractive, so as to make a volume or more at some future date.” And *Wessex Tales* was the result.

The first edition of *Wessex Tales* in 1888 appeared in two volumes. For this edition Hardy not only selected five of the best stories he had written to date but also those most closely related to the Wessex setting—"The Three Strangers", "The Withered Arm", "Fellow Townsmen", "Interlopers at the Knap" and "The Distracted Preacher". "An Imaginative Woman" was added to the 1896 edition. In 1912 Hardy reorganised the stories in *Wessex Tales* and *Life's Little Ironies* in such a way as to give greater unity and coherence to both the collections. "An Imaginative
Woman" was shifted from *Wessex Tales* to *Life's Little Ironies* because it was a contemporary tale whereas *Wessex Tales* was a volume of traditional tales. For this same reason "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" and "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" were transferred to *Wessex Tales*.

In writing his fiction Hardy depended mostly on his personal experiences, on first hand reports of incidents and events and on ancient traditions and legends and accounts in newspapers and church registers. This does not mean that Hardy's short stories are dry historical accounts or records. "The stories are but dreams and not records," said Hardy. The actual facts instead of being presented as bare facts are brightened up by highly imaginative touches and beautiful, accurate description of the Wessex landscape. Hardy's special genius is fully manifest in this volume of short stories.

"The Three Strangers," the first story in *Wessex Tales* gives us a fair idea of the kind of short story writer Hardy is. It is a typical Wessex tale in setting, subject matter and mode of narration. It was written long before its appearance in this collection in 1888. The story appeared for the first time concurrently in *Longman's Magazine* in England and *Harper's Weekly* in America in March 1883. J.M. Barrie saw the tale as a compact little drama and at his suggestion Hardy dramatised it and called it "The Three
Wayfarers", which was first performed in London with other short plays in June, 1893 and judged by the *Times* critic to be the 'best piece of the evening' although in Hardy's opinion it was a mere trifle.

There is nothing finer in *Wessex Tales* than "The Three Strangers". Here Hardy is writing about the lives of Wessex shepherds and artisans and the situation which develops in this story has endowed it with a lasting appeal.

The central event of this story occurred during the agricultural unrest of the 1820's and 1830's. The action takes place in a setting described beautifully and realistically by Hardy in the few opening paragraphs.

"Among the few features of agricultural England which attain an appearance but little modified by the lapse of centuries, may be reckoned the long, grassy and furry downs, coombs or ewe-leases, as they are called according to their kind, that fill a large area of certain counties in the south and south-west. If any mark of human occupation is met with hereon, it usually takes the form of the solitary cottage of some shepherd".5(3)

This is the opening paragraph of the story - and as we read more and more of Hardy's short stories we will find this a typical Hardyan beginning. He sets his scene by a vivid description of an extensive landscape. Then he closes in to pick out and scrutinize smaller details, for example, one lonely cottage, Higher Crowstairs in "The Three Strangers".
“Fifty years ago such a lonely cottage stood on such a down, and may possibly be standing there now. In spite of its loneliness, however, the spot, by actual measurement, was not three miles from a county-town. Yet that affected it little. Three miles of irregular upland, during the long inimical seasons, with their sleet, snows, rains and mists, afford withdrawing space enough to isolate a Timon or a Nebuchadnezzar; much less in fair weather to please that repellent tribe, the poets, philosophers, artists and others who conceive and meditate of pleasant things.” (3)

And into this desolate scene one rainy night characters arrive one by one and depart in the manner of a theatrical production, and all that occurs, though rather melodramatic in essence, is interesting enough to give rise to a legend.

When the scene opens in Shepherd Fennel’s lonely cottage we see a rustic celebration in progress, a genial scene full of good humour but with an underlying sense of mystery - this sense of mystery which runs through the whole story is one of the reasons for its great popularity. The atmosphere inside the cottage is one of great joy because Shepherd Fennel is “entertaining a large party in glorification of the christening of his second girl”. (4) In contrast to the domesticity and cosiness of the scene inside the cottage the rainstorm outside

“...smote walls, slopes and hedge like the clothyard shafts of Senlac and Crecy. Such sheep and outdoor animals as had no shelter stood with their buttocks to the winds; while the tails of little birds trying to roost on some scraggy thorn were blown inside out like umbrellas”. (4)

With great inventive energy and delight and like an ancient teller of tales Hardy continues with his tale.
The familiar and the cozy scene at Farmer Fennel's cottage is suddenly interrupted by the alien and the unexpected. This is a theme which occurs repeatedly in many of Hardy's tales. Into the Wessex world represented by the gathering at Higher Crowstairs walk in the three strangers disturbing the peace of the Wessex people. The first stranger to walk in is the runaway convict, who is followed closely by the hangman actually on his way to string up Timothy Summers, the first stranger, the next morning. They come in out of the rough weather to the merrymaking round Shepherd Fennel's fire and make themselves at home. When the third stranger, the brother of the condemned man, finally appears—he is on his way to bid his brother a last farewell—he is thunderstruck to see his brother and the hangman, the most unlikely of partners singing together and hobnobbing over a flagon of mead. Seeing this he immediately takes to his heels for fear of his brother getting detected through him. When the King's men track down the third stranger, mistakenly identified by the Wessex crowd as the runaway convict it is too late. Timothy Summers has already vanished and we the readers are glad to learn of this because Summers had committed the crime only because of need and because his ready wit and great self-possession has gained him the readers' regards.

"The Three Strangers" is a gripping tale. The mystery of the condemned man's identity is not revealed till the very last. It is free of any moral or hidden meaning. It
is simply the story of an event that has occurred to a certain set of people and which has been passed on from generation to generation, orally, and in this manner has acquired mythic perpetuity.

The narrative mode used in "The Three Strangers" is in keeping with the tradition of the tale. The story is told by an unidentified narrator in an instructional style which is both convincing and compelling. Wessex is described as a place with a distinct and living culture of its own. Hardy helps his readers to see below the romantic aura surrounding the tale and discover the real Wessex where the Shepherd and his friends manage to derive a living from their environment. Hardy presents a detailed picture of Wessex including a lot of local particulars such as the song "now nearly disused" (14) that the soldiers sang when leaving a town, the walls that formed the "field fences" (17) along the Ridgeway and the importance of the Sunday sermon to the people. Hardy not only portrays rural life but he takes great care to show the difference between the regional and the non-regional. The intrusion of the three strangers from outside upon the insular world of the countryside shows the discrepancy between the Wessex people and the outsiders. There is some difference between the King's law and rural justice and Hardy says that at times the rural sense of rough justice is more right than the urban sense of law. It is because of this that Timothy
Summers who steals only to survive and who escapes death by hoodwinking the man who is to hang him is considered to be a "folk hero".

Character portrayal in "The Three Strangers" is very vivid. The generous Shepherd Fennel and his frugal Shepherdess; the desperate, quick-witted and resourceful Timothy Summers; the arrogant, jovial and cosmopolitan hangman and the terror stricken third stranger are all painted as individuals very different from one another. Hardy exhibits skilful craftsmanship in bringing alive such a multitude of characters in such a short space.

The imagery in "The Three Strangers" is historical and cosmic in keeping with the pastoral mode of WESSEX TALES. Set in the downs of Wessex the story contains a few biblical, classical and medieval allusions but unlike the references in the novels which are sometimes misplaced the references here are appropriately placed and give a classical touch to the story. References to "Timon", "Nebuchadnezzar" and "Belshazzar" are made because their abuses of power can be compared to that of the hangman, whose action is lawful but derives from an inhuman sense of justice.

The merit of "The Three Strangers" has been recognised by collectors who have often included it in short story collections along with the best and most representative pieces of this genre.
One of Hardy's brief but well written and memorable stories is "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four", the next story in this collection. It appeared originally as "A Legend of Eighteen Hundred and Four" in the December 1882 issue of Harper's Chronicles. It was originally included in the 1894 volume of LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES but was transferred to WESSEX TALES in 1912 because Hardy thought it to be more suited to the earlier volume.

The story, briefly, is about how Solomon Selby as a Shepherd boy was roused from sleep at night by voices when he had gone to the Cove to watch over the sheep at lambing time. He was accompanied by his Uncle Job, sergeant of the Sixty First Foot. The voices, as he discovered later, were that of two Frenchmen who were seen discussing a map by the light of a lantern. Uncle Job recognised one of them as Napoleon Bonaparte, the Corsican 'ogre' and 'tyrant' and regretted that he had not brought with him his "new flinted firelock and that there man must live". (40) Napoleon had crossed over with another French officer from "the other side of the Channel, scarce out of sight and hail of a man standing on our English shore" (34) "to see where to land their army" (38). Though Hardy's "tradition" was wholly fictional he was astonished to discover years later that his story was in fact a "tradition".
"The incident of Napoleon's visit to the English coast by night, with a view to discovering a convenient spot for landing his army of invasion, was an invention of the author's on which he had some doubts because of its improbability. This was in 1882, when it was first published. Great was his surprise several years later to be told that it was a real tradition. How far this is true he is unaware."  

But later Hardy discovered that it was his invented story which had given rise to this tradition and he worried that he had been "too natural in the art he could practice so well". Florence Emily Hardy further wrote that:

"Had he not long discontinued the writing of romances he would, he said, have put at the beginning of each new one: "Understand that however true that this book may be in essence, in fact it is utterly untrue"."

What Hardy had to say regarding the tradition is interesting and the fact that he was able to pass off that which was based entirely on his imagination and creativeness as something that had actually come to pass goes to show his narrative power and his skill for story telling. Hardy uses a first person narrator in "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four". The story is told by a narrator who was actually present at the "yawning chimney-corner of the inn kitchen" when Solomon Selby who himself had witnessed the events was narrating it. Besides the two introductory paragraphs and the concluding last paragraph which are remarks made by the anonymous narrator the rest of the tale uses Solomon Selby's words. The framework Hardy uses is the traditional one which tellers of tales and balladists have been
using for ages. The story teller sits with a group of eager listeners around the fire, takes out his pipe and introduces his tale in an easy paced and amiable mode of narrative. Selby does not address his tale to the "maker of newspapers or printer of books" or to the "gentry who only believe what they see in printed lines" (36) but to a captive audience of naive Wessex people, people who as soon as they saw Solomon smile knew that they were going to hear some extraordinary tale and which they were eager to hear.

".... withdrawing the stem of his pipe from the dental notch in which it habitually rested, he leaned back in the recess behind him and smiled into the fire. The smile was neither mirthful nor sad, not precisely humorous nor altogether thoughtful. We who knew him recognised it in a moment: it was his narrative smile. Breaking off our few desultory remarks we drew closer". (33)

And Solomon's "manner of narrating the adventure which befell him on the down" (41) with phrases such as "as you mid know" (33) and "you mid suppose" (40) thrown in, give the audience a sense of involvement. Both the teller and the listeners belong to the same Wessex background and therefore communication between them is easy and they can accept the story more easily than the gentry who would shake their head over such a story. Kristin Brady questions the truth about the garrulous Solomon Selby's story. She says that details within Solomon's narration confirm the reader's suspicion that the story is the product of a frightened and fascinated imagination. Fed with Uncle Job's stories of "battle, smoke and flying soldiers" (36) Solomon falls asleep and has
romantic dreams only to be awakened by voices in a strange language at a place where it was more normal not to see human beings at night. So it is little wonder that he identifies the two strangers on awaking suddenly as Napoleon and a French Officer. Even Uncle Job's reaction "O that I had got but my new-flinted firelock, that man there should die! But I haven't got my new flinted firelock, and that there man must live" which is somewhat hilarious seems to be "a performance for the child's benefit". Brady says that Solomon most probably had witnessed men who were engaged in smuggling or as the uniform suggests in its detection. Smuggling was a common practice during those days in Wessex. The men could also have been members of the King's German Legion as they spoke a foreign language and wore uniforms which resembled the British Uniform of that time - "boat cloaks, cocked hats and swords" (38).

The episode can be interpreted variously and these interpretations are not important by themselves. What is important is Solomon's and thus Hardy's process of story telling. Solomon tells his story with such seriousness and so successfully that his audience believes in the existence of such a tradition.

What is refreshing about "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" and what makes it stand out among Hardy's stories is that it is one of those very few stories where Hardy is not working on his favourite theme of love,
courtship and marriage. Moreover, this story does not have the usual tensions between agricultural and city life; the bitterness arising from social ambitions; neither is it about the rural people troubled by circumstances. It is also free of the macabre, the gruesome, the grotesque, the morbid and the bizarre elements which sometimes make the reading of some of Hardy's novels and short stories a rather tedious task. Excessive use of coincidence which sometimes causes interesting developments of plot in some of his stories and at other times proves to be a major weakness in his works is totally absent from this short story.

In "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" we have a tale set in the past, a tale in which Hardy is preoccupied with ancient things. He begins by painting the backdrop against which the event occurs. The harmony between the plot and background is such that one feels the story could not have been told with any other geography. Exhibiting great economy in telling and with an eye for significant details Hardy describes the secluded Cove where Solomon lived as a child - there was no house within a mile and a half of Solomon's sheep farm house and the Cove where the house stood was "screened from every mortal eye" an ideal place for a secret landing. Inspite of the place being rather isolated there was something homely about the setting with Solomon's father going about his daily work not paying any attention to Napoleon and his men across the Channel, preparing themselves to attack England. It is in this homely
setting that the dramatic events unfold. Even as he is writ-
ting about the unusual Hardy takes great care to give a
minute description of a Wessex Shepherd's life and Hardy's
description shows his intimate knowledge of the country and
its ways, traditions and customs. In describing Wessex life
he very casually refers to the unconventional moral patterns
and practices such as smuggling which is the theme of anoth-
er short story in this collection, "The Distracted
preacher".

And as regards characterisation, with a few sure
strokes Hardy silhouettes Uncle Job, Solomon Selby and the
other characters who appear for a few moments. We have the
romantic, highly imaginative and garrulous Solomon telling
us the tale. He tells his story from a narrowly subjective
point of view and in a matter of fact manner. He does not
become nostalgic or sentimental while recollecting his expe-
rience. Then, we have Uncle Job, Sergeant of the Sixty
First Foot, a man who was fond of a drink and who was in
the habit of telling the young Solomon "strange stories of
the wars he had served in and the wounds he had got" just to
impress the young boy.

The story ends with the unnamed narrator winding
up with a comment on the effective narrative of Solomon and
the varied reactions of his audience. The narration is easy
paced and enticing and the framework of the story resembles
that of a tale. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Hardy
transferred this story from LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES to
The next story in *Wessex Tales* is "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion". It is another transfer from *Life's Little Ironies* and it was included in the *Wessex Tales* in 1912. Because the plot is a dramatic one and set in a homely scene and because it is historical in tone and its mode of narration resembles the tale it is more suited to the *Wessex Tales* than to *Life's Little Ironies*. Hence it is only natural that it found its way into Hardy's first collection of short stories.

"The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" first appeared in the *Bristol Mirror* in October 1889 and in the *Times* the following January as "The Melancholy Hussar". It was reprinted in a collection, *Three Notable Stories* together with "Love and Peril" by the Marquis of Lorne and "To Be or Not to Be" by Mrs. Alexander. In 1894 Hardy included it in *Life's Little Ironies* and in 1912 he transferred it to *Wessex Tales* because it is emphatically a *Wessex Tale*. It has a traditional basis. Hardy tells the tragic tale of a German subject of the English Crown, come over with his regiment from Hanover, and who has to face the firing squad for desertion. To give pathos to the bare facts Hardy interweaves the story of a young girl in love with the soldier. She has to abandon her lover at the last moment, much against her will, because of circumstances.
The story was written in 1897, at a time when Hardy was of the same age as the narrator. We have already seen from the two earlier stories that Hardy took great interest in local activities and that he made fictional use of things he saw and heard. He makes use of an eye-witness account of the execution of Bincombe Down which he found in the Morning Chronicle (4 July 1801) while making notes in The British Museum for his novel THE TRUMPET MAJOR. In a note of 1876 he writes:

"July 27. James Bushrod of Broadmayne saw the two German Legions (of the York Hussars) shot (for desertion) on Bincombe Down in 1801. It was in the path across the Down, or near it. James Selby of the same village thinks that there is a mark."10

The story gives the actual names of the deserters and everything relating to their attempt to escape is based on the facts Hardy recorded in his note-book thus making the story a historical one. Hardy did a lot of research before the composition of this tale. He had talked with old people who had known Phyllis Grove, he had visited the place where the two Hussars were buried, he had spoken to two Broadmayne villagers one of whom had witnessed the execution and he examined old newspapers and church registers to find accounts of the execution and burial.

"Hardy's favourite theme is an incongruous love situation in a peculiar setting", says John Bayley and this theme is explored repeatedly in tale after tale. This is a tale of sexual mischance which is a result of hostile
circumstance - the circumstance here is the impossibility of ever attaining a happy alliance.

Dr. Grove abandons his medical practice and moves to "a dilapidated, half-farm, half manor house" in an "obscure inland nook" to indulge in his "taste for lonely meditation over metaphysical questions". In the isolated countryside he realises that "he had wasted his life in the pursuit of illusions". He becomes "irritable" (47). As a result of this withdrawal Phyllis Grove, his daughter is forced to lead the life of a semi-recluse. Yet Phyllis was discovered here by an admirer and her hand most unexpectedly asked in marriage". (47) She accepts Humphrey Gould's proposal. After getting engaged Humphrey retires to Bath and maintains his engagement with Phyllis by means of erratic correspondence. With the withdrawal of her fiance from the scene Phyllis returns to the lonely, weary life which she was accustomed to before the arrival of Humphrey:

"When a noise like the brushing skirt of a visitor was heard on the doorstep, it proved to be a scudding leaf; when a carriage seemed to be nearing the door, it was her father grinding his sickle on the stone in the garden for his favourite relaxation of trimming the box-tree borders to the plots. A sound like luggage thrown down from the coach was a gun far away at sea; and what looked like a tall man by the gate at dusk was a yew-bush cut into a quaint and attenuated shape". (46-7).

The arrival of the colourful York Hussars soon brings about a change to her bored existence. Phyllis falls in love with Matthaus Tina one of the York Hussars. In spite
of his flashing appearance Tina is sad and homesick for his fatherland and misses his mother whom he has left all alone at Saarbruck his native town. Fully aware that she was being unfaithful to Humphrey, Phyllis falls in love with Tina. "Like Desdemona she pitied him and learnt his history" (51). She agrees to elope with her lover to Germany and on the eve of the day they agree to execute their plans, while waiting for Matthaus to join her, she spots her fiance Humphrey alighting from a coach. She overhears him tell his companion that he has brought her a present and hopes that it will please her. Humphrey's return makes her realise that she was about to perform a foolish deed and she decides to break her promise to Tina and marry Humphrey and "preserve her self respect. She would stay at home, and marry him and suffer". (60). But there was no going back for Matthaus and his friend Christoph for they had decamped and so must flee. They follow their separate ways. Phyllis returns home to discover that Humphrey was already secretly married and had brought her a present as a kind of consolation prize. Matthaus Tina and his friend Christoph, in the meantime, are caught and identified as deserters and delivered to the authorities who decide that they must face the firing squad for desertion. From her garden Phyllis sees the execution of her lover and his friend. Their bodies are buried at the back of the church and near their graves Phyllis too is buried when she dies years later without ever having married.
Hardy tells this story through a narrator who had heard it first hand from Phyllis. His intention in telling the story is to set right the tale about Phyllis. It had been mistold countless times and it had thrown an unfavourable light on her character. He wanted to set right the injustice inflicted upon her memory. Hardy tells the story of Phyllis Grove with great compassion. The narrator tells the story many years after he hears it. His mode of narration is neither nostalgic nor sentimental.

"The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" is very melodramatic and it exhibits Hardy's inclination towards the bizarre and sensational. The memories that he links with the Dorset landscape are sombre and gruesome. But these are about all the weakness that one can detect in it which are negligible compared to its merits. "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" is a powerful tale of ironic mischance and human waste containing picturesque passages describing Wessex life. It has a period flavour. From the life of Shepherds which he writes about in the earlier two tales Hardy shifts to writing about the colourful life of the soldiers who were considered to be "monumental objects" and "glorious" things (45) by their contemporaries.

Hardy in this story expresses his views and the Wessex people's views about marriage.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with a comparative study of Soso Tham and V.G. Bareh's poetry from the point of view of forms and themes.

The inductive methodology is used in this study.

The organization of the dissertation is in four chapters. The first chapter is an introduction. It gives a summary of views expressed about the origin and meaning of poetry.

The second chapter is on forms of poetry which are often classified according to their characteristics. Different forms of poetry can be found in Ka Duitara Ksiar of Soso Tham and V.G. Bareh's Ki Poetry Khasi. The widely used forms by these poets are lyric, ballad, ode and the dramatic monologue.

The third chapter is on themes of poetry as found in Ka Duitara Ksiar and Ki Poetry Khasi. The major themes are (1) Nature, (2) Love, (3) Suffering, and (4) Patriotism.

The fourth and last chapter is a conclusion summing up major findings.
"In those days unequal marriages were regarded rather as a violation of the laws of nature then as a mere infringement of convention, the more modern view, and hence when Phyllis of the watering place bourgeoisie was chosen by such a gentlemanly fellow, it was as if she were going to be taken to heaven". (48)

Phyllis having been brought up and confined to an isolated place (once again as in "The Three Strangers" and in "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" the place where all the action occurs is secluded. This shows that in Wessex during those days most country places enjoyed solitude) and with limited experience hardly took any time in accepting Humphrey Gould's offer because according to the standards of the Wessex people he was a good match. It also took her very little time to forget Humphrey and fall in love with Matthias Tina because he represented the "golden radiance of the York Hussars which flashed in upon the lives of the people here and charged all youthful thoughts with emotional interest". (49)

Character portrayal in "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" is excellent. We remember all the characters who appear in this tale - even those like Christoph who make a fleeting appearance and do not occupy the centre of the action for long. Phyllis Grove's unhappiness is conveyed very successfully. She is unhappy because she had been forced to live away from the rest of Wessex society by her father who not only alienates her socially but also
emotionally from her lover because the latter is not acceptable to him. Susan Hill writing about this tale says that here Hardy has conveyed particularly well "the sense of freshness and optimism and the fatal rashness of youth, and the contrast between its impulsive innocence and the sourness and suspicion of those who have lived longer without gaining more than years". 12

From this somewhat melodramatic tale we move on to "The Withered Arm" one of Hardy's most popular tales. Hardy believed that a tale must be unusual to be worth the telling and "The Withered Arm" is one of the most unusual and at the same time most striking tales ever told by Hardy. The story was first published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in January 1888. Even though the events recorded in this story appear impossible we must keep in mind that what is narrated here occurred during a period when Wessex rustics commonly believed in supernatural agencies.

Rhoda Brook, the main character of the story, is a thin, hardworked, horn milkmaid who possesses all the qualities required of a village witch and she is fully aware that her fellow villagers look upon her as one. In the days gone by she had a clandestine love affair with farmer Lodge but now she is deserted. Farmer Lodge has instead shifted his affection to a "rosy cheeked tisty-tosty little body" (69), Gertrude, a girl who has been
brought up in the more refined urban areas and who is not cut out for the rigours of life on a farm. Rhoda, thus, lives alone with her illegitimate son by Farmer Lodge, not involving herself in village activities and it is only natural that, she bitterly resents Farmer Lodge's pretty, young wife. Her resentment grows till one night she dreams that she could feel the weight of Gertrude on her chest with features shockingly distorted. In her nightmare she sees Gertrude as an evil old hag, mocking her with her left hand thrust forward "so as to make the wedding ring it wore glitter in Rhoda's eyes". (77) After a desperate struggle she seizes the apparition by its left arm and hurls it to the floor. At exactly the same time, miles away, Gertrude awakes from her sleep experiencing a sharp pain in her left arm. In the morning Gertrude discovers that her left arm is bruised with fingers and thereafter her arm begins withering. The process is slow and takes many years. With the shrivelling of her arm, Farmer Lodge's love for his wife begins to wither as well.

Months and years pass by. Because of her affectionate nature Rhoda cannot avoid making friends with Gertrude. When Rhoda sees Gertrude's withered arm for the first time she sees in it a faint shadow of her own finger prints and when Gertrude departs after the visit she exclaims to herself: "O can it be that I exercise a malignant power over people against my own will?" (81) Rhoda's sense
of guilt increases as Gertrude's arm grows progressively worse and it does not respond to any kind of treatment. As a last resort, accompanied by Rhoda she pays a visit to Conjuror Trendle, the white wizard of Egdon Heath. Conjuror Trendle explains to Gertrude the source of her trouble by showing her an image of that enemy who has brought this curse upon her. The image revealed is that of Rhoda. Soon after this visit to the Conjuror, Rhoda not wishing her friend any ill leaves the neighbourhood taking her son along with her.

Six more years pass by and Gertrude has to pay a second visit to the Conjuror as the arm gets worse. She is told that the cure lies in putting the withered arm to the neck of a man who has just been hanged. This would cause the "turning of the blood" in the withered arm which would subsequently cure the diseased arm. After much scheming, pleas and bribery Gertrude manages to get into the jail to accomplish her object and gains access to the body of a freshly hanged man. Coincidently, the corpse she puts her arm to happens to be the corpse of Rhoda and her husband's son who is hanged for having been present at a rick burning. So it is natural that Rhoda and Farmer Lodge are also present on the scene when Gertrude, unaware of their presence, goes through her therapy. Just as Gertrude touches the hanged man's neck Rhoda snatches away Gertrude from her son's corpse. The psychological impact of such
multiplied shocks is too much for Gertrude, "her blood had been 'turned' indeed - too far" (107) and she dies. Rhoda after a temporary absence returns to her parish and resumes her familiar way of life.

The thing that strikes us most about this story, as it did Leslie Stephen, is the high degree of improbability of the event. Leslie Stephen thought that the lack of a material explanation for its less believable aspects weakened the tale. In a letter to Hardy he wrote:

"I don't think you have exactly hit off the right line of belief. Either I would accept the superstition altogether and make the wizard a genuine performer - with possibly some hint that you tell the story as somebody told it; or I would leave some opening as to the withering of the arm, so that a possibility of explanation might be suggested, though, of course, not too much obtruded. Something, e.g., might have happened to impress the sufferer's imagination, so that the marks would be like the stigmata of papists.

As it is, I don't know where I am. I began as a believer and end up as a sceptic". 13

Even though Hardy generally paid heed to Stephen's suggestions this time he took no steps towards presenting the story as a superstition told by an unreliable narrator. For Hardy thought that: "a story dealing with the supernatural should never be explained away" and such a letter represented "a dull and unimaginative example of gratuitous criticism". 14 Hardy believed that the story would be more effective and artistic when presented as a believed folk tale, demanding of its reader the same degree of
respect and acceptance that it would receive from a local audience.

Whatever Hardy's expectations may have been, the readers in the 20th century consider the story highly improbable. It demands and elicits suspension of disbelief to a high degree. But we must keep in mind that "The Withered Arm" is not the record of a social historian. It is the creation of an imaginative artist who blends rural superstition with speculative psychology and has the tale told by an authoritative story teller. The narrator believes what he is narrating and it is not only he who believes in its validity but those who are listening to him as well. For in the country world of Wessex what may seem to us extraordinary is looked upon as quite ordinary.

In spite of the improbability of the story, "The Withered Arm" is still enjoyable reading for it is a very charming piece of short fiction. If the unrealistic element is the only reason which prevents the reader from enjoying the fine story based on a local lore he can regard it as a

"Curious mixture of traditional folk belief and modern hypothesis and translate the events of this grotesque tale into an acceptable instance of character psychology, but the result of such gratuitous sophistication can only be a literary loss, a distraction from Hardy's boldness of narrative".15

It is the combination of the strange with the common place in the Wessex world which makes this story one of the best and gripping short stories. In the world of Wessex the
strange and the common place are not in conflict. They are
different aspects of the samething. Our imagination is in
the habit of looking for the 'uncanny' in human experience
and it thus blurs the lines between imagination and reality.

In "The Withered Arm" one can find the typically
Hardyan characteristics in abundance. In it Hardy builds
up the macabre and grotesque details very effectively in
scene after scene. When Gertrude Lodge arrives alone on the
outskirts of Casterbridge, she looks first at the general
view across the countryside towards the distant roofs of
the town, and then her eye is gradually drawn towards the
men moving about on the skyline and finally to the gallows
they are erecting. Fascination and horror mount within her
and within the reader when she is taken into the prison
and brought close up to the body of the hanged man. When
she touches the corpse's neck the tension of the scene
reaches a powerful climax.

Dr. Noorul Hasan commenting on this scene writes
that the story uses vindictive and violent sexual jealousy
as its central motif

"To illustrate this primal drive the story creates a
condition in which it becomes so compulsive and
implacable as to acquire a demonic power. "My art",
 wrote Hardy, "is to intensify the expression of
things (as it is done by Crivelli, Bellini, etc) so
that the heart and the inner meaning is made distinct-
ly visible". In order to get at "the heart and inner
meaning", he had to go sometimes beyond the limits of
ordinary rationality and bring the occult and the
irrational into the workings of primary human impulses.
And he could do so without sacrificing plausibility.
Hardy's ability to domesticate the occult is fully
illustrated by "The Withered Arm".16
In "The Withered Arm" Hardy has conveyed the feelings and emotions of his characters very successfully. Rhoda Brook, Gertrude Lodge and Farmer Lodge are all striking individuals and they possess all the individuality that they require. Hardy has portrayed well the feelings of Farmer Lodge. The Farmer who is initially very proud of his young, beautiful wife does not take long to turn savage at this same wife as a mysterious blemish gradually begins to mar her beauty. Hardy has also given a very good description of the relationship between the farmer and the patient milkwomen, Rhoda Brook whom he has loved and deserted. Rhoda by the end of the story has unintentionally been able to take revenge on the Farmer for having betrayed her.

The narration in "The Withered Arm" is closer to a folk tale than in any of the other stories. There is an oral quality to its prose style and the narrator has no personal motive for telling this story. He is in no way involved with the story and thus can report the story with total detachment. He tells the story using both dialogue and description. Where description is concerned it is one of the most visual of Hardy's stories. Hardy gives a series of vivid descriptions of the Wessex life experienced by him during his boyhood days. The language Rhoda uses while conversing throughout the story is the Dorset dialect. In "The Withered Arm" Hardy not only holds our
attention with the gripping, grotesque, unusual and supernatural story but also by his portrayal of a living, breathing Wessex.

From the superstitious world of "The Withered Arm" we move into Port Bredy, a town where a conflict is going on between the rural and the urban values and which is the scene of the next story in WESSEX TALES. "Fellow Townsmen" was published in the Spring of 1880 in The New Quarterly Magazine and Harper's Weekly. The version that we have in WESSEX TALES is, however, a considerably revised version of the original.

The plot of "Fellow Townsmen" is complicated and is more like a crowded synopses of events then anything else. It illustrates Hardy's central creed that man is often at the mercy of chance and it shows the behaviour of a "whimsical God" operating through "blind Circumstance". Mr. Barnet, the main character of the story, has inherited a successful flax trade from his father. "Having acquired a fair fortune old Mr. Barnet had retired from business bringing up his son as a gentleman-burgher, and it must be added, as a well-educated, liberal minded young man" (112). Despite his position of wealth and respectability his personal life is not very happy. He is married to a haughty woman whom he detests. Lucy Savile is the woman he really loves. He does everything his wife desires just "to preserve peace in the household" (114) but he does not
succeed. His unhappy life makes him more and more aware of the mistake he had made regarding choice of wife and this sends him to seek out his old love Lucy. In the meantime, offering no explanations, his wife leaves him to lead a life in London from where she does not return. She dies in London. The moment he hears of his wife’s death he decides to offer himself to his old love Lucy. But, alas, he is just half an hour too late. She has already accepted an old friend and fellow townsman of his, Downe. He had introduced Lucy to Downe and recommended her name to this widower friend of his for the job of a governess to take care of his motherless children. Hardy writes:

"The events that had, as it were dashed themselves together into one half-hour of this day showed that curious refinement of cruelty in their arrangement which proceeds from the bosom of the whimsical god at other times known as blind - circumstance" (139-160)

Nor is this the end. After wondering about the globe for several years Barnet returns to find Lucy a widow. They are both elderly people now, yet he asks her to marry him. She refuses and again he takes 'no' for an answer and returns to his hotel. But on second thoughts she alters her decision and drops him an affectionate line and hopes that he will pay her another visit. But once again the decision has been taken too late. Barnet had already left and she never sees him again.

The plot of "Fellow Townsmen" appears over contrived and too unrelievedly sombre. Mrs. Proctor, widow of
Barry Cornwall, wrote to Hardy concerning this story:

"... you are cruel. Why not let him come home again and marry his first love? But I see you are right. He should not have deserted her. I smiled about the Tombstone. Sir Frances Chantrey told me that he had prepared fine plans - nothing could be too beautiful and too expensive at first, and the end was generally merely a headstone".17

And it is not only Mrs. Proctor who appreciated this story. His novelist friend Mrs. Henniker preferred it to "The Three Strangers" and Hardy considered her right in doing so.

It is difficult to classify "Fellow Townsmen" as a short story. It is more like a novelette. However, it is immaterial what genre this piece of fiction will come under. It is sufficient to recognise that it is a good piece of short prose fiction. Within the framework of this story Hardy is tackling once again his favourite themes of love, courtship, marriage, effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on Wessex society, workings of fate and the contrasts between the rural and urban ways of life represented by Lucy Savile and Downe on the one hand and Mr. and Mrs. Barnet on the other. Their different homes are presented as symbols of their different ways of life.

Using an analytical mode of narration Hardy begins his pastoral history by giving a description of the small provincial town, Port Bredy, in which the events occur.
"The shepherd on the east hill could shout out lambing intelligence to the shepherd on the west hill, over the intervening town chimneys, without great inconvenience to his voice, so nearly did the steep pastures encroach upon the burghers' backyards. And at night it was possible to stand in the very midst of the town and hear from their native paddocks on the lower levels on greensward the mild lowing of the farmer's heifers, and the profound, warm blowings of breath in which these creatures indulge. But the community which had jammed itself in the valley thus flanked formed a veritable town, with a real mayor and corporation and a staple manufacture". (111)

And with this introductory paragraph Hardy portrays the complex, contrasting relationship between town and country in a place where they are contiguous and interconnected. This conflicting relationship is continued between Mr. Barnet and Mr. Downe, the two main characters in this story. This contrast has been evoked with great care and insight.

Now, regarding the placement of "Fellow Townsmen" in Wessex Tales one might agree with Baker\textsuperscript{18} that the plots' dependence on coincidence and ironic comparison suggests that it could qualify well for Life's Little Ironies, the third collection of Hardy's short stories. Even though it is the most ironic of Wessex Tales and can qualify as a Life's Little Ironies story its presence in Wessex Tales is not misplaced. As Kristin Brady says:

"... its presence in Wessex Tales gives the volume a broader and more profound frame of reference by presenting a character who incorporates within his person some of the private crisis which can exist even within such a small and integrated world as Wessex. The
detailed portrayal of Port Bredy as both a source and an image of Barnet's inner conflict gives "Fellow Townsmen" a specifically regional context, making it a pastoral history in a special but legitimate sense; the faults in Barnet's character are firmly grounded in his relationship with his local community and can only be fully understood when seen in this Wessex context".19

"Interlopers at the Knap" the next story in our collection has a thematic unity with "Fellow Townsmen". In this story as in the previous one, Hardy is writing about the chief male character, Darton, failing to make a proper marriage choice. This failure to make the correct choice is a result of his failure to properly understand his own self and Wessex culture. Once again the story is that of a courtship with an ironical twist in it and we encounter the typically Hardyan characteristics all over again here - his preoccupation with ancient things, customs, beautiful descriptions of the countryside and his enjoyment of a tale well told. "Interlopers at the Knap" was written when Hardy was a well established novelist engaged in writing THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE. In this short story we see a brilliant handling of the favourite Hardyan theme of courtship. It was first published in May 1884 in the English Illustrated Magazine.

The plot of "The Interlopers at the Knap" is a complicated and crowded one. It is centred round the story of an unsuccessful courtship between Charles Darton, a farmer and Sally of the Knap. It is about Charles Darton's
attempt to be adapted to the way of life at the Knap, his failure to be adapted and his remaining an alien to that place forever. When the story begins we encounter Darton travelling towards the Knap on his way to marrying Sally. Charles' attitude towards his betrothed was most unromantic. He looked upon the union more as a practical necessity than as a romantic event. This can be seen from the attitude he adopted regarding a presentation of a dress to Sally. On the eve of his wedding he tells his friend Japheth Johns -

"Not exactly a wedding dress, though she may use it as one if she likes. It is rather serviceable then showy - suitable for the winter weather for why should a woman dress up like a rope dancer because she's going to do the most solemn deed of her life except dying?" (182).

But as we read on we discover that Darton had not always been unromantic for there was a time when he had loved Helena intensely. Helena was the young daughter of a deceased naval officer who was brought up by an uncle, a solicitor. His bitterness towards marriage was the result of Helena leaving him to marry Philip. He later discovers that Philip is Sally's brother.

At the beginning we see Darton advancing towards the Knap one misty night. He has a friend with him to give him company. The road which they traverse is not a very easy one. The brambles along the road "scratched their hats and hooked their whiskers as they passed" on their way to the Knap. Darton was making this journey in order to
marry Sally of the Knap. But in a Hardy story one does not expect things to end "happily ever after". Darton follows the wrong road, loses his way and a lot of precious time. By the time he reaches the Knap, events have occurred which alter the course of his life.

Even as Darton is making his way towards the Knap Sally, a self reliant, independent and confident girl is awaiting the arrival of her fiance. The quiet of the Knap is suddenly broken with the arrival of Philip, her brother in a very sick state. He had left home years earlier to seek a fortune for himself but had returned home now without fortune. He had brought with him a wife and two children. Philip leaves his wife and children in the stable and goes on ahead to announce his marriage to his mother and sister. When Sally hears about them she goes to the stable to call in her nephews and sister-in-law and when she enters the stable she comes upon Helena, for that was Philip's wife's name, and Darton clasping hands. Sally puts up a brave face and when her brother dies soon after she breaks off her engagement with Darton so as to enable him to marry his old love.

It is only after the marriage that Darton begins to realise the mistake he had made in marrying Helena for she was not a very good housekeeper and he begins to regret his betrayal of Sally. After a few miserable years of married life Helena dies and Darton goes to ask Sally to marry him again but she refuses and would not hear of
marriage again with him or anybody else.

Sally's character appears a bit rigid but inspite of her rigidity she remains an attractive lovable character whose resilience and independence are a contrast to Darton's personal weakness. The plot of the story goes a long way in illuminating characters and the best part of the story is the contrast shown between the two main characters in the story.

Besides good character portrayal Hardy has shown his powers of landscape painting and his knowledge of country customs. Describing country customs like the one regarding death he comments:

"It was the universal custom thereabout to wake the bees by tapping at their hives whenever a death occurred in the household, under the belief that if this were not done the bees themselves should pine away and perish during the ensuing year. As soon as an interior buzzing responded to her tap at the first hive Mrs. Hall went on to the second and thus passed down the row". (203)

"The Distracted Preacher" is the concluding story of WESSEX TALES. This is one of the best and most flawless of Hardy's short stories. It is one of Hardy's earliest short stories and was written just before THE TRUMPET MAJOR. It was published in The New Quarterly Magazine in April 1879 and also in Harper's Weekly in five instalments (19 April to 17 May 1879).

The plot of "The Distracted Preacher" is generally a love plot giving rise to moral issues. It is a light
satire upon a Wesleyan minister but though light there is no shabbiness of tone at any point in the story. Against a gay background of smuggling Richard Stockdale, the preacher about whom Hardy is writing, falls in love with an attractive young widow, Mrs. Lizzy Newbury, who is his landlady at Nether-Moynton. His moral orthodoxy is severely jarred when he finds out that the liquor with which she cured his cold is smuggled and he is further agonised when he discovers that she is herself actively engaged in smuggling and goes about her illicit business dressed in her farmer husband's old clothes. His moral orthodoxy is, however, overcome by a stranger and more overpowering sexual impulse, and in a series of comic episodes he keeps on returning to her. Ultimately Victorian morality wins and Lizzy discards her smuggling and her smuggler friends for the sanctity and safety of the life of a parson's wife. "She studied her duties as a minister's wife with praiseworthy assiduity. It is said that in after years she wrote an excellent tract called Render unto Ceaser, or The Repentant Villagers" (295)

But in 1912 Hardy, not satisfied with this forced ending added a postscript:

"Note: The ending of this happy story with the marriage of Lizzy and the minister was almost de rigueur in an English magazine at the time of writing. But at this late date, thirty years after, it may not be amiss to give the ending that would have been preferred by the writer to the convention used above.
Moreover, it corresponds more closely with the true incidents of which the tale is a vague and flickering shadow. Lizzy did not, in fact, marry the minister, but much to her credit in the author's opinion — stuck to Jim, the smuggler, and emigrated with him after their marriage, an expatriate step rather forced upon him by his adventurous antecedents. They both died in Wisconsin between 1850 and 1860 (May 1912) "(295)

As George Wing puts it a woman with Lizzy's sense of fun and adventure would "have been inordinately bored as the leading moral lady in a nonconformist parish, perhaps her incarceration into respectability, besides being a sop to the magazine - readers marks the beginning of latter-day suburban neurotics". 20

Hardy's satire on the Wesleyan minister was moulded by his own beliefs regarding the clergy and religion. Though he had lost religious faith early in adult life, Hardy remained a church goer throughout his life. But he could be a bitter denouncer of the clergy when he chose. However, his portrait of the young non-conformist minister here is relatively tender. The man is silly, but honest and decent and he is genuinely concerned with the role Lizzy is playing. He is not priggish and stuffy even though he disapproves of what Lizzy does and gives her advice, even while he is in love with her. Hardy deals with his pomposity in a gentle manner.

Lizzy inspite of her involvement in illegal activities, is inevitably loveable. Her involvement in smuggling does not trouble her. She is free from any self
questioning or qualms of conscience. She does not smuggle with an eye on profits but because of a deeper compulsion in her blood. She loves the dangers, secrecy and the very spirit involved in smuggling. "It stirs up one's dull life at this time o' the year, and gives excitement, which I have got so used to now that I should hardly know how to do without it." (289) Lizzy, like most women characters of Hardy is highly instinctive. Commenting on her character Dr. Hasan writes:

"She can survive only as an outlaw. To ask her to adhere to a prescribed 'correctness of conduct' is to violate her authentic self. She is opposed to the precepts of civilisation." 21

But within her own circle, consisting of the smugglers, she is good, kind and altruistic. In spite of all the immoral things that she does, Lizzy is the most moral character in "The Distracted Preacher"

Susan Hill commenting on this story says:

"This early, long story is one of Hardy's most flawless, a perfect comedy with some noticeably Shakespearian touches. It is light-hearted, but like his novel UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE, in the same mood of comic pastoral, has a vein of sadness and seriousness underlying the often uproarious surface, which is reminiscent of TWELFTH NIGHT, there is the basic disparity of temperament and life style between the ill-matched lovers, Stockdale and Lizzy, the serious risk to their security, and to their lives, run by the smuggling villagers, and indeed, the whole moral issue involved".22

Strange, Lively, Commonplace was the sub title that Hardy had given to his first edition of WESSEX TALES and this describes well the nature of the stories encountered
in this volume. All the stories have the strange, lively and commonplace elements in them and this along with the Wessex setting is all that is common about the stories. Hardy's choice of stories for this volume was prompted by the settings, all events occurring mostly in Central Wessex. There are some themes which Hardy was fond of dealing with in his longer prose fiction and these we encounter repeatedly here but the treatment of these themes in each story is different. In spite of the sameness of theme and setting the book is not monotonous reading. The seven stories vary widely not only in length but also in character ranging from the humorous "The Distracted Preacher" to the tragical "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" and from the rather romantic "Interlopers at the Knap" to the more realistic and witty "The Three Strangers".

Some of Hardy's stories may appear rather strange but then Hardy has explained the reality behind their more extraordinary features in his preface. In his stories he has expanded anecdotes or traditional tales or the sort of good story that he has heard or read about during his lifetime but he has taken care to let us know that his "stories are but dreams, and not records".

Hardy thought of the exceptional as the richest source of interest in his fiction but all the exceptional occurrences in his stories occur in a homely Wessex setting. In *Wessex Tales* Hardy offers a revealing, comprehensive
microcosm of his fictional world. The stories may appear hap hazard but it is this discontinuity and disjointedness of the volume which in the long run contributes towards the portrayal of a more complete Wessex life than any single novel of his. It depicts various ways of life that contribute to the economy and culture of Wessex and the way that the stories are told exemplifies the local modes of story telling. The mode of narration varies from story to story, from the narrowly subjective point of view of "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" to the distanced voice narration of "The Withered Arm" and from the instructional style of "The Three Strangers" to the analytical mode of "Fellow Townsmen". They are, therefore, very refreshing reading.

While writing his stories Hardy was well aware that the majority of his reading public would be urban. So in narrating his stories Hardy took great care to see that its specifically rural subject matter was comprehensible to the urban reader and this was not a very difficult task for him as he was well acquainted with both the rural life of Dorset and the urban life of London and he was well versed in the differences which existed in these two opposed ways of life. Wessex of the WESSEX TALES is the Wessex which was slow in adopting the changes brought about to the rest of Europe as a result of the Industrial Revolution. There was a big difference in the attitude towards things between the county people and the town people. So to convey a picture
of the rural way of life to the town dwellers Hardy converted the oral culture of his native region into a literary form which was comprehensive to those who lived outside it. Herein lies the modernity of the traditional stories of Hardy in *Wessex Tales*.

Hardy’s stories in *Wessex Tales* are simple, direct and lucid in keeping with the traditional form he has adopted. He has exhibited great economy in telling his stories. Hardy is a meditative story teller, a romancer like Solomon Selby and he exhibits ready charm and pathes in telling his stories. His narrative voice is regional, that of a local historian speaking of people and events still within his living memory and he tells these stories stressing the accuracy and roughness of details as the ancient bards told pastoral tales. But unlike the pastoral tale which as Howe points out “stops starts up again and wanders”23 Hardy’s tales, even though long most of the time and with what appears to be digressions every now and then, are in reality tightly controlled narratives, whose digressions contribute to the overall pattern of meaning. His tales, in spite of the traditional framework, are consciously crafted and uniquely modern.

In *Wessex Tales* the readers can appreciate the peculiar charm attached to Old Wessex country scenes. Hardy not only exhibits the country in its supine moods but also the elements of hostility and tension. The Wessex portrayed
is the Wessex of the mid-nineteenth century and the superstitions and traditional elements come through successfully and the reader becomes familiar with some of the complex substance of rural life in all its picturesqueness and variety.

The ironies of marriage, the family and the community which sustains country life constitutes a basic theme of WESSEX TALES. People are unhappy when they are alienated from their own society or from their loved ones and marriage is considered to be rather an arrangement of convenience than a union of two separate souls or people. Those people who peacefully coexist with nature are the really happy ones like the characters in "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Forty" and the houses where the people live are portrayed as the emblems of the peaceful existence of man with nature.

In spite of the numerous merits pointed out in the above discussion Hardy's stories have not gained much popularity. Some people have alleged that this volume has stories which are repetitious. There is not much variety to hold the reader's attention for long. In fact Hardy in the Preface to the 1912 edition of the WESSEX TALES wrote:

"An apology is perhaps needed for the neglect of contrast which is shown by presenting two stories of hangmen and one of a military execution in such a small collection as the following".24

but as Hardy explains:
"... in the neighbourhood of county-towns hanging matters used to form a large proportion of the local tradition". 25

Though the collection contains some stories which are concerned with identical themes they are very different from each other in approach, subject matter and diction (dialects of the different counties have been used in different tales) and the similarities only point to a coherent and self-explanatory rural ethos slow to change.

In conclusion, I would like to say that whatever one may think of the literary merits of the stories (and if one cannot recognise the merits it can be only for lack of sympathy) it is difficult to argue that the stories lack in pace, interest, readability even if at times a story or two does appear rather overcrowded with events. The WESSEX TALES exhibits all Hardy's merits and all his weaknesses. If we accept Hardy, the novelist, as 'great' there is no reason why we should not consider the tales as an integral part of his total achievement with all its specks and flaws.