Chapter 5

The Return of the Native: ‘The Instincts of Merry England’

‘You be bound to dance at Christmas because ’tis the time o’ year; you must dance at weddings because ’tis the time o’ life.’

‘[...] For my part I like a good hearty funeral as well as anything. You’ve as splendid victuals and drink as at other parties, and even better.’

Millgate observes, ‘Much of the remembered happiness of the Sturminster Newton period had its source in the generous and confident flow of Hardy’s creative energies as he worked on the manuscript of The Return of the Native’ (197). The delightful description of the jovial rustics around the bonfire or at wedding fiesta or at Christmas rejoicings bears evidence to that creative surge.

In 1879 the Rabelais Club was founded by Walter Besant who, inviting Hardy to join the club, had praised The Return of the Native as ‘the most original the most virile and most humorous of all modern novels’ (Millgate 208). Hardy attended the Club thrice, the first visit being in 1879.

The entire action of The Return of the Native is enacted within the periphery of the Egdon Heath that ‘had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim’ (RN 5). In this vast stretch of ancient space Hardy situates the
novel, and weaves it around ancient folk festivals of pagan origin. In the essay "Hardy and Folklore" [in A Norton Critical Edition of The Return of the Native] James Gindin points out,

[...] the principal action of the novel takes a year, from one Guy Fawkes night to the next; the long scene in which Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright become acquainted with each other takes place at an ancient mummers' play performed every Christmas; the final section of the novel, the extension of the time scheme required to bring Diggory Venn and Thomasin together, is centered on the communal dance around the maypole' (396).

Gindin also observes that the folk ceremonies which are portrayed by Hardy and which continued to exist in Dorset and other South Western counties in the nineteenth century contained both residual pagan and Christian elements. The bonfires of Guy Fawkes' night on the fifth of November each year not only commemorated the saving of the state from Roman Catholic plotters in 1605, but also the pagan ceremony which utilized the fire to tame the power of the ensuing winter and to commemorate the dead of the past year. For the local community of the heath 'the bonfire is public, ceremonial and connected with a set of established traditions' (396).
The ceremony, which harks back to pagan folk custom, is the dance of the rustics around the maypole, a pre-Christian celebration of fertility in summer, which ultimately brings together Venn and Thomasin. These two characters along with some other jovial and happy rustics are 'lighter, free to live following the ancient world of the seasons without being tortured by guilt, excessive ambition, or the wish to be other than they are.' (Gindin 397)

The vital force of the rustic community, their enduring vigour, their zest for festive occasions makes them emerge triumphant over the gloom of their surrounding atmosphere. The tragic atmosphere that affects the psyche of the protagonists fails to suppress the rustics' instinct for delight. The stern environment of the heath, which forces them to accept cutting thorny furze as their profession, cannot reduce their positive attitude towards mirth and merriment. On the contrary,

The heath does nourish this community; more, it nourishes the vitality, the purposeful staying power, the continuing mirth, which sustain and are sustained by the community's labour (Brown 56) [emphasis added].

The down-to-earth rustics are not daunted by their tough profession or hard schedules. Despite their everyday struggle their vitality establishes
itself more vigorously than that of the modern urban. In the essay “Hardy’s Major Fiction”, John Holloway observes, ‘throughout the book the stress falls on the revitalizing power of rural life, and on how its vitality is intrinsically greater than that of modernity’ (Guerard 53). Clym, who having been fed up with the false glamour of Paris returned to his native place Egdon, was revitalized by the flora and fauna of the heath and its surroundings. Those who rebelled against the antiquity and age-old traditional way of life ultimately perished in the battle of existence. Persons yearning for the urban ways like Eustacia cannot survive while the rustics can. Holloway observes:

The whole rural ambience can ultimately assert a greater vitality than the city life from which Clym has come. As he gives himself to it, he is regenerated from a basic source. By the end, Egdon has triumphed, even if on its own stern terms. The novel resolves in an assertion of the old order, its regenerative austerity, its rewarding unrewardingness (Guerard 54).

The rustics who are firmly rooted, in Egdon and the old order it represents, are to provide the elements of mirth which offset the grimness of the story. The rural characters such as Grandfer Cantle, his son Christian Cantle, Timothy Fairway, Susan Nunsuch, Olly Dowden, Humphrey, Sam,
et al, are instrumental in introducing the reader to the local celebrations, rituals, beliefs, superstitions and professions. That life is not all struggle, is exhibited by their buoyant joviality whenever festive occasions offer congenial situations. Douglas Brown observes,

The deeply-rooted communal life expresses itself in the bonfire ritual and the wedding rejoicings, in the mumming, and the fair, and the effigy. [...] The deep source of this life of the heath hamlets is in dark and fecund Egdon itself; and it will persist, through whatever catastrophe, numbed, but strong. (63)

After the famous opening chapter introducing the reader to the Egdon Heath and the following chapter where ‘Humanity Appears upon the Scene Hand in Hand with Trouble’ (RN 5), we meet the offsprings of the soil — the rustic bystanders — in the third chapter titled ‘The Custom of the Country’. The rustics pile up surge faggots in the form of a pyramid of thirty feet circumference at the top of Rainbarrow. While they have been building the heap, thirty bonfires like ‘red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round’ (RN 11). In this context the author openly evokes and invokes the Bacchanal spirit. Some of the fires are like ‘Maenades’, the Greek worshippers of Bacchus, the wine-god. The jubilant crowd lights the bonfire to commemorate the Gunpowder plot (Guy Fawkes’
Day), but probably the fire is also connected with the rituals of Druids, the pre-Christian priests, and Saxon ceremonies. The heath becomes luminous with the bonfire —

The first tall flame from Rainbarrow sprang into the sky, [...] The cheerful blaze streaked the inner surface of the human circle — now increased by other stragglers, male and female— with its own gold livery, and even overlaid the dark turf around with a lively luminousness. [...] It seemed as if the bonfire-makers were standing in some radiant upper storey of the world, detached from and independent of the dark stretches below. (RN 11)

The bonfire brings out the inherent vitality of the rustics. Their power of enjoying the revelry is kindled by its flames. For the moment, being oblivious of the scuffles of life, they feel themselves exalted to an elevated level of merriment. Adjourning all the cares of life, they relish the occasion blithely.

The ancient ritual of the rural community functions as a 'spontaneous resistance to the dark fiat of nature' (Brown 57).

To light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature (RN 12).
The bleak surface of the heath and its impending gloom are challenged by the vivacity of its inhabitants. The heath seems to foster this virility and stability of these rustics.

Douglas Brown observes,

The brooding darkness of the heath lit by the labourers’ bonfires, repeats the crashing storm defied by Oak’s persistence. The heath, it appears, nourishes the very vitality and stability it would threaten to destroy; and the vitality and the stability together penetrate the interchange of voices from which the tale itself now emerges.’ (57).

Hardy’s rustics emerge gradually and tantalizingly from the darkness of the night. The bright light and dark shades on the body and the garments of the congregation manifest them as a work of Dürer (1471-1528), the famous German painter and engraver:

The brilliant lights and sooty shades which struggled upon the skin and clothes of the persons standing round caused their lineaments and general contours to be drawn with Dürer-esque vigour and dash.’ (RN 12)

Incidentally Dürer’s picture celebrates the bucolic mirth at a carnival gathering. As J. B. Bullen in The Expressive Eye maintains, “Dürer’s own
"Dancing Peasants" was described in similar terms by William Bell Scott [in Albert Dürer: His Life and Works 214] in an 1869 edition of the engravings. It is, he says, 'a group full of vigour and enjoyment, the sturdy little woman being as strong and frisky as a young bear.' In Under the Greenwood Tree Hardy had already exploited the vigour of the genre scene, but the spirited 'dash' of Dürer's engraving stands in strong contrast to the quieter pictures of English and Dutch life which had inspired the scenes of the earlier novel. In Under the Greenwood Tree the distortion introduced into the descriptions of the Mellstock choir was simply comic in its effect” (98-99). Here the merry group attains a sudden and amazing metamorphosis around the carnival fire.

Shadowy eye-sockets, deep as those of a death's head, suddenly turned into pits of lustre: a lantern jaw was cavernous, then it was shining; wrinkles were emphasized to ravines, or obliterated entirely by a changed ray. Nostrils were dark wells; sinews in old necks were gilt mouldings; things with no particular polish on them were glazed; bright objects, such as the tip of a furze-hook one of the men carried, were as glass; eyeballs glowed like little lanterns. Those whom Nature had depicted as merely quaint
became grotesque, the grotesque became preternatural; for all was in extremity. (RN 18)

It is this emphasis on the ‘grotesque’ in Hardy’s depiction of the rustic joviality that would inevitably remind a reader of our times of Bakhtin’s approach to the carnivalesque. The ‘grotesque’ has also been privileged over the classical in Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, indeed so much so, as to provoke the reviewers’ comment, ‘outside the grotesque there is no salvation’ (Emerson 98). Emerson rightly perceives, ‘the specific locus’ of the ‘carnival space’ is ‘the vulnerable, yet superbly shame-free, grotesque body’ (163).

The festive atmosphere lends an added shine to the rural ambience and the inherent exuberance transforms the common rustics into extraordinary creatures. The luminous glow of the fire turns their common or even distorted features illuminated and jubilant. The light of the bonfire confronts the dark drabness of the heath. Harold Bloom observes,

_The Return of the Native_ is concerned with the Promethean struggle of conscious life against the unconscious “rayless” universe from which it sprang. The poetic-dramatic structure of the first chapters initiates the underlying metaphor of the novel, the ancient conflict of light and darkness. The white man-made
road that crosses the brown heath, the red glow of bonfires, the
"blood-coloured" figure of Diggory Venn, challenge the dark
drabness of the earth (57).

Around the bonfire the rustics evince an attitude which bears direct
correspondence with the Rabelaisian spirit of carnival. Grandfer Cantle, the
most veteran and most jovial member of the congregation, is elated by the
glimmering 'conflagration':

The beaming sight, and the penetrating warmth, seemed to breed
in him a cumulative cheerfulness, which soon amounted to
delight. (RN 13)

He begins to dance by himself singing a song in which the king wishes to go
to the queen along with the earl marshal to hear a penitential confession
from her —

'The king' call'd down' his no-bles all',
  by one', by two', by three';
Earl Mar' -shal, I'll' go shrive' the queen',
  And thou' shalt wend' with me'.

'A boon', a boon', quoth Earl' Mar-shal',
  And fell' on his bend'-ded knee',
That what'-so-e'er' the queen' shall say',

No harm' there-of' may be'. (RN 13)

This portion of the traditional Dorset ballad called "Earl Marshal" (also known as "The Jovial Crew" or "Queen Eleanor's Confession"), obviously 'uncrows' the queen who is going to confess her fault. This uncrowning manifests a carnival spirit. The rural bystanders frequently take chance of festive occasions to subvert the grandeur of authority of the high and mighty. Grandfer feels that he becomes younger while dancing and singing around the fire. He takes a pause for a while to enquire whether they should go that night to the Quiet Woman Inn to congratulate Thomasin and Wildeve who are thought to have already been united in the bond of matrimony (actually the wedding had not taken place). When Fairway replies in negative, the jovial old man protests and insists that they must go, and continues the ballad—

"Do thou' put on' a fri'-ar' s coat',

And I'll' put on' a-no'-ther,

And we' will to' Queen Ele' anor go',

Like Fri'ar and' his bro' ther." (RN 14)
Here by 'queen' Grandfer must have meant Thomasin, but when in the ballad the king proposes that he and the earl marshal should go to hear the confession of Queen Eleanor in the disguise of friars, this also in a way shows the daring to mock both the royal persona and the church official. Besides, in this context Grandfer Cantle means to identify himself and his fellow rustic with friars, which is an oblique way of overthrowing the social hierarchy — a characteristic feature of the carnival attitude.

The rustics function as rich source of information about the major characters and action of the novel. From their conversation, it is revealed that Mrs Yeobright initially had not given her consent to the wedding. Fairway informs that during the forbidding he had been present at the church 'which was a very curious thing to happen' (RN 15). This comment and their subsequent conversation expose their casual attitude towards the church and reveal their disregard for the ecclesiastical authority:

'I ha’nt been there to-year; and now the winter is a-coming on I won’t say I shall.’ [said the Grandfer]

'I ha’nt been these three years’, said Humphrey; ‘for I’m so dead sleepy of a Sunday; and ’tis so terrible far to get there; and when you do get there ’tis such a mortal poor chance that you’ll be
chose for up above, when so many bain’t, that I bide at home and don’t go at all.’ (RN 15)¹

During the conversation when Fairway observes that they cannot blame Wildeve and Thomasin who have not invited anyone at their wedding, as dancing on such occasions often affects the legs of men particularly of the age above forty, Grandfer objects vehemently and asserts —

You be bound to dance at Christmas because ’tis the time o’ year; you must dance at weddings because ’tis the time o’ life. (RN 17)

Their zest for merry-making is further manifested more vigorously in the next part of his comment —

‘...For my part I like a good hearty funeral as well as anything. You’ve as splendid victuals and drink as at other parties, and even better’ (RN 17)

This remark also brings out their refusal to be overwhelmed by the apprehension of death which is an inevitable termination of life. To defy death is a carnival disposition, and the rustics refuse to miss any chance for community eating and drinking as on such occasions normal strenuous life is suspended for the time being.

The character of Christian Cantle, though somewhat pathetic, is humorously built. He is ‘the man no woman will marry’ (RN 19) as
confessed by himself. He comes to this inference after proposing and being rejected by several women. The last woman he proposed, replied (as reported by Christian himself), 'Get out of my sight, you slack-twisted, slim-looking maphrotite fool' (RN 19).

The interpretation given by Christian's mother of the cause of such ill luck again reflects delightful earthy humour. When he was born there was no moon, and his mother said 'No moon, no man' (RN 20). This concurrence was drawn from a traditional superstition that virility is connected with the full moon while on the contrary 'no moon' would naturally suggest lack of vigour and luck. At the same time this uninhibited preoccupation with the body, sex, lower bodily stratum brings out a latent carnival spirit which still existed among these lowly people whereas it had already disappeared from the upper strata of the society. Thus Christian and Fairway carry on their conjectures about the size of the moon at one's birth and its proportionate impact on the (future) virility of the new-born concerned. Christian asks him whether the moon was 'terrible full' (RN 20) when Fairway was born. The former replies, 'Well, 'a was not new' (RN 20).

Similarly funny is Christian's apprehension of ghosts. Based on the report of a little boy, Johny Nunsuch (Susan's son), who has mistaken the reddie to be a ghost, Timothy informs that an apparition has been seen
of late in Egdon. Timothy's comment and Christian's reaction continue in the same vein.

'You'll have to lie alone all your life; and 'tis not to married couples but to single sleepers that a ghost shows himself when 'a do come. One has been seen lately, too. A very strange one.' (RN 20)

The proposal of congratulating the newly married couple and the rustics' subsequent remarks bring out once again their zest for pleasure. Fairway said, ' [...] I am no drinker, as we know, but when the womenfolk and youngsters have gone home we can drop down across to the Quiet Woman, and strike up a ballet in front of the married folk's door.' (RN 21). The jovial Grandfer immediately agrees and says 'I'm as dry as a keg with biding up here in the wind, and I haven't seen the colour of drink since mammet-time today. 'Tis said that the last brew at the Woman is very pretty drinking.' (RN 21). The old guy also promises that he will sing the 'Jovial Crew' or any other song on that occasion.

The rustics' attitude here also manifests their fellow feeling. They are ever ready to witness any merry event of the county to display their support to and appreciation of such occasions. Unlike the aristocrat urban, they are inclined to take share in the collective life and thereby participate jovially on
every social occasion. Though Thomasin and Wildeve have not invited
them, they agree to perform their duty of wishing them happy conjugal life.

Though the bonfire gradually starts to die down, the jolly mood of
the rustics hardly displays any sign of decline. Fairway proposes Susan to
have a jig with him and the next occurrence, which the congregation
witnesses

[...] was a vision of the matron’s broad form whisking off
towards the space whereon the fire had been kindled. She was
lifted bodily by Mr Fairway’s arm, which had been flung round
her waist before she had become aware of his intention. (RN 23)

Fairway’s enthusiasm permeates through the gathering. The turf-cutter
chooses Olly Dowden as his partner and dances with her likewise. The youths
around are immediately inspired by the performance of their elders, select
their individual maids and start dancing. Grandfer Cantle jigs like a three-
legged creature with his stick. Within a few seconds Rainbarrow witnesses
the revolving of dark figures around the almost subsided bonfire —

The chief noises were women’s shrill cries, men’s laughter,
Susan’s stays and pattens, Olly Dowden’s ‘heu-heu-heu!’ and the
strumming of the wind upon the furze-bushes, which formed a
kind of a tune to the demoniac measure they trod. (RN 24)
Thus the merriment reaches its climax and brings out Saturnalian exuberance. The rural people’s remarkable aptitude for enjoyment from the cup of drink becomes manifest. They resemble the tipsy team of the Lord of Misrule to form the laughing chorus. Here we have a manifestation of the true carnival spirit with its emphasis on bodily abandon: ‘as Bakhtin describes it in his *Rabelais*, the common language of bodies is of a certain highly convenient sort. […] the body (and even more, the grotesque body) cannot make a misstep or mistake. It is already out of step….. This body is inviting and available to all without discrimination. […] the grotesque body…is guaranteed triumph over classical form, institutional oppression, and individual death.’ (Emerson 163-64)

Chapter V of Book I titled ‘Perplexity among Honest People’ depicts some of the rustics gathered in front of The Quiet Woman Inn who have gathered to compliment Wildeve and Thomasin on their supposed wedding. They turn up singing with bass viol and flute led by the Grandfer and Fairway. The couple along with Mrs Yoebright is somewhat embarrassed by their presence as the marriage has not actually taken place for some misinterpretation already mentioned. However, Wildeve does not want to dampen the spirit of the congregation and instead of informing them about
the mistake he accepts their compliment and treats them by offering a stone jar containing mead which instantly animates the rustics —

‘That’s a drop of the right sort, I can see,’ said Grandfer Cantle, with the air of a man too well-mannered to show any hurry to taste it.

‘Yes’, said Wildeve, ‘’tis some old mead. I hope you will like it.’

‘O ay!’ replied the guests, in the hearty tones natural when the words demanded by politeness coincide with those of deepest feeling. ‘There isn’t prettier drink under the sun.’

‘I’ll take my oath there isn’t,’ added Grandfer Cantle. ‘All that can be said against mead is that ’tis rather heady, and apt to lie about a man a good while. But tomorrow’s Sunday, thank God.’

(RN 37)

When Wildeve asks whether they would like to drink in cups and glasses they express their eagerness to share it from a single beaker by passing it round. Thus their feeling of communal unity is expressed along with their inclination for Dionysian mirth.

Timothy observes that the woman whom Wildeve has got is as precious as a ‘dimant’ (RN 37) and her father was an expert player of
clarionet and bass viol. Then follows a humorous description of Mrs Yeobright's performance one Sunday at the Kingsbere church:

One Sunday I can well mind — a bass viol day that time, and Yeobright had brought his own. 'Twas the Hundred-and-thirty-third to 'Lydia'; and when they'd come to 'ran down his beard and o'er his robes its costly moisture shed,' neighbour Yeobright, who had just warmed to his work, drove his bow into them strings that glorious grand that he e'en a'most sawed the bass-viol into two pieces. Every winder in church rattled as if 'twere a thunderstorm. Old Pa'son William lifted his hands in his great holy surplice as natural as if he'd been in common clothes, and seemed to say to hisself, 'O for such a man in our parish!' […]

(RN 38-39)

This vigorous account of Yeobright’s performance reveals the rustics’ power of appreciating boisterous action and can remind the reader of the performances of Hardy’s grandfather at the Stinsford church. Rutland observes, 'The comical description, in the fifth chapter, of the playing of the clarinet by Thomasin’s father is a humorous reproduction of the tales which Hardy had heard in his youth of the prowess of his grandfather, Thomas Hardy the First.' (182)
At the time of parting Grandfer offers to sing another song as he considers himself to be ‘as full of notes as a bird’ (RN 40). But Wildeve stops him politely saying that he would not trouble Grandfer at that moment, he would rather listen to his song some other day. The simple-hearted old man promises that he would learn ten new songs to entertain Wildeve at his next performance.

Chapter V of Book II titled ‘Through the Moonlight’ portrays the collective mirth on the Christmas Eve at the residence of Mrs Yeobright who has invited ‘the plain neighbours and workpeople without drawing any lines, just to give ’em a good supper and such like’ (RN 105). The supper is preceded by boisterous dance and revelry and the performance of the well-known mummer’s play *Saint George* where the Turkish Knight’s role is enacted by Eustacia in disguise. Other members of the mumming group are rustics like Humphrey, Sam, Fairway etc. Though ‘they were not enthusiastic’ about performing in mumming and they are used to participate in such ‘a traditional pastime’ (RN 96) only to carry on a tradition, yet the jovial dance preceding it is enjoyed by the rustics to their heart’s content.

When the group of mummers approaches at close quarters of Mrs Yeobright’s dwelling they can comprehend that lively music and dance are progressing within. From the note of the serpent the mummers identify it to
be ‘Nancy’s Fancy’ which is a well-known folk tune of the locality. The dance is proceeding at a place adjacent to the door: ‘The brushing of skirts and elbows, sometimes the bumping of shoulders, could be heard against the very panels’ (RN 104). The mumming team wait outside for the termination of the performance within so that they may secure the entrance. The musical instruments come to a pause, but the dancers continue with renewed vigour and enthusiasm:

The air was now that one without any particular beginning, middle, or end, which perhaps, among all the dances which throng an inspired fiddler’s fancy, best conveys the idea of the interminable — the celebrated ‘Devil’s Dream.’ The fury of personal movement that was kindled by the fury of the notes could be approximately imagined by these outsiders under the moon, from the occasional kicks of toes and heels against the door, whenever the whirl round had been of more than customary velocity. (RN 105)

The “Devil’s Dream” which is also called “The Devil Among the Tailors” is a famous six-handed reel; it continues for a considerable time and ‘the bumping against the door, the laughter, the stamping’ (RN 105) are quite boisterous. The carnival atmosphere reigns supreme and when carnival
festivity goes on, all other normal activities remain suspended for the time being. The revellers at Mrs Yeobright's apartment celebrate the Christmas Eve amid extreme jubilation and mirth. Grandfer Cantle along with other rustics participates in this mirth displaying once again their capacity of rejoicing, laughing out the ordeals of life. The music and dancing are performed with a remarkable vivacity—

At this moment the fiddles finished off with a screech, amid the serpent emitted a last note that nearly lifted the roof. (RN 106)

The dance being over, the mummers are warmly greeted by the guests who earnestly want to sustain the festive fervour. The humpbacked Father Christmas appears with a huge club, makes his inaugural speech concluding with—

'Make room, make room, my gallant boys,
And give us space to rhyme;
We’ve come to show Saint George’s play,
Upon this Christmas time.' (RN 106)

The Valiant Soldier, the Turkish Knight, Saint George, the Doctor and the Saracen make their entrance one by one.

Following the completion of the mummer’s show the guests as well as the mummers are served supper, the menu include beef, bread, cake,
pastry, mead and old wine (RN 112). Clym and his mother serve the supper so that their maid servant may have her food as a guest. Thus on this festive occasion people of the lower rungs are entertained by their social superiors. This detail is reminiscent of the Roman Saturnalia of the Golden Age when masters used to serve the slaves, celebrating the reign of Saturn during the days of the carnival. Though here the mutual relation is not of master and slave, but the rustic invitees and the maidservant obviously belong to lower stratum of social hierarchy than Mrs Yoebright and her son. Bakhtin observes that, 'The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official fests; [...]. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival' (RHW 10). Carnival features such as mass indulgence in riotous dance and music, consumption of victuals and liquor and inversion of social hierarchy are prominently focussed in this celebration.

The play of *St George* which had been seen several times by Hardy in his boyhood was in vogue in Dorset for many generations. In 1920s he reconstructed the play from his memory and printed it privately in 1921. Twenty years before its reconstruction, he discussed about the play with William Archer, as described in *Real Conversations* (Rutland 180). Rutland
observes, 'Beside the Heath, transmuted by Hardy's imagination into a Presence, there are also many smaller matters introduced into the novel which are faithfully painted from the real. The most obvious of these are the Christmas festivities at Mrs Yeobright's house, which bear a close relationship to those described in Under the Greenwood Tree. But while the music of the choir was the centre of the early picture, that of the latter is the play of St George, which Hardy as a boy had seen acted many times' (Rutland 180).

The first chapter of Book VI titled 'The Inevitable Movement Onward' delineates the preparation and celebration of the Maypole in Egdon. Originally, the Maypole was an ancient emblem of fertility ritualised at the beginning of summer (Hole 136) and it is still continued in the celebration of the May Day. Christina Hole informs in her British Folk Customs,

In the darkness of the early morning, the young people went out on May Day and cut down a tall, young tree, lopped off most of its branches, leaving only a few at the top, and so brought it home, to be adorned with flowers and garlands, and to serve as a centre for their dances.' (136-37)
Here, in Egdon, all the youths from the adjacent area of a radius of two miles congregate in an open area beside Fairway's residence on the eve of Maypole. The pole is kept slanted with one terminal rested on a trestle and women are busy encircling the pole with garlands of fragrant wild flowers from the top downwards. The summit is wreathed with 'crossed hoops' (RN 298) of small flowers; beneath these follow one by one the zones of milk white Maybloom, bluebells, cowslips, lilacs, ragged-robins, daffodils and other flowers garlanded up to the lowest part. Hardy portrays the jubilant preparation in a picturesque way. He observes—

The *instincts of merry England* lingered on here with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still — in these spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, seem in some way or other to have survived mediaeval doctrine. (RN 298) [Emphasis added]

The next morning the Maypole can be seen erected at the centre of the green field, its summit penetrating into the sky. It is raised and set upright in the previous night or early morning by the young enthusiasts. Opening her
casement and withdrawing the curtains Thomasin can see the pole. The fragrance of the charming sweet perfumed wild flowers has spread into the air of the surrounding arena and she is delighted by the scent. Later, Hardy writes in ‘The Night of The Dance’:

Yes; far and nigh things seem to know

Sweet scenes are impending here;

That all is prepared; that the hour is near

For welcomes, fellowships, and flow

Of sally, song, and cheer;

That spigots are pulled and viols strung;

That soon will arise the sound

Of measures trod to tunes renowned; (11-18) [WTH 215]

In the afternoon people start to congregate in the field. Clym observes the proceedings interestedly from an open window of his room. He sees Thomasin dressed gaily and appreciates her prettiness. The zealous brass band arrives about five o’clock and strikes up ‘with apparently wind enough among its members to blow down his house’ (RN 299). The boisterous dancing and music continue almost for four hours. Clym and Thomasin cannot participate in it due to their recent tragedies. But all the
VILLAGE MAY DAY CELEBRATION C. 1880: CHILDREN DANCE AROUND THE MAYPOLE.

rustics including Diggory Venn jovially join in this revelry. It transparently authenticates the fact that though Hardy’s protagonists are psychologically daunted by the tragedies of their earthly existence (Mrs Yeobright has passed away bitten by an adder, Wildeve and Eustacia have been drowned, Clym and Thomasin are much affected by such accidents), the ordinary rustics, though bitten regularly by the adder of hardship and drowned in the sea of problems, manifest extraordinary hilarity whenever life offers them such merry occasions. Bakhtin’s comment on ‘death’ in Rabelais’s novel seems illuminating in this context:

In Rabelais’s novel the image of death is devoid of all tragic and terrifying overtones. Death is the necessary link in the process of the people’s growth and renewal. It is the ‘other side’ of birth.

(RHW 407)

The last chapter, titled ‘Cheerfulness Again Asserts Itself at Blooms End, and Clym Finds His Vocation’, delineates the happy union of Diggory and Thomasin and the rustics’ cheerful participation in it. Any nuptial is an appropriate occasion for the carnivalesque release; they not only long for its accompanying merriment, but also involve themselves in the preparation—how they can entertain the newly-wedded couple and other guests in the best possible manner.
The twenty-fifth of June has been scheduled for the wedding day of Venn and Thomasin. The novel is concluded, after all, on a happy and jovial note. However, originally Hardy planned to retain Venn as an isolated and mysterious figure who was to disappear from the heath and Thomasin was to remain a widow. But the novelist is supposed to have altered his plan in response to public opinion.

On the scheduled day Grandfer Cantle, Humphrey, Fairway and some other rustics are seen working on a feather-bed, the proposed marriage gift for the couple. Grandfer, in his usual fervour, plans to sing a wedding song called “Down in Cupid’s Gardens” that night. Soon a coach carrying the newly married couple is driven past them and with a ‘Hurrah!’ they wave their hands to congratulate them with ‘Grandfer Cantle’s seals dancing merrily in the sunlight as he twirled himself about’ (RN 311).

In the evening all the invitees assemble to celebrate the wedding. Mr Venn asks Christian to sing and as usual, the diffident young man moves about in his chair seemingly afraid at the request and ‘his father struck up a stave instead of him’ (RN 313). The guests hold up their glasses and drink the married couples’ health. Thus the rural congregation celebrates the occasion in a jaunty manner. To go back to Bakhtin once again, ‘Carnival
celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world— the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom' [RHW 410].

Note
1. This subversive attitude of the rural bystanders not only brings out the practical scenario of the English counties but also manifests Hardy’s loss of faith in religion: ‘By the age of twenty-seven he had already lost his faith’ (Cecil 22). This was caused by the Darwinian theory of evolution which shook the rational psyche of the novelist, mid-nineteenth century criticism of the Bible and other such influences.