Introduction: The ‘Other’ Hardy

‘O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool’d a long age in the deep-delvéd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!"¹

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), who is commonly known as a pessimistic writer standing on a ‘Darkling Plain’² and supposed to be preoccupied with the seamy side of life, can be studied afresh from a comparatively unexplored perspective. Towards the end of his career Hardy expressed his dissatisfaction to W.W. Morgan complaining that his writings had not received ‘fair reading’ and ‘fair judgement’ (Life 402). The critics have generally emphasized his treatment of destiny, fate or chance, the circumscribing of free will, socio-economic infrastructure, and agony of industrialization or biological determinism. Indeed, ‘these different and at times conflicting approaches do not take into account the whole of Hardy. Thus, as one or other aspect is blown up, much remains unexplained or misinterpreted’ (Kundu 1983 i). In Hardy there is not just one pattern; there are
many patterns. Even within the space of a single novel of Hardy, one can trace various approaches which conflict yet cohere.

Furthermore, an in-depth study of his fiction manifests his fascination for another — a brighter — side of life as well. This is discernible in his portrayal of the rustic chorus, who on occasions show a gay abandon and an extraordinary hilarity. And sometimes, significantly enough, it is these jovial rustics who seem to steal the show. They prefer to indulge in a carefree, merry, and at times even exuberant response to the significant as well as to the comparatively unimportant events and issues of life around them. 'Through the mirth of these people Hardy suggests, evokes and conjures up — though in a quite modified way — the old tradition of the mirth and the laughter of the carnivalesque, particularly the kind of drunken revelry that accounts for the special flavour of Rabelais's book'.

Throughout his career and particularly in his later years Hardy constantly resisted the label of a pessimist. He was considerably influenced by the Positivist Movement which was initiated in France by Saint Simon and later propagated by Comte. The movement entered England through Spencer, Huxley and Leslie Stephen. In the mid 1880s Hardy became a close companion of Frederic Harrison, the leader of the English positivists. The Woodlanders was also written and published during this period.
Hardy had been tremendously influenced by the new wave of ideas, generated by a host of literature including Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, and had already lost his faith in Christianity by the age of twenty-seven (Cecil 22). Inspired by the positivist ideas Hardy felt the necessity of a new religion and transposed his faith from the Almighty to human beings and the human society. Besides, he preferred to be considered a meliorist rather than a pessimist; he said, ‘On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist’ (Blunden 111). But what seems much more significant is the way Hardy endeavoured to recapture the folk-culture of England in some of his novels and stories, which had been rapidly vanishing from Wessex even during his lifetime (as mentioned in ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’). ‘Humour is not the quality that one might expect to find in him [Hardy], so grand and so gloomy as he is’, observes David Cecil, ‘but it is there all right. Nor is it incongruous with the rest of his achievement. It is rustic, it is elemental, it is grotesque, it is Gothic, it is traditional’ (94). What D. Cecil does not mention is the ‘carnivalesque’ element that appears in some of Hardy’s novels and stories. He captures the carnival ardour of the Wessex rustics to a significant extent in an entertaining way by incorporating the elements of unrestrained merriment like eating, drinking, gossiping, dancing and ‘sunburnt mirth of the rustic people who gladly scramble up the chariot of Bacchus whenever
the situation permits. Hardy can conjure up this spirit primarily because most of his novels and stories have country settings as their background which represents a waning past, and he focuses on such simple rustics who happen to be the traditional custodians and practitioners of the carnival jollity till the intrusion of industrialisation and subsequent urbanisation of spaces and people.

Hardy uses the carnivalesque in a chastened form as a way of reviving folk customs and folk life of the past. Categorising Hardy’s characters into three different categories, J. C. Dave in The Human Predicament in Hardy’s Novels places the rustics in the first category and observes, ‘Such rustics rarely get depressed, are easily consoled by the comforts of religion and recover fast from depression when occasionally they sink into it. They stand for the average humanity, unawakened to the plight of man in Nature, who toil with endurance through the dust and din of life enjoying the bliss of ignorance. They eat and drink and talk, without even a touch of melancholy,’ (30-31). Hardy himself observes, ‘It is among such communities as these that happiness will find her last refuge upon earth, since it is among them that a perfect insight into the conditions of existence will be longest postponed’ (Orel 253).
The humour in the Wessex novels and stories is primarily rustic in nature as the author recaptures the tenor of joyous utterances and gestures of the villagers as they speak and perform. H. C. Duffin says, ‘Almost all the humour in the Wessex novels that is worth preserving is rustic humour — caught up with joy from the lips of the villagers themselves, redundancies removed, the form perfected, but otherwise the pure unadulterated essence of the South English peasantry of the third quarter of the nineteenth century’ (144). The laughter, one expression of this humour, springs out of simple, genial enjoyment of life that the rustic people exhibit. It is neither satiric nor caustic and the author never ridicules the faults and follies of his rustic characters. David Cecil observes, ‘His are the jokes and anecdotes that enliven the evenings in cottage and village inn, and like theirs, his primary aim is simply to make us laugh. The mood which inspires them is simple, genial enjoyment — the countryman’s slow relish of the absurd for its own sake. The main themes are the themes of most country humours — the naïve credulity of yokels and of crusted old eccentrics. We are made to laugh at the immemorial butts of village life — garrulous, reminiscent old grandfathers, henpecked husbands, ludicrous timid simpletons, and the incongruity between the facts of life and the countryman’s ignorant comment on them.’ (94)
The rustics in Hardy's fiction, despite their tough and strenuous schedule, are endowed with such an irrepressible spirit that in a sense they emerge to be the happiest creations of Hardy. They are almost always in a jolly and buoyant mood, and are refreshingly entertaining with their rustic conversation and interaction. During carnivals or festivals, when they gather in an inn or under the open sky or around a bonfire, they enjoy food, drink, dance and music in the *carpe diem* spirit as they join these revelries. On such occasions they even dare to poke fun at the king or the church, and at death or marriage. Thus the hilarity of Hardy's rustics may well be placed in the proper carnival tradition of England.

Hardy's work is meticulously and essentially based on popular sources and thus it smacks of the ancient tradition of folk-humour. Carnival imparts his laughing chorus the stamina to enjoy in the face of day-to-day struggle and climactic events. Hardy's rustic people, with their rural idioms, sayings, proverbs, crude farces, display a kind of collective wisdom. They also manifest frank subversion of rank and authority. They not only fulfil the need of comic relief but with their formidable treasure of folk humour they offer a striking contrast to Hardy's melancholy and providence-stricken protagonists who are overwhelmed by life to suffer alone and perish alone.
The common folk in Hardy’s fiction, unlike the serious characters of the front stage, appear to be fine illustrations of the Bakhtinian idea of revellers, — blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; coarse, dirty, physical, down-to-earth, revelling in drink, food and other bodily enjoyments. Thus they come to display the popular impulse of carnival.

Like the tipsy team of the ‘Lord of Misrule’ 5 the rustic community in Hardy’s fiction performs the role of the laughing chorus of ‘Carnival’. They seem to cater partially to the purpose of the intrinsic nature of the carnival laughter. Their gay laughter is generally festive and collective in nature. It belongs to all people, is directed at all and everyone including the participant. Basically it is gay and triumphant, sometimes mildly mocking and deriding too. This ambivalent laughter manifests the point of view of the entire community as well.

David Cecil identifies Hardy’s chorus as the groups of rustics which in his greatest works form, as it were, the chorus to the main drama: the choir led by Tranter Dewey in “Under the Greenwood Tree”; the turf-cutters in “The Return of the Native” — Fairway, Christian, Grandfer Cantle and the rest; the cottagers of Little Hintock— Wood, Cawtree,
Upjohn, Crendon; the Casterbridge gossips in “The Mayor of Casterbridge”; Bathsheba’s labourers in “Far from the Madding Crowd”—Joseph Poorggrass, Henry Fray, Billy Smallbury, Jan Coggan; the grave-diggers in “A Pair of Blue Eyes”; Haymoss, Blore and the rest of Lady Constantine’s tenantry in “Two on a Tower”. They cannot be compared with the central figures in the drama just because they are placed in a story to provide a chorus (91-92).

It is noteworthy that Hardy’s rustics always appear in a group and rarely as individuals. Their characters are never full-length delineations. Cecil has tried to place them in the Shakespearean tradition. These characters, according to Cecil, ‘are the direct descendants of Bottom and Dogberry and the rustics who gather in response to Falstaff’s call to arms at the house of Justice Shallow […]. Rich fragments of rusticity, they are as entertaining as any of the classic comic characters of Fielding and Goldsmith. But unlike theirs and like Shakespeare’s, they can also stir serious emotions’ (92).

Hardy portrays the festive life of people which is, à la Bakhtin, their second life, — organized on the basis of laughter. Bakhtin believes that folk custom is the origin of the carnivalesque which was a way to overcome
apprehension of the king, the church, the hell, the plague, and the serious. Hardy uses the carnivalesque in a modified and chastened manner as a part of his revival of the folk tradition of the past. At the same time Hardy’s rustics manifest a carnivalesque approach of defying terrestrial and ethereal fears through laughter.

The rustic chorus hardly indulge in parodic laughter. However, they illustrate that “carnival achieves a transformation downward or ‘uncrowning’ de jure relations of dependency, expropriation, and social discipline” (Bristol 22); they, on the occasions of their carnival revelry, indulge in irreverence, cursing, obscene hints, as also in dance, music, feasting and drinking. By their hilarious enjoyment they consistently endeavour to offer the possibility of interpreting life from another perspective than the serious and sombre one. This festive mirth indeed constitutes a common feature of Hardy’s works. The simple parties in rustic households, especially, on winter evenings, are occasions for uninhibited mirth and revelry in Hardy’s novels. As Cecil remarks,

Hardy’s descriptions of dancing are especially memorable — he loved it himself as a young man. To the end of his life the names of the old dance-tunes— “The Lady’s Triumph”, “The Dashing White Sergeant”—struck a wistful, responsive chord
in his heart. They were not the languid unsociable peregrination of the modern dance, but the old country dances, festive, communal and energetic, all leaps and twirls and linked hands. They went on and on, until the chalk rose in clouds from the floor and the sweat shone on the dancers’ foreheads. (106)

Hardy’s humour is often verbal in nature depending for its impact on the particular words used by the author. The intrinsic poetic quality in him is delightfully manifested in the speech of the rustics. This humour has also an Elizabethan fervour in its leisurely flourish of whimsical fancy. The Elizabethan bias for the macabre (the Hamletian grave-diggers, for instance) is expressed through his sense of the irony of human destiny which is sometimes displayed by a hearty fun related to coffins and funerals:

‘Ah, poor lord George!’ he [Martin Cannister, a mason] continued, looking contemplatively at the huge coffin; ‘he and I was as bitter enemies once as any could be when one is a lord and t’ other only a mortal man. [...] But once now and then when I looked at his towering height, I’d think in my inside, “What a weight you’ll be, my lord, for our arms to lower under the aisle of Endelstow Church some day!” ’[A Pair of Blue Eyes 200].
Solomon Longways’ comment — ‘Why should death rob life o’ fourpence. I say there was no treason in it.’[The Mayor of Casterbridge 126] — reverberates with echoes from a long tradition; one is reminded of Dame Quickly’s account of Falstaff’s death [in Shakespeare’s King Henry IV].

There is a universality and timeless proverbial feature about this ordinary utterance. ‘We forget Solomon Longways’, observes Cecil, ‘and seem to be listening to the voice of all humble humanity as, from the wisdom of its hard workaday experience, it makes unillusioned its comment on the mystery of death.’(93). Hardy’s rustics manifest the quality of defying the annihilating power of death and like people in the carnivalesque tradition they seem to realize and assert the inherent implication of the cycle of rebirth and regeneration. While contrasting between the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (1929), Bakhtin argues that the former’s novels are in the ‘dialogic’ or ‘polyphonic’ form, where the characters are allowed to speak in their own voices. They are liberated to speak ‘a plurality of independent and unmerged voices of consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices…’ (Cuddon 219). In Hardy we note this plurality; besides the voice of the so-called ‘tragic protagonists’, there is a clearly audible voice of the laughing people in his novels. The elements of mirth in the festivities are the secret of their strength and sustenance. The
rustic bystanders prove that life can be endured and even enjoyed when approached from another point of view. They manifest that despite the everyday material struggle, it is still possible to laugh out the problems of life. Although individuals suffer the Wessex folk enjoy themselves in spite of the strains of life.

The rustics thus serve to provide a counterpoint to Hardy's main plots. They represent the vast majority of humdrum herd, who continue living their unruffled life, whatever catastrophe may overwhelm the protagonists: ‘Henchard and Eustacia may love and suffer and die; but the rustics go on. It is they who bring the children to birth, dance at the wedding, mourn at the graveyard, and speak the epitaph over the tomb. They are eternal as the earth by which they live. And their very prosaicness anchors the story to reality. It gives the reader a standard of normality by which he can gauge the tremendous heights and depths to which the main characters rise and fall.’ (Cecil 93-94)

The carnivalesque impulse can be traced through the Hardy canon right from Under the Greenwood Tree till The Woodlanders; however this charming rustic band, disappears in his final novels. This decline in the elements of laughter can be partly explained by the unhappiness in the author's own conjugal life; but a profounder reason can be traced in his
essay ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’ (July, 1883) [Longman’s Magazine, 252-69]. In this essay Hardy notes in a melancholy mood how, as a result of annual migration ‘the humorous simplicity that formerly characterized the men and the unsophisticated modesty of the women are rapidly disappearing or lessening, under the constant attrition of lives mildly approximating to those of workers in a manufacturing town’ (Orel 180).

Bakhtin observes, ‘To ignore or to underestimate the laughing people of the Middle Ages also distorts the picture of European culture’s historic development’ (6). Hardy presents the progeny, a little enfeebled and chastened though, of those ancient generations of laughing people of the rural England. He never ignores or underestimates the laughing rustics of Wessex who contributed to a significant extent to constitute the history of the local culture. He argues in the essay: ‘the pleasures enjoyed by the Dorset labourer may be far from pleasures of the highest kind desirable for him. They may be pleasures of the wrong shade. And the inevitable glooms of a straitened hard-working life occasionally enwrap him from such pleasures as he has; and in times of special storm and stress the “Complaint of Piers the Ploughman” is still echoed in his heart. But even Piers had his flights of merriment and humour; and ploughman as a rule do not give sufficient thought to the morrow to be miserable when not in physical pain’
(Orel 171). In the same essay Hardy reacted against the contemporary practice of projecting the rustics as the melancholy, dull, comical 'Hodge': 'The happiness of a class can rarely be estimated aright by philosophers who look down upon that class from the Olympian heights of society' (Orel 172).

The present dissertation attempts to consider Hardy’s novels and short stories in the light of the carnivalesque which is, of course, much less robust here than their Rabelaisian manifestations. However, I have endeavoured to show the sunny side of the oeuvre of Hardy’s fiction though he is usually perceived as a pessimistic writer. The elements of laughter are never scanty in his earlier novels; and from Under the Greenwood Tree (his second novel) to The Woodlanders (his eleventh novel) they are incorporated by the author as necessary components of his design. Some of his short stories also abound with these elements. An intensive textual analysis has been attempted in the following chapters and the texts are allowed to speak for themselves.

To set my work in perspective I have tried to present in ‘The Premise’ (Chapter 1), the position accorded to laughter in the social life and literary arena of England and Europe through the ages. The chapter also endeavours to take into account some of the conventional approaches regarding the presence of the elements of laughter in literary works. It also attempts to identify the presence of the carnivalesque in British Literature, which may
help us to see if we can place Hardy's rustics in the age-old carnival tradition of England.

The second chapter explores the carnivalesque elements in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. This novel of Hardy introduces abundant merriment, laughter and festivity. It illustrates the author's optimistic outlook and ends in fulfilment. The Mellstock Quire is a fictional name for the Stinsford choir with which Hardy had long family association. The novel is based on the materials which have been adapted from the author's first-hand experience or anecdotes listened to in his young age. This work portrays the jovial rustics of Mellstock epitomizing the continuation of the carnival spirit even in the nineteenth century England.

An intensive study of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is made in Chapter 3 to highlight the 'decrowning' of nobility, church and death in the novel. This first novel of Hardy to be published with the author's name on the title page is reminiscent of his first meeting with Emma, his first wife. This work portrays the simple genial humour of the country life, the rural customs, beliefs and the rustic's ability to revel on festive occasions despite their strenuous everyday schedule.

The spirit that in spite of regular material strain and struggle makes it possible for one to laugh out the problems of life is manifested in *Far From*
the *Madding Crowd*, the novel which is analysed in the fourth chapter. This novel reverberates with the uproarious voice of the common people beside the sad serious voice of the so-called ‘tragic protagonists’. This work in which the author first uses the fictional name ‘Wessex’, is a rural painting of the simple folk of the south-western counties of England in their boozing and rejoicing which provides the tragic texture of the novel with comic relief.

The fifth chapter examines *The Return of the Native* to bring out the latent carnival spirit which still existed in rural England of the time though it had already disappeared from the upper strata of the society. It brings out the elements of laughter in the people’s mass indulgence in riotous dance and music, consumption of victuals and liquor, as well as the inversion of social hierarchies. Extensive participation of the rustics on the occasions like Maypole celebration exemplifies the continuing presence of the carnival ardour even in the nineteenth century.

The sixth chapter explores *The Trumpet-Major* to show the continuation of the *carpe diem* spirit even at a moment of national crisis. Written with the local history of Dorset and Weymouth during the Napoleonic invasion as the backdrop, this novel displays Rabelaisian mirth. At a time of concern and tension, the commoners manifest their zest for delight and
entertainment. Counted as the ‘lightest-hearted novel Hardy ever wrote’ (Duffin 22), this novel portrays the rustic community indulging in carnival jocundity.

Through a scrutiny of The Mayor of Casterbridge in the seventh chapter I have tried to trace the carnivalesque even in this tragic novel. Even here the semi-urban ambience presents adequate evidence of the common people’s jovial disposition. ‘Uncrowning’ death and celebration of life in the face of imminent death, which undoubtedly suggest carnival temperament, are displayed by characters like Christopher Coney who manifest the Bacchanalian spirit. Besides, the plebeians illustrate the craving for ‘decrowning’ their social superiors, as well as for drinking, eating and collective revelry.

The Woodlanders which may be said to be Hardy’s last novel with ample evidences of carnival attitude is analysed in the eighth chapter. The rustic bystanders of Little Hintock evince extraordinary hilarity despite the moments of pathos in the lives of the protagonists. Living close to nature and being soaked in the tradition of their primitive ancestors, they are imbued with a freshness and fellow-feeling. With their genial disposition they enjoy feasting, gossiping, playing cards or musical instruments — of course along with drenching their throats with liquor. Despite their hard
labour in bark-ripping they remain hale and hearty in their ‘appreciative throats’.

The ninth chapter explores the thin trickle of laughter flowing through Hardy’s novels other than those analysed in the preceding chapters.

Most of Hardy’s short stories, unlike his novels, are vibrant with the robust vigour of the rustics. The tenth chapter examines some selected stories in which is depicted by the author reminisces the anecdotes, legends and chronicles of the local history. While shunning the tragic vision of Von Hertmann and Schopenhauer, in many of these stories Hardy presents the exuberant laughter of the simple folk. Some of these short stories resemble the traditional English ballad.

The inferences drawn from the probing in these ten chapters are summed up in the concluding chapter.

This dissertation, thus, proposes to explore some of the features of Hardy’s novels and short stories which have received comparatively less critical attention. It endeavours to re-read the so-called ‘pessimistic’ writer in order to bring out the ‘other’ side of his work which foregrounds elements of laughter and merriment.

NOTES

2. The title of H. C. Webster’s book on Hardy. According to Webster, Hardy’s philosophy ‘as a whole may be called either deterministic or fatalistic’ (156).


Hardy attended the Rabelais Club in London in 1879, 1883 and 1886. This information is furnished in F. E. Hardy’s book The Life of Thomas Hardy.


5. A holiday custom prevalent in some parts of Europe. C.L. Barber in Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy informs that in this custom ‘the rougher pleasures of defiance and mockery are uppermost, […] Abuse predominates […]. The formal Lord of Misrule presided over the eating and drinking within-doors in the cold season. But the title was also applied to the captain of summer Sunday drinking and dancing by the young men of a parish […], (24).
Methodology and Approach:

In this dissertation two associated research methodologies have been adopted. First, I have searched libraries for primary and secondary materials on Thomas Hardy (his novels, short stories, poems, essays and other personal writings, interviews given by him, biographical and critical writings on him). The second methodology is to analyse the author's contemporary socio-cultural and historical scenario and its impact on his writing. For the format of the dissertation, referencing, documentation etc., I have followed the style sheet provided in *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (sixth edition) by Joseph Gibaldi.

Essentially, the analytical approach is followed by furnishing adequate examples from the texts wherever necessary. The dissertation endeavours to analyse Hardy's novels and short stories and traces out the elements of laughter in them basing mainly on the plebeian attitude during carnivals as observed by Mikhail Bakhtin.