

**MUDr. Kristýna Šejvlová, *Space and Its Connection to the Characters in Thomas Hardy's Novels***

BA thesis

Supervisor's Report

In her thesis Dr Šejvlová examines the specificities of space in three Hardy's novels of "Character and Environment", *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, with regard to their relation to the major characters. In other words, she attempts to define how the author's fictitious world known as Wessex is constructed. In her comments she reflects such features as nature versus civilization, or the contrast of the rural and the urban; the presence of religious systems (Christianity vs. various forms of paganism); and specific topoi bearing both realistic and symbolic meanings.

In the introductory parts she gives a rather brief survey of the genesis and application of the term Wessex in Hardy's fiction. Her exposition of the problem is perhaps too brief, avoiding to see the literary space in a larger, more theoretical perspective. This may be the reason for a lack of firmer conception the reader feels in some parts of the thesis when it is not certain how some discussed aspects contribute to our understanding of the Hardy-esque space.

The significance of space seems the least prominent in the first novel. The student quite rightly sees the opposition between Gabriel Oak, who lives in harmony with the rural environment, and Sergeant Troy, who is an intruder never able to accommodate and thus representing the "other" world, the world of urban glamour and carelessness, with Bathsheba Everdene oscillating between these two extremes. However, there are moments which problematize this bipolar structure, especially the fact that it is Gabriel's *displacement* caused by the loss of his flock that brings him to Bathsheba and thus creates mutual dependence. The motif of the Great Barn also shows that the concept of Wessex is actually spatio-temporal: the topos of the barn as the centrepiece of the farm is a locus of the *norm* rooted in traditions (impersonated by the authority of the oldest worker at the sessions); the protagonists are then viewed as figures more or less deviating from this norm, with due consequences.

In *The Return* the student points out the relevance of separate loci such as the house of Mrs Yeobright, of Eustacia's grandfather, of the Quiet Woman inn or of Alderworth, the home of Clym and Eustacia. It is, however, not possible to mix them up with places outside Egdon Heath, such as Paris or Budmouth, as we get it in a rather sweeping statement on p. 35. These points on the Egdon map tend to convey specific meanings that establish or break relationships (symbolism of the mumming, closed door, fishing for a bucket in the well, etc.) – this is a different role than that played by the places of desire. The space of Egdon is also characterised by the *distance* between its loci and the necessity to cross the Heath – this is the characteristic movement in the novel.

In *Tess* the major focus is put on how the space is structured by religious meanings (i.e. in terms of the popular understanding of the role of Christianity and paganism of the time). This is of course essential and again it confirms the spatio-temporal character of Wessex in this novel. It is however not the only distinctive feature and in any case it cannot be applied too rigidly. Can the student explain what she means by the sentence "The conflict of the two religious systems culminates in the picture of a mansion that seems wonderful, yet with the wrong interpretation brings only sorrow to Tess" (48-49)? It is one of the cases when one feels the arguments sound unconvincing because they are based on inaccurate reading.

To conclude: The thesis combines elucidating moments with passages which call for more detailed elaboration. This is perhaps due to the fact that the author was not able to grasp a firmer conception of her topic during the work on her thesis. Some parts are more or less

descriptive, sometimes they relate to the problem of space rather awkwardly or in a shallow way (e.g. the motif of storm in *FMC*). The result is unequal. This, too, corresponds with occasional linguistic confusion (small-town life is put in opposition to the corrupt city life, but elsewhere towns are defined as devil-made).

In view of these reservations, I recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary suggestion of the grade to be either very good (velmi dobrá) or good (dobrá), depending on the defence.

31 January, 2022

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran