

# The Creative Launcher

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## Hardy's Wessex: An Imaginary-Literary-Topography

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### Abstract

Geo - (topo) graphically Hardy's Wessex is located on the West Country of England and lying south of the Thames and the Bristol Channel. The invention of "Wessex" is described by Hardy in his preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd* in which, he first re-introduced the old word to give territorial definition. Travelling into Hardy, I wish to argue that place ought to receive special attention. Most of the writers have written their works with deep concern with their native special attention. Place needs to be understood as something local, regional and real, despite the complexities and difficulties involved in the use of such terms. Generally, places themselves could have the sort of centrality in literary studies that has more frequently been given to notions such as author, character, text, historical context and narration etc. This paper wants to Geo - (topo) graphically appreciate the correspondence between Wessex and Hardy's relationship in an imaginary and cartographical mode.

**Keywords-** Geography, Cartography, Topography, Landscape, Real Vs Imagining, Wessex

### Introduction

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 near Dorchester. He was a son of a stonemason and was schooled locally. He played the fiddle well enough to perform at church services and local

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celebrations, and taught at the Sunday school. He moved to London after becoming an architect but was inspired by the customs and traditions of the people and places he knew best.

Hardy was famous for his novels of nineteenth century rural life. He was rich in his description and dialect. Even Wessex Poems were set against the bleak and forbidding Dorset landscape by Hardy and he set them in Wessex, an imaginary region mapped onto the geography of south and south-west England.

## Wessex in History:

The Anglo- Saxons formed seven kingdoms known as the *Heptarchy* (Greek word meaning ‘rule of seven’). The seven kingdoms were Kent, East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria, Essex, Sussex and Wessex. These kingdoms fought among each other for supremacy. King Egbert of Wessex, Who established the supremacy of his kingdom and considered to be the first king of England.



Note: A map of England during Egbert's reign.

## Hardy's travel in Wessex:

Topographical Literatures in real it encourages the description of a specific natural scene with historical, political or moral reflections that are associated with the scene or are suggested by its details. i.e. Topographical poetry. In the case of Hardy's topography describes a particular landscape with imaginary stories.

Travelling into Hardy, I wish to argue that place ought to receive special attention. Most of the writers have written their works with deep concerned with their native special attention. Place needs to be understood as something local, regional and real, despite the complexities and

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difficulties involved in the use of such terms. Generally, places themselves could have the sort of centrality in literary studies that has more frequently been given to notions such as author, character, text, historical context and narration etc.

Noel Castree, British geographer argued that for geographers the word ‘place’ has three main senses:

1. Place as location – a specific point on the earth’s surface.
2. A sense of place – the subjective feelings people have about places, including the role of place in their individual and group identity.
3. Place as locale – a setting and scale for people’s daily actions and interactions.

Hardy had been associated with the second and third one of these and who appreciated place as a concept in literary studies therefore he created his own “Wessex”.

Wessex functions as an imagined place based on a real region with actual places which Hardy knew well and observed closely. He created his own place-names which correspond to actual place-names.

## **Invention of Wessex- A Dream Country:**

In 1895 edition of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, he called it ‘a merely realistic dream-country’. Obviously, The invention of “Wessex” was described by Hardy in his preface to *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where he first re- introduced the old word to give territorial definition and unity of sense to his novels, for which ‘area of the single county did not afford a canvas large enough’. In its ultimate form Wessex acquired a uniform seriousness in its arrangement, but in his younger days Hardy was apt to bring a touch or two of jokiness into the way hardy presented to classy readers the endearing peculiarity of his rustic scenes.

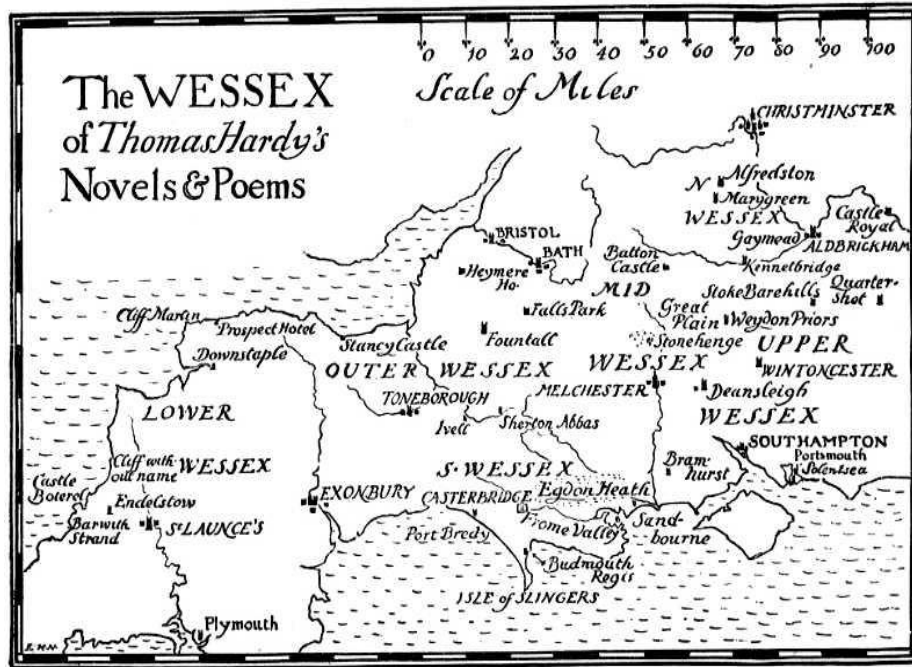
Geographically, Hardy’s Wessex is located on the West Country of England and lying south of the Thames and Bristol Channel. In this south- western peninsula, extending from Southampton down Channel to the Atlantic, the heartland of Hardy’s writing is Dorset and the adjoining areas of Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. It is a landscape of Chalk and limestone down land, of low moors and acid heaths, of alluvial valleys, of the New Forest of the Norman Kings and the old cleared forests on heavy clay soils like the Vale of Black moor where in Hardy’s view ‘superstitions linger longest’. To the visitor’s eye Wessex is in many ways the classic embodiment of so much of England’s history – enshrined here in Stonehenge and Glastonbury, in the long barrows of Cranborne Chase, in Roman Dorchester and Saxon Winchester, in the ports of the Tudor sea- captains and venturers, in the elegance of eighteenth – century Bath, in the wealth of domestic and ecclesiastical architecture that so many Wessex towns and villages can show – from the church towers of Somerset to the splendors of Longleat and Wilton and Stourhead. And to Hardy’s contemporaries it served as a symbol for the feudal



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The significance of Hardy's 'regionalism' can be hardly designed although he is a giant figure to be contained in any valid definition of a purely regional author.

In the 1896 preface to his *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy described the manuscript music books of the old musicians, which had their church music in the front of the book, and then starting from the back page, an assortment of jigs, reels, hornpipes, ballads and songs, some of which exhibited 'that ancient and broad humor which our grandfathers, and possibly grandmothers, took delight in, and is in these days unquotable'. Through this traditional singing-which lingered in some remote villagers into 1930s or later – Hardy had a direct connection with an unbowdlerised England of which Baring Gould and the rest could not derive him. From it he derived that occasional 'course touch' which the tranter so truly observed 'do always prove a story to be true'. It certainly safeguarded him from the Arcadian purity if sentiment with which other rural authors emasculated and deodorized their romantic shepherds and shepherdesses. (Hardy N& P - 209)

## Realism and the real

Hardy's Wessex novels are examples of naturalism and a branch of realism, which influenced by scientific observation. Hardy's reality gave him a space to fit his imagination into real. Even realist writers exaggerate and invent in order to keep their readers reading. Writings can only ever give us an impression of reality.

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Places in Hardy's lit- space:



Dorset = "South Wessex"/ Somerset = "Outer" or "Neither Wessex"/ Devon = "Lower Wessex"  
Wilts = "Mid-Wessex" / Berks = "North Wessex"

## Conclusion

Hardy said,

“.....citizens dream of the south and west,  
And so do I”.

An imaginary Wessex becomes the identity of Hardy and all his real and imaginaries moved with his Wessex narration. The real Wessex is a landscape for travel into History and Geography. The imaginary Wessex is a mindscape for travel into Hardy's History and Cartography. Thus Hardy's Wessex became a place of literary pilgrimage to his readers.

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