The Mellstock Quire
In *Under the Greenwood Tree*

*Under the Greenwood Tree*, the first of the Wessex novels, was published in 1872 by Thomas Hardy. It is a pastoral of English country life in 1830s, "before intrusion of industrialism and modern sentiments." ¹ In other words, it is the time when the life of the community was still quite stable, "still largely untroubled by the intrusions of restlessness, and still able to gain a degree of satisfaction." ² Most of Hardy's fictions are written with the nostalgic eyes to a better or simpler past, and that image of the past is provided for the first time by *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

By the time when Hardy began his writing career, "the English countryside had entered a new phase of civilisation" ³ and social stability and secureness of values and beliefs had already been threatened. With a sense of crisis and self-awareness, Hardy recalled his experiences still vivid in his mind to life in his fictions. His works might be called historical fictions-partly true pictures of a local history and partly dreams which come out of his sociological imaginations. However, Hardy is not a historian but a poet and novelist. According to Noorul Hasan,

Clearly, Hardy was averse to documentation and historical scientism. He had an historical vision, a feel of the place and its people, a tenacious memory of cultural idiosyncrasies. ⁴

Hardy's main interest is not the faithful description of history but the creation of magnificent fictional world, where the old places are restored as they used to be and its people are moving about without any restraint of historical facts. The name of the ancient kingdom of Wessex was chosen as a symbol of his great achievements of novels and poems.

The rural community was rapidly changing in the nineteenth century. Hardy himself underwent the rapid change of social, economical, and cultural standards, and was influenced by modernism. Therefore, he looks back to the past with "contemporary structures of feeling." ⁵ One of his main themes is the disappearance of traditional cultures. Hardy does not merely lament for the lost rural community in England. He "sees history as a drama of warring values," ⁶ as Noorul Hasan says. Hardy’s historical concern is how sociological, economical and cultural changes are brought about and what will happen
when the old generations are replaced by the new generations. In his novels, therefore, there are many moral conflicts between the country and the city, community and the individual, and the native and the alien. Hardy depicts a drama of the traditional bands of string instruments which are replaced by the modern organ as church musicians in *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

As the title of the novel suggests, *Under the Greenwood Tree* comes from a song of the Shakespearean comedy, *As You Like It* [II V]. The Shakespearean allusion is seen everywhere throughout the novel. It is an idyll full of songs and love. The heroine Fancy Day is a schoolmistress and a church organist, and her lover Dick Dewy is a tranter and a violinist in the parish choir. Most of the characters are musicians, who play music and dance to the music in celebration of their festivals and special occasions. The story begins with Christmas carols and ends with the songs and dances of the wedding celebration under the greenwood tree. The last scene of the nightingale’s "come hither" refers to the same song from *As You Like It*. Hardy attempted many correspondences between his novel and Shakespeare’s comedy. The central theme is the courting of Fancy Day by Dick Dewy, but the subtitle of "Or the Mellstock Quire" and "the detailed descriptions of the various members of the Mellstock Quire, the account of Mr. Penny at his work, the long passages of country conversation-these are by no means essential to the 'story'." *Under the Greenwood Tree* is the love story of the heroine, but the story of dissolution of the parish choir is the very subject he described most eagerly as he wrote in the Preface of 1912.

*Under the Greenwood Tree* was first brought out in the summer of 1872 in two volumes. The name of the story was originally intended to be, more appropriately, *The Mellstock Quire*, and this has been appended as a sub-title since the early editions, it having been thought unadvisable to displace for it the title by which the book first became known. (p. 28)

*Under the Greenwood Tree* is a sketch of a rural community based on Hardy's early experiences of Dorset village life. He had lived in the parish of Stinsford until he was sixteen. The parish of Stinsford, Bockhampton and Higher Bockhampton are collected together and named the village of "Mellstock" in the novel. Hardy's intention is to develop the history of community rather than that of personality and emphasise on the sociability and continuity of rural life. Most of the important psychological and emotional events in the novel are not personal but communal. There is a social unity in the Mellstock community. The domestic details of the cottage like Dewy's and Penny's and "the intimate grouping of the figures suggest mutual interdependence and affection." 8
Under the Greenwood Tree significantly opens with the scene of meeting of the church choir at the house of Reuben Dewy before walking around and visiting each house of the parish with Christmas carols on Christmas night. The Dewy family and their household are based on the Hardys and their home at Higher Bockhampton, and the choir’s music-making reflects the Hardy family memories. The Mellstock choir has long been sponsored by the Dewys. There is a very warm and social welcome in the Dewy’s house. The villagers gather together here to eat, drink and dance. It is the centre of the community in a true sense. The three generations of the family-old William, Reuben Dewy, and young Dick-have contributed greatly to the parish choir as violinists. "Old William Dewy, with the violincello, played the bass; his grandson Dick the treble violin; and Reuben and Michael Mail the tenor and second violins respectively." (p. 47) The other members of the choir-Robert Penny, Elias Spinks, Thomas Leaf, and the singers- are all village dwellers who have lived in the parish for many generations and have supported the church not so much as devoted Christians but as church musicians.

Christianity is a "musical religion" (p. 49) for the members of the choir. Although they are all Christians and the eldest member William Dewy "had a firm religious faith," (p. 41) they seem to be indifferent to the true meaning of Christmas and its message. Their real aim is "clearly social and aesthetic rather than devotional." With the feeling of a duty to keep long-established traditional pattern of Christmas season, they simply repeat every year without thinking about the true religious meaning.

Then passed forth into the quiet night an ancient and time-worn hymn, embodying a quaint Christianity in words orally transmitted from father to son through several generations down to the present characters, who sang them out right earnestly. (p. 50)

Christianity has already lost its spiritual aspects which sustain people’s minds and their ways of living here in the rural community. The religious festivals are only a part of the traditional activities of the villagers, especially of the church choir. Christianity is no longer taken seriously by the people of the community. The villagers' estimation of the former vicar Mr. Grinham is not based on their religious faith at all. He is very much praised as "a very honourable man" who was "not putting a parish to unnecessary trouble." (p. 86) The people never want to be involved in the unnecessary religious services or to be disturbed by the faithful parson who forces them to keep the strict rules of Christianity. Mr. Grinham was familiar with the parishioners and their social mores and paid homage to them.

Even if the people of Mellstock find no religious significance in the carols at midnight on Christmas
Eve, the tradition of singing the Christmas carols from door to door is "an expression of the communal spirit of the parish and of a sense of shared emotional and aesthetic experience." 10 The music tradition, a part of village cultures, has been handed down from generation to generation until then. Nevertheless, fashionable barrel-organs are taking place of the old-fashioned string players in the other parishes. The Mellstock-Quire, the last one left in the county, is also facing the danger of existence. The parish people do not show much interest in the choir now. Their string music is not welcomed with as much enthusiasm as in those days. The members of the choir are deeply impressed by the change of the time - 'Time have changed from the times they used to be'. (p. 48)

Three of the major characters in the novel, Fancy Day, the churchwarden Mr. Shiner, and the new vicar Mr. Maybold receive the choir's midnight carolling call in different attitudes. Fancy Day welcomes the choir in a friendly manner in the end, though she does not appear in the window of her school right away. Her sensitivity to music prevents her from being the enemy of the church musicians later in the novel. On the contrary, Mr. Shiner shows a hatred for the choir's carols by shouting and flinging his arms and body. Such terrible reaction of Shiner's discourages the members of the choir, but they dare to continue singing ignoring his hostility. Because harmony is the most important concept for the country people in their daily lives and of course in their musical performances. They cannot forgive the person of the community who disturbs their harmonious music which is one of their social activities. Mr. Shiner is a rich farmer and a snobbish man who shows a gold watch-chain off at the Christmas dance party. Although he is a member of the village community and a churchwarden, he detaches himself from the other members of the parish who belong to the lower class. Consequently, he does not respect the social environment. His coarseness is revealed when he sings the ballad of King Arthur to attract Fancy's attention during honey-taking. The ballad is a coarsely humorous one and Dick criticises it as "a terrible crippled rhyme"(p. 151) These are the reasons of Mr. Shiner's reaction against the village tradition. Parson Maybold was expected to open the window and welcome the choir's carols by reason of his profession, but his slow reaction does not satisfy the members of the choir. A "musical voice. . . heard exclaiming from inner depths of bedclothes"(p. 57) indicates "the ambivalence of his position with regard to the people of Mellstock and his inability to understand the subtleties of their social mores". 11 Thus their understandings of social environment are measured by their attitudes toward the carol-singing tradition. Responsiveness to music is "a criterion of moral evaluation"12 in the novel.

Old William, the chief pillar of the choir, is the most devoted musician. He is highly estimated by Hardy and described as one of the dignified characters. "Directly music was the theme of William ever and instinctively came to the front."(p. 48) He is a legendary figure at times in Hardy's novels. His
musical legend is narrated in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* long after his death as one of the reminiscences of good old days, when the rural community was stable and secure. Dairyman Click tells his dairymaids and men a curious story about William Dewy and a bull, while they are working at Talbothays, which is located not far from Mellstock. On the way back from a wedding party old William had a lucky escape from a bull running after him by playing the fiddle. His sudden idea to play the tunes of Christmas songs rescued him from the attack of the bull. It was a great surprise for himself to see the bull listening to his Christmas carols and kneeling down in prayer. The dairyman, who believes in the old superstitions and legends in these areas, misses the lost good, old days. Just like Hardy, Click is looking back from a more unstable time, when the values and beliefs are being challenged and Christian beliefs are dying, and remembering the time when the village community was stable and secure and its people still believed in Christianity.

Old William is a true musician who has devoted his life to the church music for a long time, but the other members of the choir in *Under the Greenwood Tree* are also devoted musicians. Their topics of daily conversation are the church music and the memories of the parish choir of long time ago. They discuss which musical instruments have tunes closer to heaven and conclude their strings to be the best: 'Strings alone would have held their ground against all the newcomers in creation.' (p. 50) It is such pride and confidence which have sustained their hard work of going around on Christmas Eve. Hardy describes these old bandsmen in the Preface as follows:

The zest of these bygone instrumentalists must have been keen and staying, to take them, as it did, on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week through all weathers to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes. they usually received so little in payment for their performances that their efforts were really a labour of love. (p. 27)

The church services have been maintained by these bandsmen's hard work and their love of music. At that time the church was still the centre of the community. It is the place the villagers come together every Sunday and on the special occasions of births, weddings, and deaths. Even though the church has already lost its religious significance, it presents people meaningful time and space for their lives. Therefore, the replacement of the church choir by an isolated organist results in the extinction of "the interest of parishioners in church doings."(p. 27)

The Mellstock-Quire and its music have played such an important part in church services for many generations that they naturally cannot simply agree to give their seats to the modern organ. On
Christmas morning, however, the musicians of the choir are unexpectedly driven into the crisis of continuance. A new atmosphere is brought into the church with Fancy, who has returned to her native village as a schoolmistress. The Sunday-school girls, under her instruction, sing boldly above the gallery leaders. Even if it is unintentional, this interference with the choir’s music in public, which has never happened before, completely humiliates and irritates the church musicians. One of them makes a bitter comment, "Really, I think we useless ones had better march out of church, fiddles and all!" (p. 62) Fancy’s new force from the outer world threatens the long-accepted status of the church musicians.

Reuben Dewy and the more perceptive members realise the inevitability of change in church music and gather together at Mr. Penny’s workshop. They have many complaints about Mr. Maybold’s modern approach to Christian dogmas and innovations of old social and cultural traditions: "And there’s this here man never letting us have a bit o’ peace; but keeping on about being good and upright till ’tis carried to such a pitch as I never see the like afore nor since!" (p. 86) In fact, however, they clearly perceive by Mellstock musical status quo that they will have to accept the change in church music. Old William and the other choir members ask an interview with a new vicar Mr. Maybold to discuss when they should be replaced by the organ. The episode of the meeting between the musicians and Mr. Maybold, the climax of a drama of opposing values, is described with Hardy’s profound sympathy for a choir. The villagers’ strength to convey their feelings and passions for the church music clearly contrasts with the vicar’s embarrassing attitude and the hesitant voice. When he is talking about his father’s love for music, Reuben Dewy gradually walks up to Mr. Maybold, and Mr. Maybold is retreating step by step, quite overwhelmed by Reuben’s eagerness.

'True, true, Dewy,' Mr. Maybold answered, trying to withdraw his head and shoulders without moving his feet; but finding this impracticable edging back another inch. These frequent retreats had at last jammed Mr. Maybold between his easychair and the edge of the table. (p. 98)

Although Mr. Maybold’s modern approach has the advantage of his opponents’ old-fashioned one, the villagers’ decision to step down from the gallery of Mellstock Church is dignified and honoured by Hardy. Reuben accepts Maybold’s proposal with dignity: "Well, then, Mr. Mayble, since death’s to be, we’ll die like men any day you name(excusing my common way)." (p. 96)

There is another short story about the dissolution of a parish choir in Life’s Little Ironies, which is a collection of short stories published in a volume in 1894. One of the short stories in it is titled "A Few Crusted Characters," which also consists of some interesting short stories about the local people in
Wessex. "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir" is among the stories of "A Few Crusted Characters."

It is a story of the Longpuddle church choir "almost as good as the Mellstock parish players that were led by the Dewys." 13 The Longpuddle choir is so popular among the villagers that they spend the busiest time during Christmas week playing carols and little reels in many places in the parish, and they cannot sleep at all. On the Sunday after Christmas, on their fatal day, it was so cold that they could not sit in the gallery. They drank plenty of hot brandy and beer to keep them warm and comfortable and slept soundly until the parson's sermon was over. The leader of the members, startled by the voice of a boy "Begin! Begin!," started the jig dance music "The Devil among the Tailors" because his head was so muddled that he thought he was at the party the night before. When he heard the evil tune, the parson thought that the choir had gone crazy and shouted "Stop, stop, stop!" The people came out of their pews, saying that they should be consumed like Sodom and Gomorrah. The parson might have forgiven the unfortunate church band when he learned the truth, but the Squire would never forgive them and sent for a barrel-organ. The old players of the Longpuddle church choir in this way played no more.

The story of "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir" is narrated by the master-thatcher rather comically, but nevertheless the narrator deeply misses the old band of twenty years ago and its good music. Before he began to tell the story, the "master-thatcher attentively regarded past times as if they lay about a mile off." 14 Therefore, he is indignant at the old musicians' fatal error which has caused the loss of a good old tradition, as his comment on the dissolution of the old band indicates:

Well, partly because of fashion, partly because the old musicians got into a sort of scrape. . . . I shall never forget it—never! They lost their characters as officers of the church as complete as if they'd never had any character at all. 15

Although the old musicians themselves in the short story are mostly accused of being replaced by a barrel-organ, they are also the victims of the modern fashion.

In Under the Greenwood Tree, unlike "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir," there are no faults in the Mellstock-Quire. The members of the choir are inevitably driven into the retirement from the gallery of the church as they are out of fashion. It is a rule of human history that the new generations replace the old generations. Whenever there is a change, however, we lose something very important and essential to our lives. The dissolution of the old choir is the beginning of a loss of the old relationship between the Church and the parish people. The parish community so far has been unified by the social and cultural traditions associated with the Church, not by spiritual religion. It is the parish choir that has
preserved and maintained long-established traditions of their community. The parish people are not interested in church activities any longer, as their togetherness is lost at the same time when the choir disappears.

On the day of the Harvest Thanksgiving, when Fancy makes her debut as a church organist, the members of the old choir are emotionally and physically alienated from the church service.

Having nothing to do with conducting service for almost the first time in their lives they felt awkward, out of place, abashed, and inconvenienced by their hands. (p. 167)

They are convinced that the simpler music they have played so far is more fitted to the simplicity of their old church than "the crowded chords and interludes"(p. 167) of the modern organ. But their reaction to the new music is misinterpreted by Mr. Maybold, who is lacking in an ability to understand the old choir members’ feeling of alienation. Without knowing how they feel and what they think in front of the new music, Mr. Maybold innocently rejoices at their dignified attitudes, which has given him the impression that they "joined in the singing with the greatest good-will."(p. 174) He is very insensitive to the local people and to their ancient traditions.

Fancy Day takes over the church music from the old choir, but she herself is not such an ambitious girl. Her father, Geoffrey Day, makes a fortune with an ambition to marry his daughter to a gentleman of higher rank, though he is a keeper of Yalbury Wood. He gives her a college education to become a school mistress. She has learned to play the organ, too. Her interest is, however, not organ-playing or teaching at school but hunting her husband who admires her face and appearance. As her name Fancy symbolizes, coquettishness is her characteristic. She is the sexual object of the three men-Dick, Farmer Shiner, and Parson Maybold. Mr. Shiner, the churchwarden, is very interested in Fancy. His chief motive of the change in church music is not a hatred for the old church choir but his interest in Fancy. Shiner proposes the innovation of the church music so that he can see her playing the organ, taking advantage of his position as a churchwarden. Parson Maybold is a proud young man, the only representative of the gentry, who thinks himself much superior to the rustic villagers. Therefore, he does not esteem their social and cultural traditions of the community. Ignorant of the social environment, he tries to enforce theological doctrine and devotion on the parish people as a faithful vicar. It is the new vicar who has brought an organ into the church. And he as well as Shiner would like to see Fancy playing the organ.

The social change of the church music is thus promoted by Shiner and Maybold's sexual interest in a beautiful young girl. The old members of the Mellstock-Quire are swept away by the barrel organ, the
symbol of an invasion, that the new vicar, the churchwarden, and the new school-teacher introduce to the church.

Fancy's homecoming after a training of school teaching brings about a series of conflicts, which are harmoniously settled down, and the story is completed by her happy wedding under the greenwood tree. She chooses the son of a tranter Dick Dewy as her husband. She is superior to Dick in education and social standing, but is she superior in moral standards? Fancy once betrays Dick’s trust in her. She receives Maybold's proposal of marriage for one day even after her engagement with Dick, because she is dazzled by Maybold's offer of a luxurious future married life:

'Your musical powers shall be still further developed; you shall have whatever pianoforte you like; you shall have anything, Fancy, anything to make you happy-pony-carriage, flowers, birds, pleasant society; yes, you have enough in you for any society, after a few months of travel with me! Will you, Fancy, marry me? (p. 171)

Her double engagements of marriage with Dick and Maybold for one day are kept secret between Fancy and Maybold from Dick, who believes her to be faithful to him. When he knows the fact that Fancy has already engaged herself to Dick, Maybold forgives Fancy's capriciousness to have received his proposal from ambition and vanity.

Fancy becomes a member of the Mellstock community by the marriage with Dick, but still is it possible for such a sophisticated modern girl of intelligence to succeed to the tradition of a rural life as a tranter's wife? It is still a question after the story ends. Hardy comments on her beautiful eyes—"too refined and beautiful for a tranter's wife; but, perhaps, not too good."(p. 184) Fancy prohibits her father and the Tranter Dewy from saying "thee" and "thou" and "drawing the back of hand across the mouth after drinking, because such habit is "decidedly dying out among the better classes of society."(p. 188) She is an "unconscious harbinger of standards and institutions different from any the village has known." 16

In Under the Greenwood Tree Hardy looks back to the social background of early nineteenth century in the countryside of England. He is anxious to write down the village and its people of many years ago mainly because the village and its people disappeared for ever from the world. The old Mellstock-Quire in the novel is closely connected with his special family reminiscences which are handed down through generations. Though musical traditions in the village died out with the dissolution of the parish choir, the story of the choir and their music remain eternally in the novels of Thomas Hardy.
Fancy's moral betrayal, which will be kept secret, symbolizes disorder in the idyllic village community, but it is kept beneath the surface. It is true that she is an agent of disruption of the ancient traditions, but the marriage ceremony of Fancy and Dick is celebrated under the greenwood tree in a traditional way. Fancy walks round the parish after wedding just because her mother did so. She enjoys greatly traditional country dances, "a vivid symbol of the vital interactive dynamic and ordered society which developed it." 17  Fancy returns home, finds love and forgiveness and accomplishes regeneration in Mellstock.

The final scene of the novels begins with the description of the greenwood tree:

The point in Yalbury Wood which abutted on the end of Geoffrey Day's premises was closed with an ancient tree, horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height. Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree; tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year; quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks; and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots. (p. 188)

The ancient tree is a symbol of the continuity and the fluitfulness of social life. "It is around this tree that Hardy gathers his little community in a final image of personal and social stability." 18 The wedding of Fancy and Dick is celebrated by the village people harmoniously under the greenwood tree. Their marriage is a symbol of harmony and regeneration. A drama of the dissolution of the old Mellstock Quire is thus completed.

Notes
The textbook of this study is as follows:


2. Ibid., p. 47
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Ibid., p. 7.


10. Ibid., p. 134.

11. Ibid., p. 134.


15. Ibid., p. 545.

