

# Literary Fertiliser for Rural History: The Representation of the Farming Sector in Western Literature

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## 1. Introduction.

Fictional literature is a field of potential interest to economic historians in analysing the past of the farming sector. Of course, there are several works related to the literature on agriculture, but such studies often meet sociological, ecological, symbolic or gender spheres; while rarely emphasize the purely economic field. The approach in this work brings together literary fiction with agricultural economic history. Therefore here are discussed literary works which can be of use to historians in order to complement our knowledge about the economic past of agriculture and, at the same time, to help us feel in a virtual way different experiences of people devoted to farming.

To this end we analyse the following aspects: the initial stance of novelists such as Jonathan Swift in relation to the first steps of the English agricultural modernization in the eighteenth century; the attitude of English Romantic poets such as Goldsmith and Wordsworth on the same subject; the stance of English social and industrial novel – Gaskell, Disraeli, Kingsley– on the social and working conditions of farming workers; the modernization of British agriculture during the last third of the nineteenth century discussed in the novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy; the difficulties of a traditional farming sector as the French, according to the point of view of Émile Zola's naturalistic fiction; the industrialization of American farming and its growing speculative nature described in Frank Norris's novels; and the crisis of American agriculture in the 1930s through the prism of novelist John Steinbeck.

## 2. The beginnings of agricultural modernization in English literature.

What was the answer given by the literature to the important changes in farming started in England during the eighteenth century and later spread to other places?

One of the first writers to refer to innovative farming techniques is Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In particular, the Irish writer takes up a stance strongly against agricultural modernization. Swift made use of an imaginary territory called *Balnibardi* to ridicule by means of a bitter satire various innovative farming methods, which eccentricity he confronts with the supposed rationality and wisdom of traditional systems. Thus, Swift shows a somewhat conservative attitude hostile to any kind of technology innovation in farming sector<sup>1</sup>.

The eighteenth-century British literature also offers several hints in relation to modern agriculture, which show how the issue affected the public widely. For example, Lawrence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1760) makes a brief and nice mention about experimentation and research into appropriate cultivation techniques<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, in

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<sup>1</sup> J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726. His sour criticism at the methods of modern agriculture is explicit in part III, chapters IV and V.

<sup>2</sup> L. Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1760, vol. VIII, chapter I.

Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) we also find a brief reference to the advisability of supplementing by practical experimentation the knowledge gained through the reading of works on agriculture<sup>3</sup>.

Without using criticism or irony, but making use of poetic sensibility and aesthetic, some of the so-called English Romantic poets –Goldsmith, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, Langhorne, Crabbe, Cowper, Clare, Cobbett and others– generally offer a negative image of the complex process of agricultural modernization which they had directly witnessed. During their childhood in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they still had known the overwhelming predominance of traditional agriculture. And now they compared that ancestral way of life with the new labour relations generated by the new agriculture. And for them, as a whole, the traditional system had obvious advantages. They did not pay attention to issues such as increases in productivity and efficiency gains that farming modernization entailed. They mainly stressed on the breakdown of traditional values, whose old labour relations had been characterized by paternalism and resistance to change, and where the peasant, though often bore appalling standards of living, enjoyed somewhat security and protection.

Well, the Romantic poets often observed the traditional rural world in process of extinction from an idealized and pastoral view. In an elegiac way they consider it the *good old days*, like a happy past that unfortunately has been lost. And they confront this old world with a modern rural environment, where many tenant farmers and smallholders have been displaced from farms and homes in order to foster the enclosures where it is more feasible to operate the modern agriculture techniques.

Consistent with this, the Romantic poets in general do not look favourably on the modern landowner, always in search of higher returns on their crops. But they regards more favourably to traditional patriarchal landlord, who had been content perpetuating a situation of inequality and backwardness, and achieving economic profit without any innovation.

Romantic poets viewed as a whole, therefore, *compute in their assets* the sensitivity and sincere commitment when highlighting the difficulties borne by the farmer without resources and displaced by modern farming. Instead, they sometimes *have in their debit side* the fact of regarding the previous system, the so-called *happy old days*, as a canvas on which to find a bucolic way of life or a supposed happy Arcadia.

Even Alexander Pope, before the Romantics, criticized the new methods of work and farming labour relations. He understood that these systems were at odds with the natural harmony maintained by traditional landlords. Pope praises ancestral patriarchal spirit and denigrates the exclusive pursuit of high profits in managing the farming<sup>4</sup>.

A poem particularly representative of the romantic stance critical to the social consequences of farming modernization is *The Deserted Village* (1770) by Oliver Goldsmith. The poem refers the benefits of an idyllic rural and traditional world, while condemning the “tyrant” who through the abuse extends the boundaries of his farm at the expense of surrounding neighbours, prompting the closure of the fields and even the communal lands, and forcing people to migrate to the city or the colonies<sup>5</sup>. Also

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<sup>3</sup> H. Fielding, *Tom Jones*, 1749, vol. VIII, chapter I.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard W. A. Speck: “Eighteenth-Century Attitudes Towards Business”, in A. Pollard (ed.), *The Representation of Business in English Literature*. London: IEA, 2000, pp. 25-30.

<sup>5</sup> W. A. Speck, *ibid*. See also: R. Williams, *The Country and the City*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1993, chapter 8. R. Williams examines how these poets insist on *the melancholy of eighteenth century poems of country life* (p. 96); *the complaints of the loss of commons* (p. 102) and *feelings of loss and melancholy and regret* (p. 127).

William Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is opposed to the incipient industrialization and clearly in favour of traditional rural society<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. The English social novel and the rural sphere.

Apart from the sensitivity of romantic poetry, other literary genre that also pays attention to the issue of agricultural innovation is the so-called English social or industrial novel in the 1840s. That is the time when fictional literature finally notices the social consequences of industrialization; but, at the same time, also addresses the effects that farming modernization was to bring about on rural society. Among the writers of this genre are Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley. Once again, they do not seem particularly interested in reflecting in their works issues such as increased profitability achieved through innovation in modes of agricultural work; but they especially choose to reflect the difficult living conditions of the poor peasant.

This literature is not devoid of interest to economic historians for several reasons; mainly because it exposes and denounces the deplorable conditions of social, economic and cultural inequality in the English countryside; and also because it does not tend to show a deceptively bucolic country landscape, but a more prosaic and closer to reality rural sphere. And, in short, although some of these novels are little read today, they contribute, however, to call attention to the reality of the situation in the countryside. From them the image of the rural world will never be the same. They will help to remove the idea of an idyllic agricultural background to make way for the notion of a harsh social environment.

E. Gaskell in *Mary Barton* (1848) refers to the image so cheerful that the surrounding countryside offered to industrial workers in Manchester in their leisure time<sup>7</sup>. But beyond the aesthetic appeal that so often the field has on the inhabitants of the city, the picture did not appear so idyllic when one was fully inserted in the rural environment and bore the prevailing living and working conditions. It speaks Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil* (1845) while exposing nothing bucolic rural circumstances. Based on *The Assistant Poor Law Commissioners's Reports on the Employment of Women and*

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<sup>6</sup> In this regard, G. Carnall, *Early Nineteenth Century: Birmingham - 'Something Direful in the Sound'*, in A. Pollard (ed.), *The Representation of Business in English Literature*, asserts: *Wordsworth famously deplored in the preface to Lyrical Ballads the effects of 'the increasing accumulation of men in cities', and saw society's salvation in the rediscovery of the virtues of humble and rustic life* (p. 36). Or, similarly: *Wordsworth looks to rustic life to heal the disorders of an over-urbanised society* (p. 38). However, M. Williams reminds us how not the whole romantic literature necessarily is nostalgic in the pastoral sense of praising an idyllic past. She states that this type of poetry sometimes also carries a realist tradition. In this regard M. Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974, pp. 191-192. The idea of rural Arcadia as opposed to a mining and industrial world that is rapidly emerging is described by the Spanish novelist A. Palacio Valdés, as late as in 1903 in *La Aldea Perdida*. Madrid: Espasa Calpé, 2007. While in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915). London: Oxford, 1998, chapter I, pp. 10-11, the transition from agriculture to mining is assumed more naturally and without evident trauma: *At first the Brangwens were astonished by all this commotion around them. The building of a canal across their land made them strangers in their own place, this raw bank of earth shutting them off disconcerted them. As they worked in the fields, from beyond the now familiar embankment came the rhythmic run of the winding engines, startling at first, but afterwards a narcotic to the brain.*

<sup>7</sup> *[D]elicious sounds of rural life: the lowing of cattle, the milk-maid's call, the clatter and cackle of poultry in the old farm-yards. (...) these fields are popular places of resort at every holiday time.* E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848). London: Vintage Books, 2008, chapter I, pp. 5-6.

*Children in Agriculture, 1843*, in Disraeli's depiction predominates filth, decay, moisture, clutter and even lack of space<sup>8</sup>.

A similar idea, which strongly reflects the contrast between a nice landscape and deplorable human conditions, is also found in *Yeast* (1849) by Kingsley<sup>9</sup>. In this novel the author called attention to the harsh living conditions of much of the rural population. The chapter XIII, entitled precisely *The Village Revel*, explores into the circumstances of the rural worker, characterized by such things as low wages; alcoholism; minimum level of education: *a boy leaves school at nine or ten to follow the horses*; long working day; monotony; lack of aspirations; risk of being driven to the *workhouse* if jobs are scarce; lack of hygienic conditions and shortage of foresight or saving. Kingsley even mentions race degradation as a result of such hardship. In short, we are informed here about *the condition-of-the-poor* in its aspect of hardship and deprivation in rural areas.

A comparison between the conditions of rural and urban life is found in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-5). The author chooses the entrepreneur Mr Thornton to praise the benefits of the urban environment. This professional says that while in the countryside there is apparent nonchalance, the city, by contrast, offers greater opportunities. For her part, the heroine, Margaret Hale, defends the virtues of the rural environment. She admits that in the country there is less commercial spirit and more loneliness, but also less suffering and pollution. She holds that life is faster and without rest in the city, that confinement in small dwellings for families is harmful to physical and mental health; while in the country there is living longer outdoors. *North and South* also tells us about the lower cost of living in the countryside, and about the persistence in it of labour relations not so tensed. But the great advantage of the country for a worker appears to be the possibility of having a small garden, as well as the option of finding work although the salaries are very low<sup>10</sup>.

Forced emigration from the country to the city or to the colonies –one topic that particularly concerned the Romantic poets– constitutes another issue frequently treated in the social novel. In *Mary Barton* we read: *spinners' and weaver's cottages are empty, because the families that once filled them are obliged to live in rooms or cellars*<sup>11</sup>.

In *Sybil* we are said that during the last half century landowners seek to destroy the cottages; so that they are exempt from the obligation to keep its inhabitants:

*This town of Marney was a metropolis of agricultural labour, for the proprietors of the neighbourhood having for the last half-century acted on the system of*

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<sup>8</sup> *The situation of the rural town of Marney was one of the most delightful easily to be imagined. The contrast between the interior of the town and its external aspect was as striking as it was full of pain. (...) Marney mainly consisted of a variety of narrow and crowded lanes formed by cottages built of rubble, or unhewn stones without cement, and from age or badness of the material, looking as if they could scarcely hold together. (...). Before the doors of these dwellings, and often surrounding them, ran open drains full of animal and vegetable refuse, decomposing into disease, or sometimes in their imperfect course filling foul pits or spreading into stagnant pools, while a concentrated solution of every spices of dissolving filth was allowed to soak through, and thoroughly impregnate, the walls and ground adjoining.* B. Disraeli, *Sybil* (1845). London: Oxford, 2008, book, II, chapter III, pp. 51-52.

<sup>9</sup> *Of all the species of lovely scenery which England holds, none, perhaps, is more exquisite than the banks of the chalk-rivers (...). But, alas for the sad reality! The cool breath of those glittering water-meadows too often float laden with poisonous miasma. Those picturesque villages are generally the perennial hotbeds of fever and ague, of squalid penury, sottish profligacy, dull discontent too stale for words. There is luxury in the park, wealth in the huge farm-steadings, knowledge in the parsonage: but the poor? Those by whose dull labor all that luxury and wealth, ay, even that knowledge, is made possible – what are they?* C. Kingsley, *Yeast*, (1849), chapter III.

<sup>10</sup> E. Gaskell, *North and South* (1854-1855). London: Penguin, 1994, chapter X, pp. 93-94 and chapter XXXVII, pp. 358-359 and pp. 363-365.

<sup>11</sup> E. Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, chapter III, p. 29.

*destroying the cottages on their estates, in order to become exempted from the maintenance of the population, the expelled people had flocked to Marney*<sup>12</sup>.

The same situation is observed in chapter XIII of *Yeast*. Given the frequency of cottages destroyed by the owners, we read:

*[T]he landlords go on pulling down cottages at their present rate; driving the people into the towns, to herd together like hogs, and walk out to their work four or five miles every morning.*

Another of the topics most commonly addressed by the social novel in its rural aspect relates to the aforementioned *happy old days* –a topic that also interested to Romantic poets. In this regard, Disraeli's stance is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand he offers a discourse of modernity when ironically using concepts such as *the bold British peasant* –a concept used by Goldsmith in praise of the traditional English farmer in *The Deserted Village*– or the concept of *merry England*, a hackneyed term, used by Carlyle and others, during the debate on the Condition of England in the 1830s and 1840s. Disraeli thus is highly critical of these ideas of assumed idyllic rural past. His attack on these concepts is devastating, seemingly leaving no room for the idea of a happy Arcadia or happy old days prior to the enclosures and the industrialization<sup>13</sup>.

Disraeli's modern discourse, however, greatly disappoints when to the economic and social problems afflicting the countryside, he contrasts an idyllic and unrealistic vision of monastic farming some centuries ago, when these religious and economic centres controlled rural economy to a large degree<sup>14</sup>.

In Kingsley's *Yeast* we also find the concept of old rural days. An old farmer refers to it in nostalgic terms. We read: *discoursing of the glorious times before the great war, "when there was more food than there were mouths, and more work than there were hands.* But Kingsley seems to leave no room for nostalgia and elegy, and critically conveys a message of modernity through the young Lancelot, hero of the novel: *Poor human nature! Always looking back, as the German sage says, to some fancied golden age, never looking forward to the real one which is coming!*<sup>15</sup>

A practical and realistic approach is one that brings in *Sybil* a pragmatist fellow, a man named Chaffing Jack, owner of the *Cat and Fiddle* inn, for whom the question is not to think about the virtues of the old or of the recent times: what really matters is business. So good old Jack says:

*I have breathed this air for a matter of half a century. I sucked it in when it tasted of primroses, and this tavern was a cottage covered with honeysuckle in the middle of green fields. (...); and I have inhaled what they call the noxious atmosphere, when a hundred chimneys have been smoking like one; and always found myself pretty well. Nothing like business to give one an appetite*<sup>16</sup>.

Meanwhile, what is the position of the great landowners according to the social novel?

Disraeli, for instance, also devotes his attention to expose the standpoint of the rural owner. Thus, in *Sybil*, Lord Marney says that the major problems that usually has to confront a landowner include lack of funding; rising costs of upgrading and drainage;

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<sup>12</sup> B. Disraeli, *Sybil*, book II, chapter III, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> B. Disraeli, *ibid*, book II, chapter III, p. 53. In this regard: Sheila M .Smith, "Notes" in B. Disraeli, *Sybil*. London: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 433-434.

<sup>14</sup> B. Disraeli, *ibid*, book II, chapter V, pp. 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> C. Kingsley, *Yeast*, chapter XIII.

<sup>16</sup> B. Disraeli, *Sybil*, book VI, chapter III, pp. 351-352.

decreasing income paid by tenants; or risk that the Corn Laws are repealed or its effectiveness being reduced<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, the debate between protectionism and free trade and, ultimately, the thorny question of the Corn Laws is another issue closely linked to the English social novel of the 1840s. Disraeli deals with the topic in detail and with irony in an interesting passage from book VI, chapter I of *Sybil*, when places several delegates in Downing Street trying to be received by the prime minister to expose the matter. In fact, references to the Corn Laws are frequent throughout the novel; thereby reflecting what was a highly topical question<sup>18</sup>.

#### 4. The Victorian novel and agriculture.

The prototype of the Victorian writer, Charles Dickens, did not feel himself very attracted by country's reality as a literary theme. He was basically an urban writer who greatly contributes to create the London literary imagination; but, unfortunately, not that of the English countryside. Other Victorian writers themselves have paid more attention to the situation of agriculture in their fiction. Anthony Trollope, for example, devotes several novels to the rural sphere. In fact, like Thomas Hardy, he outlines a rural geography half imagined, half real, based on western England around Salisbury, which he called Bassetshire, and in which he put the fiction of various novels.

George Eliot also draws attention to agricultural issues, for example in her rural novels *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*<sup>19</sup>. And although it is not essentially a rural novel, in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) we find Eliot highly interested in agricultural issues. She is here clearly conducive to innovation applicable to rural sphere. In fact, she selects some of the most gentle and intelligent characters of this novel as the biggest supporters of this trend. For instance, Dorothea Brooke, the protagonist, says:

*Surely (...) it is better to spend money in finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all, than in keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it. It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all.*<sup>20</sup>

Another character, Caleb Garth, a professional agronomist, also appears in *Middlemarch* as a fervent supporter of modern farming innovation. By contrast, less intelligent characters, as Mr Brooke, Dorothea's father, do not think favourably about the changes and experimentation in agriculture, considering even a waste of money and time. Thus, when Sir James Chettam –a major landowner who reads agronomy textbooks– intends to improve management and working methods on his farms, Mr Brook replies:

*A great mistake, Chettam (...), going into electrifying your land and that kind of thing, and making a parlour of your cow-house. It won't do. (...) your fancy-farming will not do*<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> B. Disraeli, *ibid*, book III, chapter II, pp. 152-153.

<sup>18</sup> For example book VI, chapter III, p. 352; chapter IV, p. 361; and chapter VIII, p. 383.

<sup>19</sup> M. Williams says: *George Eliot was the first great novelist to write about the problems of country life seriously*. M. Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, p. 196.

<sup>20</sup> G. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (1871-2). London: Penguin, 2003, book I, chapter II, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> G. Eliot, *ibid*, book I, chap. II, p. 86. Another example of Eliot's open stance towards the new concepts of agricultural labour and management in this novel is found in her mention of the existence of outdated practices and the persistence of ignorance in the countryside on book, IV, chapter XXXIX, pp. 397-8.

## 5. Thomas Hardy and rural economic history.

Thomas Hardy is the great English writer renowned for literary criticism who gives special interest to rural topics. He also sets, as A. Trollope did, an imaginary rural geography, where he places the plot of his works. This half real, half fictitious region is called Wessex by Hardy –making use of the name of the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Actually the Hardy's Wessex corresponds with Dorset and surrounding regions. In fact, Casterbridge is the pen name that the English author uses for Dorchester.

Hardy's interest for economic historians lies in the multifarious aspects related to the farming sector that he attends in some depth. When he was writing the beginnings of the English countryside's modernization process was something already left far behind, after more than a century of existence from the first steps. Yet the English countryside continued to be affected by a process of substantial change, and this situation is what economic historians can see reflected in Hardy's novels<sup>22</sup>. Among these Hardy's narrations are: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).

*Far from the Madding Crowd* is a very fruitful novel when providing relevant information for the economic historian on rural issues. The novel devotes special attention to the sheep that we observe above all through the activity on *Weatherbury Upper Farm*, Bathsheba's farm, the female protagonist of the novel. So we come to know many aspects of the sector, such as: the professional hierarchy (shepherd, bailiff, farmer, etc.); several activities such as grazing or breeding; or the method of washing the sheep, herd diseases, the system of grinding the shears, or the shearing process, where we witness a lively scene depicting a feverish activity similar in some sense to an assembly line, while this is a task that requires skill and precision.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* we also have the opportunity to attend some professional farming fairs as well as the intricacies of the infrastructure for the movement of flocks to them. We attend also the hiring fair in Casterbridge, where, among other activities labour for farm work is hired. And we know also the activity in the building of the corn market in Casterbridge, *dignified by the name of Corn Exchange*<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> R. Williams reminds us the importance given to work in Hardy's novels: *Work enters his novels more decisively than in any English novelist of comparable importance*. R. Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984, p. 116. Precisely, because of Hardy's purpose of giving relevance to professional activity we enjoy plentiful material for economic history. For her part, M. Williams asserts: *My central argument is that Hardy is the first writer to achieve the necessary range and realism of the novel of English country life*. M. Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, p. 193. On the other side, M. Williams reminds us that Richard Jefferies, despite not being an author so prestigious as Hardy, also provides a virtual access to English rural world in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> in a realistic and truthful way. M. Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, Introduction, p. xiv. Among Jefferies's rural novels are found: *World's End*, *Greene Ferne Farm*, *The Dewy Morn*, and *Amaryllis at the Fair*.

<sup>23</sup> T. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). London: Penguin Books, 1994. The topic of rural fairs is common in Hardy. For example we find it again in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in this case referring to the cattle fair at the little village of Weydon-Priors, immersed in a process of depopulation and decline. Hardy in the same novel also refers to the *corn-market room* of Casterbridge, to the existence of a weekly market held on Saturdays and, once again to the celebration of the *chief hiring fair* in Casterbridge. In fact, he explains how this locality, although being relatively important, actually depended on agriculture. The author presents a large list of all types of farm equipment and tools which can be purchased in it.

Obviously the novel contains also a major concern of the farmer: the importance of the weather. And likewise refers the imperative necessity of employing labour-intensive during the harvest period – thereby referring to the seasonal nature of farming work<sup>24</sup>.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* is Hardy's another novel in which there are frequently reflected interesting aspects of the agricultural sector<sup>25</sup>.

In one of the prefaces to the work, referring to the 1830s Hardy himself says that the story runs in *the uncertain harvests which immediately preceded the repeal of the Corn Laws*. He says that those days were not like the current ones –meaning the 1860s– in which there is *the present indifference of the public to harvest weather*.

In this novel, once again, the issue of rural depopulation is reflected in literature<sup>26</sup>. Here we find also the theme of modern farming machinery. Specifically Hardy introduces it through the expectation that an automatic seed drill causes in the weekly market at Casterbridge.

*[A] vehicle of strange description had come to a standstill, as if had been placed there for exhibition.*

*It was the new-fashioned agricultural implement called a horse-drill, till then unknown, in its modern shape, in this part of the country, where the venerable seed-lip was still used for sowing as in the days of the Heptarchy. Its arrival created about as much sensation in the corn-market (...). The farmers crowded round it, women drew near it, children crept under and into it<sup>27</sup>.*

Here we find a predisposition about the modern machinery different from that that we will later observe in *Tess*. While this latter novel conveys a somewhat pejorative sense of the machinery –by means of incessant, repetitive and exhausting working patterns–, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* we find a more kind representation of innovative technology. In fact, although the mature businessman Mr Henchard clumsily tries to deride the new machine, Farfrae, a smart young entrepreneur, better understands the potential virtues of the technological change. Thus he says:

*It will revolutionize sowing heerabout! No more sowers flinging their seed about broadcast, so that some falls by the wayside and some among thorns, and all that. Each grain will go straight to its intended place, and nowhere else whatever! (...) the machines are already very common in the East and North of England<sup>28</sup>.*

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* also introduces us, however briefly, in different economic circumstances of the wheat market. Thus, we see the sector is not stranger to speculation. But above all, in a passage very substantial, Hardy puts us in the mentality of the corn businesspersons before the repeal of the Corn Laws, and before the influx of farming competition from the so-called new countries, caused that local weather ceased to be practically the only relevant aspect to take into consideration as to the status of the wheat market was concerned:

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<sup>24</sup> About the importance of the weather in the daily life of a little town as Casterbridge dependent on agriculture Hardy also speaks with some frequency in other novels as *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Once again, Hardy covers in this novel the essence of seasonal and intensive farming labour at harvest time – in term of labour requirements. The same idea is found in *The Woodlanders*, where we are informed again about the seasonal nature of forestry. Similar need for labour-intensive both in time of harvest and at work in various dairy farms is also reflected in some passages in *Tess*. Evidently, the seasonal nature of work often leads to the consequent dismissal of surplus personnel.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). London: Penguin, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> We also find frequently the topic of rural depopulation in *Tess*.

<sup>27</sup> T. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, chapter XXIV, p. 191.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, chapter XXIV, p. 194.

*The time was in the years immediately before foreign competition had revolutionized the trade in grain; when still, as from the earliest ages, the wheat quotations from month to month depended entirely upon the home harvest. A bad harvest, or the prospect of one, would double the price of corn in a few weeks; and the promise of a good yield would lower it as rapidly.*

*The farmer's income was ruled by the wheat-crop within his own horizon, and the wheat-crop by the weather. Thus, in person, he became a sort of flesh-barometer, with feelers always directed to the sky and wind around him. The local atmosphere was everything to him; the atmospheres of other countries a matter of indifference. The people, too, who were not farmers, the rural multitude, saw in the god of the weather a more important personage than they do now<sup>29</sup>.*

For its part, *The Woodlanders* is set up in the forestry sector, with which features we are familiar in so far the story evolves. The novel runs around the turn of the 1860s to the 1870s, at a place named Hintock<sup>30</sup>.

One of the central topics for economic historians in *The Woodlanders* is the question of the end of the lease period of an estate, which is closely related to forced migration and depopulation of the countryside, a subject in which, as we have seen, is highly interested literary fiction that deals with rural topics. In *The Woodlanders* closely related to this is also the preference of the owners for the non-renewal of leases. Thus we read: *small homestead (...) would fall in and become part of the encompassing estate*<sup>31</sup>. Thus, after the end of the lease, the cottage in which Winterborne lived is destroyed by the owner, Mrs Charmond, *according to the landlords principle (...) of getting ride of cottages wherever possible, wishing not to have tenants who where not profitable*<sup>32</sup>.

Interesting aspects of forestry are scattered throughout the novel. We find, for instance: journeypersons; several professional foresters such as timber-dealers, woodland men, woodcutters, etc.; advertising trees; tree planting techniques; or the peculiarities of a forest auction. We are also introduced in the secrets of the cider-making process. While we have the opportunity to explore aspects of the distribution and transport in the forest sector; while we roam along forest paths and trails which route –like nowadays– is changing due to alterations caused by the own needs of forestry:

*[T]he transformation of outlines had been great; old trees which once were landmarks had been felled or blown down, and the bushes which then had been small and scrubby were now large and overhanging*<sup>33</sup>.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* also offers many interesting passages relating to various farming activities. For example, the references to different aspects of women's

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, chapter XXVI, p. 211.

<sup>30</sup> T. Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887). London: Penguin, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, vol. I, chapter XIII, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, vol. II, chapter X, p. 185. The theme of the growing depopulation of the countryside and the gradual tendency for leasing to be carried out annually –and not in long term at previously– is a topic that also appears in *Tess: A depopulation was also going on. (...) as the long holdings fell (...). These families, who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past, who were the depositaries of the village traditions, had to seek refuge in the large centres; the process, humorously designated by statisticians as 'the tendency of rural population towards the large towns (...). So on this, the first Lady-Day on which the Durbeyfields were expellable, (...) had to go elsewhere.* T. Hardy, *Tess*, phase VI, chapter LI, p. 449-450.

<sup>33</sup> T. Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, vol. II, chapter XVII, pp. 238-239. The importance of the turnpike is also evident throughout the novel.

work abound in the novel –and later I will return to them. But above all economic historians are interested in *Tess* due to a series of lively and lengthy descriptions about the mechanization of agricultural work<sup>34</sup>.

Thus for example the novel offers an invaluable presentation of a striking reaping machine drawn by three horses. We are informed about the tasks of preparation, the characteristics of the activity and operation, etc<sup>35</sup>. Later we observe an impressive description of the threshing machine operating by steam engine. It is the time of threshing in *Flintcomb-Ash Farm*. We meet here with one of the greatest moments in literature that refers to the countryside's industrialization. We observe the way in which the pace of farming workers' activity changes radically, while they become slaves of the machine's movements. It appears clear therefore a somewhat despotic character of the machine and the engineer which set their compasses and execution times of tasks:

*Close under the eaves of the stack, (...), was the red tyrant that the women had come to serve –a timber-framed construction, with straps and wheels appertaining- the threshing machine which, whilst it was going, kept up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves<sup>36</sup>.*

We are said how the threshing machine requires that workers attend incessant and continuous movements without rest, as if they were automatons:

*It was the ceaselessness of the work which tried her so severely, and began to make her wish that she had never come to Flintcomb-Ash. (...); but for Tess there was no respite; for, as the drum never stopped, the man who fed it could not stop, and she, who had to supply the man with untied sheaves, could not stop either, (...)*

*The hum of the thresher, which prevented speech, increased to a raving whenever the supply of corn fell short of the regular quantity. As Tess and the man who fed could never turn their heads<sup>37</sup>.*

We also witness the strange and apathetic character of the engineer in charge of the steam engine in the rural environment:

*The isolation of his manner and colour (...) of this region of yellow grain and pale soil, with which he had nothing in common. (...)*

*What he looked he felt. He was in the agricultural world, but not of it. He served fire and smoke(...). He travelled with his engine from farm to farm, from county to county, for as yet the steam threshing-machine was itinerant in this part of Wessex. He spoke in a strange northern accent; his thoughts being turned inwards upon himself, his eye on his iron cage, hardly perceiving the scenes around him, and caring for them not at all: holding only strictly necessary intercourse with the natives, (...). The long strap which ran from the driving-wheel of his engine to the red thresher under the rick was the sole tie-line between agriculture and him.*

*While they uncovered the sheaves he stood apathetic beside his portable repository of force, round whose hot blackness the morning air quivered. (...). If any of the autochthonous idlers asked him what he called himself, he replied shortly, 'an engineer'<sup>38</sup>.*

Another major issue related to rural activity and analyzed by Hardy in *Tess* is the dairy sector. Here we find extensive information on working of a large dairy farm,

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<sup>34</sup> T. Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). London: Penguin Books, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, phase II, chapter XIV.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, phase VI, chapter XLVII, p. 414.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, phase VI, chapter XLVII, pp. 416-417.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, phase VI, chapter XLVII, p. 415.

*Talbothays Dairy*. It conveys the sense of extensive production in quantity, but less elaborate care of what usually occurs in the home production of a small family farm. Thus we know about Tess's thoughts: *[T]he Valley of the Great Dairies, the valley in which milk and butter grew to rankness, and were produced more profusely, if less delicately, than at her home*<sup>39</sup>. In *Talbothays Dairy* we attend a detailed description of activities such as milking cows, butter and cheese-making, skimming and so on.

Another well-known passage from *Tess*, relevant for economic historians, refers to the transportation and distribution of milk. The passage reflects the industrial character of the sector and its relatively complex organization that effectively serves a highly perishable product to anonymous middle-distance customers. Evidently, here the importance of the railway is essential. Tess tells young Angel Clare when carrying the milk jars to the station:

*'Londoners will drink it at their breakfast tomorrow, Won't they?' she asked.  
'Strange people that we have never seen'*

(...)

*'Who don't know anything of us, and where it comes from; or think how we two drove miles across the moor to-night in the rain that it might reach 'em in time?'*<sup>40</sup>

## **6. The difficulties of French agriculture according to Zola in *The Earth*.**

When analysing the intricacies of one European farming different from the British, one essential novel is *The Earth* (1887), by French naturalist Émile Zola<sup>41</sup>. As was usual with him, the French author was extensively documented about the technical information to be used in his work, lingering in every kind of specific aspects. This circumstance allows a wealth of detail of great interest to economic historians.

The geography of the novel is set in the rural area around Chartres and Orleans. In *The Earth* we meet a farming sector under uncertainty and lack of direction, no clear decanted for modern innovation or for more traditional farming systems. And all this burdened by the overwhelming competition of American agriculture, helped by improvements in railways and in sea transport that allowed its competitive placement in the European markets. This circumstance also introduces us in a passionate and lively debate between protectionism and free trade positions which also pervades the work.

But the issues addressed by Zola in *The Earth* in relation to agriculture are not easily exhausted. In fact, the novel virtually addresses every aspect of farming sector. Thus, for instance, Zola enjoys in depicting agricultural landscape like an impressionist painting. Farmers's traditional heavy dependence on climatic conditions is also reflected in the novel. Issues such as the unpredictable nature of the sector in direct relation to the capricious nature conditions are described in a raw form. Especially adverse are considered ravages of hail on crops. We are told in relation to this: *[W]as it possible to lose the fruit of a whole year's work in the space of a quarter of an hour?*<sup>42</sup>

We have occasion to observe another adverse circumstance: land degradation and its gradual loss of fertility. In this case the origin of the problem is not derived from natural circumstances, but from the practice of traditional –although not sustainable– farming methods.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, phase III, chapter XVI, pp. 132-133.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, fase IV, chapter XXX, p. 240.

<sup>41</sup> É. Zola, *The Earth*, (1887). London: Penguin, 1980.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, part II, chapter II, page 123.

The concept of land ownership is a notion often felt by the owners in line with what is called an attachment to the land. Precisely this is one of the major issues treated in this novel by Zola. This topic is shown in several forms, for example, pettiness and selfishness manifest in the form of excessive attachment to the land; the dispute between heirs for the lots which they are entitled in the estate (in a passage that recalls *King Lear*); or interest in increasing more and more land for several generations, for instance from arranged marriages between landowners. All this, however, can not prevent the progressive emergence of the land divided into plots by inheritance. In *The Earth* we also observe aversion to having to mortgage the own land –being a resource only to be used in extreme cases–.

In this novel we also meet thorough depictions of farming activity and work. So eloquent we feel here the monotony, the sweat and exhaustion of agricultural labour. We are informed in detail about traditional practices, for example, the hard work of planting and manual harvest in the fields of wheat and ploughing in small plots. We meet, in short, vivid descriptions of the traditional agricultural work, in which we observe –despite not being a machining environment– work somewhat monotonous, repetitive and exhausting. In short, lack of mechanization, and the persistence of traditional forms of agriculture are apparent in *The Earth*<sup>43</sup>.

But we observe also more sophisticated farming practice. The rural businessman Monsieur Hourdequin here becomes the driving force behind innovative techniques on his farm *La Borderie*. Zola, in fact, personified in Hourdequin the concept of modernization of the countryside, manifested, for example, by the introduction of diverse farm machinery, or also in the use of accounting techniques:

*[S]o that he was kept continually informed as to the result of his operations, good or bad.*

*'At least,' he said with a guffaw, 'I can know how I'm being ruined'*<sup>44</sup>.

Through the character of Hourdequin Zola analyses the main difficulties faced by any businessperson farmer in France. According to the French writer, such obstacles were: lack of funding; social resistance to change and innovation (for instance expressed by derision from neighbours and *thick-headed, completely conservative small landowners*); the slow implementation of farming machine (*only one machine, the threshing machine, was beginning to be accepted*); or the –already mentioned– poor quality of chemical fertilisers<sup>45</sup>.

In a resounding passage Zola tells us graphically the harmful nature of the inertia and the perpetuation of traditional farming practices; by stating:

*Any peasant would sooner starve than pick up a handful of his soil and take it to be analysed by a chemist who would tell him what it lacked or what it had too much of, what fertilizer it needed, what crop would do well on it. For centuries the peasant had been robbing the soil without ever a thought of putting something back in, except the manure of his two cows and a horse, and sparingly at that; the rest was left to chance, the seed cast in any old field and sprouting at random, and if it didn't sprout it was God who got the blame'*<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> The novel also devotes special attention paid to the issue of manuring and fertilising the fields, either in its traditional side –in this regard *The Earth* brings to mind a famous passage of Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* (1862), part V, book II, chap. I– or in relation to modern systems. We are told, repeatedly, of the need for improved fertilisers, since they are open to many frauds.

<sup>44</sup> É. Zola, *The Earth*, part II, chapter V, p. 159.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, part II, chapter V, p. 154.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

In short, Zola speaks at length at some of the great evils that according to him afflicted the French agriculture: routine, lack of entrepreneurship; lack of innovation, of new methods, of new crops and of new machinery. All this combined to scepticism or even outright opposition to any attempt for improvement<sup>47</sup>.

In the end, Hourdequin's farming failure in implementing his scientific agriculture is evident. Zola here does not reward the innovator. Among the reasons for this failure –in addition to those outlined above– there were other serious problems that affected the French agriculture: the dramatic fall in farming produce prices as well as the crisis of the sector. Precisely, the situation of backwardness and crisis of continental European agriculture in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is perfectly embodied in *The Earth*. For example, we find frequent mentions to the declining price of wool and grain, to the discomfort of the owners, to the falling rents of the leasing system, and to the agricultural crisis in general<sup>48</sup>.

Zola exposes the reasons for the crisis by means of Hourdequin, referring: the depletion of the earth itself, the lack of investment, the lack interest of new generations towards the countryside, the shortage of expertise and skills in the sector, increasing labour cost, growing tax burden, investments aimed mainly at finance and industry and not at the agriculture, the lack of farming credit on reasonable terms, and the scarcity of large farms. Another reason for the crisis also considered by Hourdequin is obviously foreign competition.

In fact, the classic struggle between protectionism and free trade occupies a large space in the novel. There is no doubt that this was a subject of intense debate in France. Zola personifies the protectionist stance in the characters of the farmer Hourdequin and the candidate for deputy Monsieur de Chédeville; while the free trade option is defended by the industrialist and also candidate for deputy Monsieur Rochefontaine<sup>49</sup>.

The novel collects more discussions about the acrimonious debate between protectionism and free trade. Thus, in vivid conversations in which are involved Lequeu –a bitter school teacher– and a farmer committed to the political left –called Canon–, it becomes clearly how to the mechanization and science applied to the vast expanses of American agriculture is crushingly superior to the backwardness, the routine and the modesty of French agriculture<sup>50</sup>.

The novel also includes other aspects regarding farming, as for instance the advantages and disadvantages of both the small and the large property<sup>51</sup>; or the

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<sup>47</sup> On a vivid dialogued passage in *The Earth* (which reminds that of Eliot in *Middlemarch* when some farmers are opposed to the railway), Zola provides an example of opposition to the implementation of modern machinery in the countryside even by the day labourers and by some conservative owners opposed to Hourdequin's new methods. *The Earth*, II part, chapter V, pp. 159-160.

<sup>48</sup> In this regard Douglas Permée in his "Introduction" to *The Earth*. London: Penguin, 1980, p. 17, with relation to the chronology of the novel's plot, warns us that *his chronology is faulty, for the sixties were in fact a time of prosperity, not of hardship, for French farmers*. That is, Zola would put in the plot of his novel, which runs in the 1860s, what is really going to happen in the next decade.

<sup>49</sup> In this context, Hourdequin concludes: *There's no end to it... If the farmer gets a good price for his wheat, the worker starves, if the worker gets enough to eat, the peasant goes hungry*. *The Earth*, part II, chapter V, pp. 152-3. Another substantial conversation, in this case between the protectionist landowner Hourdequin and the free trader industrial businessman Rochefontaine is found in part. IV, chapter V, pp. 359-360.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, part IV, chapter V and part V, chapter IV. In fact this is a passage that shows the characteristics of modern American farming on which further Norris would stress in *The Octopus*.

<sup>51</sup> In this respect: *The Earth*, part II, chapter V. Among the advantages of small properties are mentioned: the fact of linking the farm worker to the land when being owner; the opportunity to promote proud and educated persons; and to achieve higher quality and output in farming produce because the owner devotes higher efforts to the land. The disadvantages of small property and excessive

influence of improving roads in rural areas (in the case of landowners expropriated and compensated, and in the case of neighbours adjacent to the new road whose lands are revaluated). In the novel there are also vividly depicted the activity of a rural market, that of Cloyes<sup>52</sup>; the importance of cattle for the peasant economy<sup>53</sup>; and even certain aspects of rural taxation and updating land registry are explained.

Zola returns to treat some questions of the agricultural sector in *Travail* (1901), his novel about utopian socialism. Although in this case the commitment to rural issues is less than in *The Earth*, in *Travail* again appears topics such as agricultural protectionism, rural lease, land impoverishment due to lack of care, or the perennial dispute over boundaries. Also the concept of attachment to the land exposed by Zola in *The Earth* now reappears in *Travail*. In this case in the form of mistrust and resistance of the peasant against land consolidation, cooperation and work together<sup>54</sup>.

## 7. The industrialization of American agriculture in the narrative of Frank Norris.

In *The Earth* we have met a French agriculture unable to compete with American wheat production. Anyhow the counterpart, that is to say the representation of United States farming may be found in *The Octopus* (1901), a novel by Fran Norris, an American naturalist writer precisely very influenced by Zola<sup>55</sup>.

Norris's initial project was to write a trilogy about wheat, covering from production and cultivation in North America (*The Octopus*), to financing and speculation of the sector in the Chicago stock market (*The Pit*), to its marketing in Europe (*The Wolf*). Unfortunately, the last of these novels would not be written, given the premature death of the writer.

In *The Octopus* is shown at its best the American system of agricultural production on farms of huge size. These are called *bonanzas*, ranches with several thousand acres, run as if they were large industrial companies, and characterized by professional management, strict division of labour and internal hierarchies, adoption of advanced technology and machinery, making use of accounting methods and heavy capital investment, tending to monoculture, etc<sup>56</sup>.

In short, nothing to do in terms of dimensions and modernization with the *little things* and *trifles* in which seem to become the European farms in the novels of Hardy

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fragmentation mentioned are: hard work for the whole family; increased costs and unnecessary waste of time; and difficulty in proceeding with the use of machinery.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, part II, chapter VI.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, part III, chapter V. This is a passage that reminds *Adiós Cordera*, Spanish Alas Clarín's short story.

<sup>54</sup> See: É. Zola, *Travail*, book I, chapter III; book II, chapter I; and book III, chapter IV.

<sup>55</sup> F. Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901). New York: Penguin, 1994. *The Octopus* describes profusely two large ranches activities: *Los Muertos* ranch (ten thousand acres managed by the Derrick family) and the *Quien Sabe* ranch (four thousand acres run by the young Annixter). In addition to Norris, another American realistic novelist immersed in the genre of farming novel of interest for economic history is Hamlin Garland. Among his works are collections of short stories entitled: *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), *Prairie Folks* (1892), and *Other Main-Travelled Roads* (1910). Regarding Garland, S. L. Sarver says: *Using realistic, hard-edged descriptions of the agrarian setting, Garland reveals the failure of the American agrarian dream.* S. L. Sarver, *Uneven Land. Nature & Agriculture in American Writing*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> In this respect, see: W. Conlogue, *Working the Garden. American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001, chapter I. See also: S. L. Sarver, *Uneven Land. Nature & Agriculture in American Writing*, pp. 75-103.

or in Zola's *The Earth*. The contrast is evident, and who read these novels comes quickly to understand the fear felt by the European farmer before the flood of agricultural production from their American cousins, which led European farmers to their respective governments seeking for more and more protection<sup>57</sup>.

Similar to *The Earth*, *The Octopus* is also very rich in aspects related to farming sector. Once again, despite all the progress of American farming, the novel shows the traditional dependence on weather conditions, as well as the seasonality of the sector, the existence of periods of idleness after moments of great activity. Another key theme in the novel is the importance of irrigation –in both senses as an indispensable feature for agriculture in dry regions and as a contributing factor to substantially increase the value of the land–. The novel also shows something that we already saw in *The Earth*: the risk to an owner to mortgage the land. It is an advice that in *The Octopus* the rancher Harran Derrick gives to a friend: *Well, mortgage the crops, but don't mortgage the homestead, Dyke*.<sup>58</sup>

The rural landscape depicted here is characterized by its enormity and monotony: *[T]he eternal monotony of the earth (...) without a single adornment, without a single variation from its melancholy flatness*<sup>59</sup>. Such dimensions overwhelm to Mrs Derrick, accustomed from infancy to more traditional and manageable farming. Norris takes advantage of this situation in a memorable passage to establish a comparison between the traditional farming and industrial bonanzas. In this regard we read: *The direct brutality of ten thousand acres of wheat, nothing but wheat as far as the eye could see, stunned her a little*<sup>60</sup>.

In *The Octopus* there are also reflected other problems that could potentially affect large ranchers, such as: the fall in grain prices for excess of cultivated land; cuts in the profit margin of the ranchers because of the involvement of intermediaries and banks; and above all –as mentioned above– the railroad rates.

But for the economic historian, the novel also stands out for its powerful descriptions of American industrial agriculture. In this sense the book I, chapter II is very graphic. Here Norris displays a farm management as a modern business in *Los Muertos* ranch, run by the Derrick's. Observing its installations and facilities we feel like in the offices of a company rather than on a rural farm. We see accounting books, a safe, a typewriter, a phone and a map depicting the topographic features of the ranch. We are said that: *The office was the nerve-centre of the entire ten thousand acres of Los Muertos, but its appearance and furnishings were not in the least suggestive of a farm*<sup>61</sup>. And especially highlights the ticker, an instrument that kept informed the ranch of fluctuations in wheat prices worldwide.

The book I, chapter IV is also very graphic to help us understand modern farming in the United States. The chapter describes the spectacular activity of ploughing on the *Quien Sabe* ranch, run by Annixter. Everything here is synchronized and coordinated: food, time, information and work in general. The proportions of agricultural work shown here are enormous as compared with those of Europe:

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<sup>57</sup> But everything is not favourable for American agriculture in *The Octopus*. Among the problems it faces is that of the dependence on abusive railroad tariffs of monopolistic nature –hence the title *The Octopus*.

<sup>58</sup> F. Norris, *The Octopus*, book I, chapter II, p. 73.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, book I, chapter II, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, book I, chapter II, p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, book I, chapter II, p. 53. To this regard, W. Conlogue says: *Land was no longer a home but a factory*. W. Conlogue, *Working the Garden. American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture*, p. 44.

*The ploughs, thirty-five in number, each drawn by its teams of ten, stretched in an interminable line, nearly a quarter of a mile in length (...). Each of these ploughs held five shears, so that when the entire company was in motion, one hundred and seventy-five furrows were made at the same instant. At a distance, the ploughs resembled a great column of field artillery*<sup>62</sup>.

In turn, the book I, chapter V shows another graphic scene of the work in the bonanzas – in this case it is the mechanized planting in Derricks' ranch:

*The horses were in lines, six abreast, harnessed to machines. (...) The click and clink of metal work was incessant, the machines throwing off a continual rattle of wheels and cogs and clashing springs. (...) a bewildering confusion; the impact of innumerable hoofs was a veritable rumble. Machine after machine appeared, (...) like an array of chariots (...), an interminable procession, machine succeeding machine, six-horse team succeeding six-horse team – bustling, hurried- Magnus Derrick's thirty-three grain drills, each with its eight hoes, went clamouring past, like an advance of military, seeding the ten thousands acres of the great ranch*<sup>63</sup>.

The internationalization of the agricultural sector, which is consistently felt in the novel, it is also another sign of its modernization. This, in turn, highlights the importance of information, the availability of updated data on the fluctuation of world wheat markets. As already mentioned, this internationalization of farming sector is supported to some extent by the ticker:

*The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world's crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos, to that of the Quien Sabe, to Osterman's, and to Broderson's. (...) At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant – a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine*<sup>64</sup>.

In the novel *The Pit* (1903) Norris introduces us to a fundamental and tricky subject for the farming sector: funding and speculation, as well as the sector's reliance on a highly globalized and internationalized market<sup>65</sup>. In this novel we can analyse in depth the financial market in relation to the agricultural sector. We have occasion to note, for example, the activity of La Salle Street, Chicago's financial center, as well as its stock market, and the centrality of the Wheat pit in the Board of Trade of this city. We delve into an environment of brokers, of commission men, of wheat options and futures, of different market trends. We attend an environment that grants great importance to information, where data transmitted by telegrams and telephone are constants, where is necessary to keep correspondents providing information, and where the government agricultural reports on the condition of wheat play a fundamental role.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, book I, chapter IV, pp. 127.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, book I, chapter V, pp. 176-7.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, book I, chapter II, p. 54.

<sup>65</sup> F. Norris, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (1903). London: The Echo Library, 2006. In the novel we find abundant examples of the internationalization of the sector. The decisions taken at the Chicago Stock Exchange affect virtually worldwide. The short story by Frank Norris, "A Deal in Wheat" (1903). London: The Echo Library, 2006, is another muckraking narration that also refers to the American farm sector's reliance on the stock market in Chicago.

In *The Pit* Norris denounces the close dependence of the agriculture sector on stock market fluctuations. Especially in chapter IV, an investor and dealer in grain called Charles Cressler presents one of the toughest imaginable speeches against speculation in agricultural assets:

*They call it buying and selling, ' he went on, down there in La Salle Street. But it is simply betting. Betting on the condition of the market weeks, even months, in advance. You bet wheat goes up. I bet it goes down. Those fellows in the Pit don't own the wheat; never even see it. Wou'dn't know what to do with it if they had it. They don't care in the least about the grain. But there are thousands upon thousands of farmers out here in Iowa and Kansas or Dakota who do, and hundreds of thousands of poor devils in Europe who care even more than the farmer. I mean the fellows who raise the grain, and the other fellows who eat it. It's life or death for either of them. And right between these two comes the Chicago speculator, who raises or lowers the price out of all reason, for the benefit of his pocket* <sup>66</sup>.

### **8. The farming sector in crisis: Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.**

The American farmer ideal model established by Jefferson –characterized by independence, dignity and adequate economic and cultural resources–, is demolished – as is the American rural dream as a whole– by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*<sup>67</sup>.

Set in the 1930s, this shocking and devastating novel alternates harshly realistic and naturalistic chapters –those regarding the Joad family– with other more poetic and generic. The agricultural crisis, the dust bowl, the sense of land ownership, the tractor, the forced migration, the deplorable rural labour relations in Oklahoma and California during the thirties, that is to say all these aspects that interest the economic historian are reflected here, but with no chance for a happy ending.

Among the issues addressed in Steinbeck's novel one of the key topics is basically the old theme that already was evident in English Romantic poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the English social novel of the 1840s, and also in Hardy's several novels during the 1860s and 1870s. This topic is the pain caused by the forced emigration of smallholders and tenants when evicted from their land and places because of compelling circumstances of the market and the technological development.

The chapter V, one of the fundamentals of the novel, presents the conflict of interests between, on the one hand, the bank, that is the large financial and landowner company and, on the other hand, the farmers –former landowners and now tenants– who can not pay the rent and passively have to observe their own eviction<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> F. Norris, *The Pit*, chapter IV, pp. 74-75.

<sup>67</sup> J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). London: Penguin, 2000. To this regard S. L. Sarver says: *In such novels such The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Steinbeck illustrates the failure of the Jeffersonian agrarianism.* Stephanie L. Sarver, *Uneven Land. Nature & Agriculture in American Writing*, p. 168. With regard to the influence of intellectuals and essayists such as Thomas Jefferson, St John de Crèvecoeur and Ralph Waldo Emerson in creating a specific image of the farmer and rural world in the United States, see: S. L. Sarver, *Uneven Land. Nature & Agriculture in American Writing*, pp. 1-45.

<sup>68</sup> Contrary to what Zola did in *The Earth*, which mostly regarded exacerbated idea of land property as a mean concept, Steinbeck poeticizes this concept to explain a romantic point of view of farmers opposed to the practical nature of the current legislation: *Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. (...) That's what makes it ours – being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.* J. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, chapter V, p. 35.

To some extent Steinbeck symbolizes in the adoption of the tractor as a working tool the causes of the situation of agricultural crisis. We read in this regard: *The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families*<sup>69</sup>; or, similarly: *Can't make a living on the land unless you've got two, five, ten thousand acres and a tractor*<sup>70</sup>.

Moreover, the attitude of the tractor driver reminds us that of the engineer of the steam engine, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century travelled through the fields, showing himself as someone totally alien to the rural world, as we observed in *Tess*. In this regard, Steinbeck says:

*And in the tractor man there grows the contempt that comes only to a stranger who has little understanding and no relation. (...). But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land*<sup>71</sup>.

But Steinbeck is not opposed to progress symbolized by the tractor, but the way progress is used. That is, he does not denigrate the advances in agronomy, but the way the capitalist system is applied to the field. For example, we read:

*Pa borrowed Money from the bank, and now the bank wants the land. The land company – that's the bank when it has land– wants tractors, not families on the land. Is a tractor bad? Is the power that turns the long furrows wrong? If this tractor were ours it would be good –not mine, but ours*<sup>72</sup>.

In addition to the harsh appalling living conditions in the countryside during the depression years and the hardships inherent with no future emigration, *The Grapes of Wrath* touches on other aspects of the farming sector which often receive minor treatment, but which relevance is evident for economic historians. The novel is highly critical of agricultural capitalism and industrial farming. In this context exposes aspects as the process of increasing agricultural capitalization, the take over of smaller farms by powerful agricultural companies, the war between rival firms, the enormously increased farm size, and so on.

In short, although this novel is mostly known for the harsh labour relations in agriculture during the 1930's crisis, so is relevant to analyse the circumstances of smallholder agriculture, and small and big business and canning in California.

In response to the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a year later, in 1940, American writer Ruth Comfort Mitchell published a farm-novel entitled *Of Human Kindness*. The novel presents a very sympathetic picture of the large agricultural enterprise. To this regards, W. Conlogue asserts:

*Though The Grapes of Wrath has earned an enduring place in American literature, the values represented in Of Human Kindness have won the larger*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, chapter V, p. 35.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, chapter V, p. 39. Steinbeck stresses on this symbolism of the tractor also in chapter IX, referring how the traditional farming implements are worthless because the interest now is focused on tractors. And again in chapter XI in which provides a poetic comparison between the draft horses and the tractor: *And when a horse stops work and goes into the barn there is a life and a vitality left, there is a breathing and a warmth, and the feet shift on the straw, and the jaws champ on the hay, and the ears and the eyes are alive. There is a warmth of life in the barn, and the heat and smell of life. But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is dead as the ore it came from. (...). So easy that the wonder goes out of work, so efficient that the wonder goes out of land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and the relation* (p. 120).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, chapter XI, pp. 120-1.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, chapter XIV, p. 157.

*economic and cultural battles. The farm community providing our food and fiber today is entrepreneurial*<sup>73</sup>.

## 9. The representation of the farmer as a businessperson in literature.

What kind of treatment literature in general gives to the figure of the farmer as a businessperson?

We have seen how at first when the modernization of English literature began from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both Jonathan Swift and the English Romantic poets, provided a negative image of the innovative owners who began to see the land as if it were a mere business. However, once past that initial moment, fictional literature began to consider the innovative landowner better in their quest to rationalize the exploitation of their lands from a modern management and breakthrough cultivation techniques. At least until the 1930's crisis, the examples are numerous, as follows:

George Eliot in *Middlemarch* introduces Caleb Garth, a professional agronomist working in fields where is required in order to modernize farming techniques and achieve greater efficiency in the farms. Actually Caleb is not a businessman, but a self-employed professional. By means of this character Eliot praises both agricultural modernization and work well done.

In Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we meet landowner Boldwood, a kind of gentleman, courteous and correct, owner of *Little Weatherbury Farm*. Here we meet also Gabriel Oak. He is a careful, tenacious and competent worker, who –despite having suffered personal and professional vicissitudes of all kinds– can get ahead, maintaining leadership, honesty and perseverance qualities in his work. Oak was –as the landowner Boldwood said– a *trust-worthy man*. In the novel we have occasion to know him as both an employee and an independent businessman.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, once again thanks to Hardy we have the opportunity to meet two businessmen engaged in wholesale distribution and trade of agricultural products. These corn merchants are Mr Henchard and young Mr Farfrae. The former is a self-made man with somewhat erratic personal qualities. He manages to establish a medium-sized successful firm, until is ruined by a series of failed speculations. Mr Henchard once says something very wise: “*In my business, 'tis true that strength and bustle build up a firm. But judgment and knowledge are what keep it established*”<sup>74</sup>. The other significant businessman of the novel, the young Scottish Donald Farfrae is intelligent, practical and honest, and even better equipped than Mr Henchard as manager. The author also adorns him with qualities of personal charm.

In *The Woodlanders* Hardy presents two businessmen involved in this case in forestry. One is Mr George Melbury, a timber merchant, self-made man owner of a medium-sized firm, and who performs responsible in his work. But in this novel highlights another professional: Giles Winterborne. He is a small entrepreneur who sometimes even works as an employee. We are said Winterborne was not a sharp businessman, but he was gifted with skill as a tree planter and cider manufacturer, and enjoyed a special sensitivity to develop his work in full integration with nature.

In *Tess* Hardy gives us more examples of businessmen and professionals. On the one hand we know the kind and correct Mr Crick, dairy employer, who owns a medium-sized farm called *Talbothays Dairy*. We know Mr Crick as a competent professional

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<sup>73</sup> W. Conlogue, *Working the Garden. American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture*, p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> T. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, chapter VII, p. 55.

with positive personal qualities. On the other hand we meet the farmer Groby, owner of *Flintcomb-Ash* farm. He is a disagreeable character, reckless with his employees whom he clearly exploits. But, at the same time, we must admit Groby's willingness to adopt modern technology. In fact, he rents a steam engine and a threshing machine to improve productivity and reduce labour costs. In the same novel we have also the opportunity to meet Angel Clare, a young man who, without belonging to a family dedicated to agriculture, made a series of practical learning in various farms and mills to become familiar with the business and to become self-employed. Clare's is a commendable example of a young gifted with entrepreneurship and professional aspirations channelled in this case to the farming sector.

Zola in *The Earth* creates the character of Monsieur Hourdequin, a rural entrepreneur openly in favour of the new methods, whose innovative spirit is reflected in the broad economic and mental efforts he dedicates to improving his farm *La Borderie*. But, he would not get the expected results. Whereas he achieves some medal in several agricultural events and, above all, his more conservative neighbours' frequent taunt and joke. The circumstances of his private life neither are enviable.

Norris in *The Octopus* presents a group of big rancher businessmen in California, such as Annixter, Magnus and Harran Derrick, Broderson, Osterman, etc. They are embroiled in a struggle against the railroad interests, in which they will be defeated. The most interesting figure of these ranchers is Annixter. Although his personal qualities are somewhat bizarre he is a young entrepreneur more than competent. Having been concerned in acquiring technical skills in order to manage the ranch, he also feels the desire to adopt the modern technology suitable for exploiting it. He manages the ranch as if it was a large industrial company, establishing divisions managed by superintendents, making use of a hierarchy of competent employees, and being well informed about the international markets fluctuations affecting his business. Magnus Derrick and the other employers to some extent imitate the management implemented by Annixter.

Again Norris, now in *The Pit*, draws the portrayal of some financial businessmen engaged –albeit reluctantly– in investment in agricultural assets at the Chicago Stock Exchange. Among them are found Curtis Jadwin and Charles Cressler. In this case, the message which Norris gives is the same that in general provides the so-called financial novel, that is: who is engaged in high speculation ends badly.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, written during the 1930's depression, Steinbeck returns to tell us something that previously the English Romantics had said: the rural owners who pursuit only economic benefits, without any consideration to people who depend on them, must be vilified. This is what Steinbeck does when putting the blame on a part of the banking sector for having expelled from farms to farmers considered surplus.

## **10. The female economic activity reflected in the rural novel.**

Female participation has long been an important component in the rural sector. It is logical, therefore, that this fact is reflected in the literature related to agricultural activity.

*Tess* can be an interesting novel in order to observe the role of women from a perspective focused on economic history. There are in this novel frequent passages in which women's participation in various farming tasks are shown. For example, we see her doing all kinds of works in her parents' small farm: from helping in the hay harvest, to milking the cows or making butter. We also observe the monotony of certain

activities in the field, such as the exhausting and repetitive female work of the sheaves. In *Tess* we are aware of how women in the field made all kinds of work, sometimes even similar to those of men in terms of hardness. This situation is clear for instance in the chapters where Tess works in the exploitation of farmer Groby and is attending the threshing machine<sup>75</sup>.

The division of labour according to gender is also an aspect clearly reflected in these novels. We observe this circumstance in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for example in the haymaking, in the sheaf of oats, or in the sheep-shearing. Similar division of tasks by gender appears again in *Tess*, where we notice the formation of two groups in the reaping tasks: one of men and lads and other of women. And the same is observed in this case in *Talbothays Dairy*, during the milking of cows<sup>76</sup>.

Literature provides more situations of different working conditions in relation to gender. For instance, the wage gap between male and female workers is shown clearly in *Tess*. When the female protagonist is constantly serving of sheaves to the threshing machine, we read: *For some probably economical reason it was usually a woman who was chosen for this particular duty*<sup>77</sup>. A similar situation of lower wages for women is also found in *The Earth*. In this regard, we read: *Hourdequin paid off his workers who had completed their contract. The men took home one hundred and twenty francs and the women sixty as a reward for their month's work*<sup>78</sup>.

Regarding female role as businesswomen, English literature –again with Hardy– provides an interesting example in Bathsheba, the central female character of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba indirectly inherits *Weatherbury Upper Farm* and, against what is expected, she chooses to run the farm personally. Although she committed several errors, Hardy makes it clear Bathsheba's leadership skills and her ability to manage an agricultural enterprise as any responsible businessman would do<sup>79</sup>.

American literature provides at least two great examples of female entrepreneurship applied to the farming sector. These are Alexandra Bergson and Dorinda Oakley, main female characters of the respective novels Villa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925). They are ahead of large farms, making use of modern methods of management and administration, and using technologies similar to those adopted by the competent businessmen in Norris's *The Octopus*<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> While in *The Woodlanders* we meet Marty South, a very interesting female character, both for her skill in forestry tasks and for her intimate relationship with nature. In this regard, Hardy concludes: *Marty South alone, of all the women in Hintock (...), had approximated to Winterborne's level of intelligent intercourse with Nature*. T. Hardy, *Woodlanders*, vol. III, chapter XI, p. 330.

<sup>76</sup> The specialization between male and female work on a family farm may be seen also in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, in the family Brangwens, D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, chapter I, pp. 6-7.

<sup>77</sup> T. Hardy, *Tess*, phase VI, chapter XLVII, p. 417.

<sup>78</sup> É. Zola, *The Earth*, part III, chapter. IV, p. 250.

<sup>79</sup> Examples of distrust regarding Bathsheba as a good farming manager by being a woman are evident in the novel. The male protagonist, Gabriel Oaks, has no confidence that the farm could operate without a male bailiff. So he openly tells Bathsheba: *How would the farm go on with nobody to mind it but a woman?* T. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, chapter XXIX, p. 184. Another proof of the limited role of women in decision-making in the agricultural sector is found in the surprise and expectation arisen when Bathsheba enters Casterbridge cornmarket –traditionally only cornered by men–: *[A]t her first entry the lumbering dialogues had ceased, nearly every face had been turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there*". Ibid: chapter XII, p. 91.

<sup>80</sup> See: Willian Conlogue, *Working the Garden*. Conlogue says about the characters of Alexandra Bergson and Dorinda Oakley: *Both characters employ the techniques and assent to the preconceptions of the new farming –hierarchies of work, trust of experts' advice, use of the latest technologies, and domination of nature* (p. 65).

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