

Exploring the opening paragraph

Firstly, read through the opening paragraph of the novel:

On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward from Shaston to the village of Marlott, in the adjoining Vale of Blakemore or Blakemoor. The pair of legs that carried him were rickety, and there was a bias in his gait which inclined him somewhat to the left of a straight line. He occasionally gave a smart nod, as if in confirmation of some opinion, though he was not thinking of anything in particular. An empty egg-basket was slung upon his arm, the nap of his hat was ruffled, a patch being quite worn away at its brim where his thumb came in taking it off. Presently he was met by an elderly parson astride on a gray mare, who, as he rode, hummed a wandering tune.

Although we can not read too much into what an author might have meant we need to balance this with the recognition that an author obviously chooses his or her words very carefully, makes choices about the language they use, re-drafts and edits their writing and often has recurring images or themes through their novels.

Bearing this in mind consider the following questions and discuss your ideas with a partner:

1. Why do you think Hardy might have chosen to set the opening of the story in May? Think about the season, what usually happens at that time of year and what it might imply.
2. Why does Hardy refer to the variations of 'Blakemore or Blakemoor'? If you have read more of the book you will probably have a better idea about this but, even if you haven't, consider why he might have wanted to do this.
3. Why do you think the man is not walking in a straight line? What evidence do you have to support your opinion?
4. What impression do we get of the man, bearing in mind this is our introduction to him?
5. What does the empty egg-basket suggest the man has been doing?
6. Which social class do you think the man is from? What evidence do you have?
7. What is a 'parson'? What sort of man would you expect a parson to be?
8. Why do you think Hardy has him sitting on a horse when the other man is walking? Think about what the pedestrian would have to do in order to acknowledge or speak to the man on horseback.
9. Why do you think Hardy has the parson humming as we travels? Think about what this suggests about his mood and the urgency of his progress.
10. In what ways is the parson a contrast to the other man? Who do we expect to behave 'better'?

Extension task:

Write a few paragraphs to explain how our ideas about the opening of the novel and the characters we meet are shaped by Hardy's use of language, the setting and time of year. Although we may not realise it as we are reading, Hardy has ensured that he has guided the way we perceive (see) the characters as we read on.