

Hardy: Class and Politics

Jann, Rosemary. "Hardy's Rustics and the Construction of Class." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2000, pp. 411-425.

Hardy's insight as well as his ambivalence about these kinds of class distinctions derive from his own humble roots in rural England. Thomas Hardy, Sr., was a master mason who in later years employed others as a small builder in the area around Bockhampton in Dorset, where Hardy grew up. His mother Jemima had worked as a servant before her

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marriage. Her social ambitions for her first-born son provided a better than average education for the apt pupil, one that included early instruction in Latin at a Dorchester day school and that encouraged him to study literature and languages on his own. These studies were insufficient, however, to satisfy his early dream of attending university and pursuing a clerical career goals that biographer Michael Millgate links at least in part to Hardy's desire for social advance. In 1856, at age sixteen, he was articled to a local architect and continued his training in London, beginning to write poetry and fiction in the late 1860s. With the completion of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874, he was able to marry the genteel Emma Gifford and (with her encouragement) to abandon architecture for what became a successful career as a novelist.

Hardy's rise from village boy to famous writer obviously contributed much to his understanding of the injuries inflicted by the class system and to his sympathies with meritorious characters struggling as he had to overcome these. But Peter Widdowson is surely correct in arguing that Hardy's self-fashioning as an urban, upwardly mobile man of letters considerably complicated his relationship to his rural roots. In Widdowson's shrewd reading, the covertly autobiographical *Life of Thomas Hardy* is shaped by numerous contradictions where class is concerned: in Hardy's elliptical handling of his own working-class origins and his sensitivity to slights from the more socially secure, in vaguely populist sentiments that stand side by side with expressions of contempt for the anti-intellectualism of the proletariat, in his insistence on his lack of ambition for social climbing in the midst of name-dropping validations of his own social prominence, in his professed indifference to monetary successes as a novelist while documenting the many compromises he made to insure them, in his retrospective construction of himself as a poet dedicated to Art, as opposed to the rather more tradesman-like writer of popular fiction. It is in light of this kind of ambivalence that Hardy's treatment of class issues in his writing must be considered.

Hardy's 1883 essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer," published in *Longman's Magazine*, provides his most explicit statement on the rural working classes and also corroborates attitudes that appear in the novels. Although there is some truth to K. D. M. Snells charge that Hardy's portrait of the unreconstructed rural laborer in this essay simply perpetuates belief in his "animal indifference," a belief that conventionally served to mute the injustices of his treatment, Hardy's views of the rural economy are more complicated than this. The essay begins by taking condescending city dwellers to task for collapsing all agricultural laborers into the faceless, uncouth, inarticulate "Hodge" of conventional stereotypes. It also criticizes middle-class do-gooders for assuming that misery and immorality must characterize those cottagers who do not meet their genteel standards of cleanliness and propriety. Hardy is keenly aware that the source of rural suffering is economic, not moral. Snell is correct, however, in the sense that Hardy characterizes the problem in terms of a loss of job security and paternalistic protection for the laborer and not by the chronic poverty, low wages, and unemployment that Snell identifies as the most serious problems in later Victorian Dorset. Moreover, Hardy's reactions to these changes are ambivalent. While acknowledging that the increasing mobility

forced on laborers also brought them better wages and more progressive ways of thinking, he is still nostalgic for the resulting loss of “community” and “individuality”. That the picturesque “peculiarities” of the old ways involved implicit forms of deference and decorum is made clear in his lament that farm laborers were now little different

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factory workers in their knowing ways, their laxer morality, and their greater cynicism about “the duties of life”; the “humorous simplicity” of the men had been replaced by a self-interested shrewdness and the “unsophisticated modesty” of the women by a scolding defiance of male authority. Thus his admission that “it is too much to expect [rural laborers] to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators” is balanced by a lingering regret for what he views as a time of greater simplicity, social quiescence, and gender conformity. Hardy’s keener interest, in this essay and in the novels, is less with the unskilled laborer per se than with that group just above the “workfolk” in rural society: the artisans, hagglers, tradesmen, cottagers, copy- and life-holders that make up the “more interesting and better-informed class” to which Hardy himself initially belonged. The other major source of economic instability that he stressed in “The Dorsetshire Labourer” was the loss of independence and livelihood for this middling group. As agriculture became increasingly centralized in the hands of large owners during the course of the nineteenth century, trade dwindled, lease holders were dispossessed, and their children were forced into an itinerant labor force. Those belonging to this semi-independent segment of rural society had formerly given stability to village life and served as “the depositaries of village traditions”, but as they too were forced out of the countryside, they “imbibe[d] a sworn enmity to the existing order of things”. Hardy also noted that the often laxer morality afforded by their relative independence degenerated further when they joined others of like minds and situations in the towns. [...]

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Characters like Stephen Smith and Grace Melbury may lament the alienation from their origins caused by the “artificiality” of their educated manners, but they are also keenly aware of the ways that being “natural” is also implicated in the crudeness and physicality that conventionally stereotype the rustic lower classes in Hardy’s fiction as much as in popular imagination. Hardy may resent this stereotyping, but has too much invested in distancing himself from it to be able to dispense with it. Hardy’s refusal to reward Giles Winterbourne’s chivalrous self-denial with success signals perhaps a clearer acknowledgment of the ideological contradictions implicit in Victorian constructions of class. This realization would bear final fruit in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, novels in which Hardy confronts more directly (if still with ambivalence) the potency of physical desire, the hypocrisies of respectability, and the brute power of money in destroying even the most worthy desires for self-improvement in his rustic protagonists.

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