

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature

Overview

The works of the English novelist, poet, and dramatist Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) unite the Victorian and modern eras. His work revealed the strains that widespread industrialization and urbanization placed on traditional English life. Major social changes took place during Hardy's life. When he was a young man, England still had a largely agricultural economy and Queen Victoria presided over an ever-expanding worldwide empire. By the time he died, the forces of modernization had changed England forever.

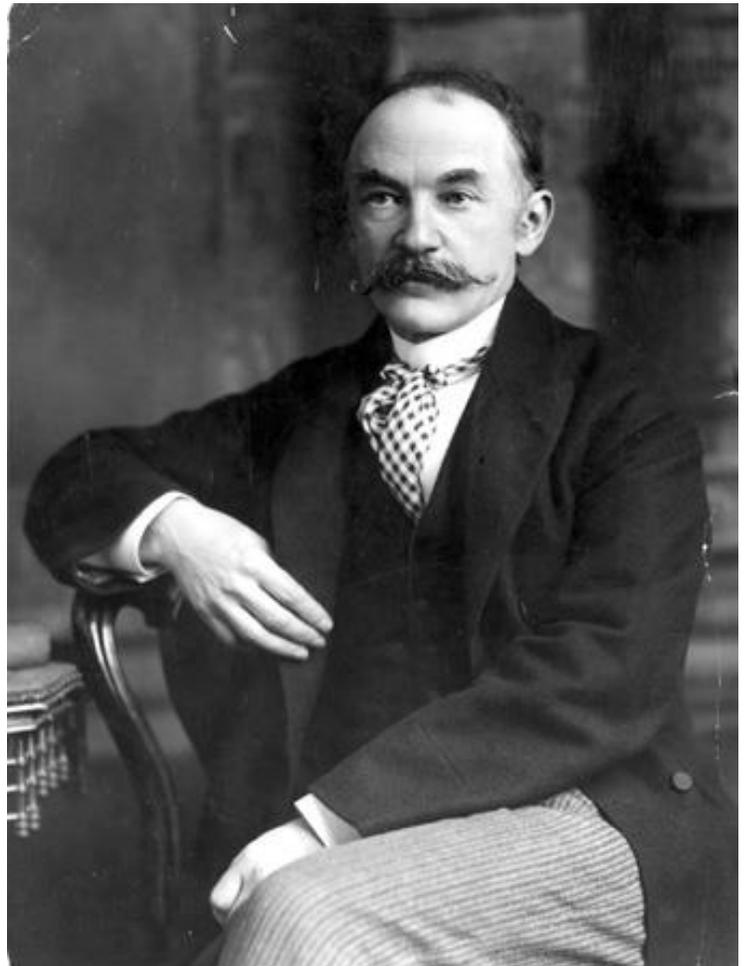
Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Early Years During a Period of Rapid Industrialization in England Thomas Hardy was born on June 2, 1840, in Higher Bockhampton in Dorset, England, which later would form part of the “Wessex” of his novels and poems. During his early years, Hardy witnessed the changing of his landscape and rural community brought on by the Industrial Revolution. While the Industrial Revolution had begun at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was ongoing through the beginning of the twentieth century.

Populations increasingly shifted from the country to the cities. Railroads linked towns and villages that were once remote to major urban centers. And with new mobility and new economic pressure, people faced new social issues, too, including a sharp spike in prostitution rates and infamous abuses of child labor in factories and mines

After attending local schools, Hardy was apprenticed in 1856 to John Hicks, an architect in Dorchester. During his time as apprentice architect, Hardy read many of the influential works of the era, such as Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), which was published when Hardy was nineteen. By the time he was twenty, Hardy had abandoned religion after being convinced of the intellectual truth of a godless universe.

Early Writing Experience: Failures, Then Success In 1862 Hardy began to write poems but was unable to get them published. Eventually, he accepted that he must become a novelist to succeed as



an author. The novelist's profession had by this time become well paid and well regarded. Hardy wrote his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, in 1867, but was advised not to publish it. His next novel *Desperate Remedies* (1871), was published but unsuccessful. On March 7, 1870, he met Emma Lavinia Gifford, with whom he fell in love. In spite of his continuing lack of success with literature, he decided to continue with it, hoping eventually to make enough money to enable him to marry Emma.

Hardy was paid thirty pounds for his next novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). The following year it was published in New York by Holt and Williams. The book was well received, and he was asked to write a novel for serialization in a magazine. In September 1872 *A Pair of Blue Eyes* began to appear, which records Hardy's courtship with Gifford.

Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), also serialized, was a financial and critical success, allowing Hardy to give up architecture and marry Emma in 1874. *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) also appeared as a serial but was not as successful. It did not have the country setting of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which his audience had been previously responsive to. Hardy began to feel a sense of discontent as a novelist because his real desire was to succeed as a poet. He preferred his poetry to his prose and considered his novels to be merely a way to earn a living.

Mid-Career Work His next novel, *The Return of the Native* (1878), received mixed attention. The novel's theme of the collision of Old World and New World, of rural and modern, allowed Hardy to explore his growing sense that humans are driven by impulses that are not under rational control. Some reviewers praised the graphic descriptions, but others found Hardy's writing strained and pretentious.

The Trumpet-Major (1880), set in the Napoleonic period, represents Hardy's attempt at historical fiction. It was followed by *A Laodicean* (1881), which Hardy dictated to his wife while he was ill. In September 1881, while that novel was still running its course, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* invited Hardy to write a serial for his magazine. The result was *Two on a Tower* (1882).

Later Fiction and Controversy over "Immoral" Content During this time, Hardy decided to return to his native Dorset for good. This move initiated a major period of Hardy's creative life as a novelist. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), his next novel, presents Hardy's belief that "character is fate." Heralded as a turning point in the writer's career, primarily for the skill with which he presents his male protagonist, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is further acclaimed as a pivotal work in the development of the English novel, demonstrating that the genre could present a significant psychological history and still serve as an important social document.

Hardy's next novel, *The Woodlanders* (1887), a traditional pastoral, actually ends on a happy note. The same cannot be said, however, for *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), in which an innocent country girl falls victim to Victorian social hypocrisy.

The Well-Beloved (1892) is thin by comparison. Hardy described it in a letter to his American publishers as "short and slight, and written entirely with a view to serial publication." It was followed in 1896 by what would be his final novel, *Jude the Obscure*, which follows the life and early death of Jude Fawley. More than any of Hardy's other novels, *Jude the Obscure* was met with savage critical

attacks, mainly for what was perceived as immoral content. Despite the controversy it inspired immediately after publication, the novel was eventually widely translated and recognized as a masterpiece before Hardy's death.

Apart from his fourteen novels, Hardy was a prolific writer of short stories, most of which were collected in four volumes. They were written for magazine publication and are of uneven quality. Most were written in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Return to Poetry After 1896, Hardy returned to his first love: poetry. Hardy the poet is best known for verses that borrow from the tradition of the ballad. *Wessex Poems* appeared in 1898. Later work encompassed everything from the monumental drama "The Dynasts" to simpler and even joyful poems celebrating nature and the moment of being, such as "The Darkling Thrush."

After declining the offer of a knighthood, in 1910 Hardy accepted the Order of Merit-- the highest honor that can be accorded to an English author. Two years later his wife died. Filled with remorse over the fact that their marriage had not been better, Hardy wrote several poems about their relationship. In 1914, Hardy married again, this time to teacher and children's book author Florence Emily Dugdale, a woman forty years his junior. From 1920 to 1927, Hardy worked on his autobiography, which, when it appeared, was disguised as being the work of his wife. He died on January 11, 1928. While he requested that he be buried next to his first wife, that wish was only partly granted. Hardy's body was interred in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, in London, while his heart was buried in his first wife's grave.

Works in Literary Context

Strongly identifying with the county of Dorset, Hardy saw himself as a successor to the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes, who had been a friend and mentor. Author William Rutland cites the Bible, the Romantic poets-- especially Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and William Wordsworth-- and Barnes as early influences on Hardy. Hardy also turned to the classics, reading Virgil, Horace, Catullus, Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, whose recurring theme was "call no man happy while he lives." In later years, scores of younger authors, including William Butler Yeats, Siegfried Sassoon, and Virginia Woolf, visited Hardy. The poet and novelist also discussed poetry with modernist poet Ezra Pound.

Classic Tragedy *Return of the Native* borrows the structural pattern of a Greek tragedy and follows the five-part division of a Shakespeare tragedy. The sense of place is intensified by the numerous references to local folk customs. The character of Eustacia has been compared to Emma Bovary, though Hardy claimed that he had not read Flaubert's 1856 novel at this time.

Shakespearean Tragedy As with *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* invites comparisons to Shakespearean tragedy, especially *King Lear*. A parallel with the Old Testament story of Saul and David has also been suggested. The professional reviewers were disappointingly unappreciative, but three writers all praised it privately-- novelists George Gissing and Robert Louis Stevenson in letters to Hardy, and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in a letter to Robert Bridges, fellow poet and later poet laureate of England.

Works in Critical Context

Early critics viewed Hardy as a consummate realist, while later evaluations by such critics as Albert J. Guerard suggest that he may be recognized as a predecessor of antirealist trends in twentieth-century fiction. For the integrity of his moral and philosophical views and for the imaginative achievement in creating the world of Wessex, Hardy continues to receive undiminished acclaim from critics, scholars, and the reading public.

Far from the Madding Crowd Author Dale Kramer calls *Far from the Madding Crowd* “the non-tragic predecessor” to Hardy’s later novels. The story ends happily, although the darker side of life is never far away. Kramer declares that this situation is based on the idea of dichotomy: “The assumption of the aesthetic in the novel is that any and all reactions to situations will be between two extremes, or on one of two extremes.” Hardy’s skill in describing the countryside, the farms, and the setting of the novel is emphasized by author Joseph W. Beach: “[W]e know by evidence of all our senses that we are dealing here with ‘substantial things.’”

Tess of the d’Urbervilles Critics of Hardy’s day have been joined by their modern counterparts in citing *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as the culminating point in Hardy’s efforts at creating a modern form of tragedy. Many consider it Hardy’s greatest novel.

Author Byron Caminero-Santangelo writes, “During the second half of the nineteenth century, much of the British intellectual and scientific community believed that ethical and social progress was linked with the natural process of evolution. Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, and Herbert Spencer all believed that ethics and values could be understood and formulated using the knowledge they had of the natural, material world....In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy... severs the link between ethics and nature, but he hardly portrays British society as ethical, kind, or just. In *Tess*, society, technology, and law all contribute to the harshness of the ‘cosmic process.’ In particular, the novel exposes the way that a patriarchal society uses a ‘natural’ discourse to oppress women. Thus, *Tess* challenges the linking of the ethical and the natural as well as the social structures which are validated by this link.” He continues, “For Hardy, a humane ethical system could not be grounded in nature because nature itself is harsh and ‘cruel,’ and it could not be rooted in religion because he does not posit the possibility of a just deity.”

Jude the Obscure Of *Jude the Obscure*, author David Grylls writes, “It is true that the book’s hero tries hopelessly to harmonise the dual demands of his nature; true, too, that he is trapped between two contrasting women, spiritual Sue and fleshly Arabella. But behind this theme lies something even large-- what Hardy called ‘the tragedy of unfulfilled aims.’ *Jude the Obscure* is about the pain of disappointment-- frustration, disillusion, loss.”