

Thomas Hardy

(1840-1930)

Biography

Thomas Hardy was born on 2 June 1840 in Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester. His father was a bricklayer with an interest in music and the social life of the English countryside.

In 1853 Hardy's studies became intensive (especially Latin, French) and he started reading intensively, but in 1856 his formal education finished because it did not qualify him for university. He was then apprenticed to a local architect but he continued his study of the classics.

In 1872 *Under the Greenwood Tree* was published anonymously. In 1873 Hardy left architecture as a career and devoted himself to writing full-time.

In 1874 *Far from the Madding Crowd* appeared serially. Serialisation prior to the publication of the book in volumes contributed to the widespread circulation and financial success of his works.

In 1878 Hardy married Emma Gifford.

The Return of the Native was published in 1886, while *The Mayor of Casterbridge* appeared the following year. *The Woodlanders* was published in 1891 and, in 1895, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* caused uproar. In 1898 the first edition of *Jude the Obscure* appeared.

Between 1903 and 1908 *Wessex Poems*, his first volume of poems, was published, while around 1910 the three parts of the *Dynasts* were published.

In 1914 Hardy revised his body of work thoroughly so as to publish the 'Wessex Edition', and his wife Emma died.

In 1928 Hardy married Florence Dugdale. World War I broke out and this contributed to Hardy's pessimism. He died on 11 January 1930. His ashes were buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy* were published under Florence's name.

Keywords

Destiny

Hardy was convinced there is a cosmic force (Immanent Will) controlling human life and destiny, ruling us in an arbitrary way, like puppets. As in the Greek tragedies, human beings are victims of chance and fate: they manifest themselves through coincidences that, even if trivial, inevitably lead to catastrophe. However, his characters struggle against adversities by showing courage and endurance (Life Urge). This pessimistic view of life derives from Schopenhauer's philosophy.

Nature and naturalism

Human manipulation and technical activities in the 19th century are dramatically changing nature, which for Hardy humankind should be kept uncontaminated and innocent because men should live in touch with it for their personal fulfilment. Thus, we always find a feeling of nostalgia for rural England. Hardy was considered a naturalist, but his naturalism is not a scientific or photographic portrait of reality, because he always hides symbols behind nature.

Dorset/Wessex

The setting of Hardy's novels is Wessex, the Anglo-Saxon and legendary name for modern Dorset, the writer's birthplace. The beauty of the landscape can give momentary solace to his characters when it keeps its primitive features of innocence and fullness. His interest in a local area has made of him a regionalist writer.

Criticism

Unlike Dickens, Hardy criticises, both industrialism and Victorian hypocrisy, but he does not suggest any concrete alternatives because there is no going back from progress. Being based on false morality, society is often cruel for it frustrates and destroys human efforts.

New women and new men

He overcomes the stereotypes of the fallen woman to show a sympathetic view on women's destiny and an appreciation of their capacity to face problems. Men are either traditional, and associated with power/money/social prestige and a patriarchal role, or more complex victims of the new woman, who is struggling to be liberated.

Love

It is a common topic in Hardy's novels. His passionate heroines do not conform to the Victorian idea of women because they are unconventional, more independent and strong, often torn between passion and a sense of independence. These contrasting features lead to isolation and death: therefore, love is always tragic.

Narrative technique

In Hardy's works, there is still an omniscient and intrusive narrator who expresses his opinions and intervenes in a subtle or ironic way, but without involving the reader directly, as Dickens had done. One of the main features of his style is the use of a cinematic technique which reproduces on the page the filming technique of zoom-in and zoom-out when portraying objects and people.

Main works

***Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874)**

A novel dealing with a very poor farm labourer who eventually marries the woman he loves, who is socially superior to him.

***The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886)**

The story of a man who, while drunk, sells his wife to a stranger.

***Wessex Tales* (1888)**

A collection of many short stories set in Wessex.

***Tess of the d'Urbervilles - A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1891)**

Tess Durbeyfield, the daughter of a poor peasant, meets the rich Alec who seduces her, thus spoiling her reputation. She is therefore obliged to leave home, bearing a son that will die shortly afterwards. Angel is the sensitive man who marries her unaware of her past, but when she confesses to him, his liberal ideas

are replaced by old-fashioned prejudices and he abandons her to her destiny. Tess is then tempted again by Alec, whom she murders after a period of life together. She will be executed for the crime but will have the opportunity to re-establish her love bond with Angel before death.

Both Alec and Angel intrude in Tess's rural world, dramatically breaking its balance. They trigger off the ruinous force ruling her destiny, turning her into a victim of fate.

Jude the Obscure (1896)

About a man who becomes a victim of society and is frustrated in all his aspirations of self-fulfilment through education and love.

Wessex Poems (1898)

The first collection of his poems including lyrics, narrative, dramatic, philosophic, elegiac poems. Critics consider them as a model for the transition from Victorian to modern poetry.

The Dynasts (1904-1908)

A 'chronicle play' mainly in blank verse and prose to celebrate the English wars against Napoleon.