

****THOMAS HARDY (1840-1928) as a Novelist****

****1. His Life.****

Hardy was born at Upper Bockhampton, in the county of Dorset. He was descended from Nelson's Captain Hardy, and was the son of a builder. He was educated at a local school and later in Dorchester, and his youth was spent in the countryside around that town, where shortly afterward he began to study with an architect. In 1862 he moved to London as a pupil of the architect Sir Arthur Blomfield. His first published work was the rather sensational *Desperate Remedies*, which appeared anonymously in 1871. In the following year the success of *Under the Greenwood Tree* established him as a writer, and soon afterward he abandoned architecture for literature as a profession. Most of his writing life was spent in his native 'Wessex,' where his heart lies buried, though his ashes have a place among the great in Westminster Abbey. In 1910 he was awarded the Order of Merit.

****2. His Novels.****

The involved construction of *Desperate Remedies* (1871) gave place to the charming idyll *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), one of the lightest and most appealing of his novels. It was set in the rural area he was soon to make famous as Wessex. The success of this book, though great, was eclipsed by that of the ironical *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which appeared in *Tins Leaf's Magazine* in 1873; and the following year (1874) saw the first of the great novels which have made him famous, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, a tragi-comedy set in Wessex. The rural background to the story is an integral part of the novel, which reveals the emotional depths which underlie rustic life. The *Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), an unsuccessful excursion into comedy, was followed by the deeply moving *The Return of the Native* (1878), a study of man's helplessness before the malignancy of an all-powerful Fate. The victims, Clym Yeo-bright and Eustacia Vye, are typical of Hardy's best characters, and the book is memorable for its fine descriptions of Egdon Heath, which plays an important part in the action. Then, in quick succession, came *The Trumpet Major* (1880), *A Laodicean* (1881), and *Two on a Tower* (1882) before Hardy produced his next masterpiece, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), another study of the inexorable destiny which hounds man to his downfall. The chief character, Michael Henchard, is clearly conceived and powerfully drawn, the rustic setting of Casterbridge is skilfully portrayed, and the book contains some memorable scenes, including the opening one of the wife-auctions at the fair. The rural setting is even more strikingly used in *The Woodlands* (1887), the tragic story of Giles Winter-bourne and Marty South, two of Hardy's most noble figures. Then, separated by *The Well-Beloved* (1892, reissued 1897), came Hardy's last and greatest novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), both of which, by their

frank handling of sex and religion, aroused the hostility of conventional Readers. They seem modest enough by the standards of today, but *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was rejected by two publishers and originally appeared in a somewhat expurgated version, and the outcry which followed the appearance of *Jude the Obscure* led Hardy in disgust to abandon novel-writing, though at the height of his powers. In these two books we have the most moving of Hardy's indictments of the human situation; both contain unforgettable scenes; the studies of Tess and Sue are two of his finest portrayals of women, and the character of Jude surpasses in depth of insight anything Hardy had previously achieved. In addition to his full-length novels Hardy published the following series of short stories—*Wessex Tales* (1888), *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), *Life's Little Ironies* (1894), and *A Changed Man, The Waiting Supper and other Tales* (1913). He is not so much at home in the short story, and these collections live for the occasional powerful tale rather than as a whole.

****3. Features of his Novels:****

****(a) His Subjects.****

Hardy's subject is the same in most of his novels. In all his greatest works he depicts human beings facing up to the onslaughts of a malign power. Accepting, as he did, the theory of evolution, Hardy saw little hope for man as an individual, and though his greatest figures have a marked individuality, Hardy's aim was to present man or woman rather than a particular man or a particular woman. He was a serious novelist attempting to present through fiction a view of life, and one entirely different from that of his great contemporaries Tennyson and Browning. Most frequently his mood was one of disillusioned pessimism, excellently summed up at the end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by Elizabeth Jane, "whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain." And yet Hardy was never quite certain of his philosophy: he hovered between the view of man as a mere plaything of an impersonal and malign fate and man as a being possessing free will, in whom character is fate, until, in *The Dynasts*, he evolved the conception of the Immanent Will.

****(B) His Treatment of His Themes:****

Hardy's preoccupation with his 'philosophy of life' is seen, in the way in which he intrudes himself into his novels to point an accusing finger at destiny or to take the side of his protagonists, and in the over-frequent use of coincidence, through which he seeks to prove his case. (Too often his plots hinge upon a sequence of accidents which have the most dire consequences, and, therefore, while he seldom fails to inspire in his readers his own deep pity for the sufferings of his characters, he frequently fails to attain the highest tragic levels. Allied with this use of coincidence are a fondness for the grotesque or unusual

and a weakness for the Melodramatic. Yet he handles striking situations with great firmness of touch and a Telling realism, and all his best novels contain individual scenes which are Unforgettable.

****(C) His characters (are mostly ordinary men and women living close to the soil.):****

The individuality of some is sacrificed to Hardy's view of life, but while he is, by more Modern standards, not really deep in his psychological analysis, characters like Jude and Sue, Tess, Henchard, and Eustacia Vye show considerable subtlety of interpretation. Such figures as Gabriel Oak (*Far from the Madding Crowd*) and Diggory Venn (*The Return of the Native*) are finely realized, country types blending with the countryside to which they belong, while the minor rustics, who are briefly sketched but readily visualized, are a frequent source of pithy humour, and act as a chorus commenting on the actions of the chief protagonists.

****(D) His Knowledge of the Countryside:****

In this Hardy stands supreme. His boyhood was spent mainly in the country, and he had an acute and sensitive observation of natural phenomena. As a unifying influence in his novels, the Wessex scene which he immortalized is second only to his philosophy. But nature provides more than a mere background: often it is a protagonist in the story, an unfeeling, impersonal force exerting its influence upon the lives of the characters. Probably the finest examples of Hardy's use of nature are in *The Woodlanders* and in *The Return of the Native*.