
UNIT 2 THOMAS HARDY'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy is a writer with protean talent. He is a versatile writer whose literary output includes short stories, novels, poetry and drama, each one of them reflecting his insight into the deeply disturbing social and religious issues of his time. His works also reveal his empathy and compassion towards the underprivileged people who bore the brunt of social injustice as a result of the Victorian moral codes that were particularly discriminatory against women. Hardy's novels are a scathing indictment of Victorian beliefs about women, its adherence to archaic Church doctrines, its iniquities, the lack of equal access to educational and judicial systems, and the destructive disruptions caused in the life of the agrarian population by the industrial revolution.

2.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.

This Unit gives you a brief introduction to Thomas Hardy and his writings. At the end of your study of this Unit, you will be able to discuss:

- * the multifaceted talent of Thomas Hardy as a writer of short stories, a novelist and a poet
- * the three phases of his writing
- * the classification of his novels
- * Wessex as the location and setting of his novels
- * Hardy and the novel of realism
- * Major features of his novels
- * Hardy's religious beliefs

2.2 THREE PHASES OF THOMAS HARDY'S WRITINGS

Hardy's work can be divided into three phases - the early phase, the middle phase and the later years. These three phases roughly correspond to the two genres of his writing: poetry, fiction and a return to poetry. One should not think of such a division as water tight and rigid, since in the last phase, as also in the first, Hardy wrote both novels and poetry. Between 1867 and 1872, when he was in his late twenties and early thirties, he wrote three novels- one of which, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, a class conscious novel was never published. The second one, *Desperate Remedies*, a less opinionated story with a dense plot had a lukewarm reception while the third one *Under the Greenwood Tree*, a humorous idyllic novel revealed his distinctive style of writing. It also reflected Hardy's early attempts at presenting the social change that was taking place in Victorian England. In 1872, he started sending monthly installments of his next novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* which, thanks to its popular appeal, was published a year later. Hardy's rise to fame as a novelist began from this period and his next venture was *Far from the Madding Crowd*, with a female protagonist wooed by three suitors. *Far From the Madding Crowd* was the first of the 'Wessex Novels' which had Wessex as the setting. Wessex is a fictitious landscape, located in the South and South west of England, principally in Dorset which was the setting of many of his novels. "This term, Wessex, has become so common and been so closely associated with Thomas Hardy's works, that we can easily forget that Hardy invented the term--or at least resurrected the term from centuries of obscurity."¹

His novels written in the middle period had a mixed response. *The Return of the Native* was a highly successful novel while the others like *The Trumpet Major* set in the Napoleonic period and two more, *A Laodicean* (1881) and *Two on a Tower* (1882) did not make the grade. The later novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* are his outstanding novels and they deal with the socio-economic issues of the day and offer deeply sympathetic representations of the working class people. While *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* criticizes society's sexual mores, *Jude the Obscure* is a critique of the educational system of the latter half of the 19th century. Both novels had a hostile reception as they affronted the Victorian sexual morality and it is then that Hardy moved away from fiction and turned to poetry.

Any writing on Hardy will remain incomplete without a reference to Hardy, the poet. When his poetry written in his early years did not receive favourable response, he switched to fiction. Later, he returned to poetry, and at the turn of the century, i.e., the 20th century, (in Hardy's later phase) he wrote only poetry. Hardy published his first volume of poetry, *Wessex Poems* in 1898, a three-volume epic drama *The Dynasts* (1904-08) as well as several war poems in the context of the Boer Wars and World War I.

2.3 HARDY'S CLASSIFICATION OF HIS OWN NOVELS

"Hardy himself has classified his novels into three groups:

Novels of character and Environment (Rural Studies): *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*.

Romances and Fantasies: *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *A Group of Noble Dames* and *The Well Beloved*.

Novels of Ingenuity: *The Hand of Ethelberta*, *A Laodicean* and *A Changed Man*.

It was only in the novels of the first category with which Thomas Hardy became associated as one of the finest English novelists.²

Check Your progress: 1

1. What are the three phases of Hardy's writing? What were the issues he dealt with in those three phases?
2. Write briefly on Hardy's classification of his novels. What do these three categories relate to?

2.4 HARDY'S WESSEX

Hardy's novels are grouped under the rubric *The Wessex Tales*. Thomas Hardy's Wessex is a literary landscape that inspired the novels. So much so, Wessex became a part of his characters with its moods and destiny.

Thomas Hardy was born in Upper Brockhampton, Dorset, where he spent much of his adult life. He was well acquainted with the local customs and location in this part of England and which are in evidence in his novels and also his poetry. They form an integral part of his writings. Wessex was the fictional name Hardy gave to this part of Southern England. "Hardy's intense study and accurate portrayal of nineteenth-century rural society in Dorset ...presents a microcosm of human life through which Hardy intended to comment on the universal condition of human existence"³. Wessex is the setting for his four major novels, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

"...in Hardy's fiction, the natural world is often described in great detail, rendering it more significant than a mere setting against which the narrative unfolds. Hardy establishes a reciprocal relationship between environment and character; an interaction which serves to demonstrate the changing position of humans in the post-Darwinian Victorian period. Hardy's narrative voice depicts the natural world in the same way the appearance of different individuals are described, and vice versa. This technique removes the sense of authority from human hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it."⁴

Hardy had come under the influence of Charles Darwin who in his *Origin of Species* had postulated the theory that the human species as it is today, is the result of natural selection which is a random selection, without any intent. It is circumstance that has enabled different species to evolve into the human species. Natural selection is the central concept of evolution which is the process where organisms evolve by adapting to their environment. Such a postulation went against the prevalent Christian belief in God as the Creator.

Hardy's emphasis on environment demonstrates the influence of Darwinian theory. The role of fate and circumstance are important features of the plot, echoing the stress evolutionary ideas place upon chance, extinction, and survival. Darwin's emphasis upon the power of circumstance to alter the outcome of natural selection is evident in Hardy's fiction. Human forces are ultimately rendered inconsequential against the unseen powers that appear to govern their immediate environment.⁵

1.5 THOMAS HARDY AND THE NOVEL OF REALISM

Hardy was a well read man and the literary and classical allusions in his writings serve as testimony to the vast reservoir of knowledge he had stored in his memory. He could cull out of his memory stories that he had listened to from his personal interactions with the people of rural England and from his reading of newspaper articles and he made them a part of his novels. He was a good prose writer and equally a good poet, and his writings reflect both his talent for expression and his enormous empathy with the rural and underprivileged people.

Hardy had a tormented adult life as he recognized the problems, sadness and lack of educational opportunities for peasants and rural people. He was also highly critical of the society's sexual mores that weighed in favour of men and victimized innocent women. He hardly communicated his grief except through his writings. Hardy once told his friend, Edward Clodd, in respect of his novels, that "every superstition, custom, etc., described therein may be depended on as true records of the same — and not inventions of mine".

Hardy's novels are realistic novels. What is realism in literature? A simple definition of realism in content, is that it is a faithful representation of reality with special focus on the representation of middle-class life. Realistic novels in the Victorian age were about the common man, in particular about the struggles of the lower classes especially when the lower class tried to gain upward mobility. Thus these novels came much closer to real life. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* illustrate the Victorian preoccupation with this genre known as social realism. Sometimes realism is defined as a 'slice of life writing' that presents a close observation of contemporary life. Realism in form relates to a literary technique to describe story elements, such as setting, characters, themes, etc., without using imagery or decorative language. Writers depicting realism use simple, transparent language. The characteristics of realism in novels include:

*An emphasis on the here and now

- Attention to specific action and verifiable consequences
- Realists evoke common actions, present surface details, and emphasize the minor catastrophes of the middle class
- They employ simple direct language and write about issues of conduct
- Characterization is very important. There is often an abundance of characters and social types.⁵

Check Your progress 2

1. What do you understand by 'realism' in a novel?
2. Write a note on Hardy's Wessex.

1.6 SALIENT ASPECTS OF HARDY'S NOVELS

Hardy examines the social conventions that hinder the lives of the poor rural folk in Victorian England, and criticizes such conventions, especially those relating to marriage, education and religion, that constrained the aspirations of those people and caused them unhappiness. Such unhappiness, and the suffering it brings, is seen by poet Philip Larkin as central in Hardy's works:

"What is the intensely maturing experience of which Hardy's modern man is most sensible? In my view it is suffering, or sadness, and extended consideration of the centrality of suffering in Hardy's work should be the first duty of the true critic for which the work is still waiting"⁶

In his novels, Hardy boldly takes a stand against the harsh and strict Victorian morals that do not accommodate passion and love that cuts across class differences. Tess is punished in the eponymous novel (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*) for her sexual involvement with a person from the aristocratic class. Hardy wants his readers to be conscious of the societal conventions that are forced on men and women as moral codes, without factoring in the passion and emotion underlying the relationships between men and women.

Fate or chance is another important theme. In Hardy's novels chance plays a predominant role almost reducing the characters to puppets who are pulled up and down by chance or Fate which often is malicious in its dispensations. Fate is not the same as Destiny though both terms are often used as synonyms. Fate is that which we cannot change. Destiny is something that holds the possibility of doing something by taking chances. For example, when we say someone is destined for great things, it means that the person can achieve it through making active and conscious decisions. Destiny is when we take chances even if we cannot control fate. Fate implies a force beyond human control that directs our actions. Indeed, Hardy's main characters often seem to be held in Fate's overwhelming grip. The role of Fate in the case of Tess is her tragedy. *Far From the Madding Crowd* is an example of a novel in which chance has a major role: "Had Bathsheba not sent the valentine, had Fanny not missed her wedding, for example, the story would have taken an entirely different path."

2.7 HARDY'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Lastly it is essential to understand Hardy's religious views that get reflected in his writings. We had touched upon it in section 2.4, focusing on Darwin's influence on Hardy. Hardy's family

was Anglican, but not very religious. He was disturbed by the struggles and often tragic events of life and Man's struggles while confronting them.

This made him question the traditional belief in Christianity that viewed God as all powerful and as the dispenser of rewards and punishments for good and evil committed by humans. He found it difficult to reconcile the existence of evil with the idea of God as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and a repository of goodness. He substituted the Christian God by the force called the Immanent Will that controls the universe – not in an orderly divine fashion, but through indifference, arbitrariness and caprice. Hardy believed that the Universe was devoid of meaning and in place of the divine force controlling the universe, he put the blind and unconscious will. Though he remained with the church he found that institutionalized Christianity with its belief in a divine and omnipotent God was incompatible with the human sufferings he witnessed all around him. Hardy developed “a consistent world-view through the notions of Chance and Time, Circumstances, Fate, Nature, Providence, Nemesis and Will tinged with metaphysical idealism”⁹.

While we study Hardy, we may have to keep in mind all these views – his views on Fate, the Immanent Will, the moral and societal codes of the Victorian period and his deep sympathy with the common people.

Check Your progress 3

How do you relate Hardy's religious views to Darwin's theory of evolution?

2.8 SUMMING UP.

In this Unit we have discussed: a brief summary of Hardy's novels; the salient features of his writings and Hardy's skepticism regarding religious beliefs. In the next two units, we will be discussing the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in detail.

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3. Charlotte Barrett, ‘Character and Environment in Thomas Hardy's Fiction’, *Thomas Hardy*
4. *ibid*.
5. British Literature, Wiki
6. Philip Larkin,, "Wanted: Good Hardy Critic" in *Required Writing*, London: Faber and Faber.
7. *Far from the Madding Crowd, Thomas Hardy – Introduction (Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 153. Gale Group, Inc.)*
8. Brennecke, Ernest Jr. *Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind*, Boston: Small Maynard and Company

2.10 GLOSSARY

Multifaceted:	Having many aspects
Protean:	Many sided, versatile
Iniquity:	Lack of justice or righteousness, injustice.
Archaic:	Old, ancient, outdated, antiquated.
Agrarian:	Agricultural, farming, rural
Watertight:	Foolproof, firm, impregnable, airtight.
Lukewarm:	Uninterested, unresponsive, indifferent
Idyllic:	Pastoral, picturesque, peaceful
Mores:	Customs, conventions and practices.
Critique:	Analysis, appraisal, assessment.
Rubric:	Class, category, heading
Microcosm:	A little world, world in miniature.

Post Darwinian: period after Charles Darwin, the British naturalist whose ‘Theory of evolution based on Natural selection’ in 1859 revolutionized the study of Biology. Evolution, he said was due to the process of changes and adaptation since the origin of the species.

Eponymous: A book or a Novel named after something else or deriving from an existing name or word:, the title of the novel has the same name of a character in it or the eponymous character in a story has the same name as the title of the story.

Boer Wars: Between 1899-1902, the Boer War was fought between the British and the Boers in South Africa (now called Afrikaners) as Britain wanted control of South Africa.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Why do we regard Thomas Hardy as a protean writer?
2. Discuss the salient aspects of Hardy’s novels.

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