

THOMAS HARDY

"Time changes everything except something within us which is always surprised by change."

Thomas Hardy

By Jessica Teisch

WHEN THOMAS HARDY WAS BORN in 1840, the railroads that had spread across England wouldn't reach his poor, rural Dorset County for another seven years. But he would soon be caught up in the rapid, often painful industrial changes sweeping through the country. The descendent of builders and stonemasons, Hardy left the countryside for London when he was 22 to work as an architect. In London, he educated himself by attending classes at King's College, visiting museums, and reading the works of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mills. After reading Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), he suffered a crisis of his Christian faith—a permanent loss. Following 16 years in architecture that included a return to Dorset, he turned to writing full time. He found his calling celebrating a rapidly disappearing rural life and exposing the hypocritical, now godless, world of staid Victorian values.

Where to Start

TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES and **JUDE THE OBSCURE**, both popular on high-school reading lists, introduce Hardy's most tragic characters and reveal his unconventional portrayal of a rapidly disappearing way of life. Also look for **THOMAS HARDY: THE COMPLETE POEMS**.

Hardy is, at one level, a classic Victorian novelist. His personal moral code, near atheism, and avant-garde philosophy, however, bridged the Victorian and modern eras. His best-known works shocked his readers' moral sensibilities: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), is a tale of sexuality and betrayal, and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), was viewed as another pornographic affront to virtue and the sacred institution of marriage. But his novels were not written to offend.

Hardy idealized rustic life and championed the values of the poorer classes. He also forcefully criticized the city's ruthless exploitation of the countryside. At heart, he was a pessimist whose sense of tragedy, stoic despair, and fate permeated his work. His doomed characters, from Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) to the poor country girl Tess, reveal his deterministic, modern view of nature's and man's cruel march of progress.

Hardy once expressed his desire to know a little bit of the world very well rather than a larger world less well. Perhaps with that in mind, Hardy returned to Dorset from London in 1867 and later introduced a semi-fictionalized version of the region called “Wessex” in his second novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). Hardy’s first great success, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), allowed him to turn to writing full time and formally presented his “Wessex,” a geographic concept that Hardy methodically developed in his seven self-described “Novels of Character and Environment” (see Major Works and sidebar, “Imaginative Wessex Only”). Later, in *Return of the Native* (1878), Hardy described this windswept wild on the edge of Egdon Heath as “perfectly accordant with man’s nature ... like man, slighted and enduring. ... It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.”

In 1874, Hardy married Emma Gifford, which proved to be an unhappy union. After traveling to Paris and setting up house in London, they returned to Dorchester, at Max Gate, a house designed by Hardy. *The Return of the Native* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* brought him acclaim, but

Tess of the D’Urbervilles and *Jude the Obscure* raised so much uproar due to their sexuality that Hardy cast aside his novel writing for poetry. Yet, no honor eluded him. In 1909, he became president of the Society of Authors. King George V conferred on him the Order of Merit and Freedom of Dorchester in 1910; two years later he received the Royal Society of Literature’s gold medal. When Emma died in 1912 (a regretful relationship he portrayed in “The Emma Poems” of 1912-13), he married his younger secretary. Hardy died in Dorset in 1928. His ashes were buried in the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey, and his (actual, not metaphorical) heart in Emma’s grave.

The “Hardy Tradition”

Although we generally think of Hardy as a novelist, he considered himself first and foremost a poet. Indeed, his poetic career spanned more than twice the length of his work as a novelist. Although Hardy produced the first of his more than 900 poems in the 1860s, his first volume, *Wessex Poems*, did not appear until 1898—three years after critics panned *Jude the Obscure* and he abandoned his novelistic

Selected Other Works

* Discussed in Major Works

THE POOR MAN AND THE LADY (1867)

After publishers rejected this satirical novel contrasting London and the English countryside, Hardy destroyed it.

DESPERATE REMEDIES (1871)

Hardy’s first published novel, which presented love triangles and themes of homosexuality, received mixed reviews. He published it anonymously.

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE (1872)

This popular “Novel of Character and Environment” portrays early Victorian life in a rural community, where a romance blossoms between the village schoolmistress and a member of the parish choir.

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES (1873)

The first novel to identify Hardy as its author and semi-autobiographical in nature, *Pair* recounts the tragic story of a stonemason’s love for the vicar’s daughter.

* FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD (1874)

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA (1876)
This domestic melodrama, a

departure from Hardy’s Wessex novels, features one humble woman’s rise to aristocracy.

* THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE (1878)

THE TRUMPET MAJOR (1880)

In Wessex during the Napoleonic era, the beautiful Anne Garland has three star-crossed suitors.

A LAODICEAN (1881)

In this novel about architecture and philosophy, an architect cavorts with an unconventional woman as a castle is restored.

TWO ON A TOWER (1882)

In this minor work, set in Wessex, Lady Constantine and an astronomer ten years her junior start a tragic affair.

* THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE (1886)

THE WOODLANDERS (1887)

Reputedly one of Hardy’s favorite works, this successful “Novel of Character and Environment” features a sophisticated village woman struggling over whether to marry up or settle down with an honest, steadfast man.

WESSEX TALES (1888)

Hardy’s first collection of short stories, most set before 1840,

portrays the lives of artisans and shepherds in Wessex and contains observations of a rapidly disappearing rural life.

* TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES (1891)

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES (1891)

This short story collection reflects Hardy’s interest in the Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club and his reading of a history of Dorset, from which he invented stories about strong women in 18th-century Wessex.

THE PURSUIT OF THE WELL-BELOVED (1892)

In search of the ideal woman, a sculptor falls in love with three women from the same family.

LIFE’S LITTLE IRONIES (1894)

These nine stories, which shed light on courtship and marriage in Victorian society, challenged the day’s moral conventions.

* JUDE THE OBSCURE (1895)

THE WELL-BELOVED (1897)

Hardy expressed disappointment in his last Wessex novel.

POETRY COLLECTIONS

Various collections of Hardy’s more than 900 poems exist.

ambitions. Hardy eventually published eight collections, including *Poems of the Past and Present* in 1901 and *The Dynasts* (1903-8), a panoramic exploration of the Napoleonic Wars.

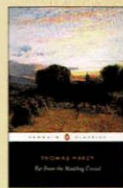
Like his last novels, Hardy's poetry was not well received initially. He wrote about love, loss, nostalgia, despair, and failure—typical themes for a poet—but he imbued these leitmotifs with a powerful, fatalist psychology that exposed the bleakness of the human condition. "Poetry is emotion put into measure," Hardy wrote about his lyrics. "The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art." Not surprisingly, reviewers criticized Hardy's work as too pessimistic and philosophically abstract.

Once again, opinion shifted over time. Today, many critics hail Hardy as the harbinger of the modern age in poetry. While traditional in technique, Hardy's colloquial diction, use of a variety of stanzaic forms, play with sound and words, depiction of familiar places and objects, and blend of Victorian softness with bluntness in diction anticipated trends in modern poetry. Although he wrote in a specific time and place, and included autobiographical elements like the harsh Dorset landscape in his lyrics, his poetry has universal appeal. "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912), for example, uses colloquial language to ruminate on the sinking of the Titanic and his era's failed dreams (see sidebar, "Hardy the Poet").

Hardy's distinctly modern voice gave rise to what critics call the "Hardy Tradition." Hardy influenced important 20th-century poets including Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas. Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Wallace Stevens all cited Hardy as an important influence. And more contemporary poets, from Adrienne Rich and Derek Walcott to Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney, hail Hardy's poetic inventiveness, authority, and lasting place in our literary canon.

MAJOR WORKS

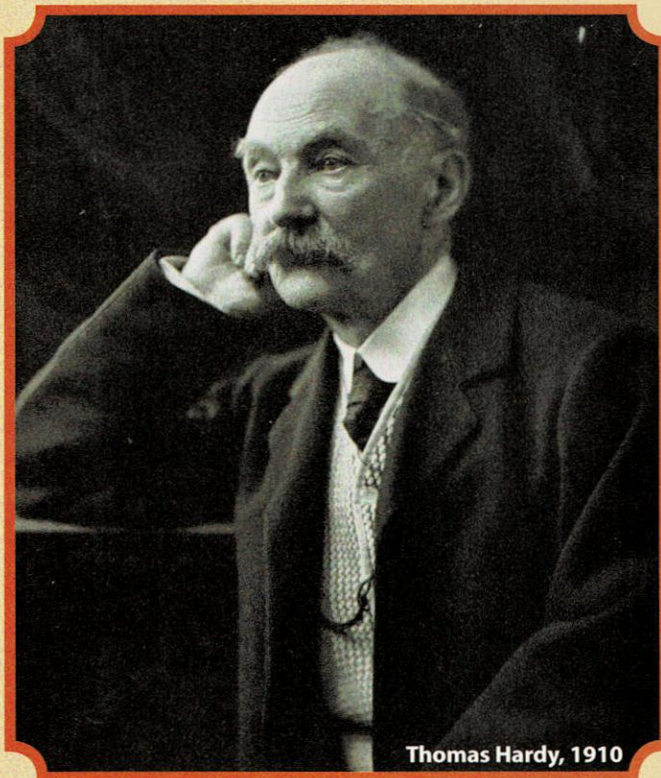
Far From the Madding Crowd (1874)



First serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* in January 1874, the first of his Wessex novels brought Hardy great acclaim. Published anonymously, it also raised speculation about its author—a few critics attributed the work to George Eliot. Considered a pastoral idyll, the novel takes place before industrialization swept through the Dorset landscape—very far, indeed, from the madding city life.

THE STORY: In this portrait of rural Wessex in the 1840s, three suitors pursue a headstrong farm girl, Bathsheba Everdene, who enjoys a position of unusual power. But when she's forced to choose among her rivals, tragedy results.

"The most genuine thing in his book ... is a certain aroma of the meadows and lanes—a natural relish for harvesting and sheep-washings." HENRY JAMES, *NATION*, 12/12/1874.



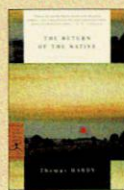
Thomas Hardy, 1910

"... the first of Thomas Hardy's great novels, and the first to sound the tragic note for which his fiction is best remembered." MARGARET DRABBLE, INTRODUCTION TO *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*, 1912 WESSEX EDITION (2001 MODERN LIBRARY EDITION).

"The subject was right; the method was right; the poet and the countryman, the sensual man, the somber reflective man, the man of learning, all enlisted to produce a book which, however fashions may chop and change, must hold its place among the great English novels." VIRGINIA WOOLF, QUOTED IN *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*, 1912 WESSEX EDITION (2001 MODERN LIBRARY EDITION).

THE BOTTOM LINE: The first of the Wessex novels, this melodramatic love story offers a romantic glimpse into pre-industrial rural life.

The Return of the Native (1878)



Hardy started this Wessex "Novel of Character and Environment" in 1876, when he and his wife Emma moved from London back to Dorset. *Cornhill Magazine* rejected the novel as too racy, and it was instead serialized in *Belgravia* during 1878. A year later, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* serialized it in the U.S.

THE STORY: When Clym Yeobright returns to his native Egdon Heath from Paris, he falls under the spell of Eustacia Vye, a willful, captivating beauty. But her dreams of escaping the hated heath to passion, doomed love, and ultimate suffering.

"[H]aving decided to write a story which should be out of the common, Mr. Hardy has shown both discretion and self-

"Imaginative Wessex Only"

Although they won't find it on a map, visitors traveling to southwestern England will find themselves bombarded with all things "Wessex"—from the local radio station Wessex FM to the names of businesses, parks, and clubs. Given this modern marketing phenomenon, it's easy to forget that Hardy invented this geography, mainly located around Dorset and modeled after the real counties of Berkshire, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset, and Wiltshire. The fictional maps that accompanied Hardy's novels upon publication gave him the moniker the "Wessex Novelist."

Hardy first mentioned Wessex in *Far from the Madding Crowd*. His public reacted so favorably to this semi-mythical region that Hardy developed it further to lend unity to his novels; the public reveled in his romantic, idyllic depictions of the landscape, even while he addressed its creeping change. Over time, Hardy carved up Wessex into discrete geographical regions—South Wessex in *Return of the Native*, Upper- and Mid-Wessex in *Tess*, and North and Outer Wessex in *Jude*.



The Wessex of Thomas Hardy, 1902, by Bertram Windle

Hardy also revised earlier editions of his novels for consistency and to conform to the actual geography of the region, though he continued to fictionalize place names. His revisions appeared in two collected editions, the *Wessex Novels Edition* (1895-96) and the *Wessex Edition* (1912). Though he mythologized the rural geography and claimed, "This is an imaginative Wessex only," visitors can follow in the footsteps of his characters today.

Max Gate, Dorchester. [1888?]

Dear Mr Marston,
 Could you, whenever advertising my books, use the words "Wessex novels" at the head of the list? I mean, instead of "By T.H.," "T.H.'s Wessex novels", or something of the sort? I find that the name Wessex, wh. I was the first to use in fiction, is getting to be taken up everywhere: & it would be a pity for us to lose the right to it for want of asserting it. It might also be used on the paper covers of the novels.
 Yours very truly, T. Hardy

SOURCE: HARDY, THOMAS. THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF THOMAS HARDY. VOL. 1. EDITED BY RICHARD LITTLE PURDY AND MICHAEL MILLGATE. OXFORD: THE CLARENDON PRESS, 1978.

knowledge in the choice of his scene. ... Egdon Heath is one of the wildest spots in all England, and is situated among some of the most sequestered of parishes. ... We are in England all the time, but in a world of which we seem to be absolutely ignorant." THE SATURDAY REVIEW, 1/4/1879.

"People talk as no people talked before, or perhaps we should say as no people ever talk now. ... These people all speak in a manner suggestive of high cultivation, and some of them intrigue almost as dwellers of Mayfair, while they live on merely equal terms with the furze-cutting rustics."

THE ATHENAEUM, 11/23/1878.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A major novel about tragic, mismatched love, set in pre-industrial Wessex.

The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886)



Critics initially condemned this novel, first serialized in *Graphic* (England) and *Harper's* (U.S.) in 1886. Hardy introduced the county town of Dorchester (the fictional Casterbridge) and chronicled the personal dramas involved during the transition from rural to modern life.

Published after the passage of the 1884 Third Reform Bill, which enfranchised some farm laborers, *Casterbridge* also comments on politics, the decline of folk traditions, and Christian morality.

THE STORY: In a fit of drunkenness, poor hay trusser Michael Henchard auctions off his wife and daughter to a passing sailor—and by turning over a new leaf, rises in wealth and status as mayor of Casterbridge. Nearly 20 years later, the discarded wife and daughter return to Casterbridge and reconcile with Henchard. But at constant war with himself over his spiritual and material leanings, his own weaknesses may destroy him.

"[The] language of the peasants again is a point on which we have an old quarrel with Mr. Hardy. It is neither one thing nor the other—neither dialect exactly reproduced nor a thorough rendering into educated English." THE ATHENAEUM, 5/29/1886.

"The Mayor of Casterbridge is a disappointment. The story which is very slight and singularly devoid of interest, is, at the same time, too improbable." GEORGE SAINTSBURY, SATURDAY REVIEW, 5/29/1886.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic tragedy whose original subtitle says it all: "The Life and Death of a Man of Character."

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891)



Graphic serialized Hardy's bestselling twelfth novel in 1891. Drawn against the background of a dying rural society, it outraged readers with its depictions of sex, sympathy for the lower classes (especially rural women), and charge of Victorian hypocrisy. Hardy nonetheless regarded *Tess* as his best work.

THE STORY: When the wealthy, dissolute Alec d'Urberville seduces poor country girl Tess Durbeyfield, descended from an ancient noble family, she becomes pregnant. Soon after the baby dies, she finds work as an anonymous dairymaid and marries a clergyman's son, Angel Clare. But when he learns about her past, he deserts her—and she turns again to Alec in a fit of passion, desperation, and violence.

"The title-page ... is decorated with the supplementary phrase, 'A pure woman faithfully presented.' In the light of this phrase the book must be read, and with the assurance that the author's definition will be found there. A definition is found, full and explicit, doubtless directly inspired, for it bears no resemblance to the common usage of people's language, but is, on the contrary, a negation if not reversal of the definition people learned at school, and of the meaning impressed on people by the practice of living."

THE NATION, 4/28/1892.

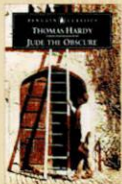
"... not only good, but great." ATHENAEUM, 1/9/1892.

"... an unpleasant novel told in a very unpleasant way."

SATURDAY REVIEW, 1/16/1892.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Hardy's bestseller during his time and ours features the most tragic heroine you'll ever meet.

Jude the Obscure (1895)



Harper's New Monthly Magazine serialized Hardy's last novel—originally titled *The Simpletons* and renamed *Jude the Obscure* by critics—in 1894. Critics on both sides of the Atlantic accused Hardy of moral degeneration in his presentation of the conflict between the carnal and spiritual life. Its fitting epigraph reads: "The letter killeth."

THE STORY: Jude Fawley, who dreams of attending university but becomes a stonemason instead, marries a local girl, Arabella. He then falls in love with his more intellectual cousin, Sue Bridehead (one of Hardy's most feminist characters), who in turn marries the schoolmaster. Jude and Sue obtain divorces, but their life together falls apart in their disapproving society. In the end, Jude fails to reconcile his competing desires for sensual and intellectual fulfillment.

"Authorities differ as to *Jude*; personally, I dislike it exceedingly, but it is only fair to say that by some it is thought to be very fine and it undoubtedly does contain some magnificent writing, but I can neither excuse nor forget its black pessimism. ... In *Jude* the tragedy becomes too horrible for words—almost grotesque." A. EDWARD NEWTON, THOMAS HARDY—

NOVELIST OR POET? (1929).

THE BOTTOM LINE: A tragic novel about the nature of commitment and marriage, and a powerful look into the dark forces that sometimes govern human nature. ■

Hardy the Poet

"THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN"

(Lines on the loss of the "Titanic")

I

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls-grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?"

VI

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

VIII

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

X

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.