

**HARDY AND HIS TIMES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO WESSEX SOCIETY**

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Abstract: Hardy's major novels were produced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He is, thus, one of the later Victorian novelists. The second half of the Victorian age was, in temper and convictions, substantially different from the first half which was marked by great complacency and optimism.

Keywords: socialism, liberalism and organized feminism. advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge, evangelical revivals.

Literature is an expression of the writer and his personality itself is formed and molded by the times in which he lives. It is more so in the case of a writer as sensitive as Thomas Hardy. It is therefore necessary that one has an idea of the age in which Hardy lived and created his immortal novels.

The British people, in the early Victorian age, were content with their system of government, and even, though not so fully, with their social order. The throne was occupied by a young and virtuous Queen, whose person inspired a chivalrous loyalty; a girl-queen, happily married, a model of all the domestic virtues, a mirror of the

proprieties that the British people loved; and her court was stainless.

The Victorian Age was a very exciting period with many artistic styles, schools as well as political and social movements. There were also rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere, from advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location. It was a time of prosperity, imperial expansion and great political reform

Parliament, too, had more than regained its old ascendancy over the mind of the nation. On the whole the nation was content with the system it had wrought for itself a full

tide of prosperity. The age began with confidence and optimism, which led to an economic boom including growing prosperity. At some point the prosperity gave way to uncertainty and doubt regarding Britain's place in the world.

As a result of the Industrial Revolution, was flowing in Britain; there was work for all, wages were rising, and the bitter cleavage between the rich and the poor which had been so formidable seemed to be healing. Careers seemed to be open to talent; fortunes were easily made; the self-made man was common enough to challenge ambition, and most men were ready to believe that the gospel of self-help which was the reigning philosophy of the time in the economic sphere might well bring about general well-being.

The old ruling class had lost their entrenched ascendancy but their social ascendancy was as great as it ever had been, especially because the old abuses of corruption and patronage had come to an end, and because Society, on the whole, reflected the sober prosperity of the middle class. Even the working classes, so recently on the verge of revolt, seemed to have settled down, and to progress. In view of the enormous increase in material wealth and the physical amenities of civilization there

seemed no good reason why this progress should not continue indefinitely.

The Victorian time saw the beginning and spread of political movements, most importantly socialism, liberalism and organized feminism. The social classes were reforming. The old hierarchical order was changing with the growing of the middle class. The composition of the upper class was changing from pure aristocracy to a combination of nobility and emerging wealthy gentlemen of commercial class

The early Victorian age may legitimately be called an age of religion. It was a matter of making the best of both worlds, the material and the spiritual. There never was a time when the churches were more active, or played a greater part in the lives of average citizens. Great evangelical revivals took place from time to time. There was, however, an element of rigidity and narrowness in the temper of the time. There was a strong flavour of Puritanism in Victorian England, which had both good and bad influences. Self-indulgence and lavish living were regarded with disfavour; and in this way the Puritan temper encouraged that worship of thrift, as one of the highest of virtues, which contributed so greatly to the economic prosperity of the country. Cards and theatre came to be looked upon as

dangerous and immoral. One of its results was that the art of the theatre was almost extinguished. Another result was the growth of that mealy-mouthed propriety, that refusal to recognize or mention unsavoury subjects which are associated with the name of Mrs. Grundy. This superficial notion of decency was nowhere better represented than in the age's attitude towards women and sex. Victorian morality placed an excessive emphasis on the chastity of women. Their proper sphere was within the four walls of the home; any contact with the outside world was supposed to corrupt and spoil them. Their chief business was to look after the comforts of their men folk.

Likewise, the Victorian concept of respectability involved a taboo on the frank recognition and expression of sex. The distrust of sex was partly religious, an inheritance from Puritanism, partly secular, the result of a determined effort to enforce standards of decency in reaction against the licence of the Regency and the reign of George IV. The sacredness of British home and family life, about which so much of the sentiment of the age gathered, was to be protected, and the Queen herself led in the movement to make domestic purity fashionable. Undoubtedly this movement was in some degrees a mere fashion, and the

maintenance of the conventions in spite of facts gave to Victorianism its taint of hypocrisy. Walter Allen states that Carlyle, at John Forster's house, declared that chastity among men was as good as dead and Dickens a fellow guest said that "incontinence was so much the rule in England that if his own son were particularly chaste, he should be alarmed on his account as if he could not be in good health."¹

The Victorian protest against sexual licence and promiscuity thus rang hollow. The Victorian morality did not in truth square with the facts of life.

The middle class people living in the Victorian age based their life on a set of values that supported sexual repression, low tolerance of crime, and a strong social ethic. Due to the enormous impact and importance of the British Empire, many of these values were spread across the world. Moreover the Queen and her husband's moral code were rather high. Prudery and Repression was dominating features in the big picture of the Victorian period. Nevertheless verbal and written communication about emotions and sexual feelings were mostly discussed in the language of the flowers.

The material prosperity that followed the Industrial Revolution gave to the Victorians

a smug and self-complacent conventionality, contentment with low ideals and an unsparing morality. The Victorians, barring a few dissidents such as Carlyle, Ruskin and later Mathew Arnold, seemed to ignore altogether the havoc caused by the Industrial Revolution, the presence of mass poverty; the existence side by side of what Disraeli called the two nations--the extremely rich and the extremely poor.

The second half of the Victorian period witnessed, at least in literature, a many-sided revolt against the conventional morality and the self-complacency of the age.

Throughout the Victorian Era movements for justice, freedom and other strong moral values dominated opposed to greed, exploitation and cynicism. Culturally the novel developed during this time. It was a very important era and can be compared to the importance of the Shakespearean plays for the Elizabethans. Some great novelists were Sir Walter Scott, Emily, Anna and Charlotte Bronte, Oscar Wilde and of course Charles Dickens.

Not one novelist of the Period- George Eliot, Meredith, Mrs Gaskell and Thomas Hardy--exulted in the happiness of his own time; they were all preachers of one form or another of revolt or retreat or discontent. They were not content with life as it was.

The single most important event in this period was, for our purposes, the publication of Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. Man, it seemed, was not a unique creature, but only the last link in a long chain of evolution. The old certainties were undermined; the new dogma seemed chill and forbidding. At one stroke, the entire theory of creation as stated in Genesis in the Bible collapsed. Man's Place in Nature (Huxley published his brilliant book on this subject in 1863) appeared to be no longer that of a triumphant master, but of a helpless creature in the grip of blind forces which he might modify, but which he could not control. The self-complacent generation was brought face to face with a total recast of some of its most fundamental conceptions. It seemed to knock out the very bottom of religious faith, and the whole edifice on which religion stood came tumbling down. Man's faith in orthodox religious beliefs was shaken; he could no longer accept without question God's omnipotence and benevolence. The process started by Darwin was carried forward by Huxley, Spenser, and Mill etc. The impact of these developments in science and philosophy on the works of Thomas Hardy was far-reaching. With the cushion of religion gone, the age as given to uncertainty, scepticism,

melancholy and pessimism. The confusion was wide-spread. Mathew Arnold gave a forceful expression to this peculiar temper of the age.

.....the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of or dreams,
So various, so beautiful, So near,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.²

Lord David Cecil states,

"Christian teachers have always said that there was no alternative to Christianity but pessimism, that if Christian doctrine was not

true, life was a tragedy. Hardy quite agreed with them."³

He did so because he lived at a time when the intellectual assent to Christianity, in view of the scientific discoveries, was extremely difficult. He did not believe because Darwin, Mill, Huxley and Herbert Spencer had, through their theories, made it "almost impossible for their younger contemporaries to retain the notion of a transcendent governing Providence." And Hardy, as Walter Allen puts it, was the quintessential younger contemporary of these scientists and philosophers.

D "Between the forces of nature, including therein the forces of his own nature and man's aspirations there could be no reconciliation: they were eternally opposed, and from the human view the workings of nature must appear hostile and **B**align."⁴

e Hardy's own temperament only served to reinforce this conviction.

h Another result of the impact of science on the society was that people were now no longer afraid to discuss the problems of sex and marriage. Havelock Ellis and Freud were already working on their epoch-making works. A change in the direction of levity, if not of laxity, took place, due' no

doubt, in part to the gradual crumbling of religious faith with which a strict and ascetic moral code had always been associated. When the hold of religion weakened, religion could no longer influence the social conduct of the people and therefore Victorian taboos on sex relaxed. Realism encouraged by science made a freer and more frank treatment of sex possible. By 1980 we find writers like Thomas Hardy shocking Victorian morality and notions of decency by a free discussion of marriage and sex-relations. Considered a Victorian realist, Hardy examines the social constraints on the lives of those living in Victorian England, and criticises those beliefs, especially those relating to marriage, education and religion, that limited people's lives and caused unhappiness.

WESSEX SOCIETY

Hardy's Wessex is that section of southern England that corresponds roughly with the old kingdom of the West Saxons and includes the counties of Berkshire, Wilts, Somerset, Hampshire, Dorset and Devon, either wholly or in part. The scenes of most of his stories are laid in Dorset itself, the centre of Wessex and his home country. Hardy had always enjoyed cycling around Dorset looking at the originals of his

Wessex places. He had no qualms about matching most of these settings up on a one-for-one basis with real places, and in 1913 he helped his friend and neighbour Herman Lea to produce the first "Hardy's Wessex" guidebook identifying the "real" sites, something that has since become a publishing industry. Merryn Williams tells us,

"In fact all the major novels except Jude are set primarily in Dorset. Under the Greenwood Tree, Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native and The Mayor of Casterbridge are all staged in the immediate Dorchester area. The woodlanders are wholly, and Tess partly on the other side of the plateau, though the Talbothays scenes in Tess take place in Frome Valley, near Dorchester or Egdon Heath. Jude has a quite different setting in Berkshire, about twenty miles south of Oxford."⁵

Hardy took great pains to preserve the local quality of the novels, and to make his descriptions of life in the region authentic. Hardy claimed,

"At the date represented in the various narratives things was like that In Wessex: the inhabitants lived in certain ways, engaged in certain occupations, kept alive

certain customs, just as they are shown dawning in these pages."⁶

At Hardy's time, Wessex, a name which stands for the historical geography turns well known. When Hardy edited all of his works into an anthology in 1920's, he entitled them with the general name of Wessex Novels, and defined the range this area belongs to. The main settings including his fourteen novels and more than forty novelettes and short stories are all in this specific area. The undulating grazing land and field, the rugged coasts and harbors, the serene and extensive mansions and gardens, and the honest peasants and simple country accent, etc, are all regarded as the necessary elements which form his works.

Thomas Hardy's hyper-detailed but fictional Wessex set a precedent for authors to follow; Hardy expanded the imaginative realm through the creation of a fictional geography

Hardy's construction of Wessex is not solely nostalgic in nature; the author clearly recognizes the various social constraints of his provincial Wessex. Through these interesting sociological tensions, Thomas Hardy proves why rural "Wessex culture" became obsolete in the late 19th century—the progressive values and rapid urbanization of the era prevented such a

traditionally pastoral lifestyle from flourishing. Ultimately, Hardy's portrayal of Wessex is neither overtly sentimental, nor is it judgmental; he is simply immortalizing the Dorset of his childhood in a literary form. However, this notion is complicated by the sheer scale of his project; through the rearticulating of local geography, Hardy succeeds in creating his own regional mythology.

It is, therefore, of utmost importance for understanding his characters, both men and women, to know the kind of society they lived in. It will do well if we, from the outset, disabuse our minds of certain misconceptions. Most critics of Hardy betray a romantic view of the Wessex countryside which requires certain modifications.

He, however, moves away from truth when he asserts that the changes wrought in agricultural economy by the Industrial Revolution had no impact on life in Wessex countryside,

"But in the Dorset countryside...one might almost have supposed that human nature was changeless, unaffected by history or technology, flowing through the centuries like a stately procession of verities and recurrences."⁷

Such a view ignores completely the conflicts that already existed within rural society in Wessex as also the impact, quite discernible, of industrialism on life in even remote Dorset.

The aristocracy constituted the backbone of the ruling class. Landownership carried a prestige which the rising capitalists like the Stoke d'Urbervilles in Tess were anxious to buy or like Mrs. Charmond in The Woodlanders inherited it through marriage. Ranking just below the great landlords was the much larger class of small country squires. The Anglican clergy was linked to these landed gentry by many family and property ties. It was virtually alienated from the labourers. About half of all farmers were tenants holding land from the Squires. The others were small holders, or 'family farmers' who employed hardly any outside labour and formed a relatively independent class. Most villages also contained a small group of rural craftsmen, described by Hardy in Tess,

"The village had contained side by side with the agricultural labourers, an interesting and better informed class ranking distinctly above the former the class to which Tess's father and mother had belonged - and including the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with non-

descript workers other than farm labourers; a set of people who owed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders like Tess's father or copy-holders, or occasionally small freeholders."⁸

This was the class which suffered most from the dwindling of the village market and the industrialization of the neighbouring towns. With the improvement of roads and communications, first the lady of manor, then the farmer's wife, and lastly the cottager learnt to buy in the town many articles that used to be made in the village. And a 'village shop' was now often set-up stocked with goods from the cities. The self-sufficing, self-clothing village became more and more a thing of the past.

To make matters worse, the farmers resented the semi-independent position of this class and persecuted it in many ways. Life holders rented their cottages for the duration of three lives, unlike the ordinary labourers who could be turned out whenever the farmers wished. John South in The Woodlanders is the last in the family to retain possession of his cottage. After his death, both Marty South, his daughter and Giles Winter-Borne, his nephew were evicted. A similar fate met Tess and her family after the death of her father, John Durbeyfield. Thus viewed, the

class structure of rural society in landless Wessex was rather complex. The gap between rich farmers and landless labourers was immense, but social mobility was possible on a limited scale.

"A small farmer might lose his capital and sink to being a bailiff, whereas a shepherd might rise to being a bailiff or even to renting a small farm of his own."⁹

Gabriel Oak begins life as a shepherd, becomes a bailiff for a short time and then rise through his own efforts to lease a small sheep farm. But when the sheep which represent his entire capital are destroyed he has to go on labour market again, offer himself as a candidate for any kind of work at hiring fair. He is passed over here but manages to get a job as a shepherd on Bathsheba's farm, becomes her bailiff, marries Bathsheba and becomes an independent farmer again. The same thing happens with Henchard (The Mayor of Casterbridge) and Giles Winterbourne (The Woodlanders). Henchard rises from the position of a haytrusser to be a considerable employer of labour and Mayor of the town and then, due to the vagary of fate, is ruined and goes back to hay-trussing and becomes a day labourer in the farms and granaries he formerly had owned. Likewise Giles who is a skilled craftsman, a cider-maker and a

planter of trees, after being dispossessed by Mrs. Charmond of the house he lived in, becomes something very much like a day labourer. Marty South also sinks almost to the bottom of the social scale.

The Labourers

The growth of the factory system and of capitalist agriculture involved a number of changes. The condition of the labourer in the countryside was already bad. His job involved rising at four in the morning and coming home to dinner and supper at seven in the evening. The average labourer lived in a cottage which was no better than a "crumbling hovel of clay and wood", like the one in which Giles in The Woodlanders spent the last few days of his life. He could be evicted from it at the farmer's convenience. Employment in many parts of the country was regulated by hiring fairs such as Weydon - Priors in The Mayor of Casterbridge and the one in Far from the Madding Crowd where Gabriel Oak offers his services.

"Once a man was lucky enough to be hired, his earning largely depended on how many members of his family were employed with him. Woman's labour, as Hardy said, was, "highly in request, for a woman.... like a boy, fills the place of a man at half the wages."¹⁰ Women, deprived of their old

means of livelihood by the decay of cottage industries, went into field work beside their men folk. The big capitalist farmers began to employ gangs of women in hoeing and weeding. Such employment had always been occasional among country women, and they had always turned out at hay time and harvest. But now the big farmers employed women all the year round because the large enclosed farms required much weeding and preparation. And women did much of the roughest work.

"A graphic picture of the hard work they had to do has been given by Hardy in his description of the work done by women on Flint comb Ash farm in Tess."¹¹

Children started very young, sometimes at younger than six. They were given usually the lighter jobs, such as bird scaring. Jude began life by scaring rooks from the corn. Many women took an active part in tilling the family patch of ground, looking after the pig (Arabella Donn in *Jude the Obscure* or cow or sheep (Bathsheba Everdene in *Far from the Madding Crowd*), marketing the goods or helping to conduct some local business. The wife was often the husband's partner and fellow-worker. But the growth of high farming and big business tended to drive them out of these activities.

The upper the upper class woman was being devitalized and cut off from life and its interests as a result of the increasing wealth of her men folk and the more artificial conditions Of modern life. It became the hall-mark of a 'lady' like Mrs.Charmond in *The Woodlanders* and Mrs. Stoke D'Urbervilles in *Tess* to be idle.

The wives of wealthy farmers tried to ape the manners of the upper class ladies. In old days a farmer's wife had always been a very busy woman, with all the cares of the house and some of the cares of the farm on her shoulders. She had to cook and care not only for her own family but for the labourers also who fed at her husband's board and lodged under his roof. These domestic conditions now changed. The hands employed were more numerous but for that very reason they no longer boarded or fed with their employer. The well-to-do farmers employed better type of domestic servant to relieve their wives of drudgery. The farmer's daughters, it was said,

"Instead of being taught their duty and the business of a dairy at home, received their education at Boarding School, are taught to dance, to speak French, and to play upon the harpsichord."¹²

Women belonging to the working classes were not only economically exploited but

sexually too. They were always subject to sexual domination and destruction from men. Some of them were forced to yield to the lecherous landlords because of the pressure of circumstances, the poverty of the family, the threat. Of eviction from the cottage occupied by their family. In the case of Tess, the Durbeyfield children are totally subject to ruin if Tess does not help them by becoming Alec's mistress. There were others who were themselves depraved and were proud of their liaison with the Master. Thus we have the example of Alec d'Urbervilles acting as a sexual despot.

"The levity of some of the younger women in and about Tantridge was marked, and was perhaps symptomatic of the choice spirit who ruled... in that vicinity."¹³

Tess's associates are 'careless women' such as 'a dark virago, Car Darch, dubbed Queen of Spades, till lately a favourite of d'Urbervilles', and 'Nancy her sister, nicknamed the Queen of Diamonds'. The latter has' stood in the relations to d'Urbervilles that Car had also been suspected of'. Tess, with reasonable justification, describes them as 'a who rage'. The picture of women staggering drunkenly home from their weekly orgy at the market town of Chase borough shows the degradation to which they had fallen. Some

of them like the 'hoydenish maiden of the hamlet' Sue Dawson in *The Woodlanders* were amoral, noisy, casually promiscuous girls.

The community in the rural countryside accepted the situation stoically. Alec's behaviour is not a disgraceful secret from the community but something he unashamedly flaunts and in which it abets him. The community itself connives at innocent girls like Tess being delivered into the hands of rich lecherous landowners. To the working class people it was the common occurrence and they accepted it in a spirit of resignation. It is this community attitude that made it possible for Tess to return home after her rape by Alec and even to suckle her child in the field. It is the upper class people who practice a double standard. Fitzpiers could seduce Sue Damson and have adulterous relations with Mrs. Charmond too. Melbury, for all his moral stance, persuaded his daughter Grace to make it with Fitzpiers and live with him. Alec could rape and seduce with impunity, but Tess's family had to be evicted because 'the village had to be kept pure.

People in the Wessex countryside, like peasants everywhere else, were given to superstitions. Henchard consulted a conjurer about the harvest and relied on his forecast

implicitly; with disastrous consequences. Susan in *The Return of the Native* was convinced that Eustacia Vye was a witch, and that her son Johnny's ailments were caused by a spell she had cast over him. To counteract this she jabbed a needle into Eustacia's arm at church. Later when Eustacia was wandering across the heath to her death on a dark stormy night, Susan was busy preparing a wax image of Eustacia into which she thrust pins through and through, melt it over the fire as she repeated the Lord's prayer backwards three times against her enemy. Hardy tells us.

"It was a practice well known on Eden at that date, and one that is not quite extinct at the present day."¹⁴

Another popular superstition was that virgins could divine the name of their future husband by attending and participating in a ritual on Mid-Summer Eve as in *The Woodlanders*. The rather drab life of the peasants was enlivened by visits to fairs such as Weydon Priors in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or the one at Chase borough in *Tess*. There would be dancing and drinking. The scenes have been vividly described in *Tess* and *The Return of the Native*. They would lit bonfires on Guy Fawke's Day (*The Return of the Native*) and hold the May Day Dance with great zest (*Tess*). People would

seek recreation in home-made traditional pleasures, customary rural ceremonies and merry-makings such as "the parties in *The Woodlanders* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, with their homely jests and rude, plenty and boisterous country dances; winter delights, as when the mummers perform the old Christmas play, "St. George," by the firelight of Mrs. Yeobright's kitchen in *The Return of the native*, or the carol singers call Fancy to her window under the frosty starlight in *Under the Greenwood Tree*; and those of summer--the Maypole, sprung up in the night like Jack's beanstalk, and gay with bluebell and cowslip and ragged robin, which greets Thomasin's eyes when she looks out of her window in the early morning; or the midsummer rites that seemed the village girls of Hintock stealing through the shadowy woods in the voluptuous June night in *The Woodlanders*; the sunburnt harvest-home supper, with its songs and its cider- drinking, outside Bathsheba's farmhouse in *Far from the Madding Crowd*."¹⁵

Hardy knew his Wessex in every aspect of its social economy and history and landscape. He was keenly sensitive to the spirit of the place. He had studied folklore and local songs, the dance music and rural sports and the succeeded in recreating

vividly the full life of the Wessex countryside before the readers.

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