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Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

By Dr. Hannah Simpson

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Thomas Hardy (2 June 1840 – 11 January 1928) was an English novelist and poet. His prolific writing career spanned the end of the Victorian period and the early decades of modernism. His novels, including *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*, are markedly naturalist in tone, focused on the sufferings occasioned by Victorian social inequality and by an inexorable, impersonal fate. Hardy's poetry is written in a vast range of poetic forms and makes frequent experimentation with metre and stanza form, indicating his engagement with the formal upheavals of the literary modernist period.

Hardy was born in Dorset and, apart from a brief period of times spent working in London as an architect, spent most of his life there; the geography of the area and its local dialect terms are frequent features of his published work. He married Emma Gifford in 1874 and, although the couple were estranged for the last twenty years of her life, was devastated by her death in 1912. The volume *Satires of Circumstance* reflects his mourning; he would marry Florence Emily Dugdale, his secretary and thirty-nine years his junior, shortly after in 1914. Twice nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature, in his later years Hardy received visits from many significant literary figures, including William Butler Yeats, Siegfried Sassoon, and Virginia Woolf, before dying of complications from pleurisy in January 1928. His ashes are interred in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, and his heart is buried with his first wife.

Hardy the Poet

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<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy>

One of the most renowned poets and novelists in English literary history, Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 in the English village of Higher Bockhampton in the county of Dorset. He died in 1928 at Max Gate, a house he built for himself and his first wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford, in Dorchester, a few miles from his birthplace. Hardy's youth was influenced by the musicality of his father, a stonemason and fiddler, and his mother, Jemima Hand Hardy, often described as the real guiding star of Hardy's early life. Though he was an architectural apprentice in London, and spent time there each year until his late 70s, Dorset provided Hardy with material for his fiction and poetry. One of the poorest and most backward of the counties, rural life in Dorset had changed little in hundreds of years, which Hardy explored through the rustic characters in many of his novels. Strongly identifying himself and his work with Dorset, Hardy saw himself as a successor to the Dorset dialect poet [William Barnes](#), who had been a friend and mentor. Moreover, Hardy called his novels the Wessex

Novels, after one of the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain. He provided a map of the area, with the names of the villages and towns he coined to represent actual places.

But other features of southern England also influenced Hardy, especially as a poet. Stonehenge was only the most famous of the many remains of the past scattered throughout the English south. There Hardy could explore and contemplate Druid and Roman, ancient and medieval ruins, a fascination which also found expression in later poems like “The Shadow on the Stone.” Hardy’s interest in history also extended to the Napoleonic Wars, which he considered one of the great events of the historical past; Dorset tradition told of the fear of Bonaparte’s invasion of England. Hardy’s epic, poetical drama *The Dynasts* (1908) reflects a lifetime of involvement with this historical material, including interviews he conducted with elderly soldiers who had fought in the Napoleonic campaigns. Hardy also visited the field of the battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon’s forces were defeated.

Alive to the past, as a writer Hardy was also sensitive to the future; scores of younger authors, including William Butler Yeats, Siegfried Sassoon, and Virginia Woolf, visited him, and he discussed poetry with Ezra Pound. Furthermore, Hardy’s well-known war poems spoke eloquently against some of the horrors of his present, notably the Boer War and World War I. In such works as “Drummer Hodge” and “In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations,’” Hardy addressed the conflicts in visceral imagery, often using colloquial speech and the viewpoint of ordinary soldiers. His work had a profound influence on other war poets such as Rupert Brooke and Sassoon.

Hardy’s long career spanned the Victorian and the modern eras. He described himself in “In Tenebris II” as a poet “who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” and during his nearly 88 years he lived through too many upheavals—including World War I—to have become optimistic with age. Nor did he seem by nature to be cheerful: much of the criticism around his work concerns its existentially bleak outlook, and, especially during Hardy’s own time, sexual themes. Incredibly prolific, Hardy wrote fourteen novels, three volumes of short stories, and several poems between the years 1871 and 1897. Hardy’s great novels, including *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), were all published during this period. They both received negative reviews, which may have led Hardy to abandoning fiction to write poetry.

From 1898 until his death in 1928 Hardy published eight volumes of poetry; about one thousand poems were published in his lifetime. Moreover, between 1903 and 1908 Hardy published *The Dynasts*—a huge poetic drama in 3 parts, 19 acts, and 130 scenes. Using the Napoleonic wars to dramatize his evolving philosophy, Hardy also pioneered a new kind of verse. According to John Wain’s introduction to the 1965 St. Martin’s Press edition of the dramatic poem, in composing *The Dynasts* Hardy took “one of those sudden jumps which characterize the man of genius. ... He wrote his huge work in accordance with conventions of an art that had not yet been invented: the art of cinema.” *The Dynasts*, following this view, is “neither a poem, nor a play, nor a story. It is a shooting-script.” Though little read today, *The Dynasts* presents Hardy’s idea of “evolutionary meliorism,” the hope that human action could make life better. The length and scope of *The Dynasts*, which

was published in three parts over five years, engendered varied, and sometimes bewildered, responses. But by 1908, with the publication of the third part, most reviewers were enthusiastic.

However, Hardy's lyric poetry is by far his best known, and most widely read. Incredibly influential for poets such as Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, and Donald Hall, Hardy forged a modern style that nonetheless hewed closely to poetic convention and tradition. Innovative in his use of stanza and voice, Hardy's poetry, like his fiction, is characterized by a pervasive fatalism. In the words of biographer Claire Tomalin, the poems illuminate "the contradictions always present in Hardy, between the vulnerable, doomstruck man and the serene inhabitant of the natural world." Hardy's lyrics are intimately and directly connected to his life: the great poems of 1912 to 1913 were written after the death of Emma on November 27, 1912. Some of these works are dated as early as December 1912, a month after her death, and others were composed in March of the following year, after Hardy had visited St. Juliot, Cornwall, where he first met Emma. Tomalin described Emma's death as "the moment when Thomas Hardy became a great poet," a view shared by other recent critics. Hardy's Emma poems, Tomalin goes on to point out, are some the "finest and strangest celebrations of the dead in English poetry." Hardy was notorious for his relationships with younger women throughout his life, and he married Florence Dugdale, a woman almost 40 years his junior, shortly after Emma's death. Hardy's Emma poems, then, according to Thomas Mallon in the *New York Times*, are "racked with guilt and wonder." They are poems in which he attempts to come to terms with the loss of both his wife and his love for her, many years earlier.

Though frequently described as gloomy and bitter, Hardy's poems pay attention to the transcendent possibilities of sound, line, and breath—the musical aspects of language. As Irving Howe noted in *Thomas Hardy*, any "critic can, and often does, see all that is wrong with Hardy's poetry but whatever it was that makes for his strange greatness is hard to describe." Hardy's poetry, perhaps even more so than his novels, has found new audiences and appreciation as contemporary scholars and critics attempt to understand his work in the context of Modernism. But Hardy has always presented scholars and critics with a contradictory body of work; as Jean Brooks suggests in *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure*, because Hardy's "place in literature has always been controversial, constant reassessment is essential to keep the balance between modern and historical perspective." Virginia Woolf, a visitor to Max Gate, noted some of Hardy's enduring power as a writer: "Thus it is no mere transcript of life at a certain time and place that Hardy has given us. It is a vision of the world and of man's lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination, a profound and poetic genius, a gentle and humane soul."

When Hardy died in 1928, his ashes were deposited in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey and his heart, having been removed before cremation, was interred in the graveyard at Stinsford Church where his parents, grandparents, and his first wife were buried.

By Dr. Andrzej Diniejko

Victorian Web

<https://victorianweb.org/authors/hardy/bio.html>

Thomas Hardy's life can be divided into three phases. The first phase (1840-1870) embraces childhood, adolescence, apprenticeship, first marriage, early poems and his first unpublished novel. The second phase (1871-1897) is marked by intensive writing, which resulted in the publication of 14 novels and a number of short stories. In the third phase (1898-1928), the period of the writer's rising fame, he abandoned writing novels and returned to poetry.

Childhood and youth

Thomas Hardy was born on 2 June 1840 in a brick and thatch two-storey cottage in the hamlet called Higher Bockhampton, in the parish of Stinsford, about three miles east of Dorchester, the county town of Dorset. With the exception of five years, Hardy lived all his long life in his home county. Both of Hardy's parents were of Dorset origin. His father, also named Thomas, was a self-employed master mason and building contractor. The Hardys were an old Dorset family, which had descended from the Le Hardy family residing in the Isle of Jersey since the 15th century. One of the ancestors, Le Clement Hardy, was lieutenant-governor of Jersey in 1488. Another kinsman, Sir Thomas Hardy (1769-1839) was Admiral Horatio Nelson's aide and best friend. At the turn of the eighteenth century the family experienced a rapid economic decline.

Hardy's mother, Jemima, was a former maidservant and cook. She came from a poor family, but she had acquired from her mother a love of reading, and her literary tastes included Latin poets and French romances in English translation. She provided for her son's education. First she taught little Thomas to read and write before he was four, and then she instilled in him a growing interest in literature. Hardy had a great affection for his mother throughout all her life. His father, who was a keen violin player, passed on to young Thomas a love of music. Both Thomas's father and paternal grandfather were important members of the Stinsford Parish Church choir. As Paul Turner writes: "Apart from parental influences, Hardy's childhood was dominated by two things: the local church, and the natural world around him." (6)

Hardy received his early schooling at the local National School in Lower Bockhampton, which opened in 1848. The school was run by the "National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church". In 1850, when he was ten, Jemima Hardy enrolled her son at a non-conformist school run by the British and Foreign School Society in Dorchester, where he learnt Latin and French among other subjects. Young Thomas had begun his formal education at the age of eight and ended at the age of 16. However, as a boy, he read both Greek and Roman classics in translation and the Bible, which he knew exceptionally well. He was also very fond of reading romances. His favourite authors were William Harrison Ainsworth, Walter Scott, and Alexander Dumas. In addition, he read Shakespeare's tragedies. Although he was

quite fond of school, he preferred solitude and reading books. In Dorset young Thomas witnessed the decline of the old pastoral society and the rise of industrialism.

Apprenticeship

Unable to pursue a scholarly or clerical career, Hardy became apprenticed in 1856 to a local architect, John Hicks, who specialised in church restoration. His occupation required extensive trips to various locations in Dorset. At Hicks's office Hardy met another boy, Henry Bastow, who had a similar interest in classical literature, especially poetry, and in religious matters. Hardy could only read early in the morning, between five and eight, before he left for the office. In Dorchester he met a local schoolmaster and an poet William Barnes (1801-1866), who published poetry about rural life in local dialect. He may have been the inspiration for Hardy to start writing poetry on a similar theme.

Hardy's architectural apprenticeship, which lasted a little more than four years, provided him with important experiences which would later inform his fiction and poetry. While still in Dorchester, Hardy met Horace Moule, a vicar's son, and a student of Queen's College, Cambridge. Eight years older than Hardy, Horace was at the start of a career as scholar. He became Hardy's best friend and mentor who encouraged him to read Greek tragedies and contemporary English literature. At that time the most recent developments in English literature included the publication of Alfred Tennyson's poems *Idylls of the King*, George Meredith's two important novels *Richard Feverel* and *Evan Harrington*, Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. Apart from those, in 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, a book which exerted a profound influence on Hardy.

London

In April 1862, Hardy decided to suspend his architectural apprenticeship and left for London. He rented lodgings at 3, Clarence Place, at Kilburn, near Edgware Road. Some biographers speculate that his decision was caused by yet another unsuccessful love affair. Thomas had already been infatuated with two Dorset girls: Elizabeth Sarah Bishop (Lizbie Browne), who "scorned him as too young," and Louisa Harding, to whom he spoke only two words, a shy "Good evening" in the lane. (Halliday, 25,26) Now he had proposed and been rejected by a Dorchester girl, Mary Waight, who was older than he. Hence, possibly the move to London was caused not only by his desire to learn more but also to make a fresh start in life.

In London Hardy spent five years working as an assistant architect for Arthur Blomfield (1829-1899), who restored and designed churches, usually in a Gothic Revival style. Blomfield was very glad of his new associate and proposed him for a member of the Architectural Association. Hardy also explored the scientific and cultural life of London. In spring 1863, he heard Charles Dickens's public lecture. He visited museums, galleries and attended plays and operas. Hardy particularly enjoyed Shakespeare and ancient tragedy at the Drury Lane Theatre. He read the works of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Henry Huxley, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin and Charles Darwin. Under the influence of these works, Hardy began to reconsider his traditional

Christian upbringing and decided to abandon his youthful plan of ordination into the Anglican Church. He became increasingly disillusioned with institutional Christianity. While in London Hardy also became acquainted with the poetry of contemporary Victorian poets, Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne, and he began to write his own poetry, but it was rejected for publication. In 1865, Hardy wrote a satirical sketch “How I Built Myself a House”, which was published in *Chambers Journal* and won him a prize. In that year Hardy bought a number of books on literature and began to study it more intensely. He also continued to write poetry which foreshadowed the themes of his later prose fiction: human misery, uncaring universe, loneliness, chance.

Back in Bockhampton

In July 1867, unable to have his poems published and weary of London, Hardy left the capital to return to Bockhampton and resumed working for Hicks. Shortly after his return, Hardy probably entered into a passionate affair with Tryphena Sparks (1851-1890), an attractive sixteen-year-old cousin. Tryphena was the youngest child of James and Maria Sparks, Hardy’s uncle and aunt, who lived in a thatched cottage in the nearby village of Puddletown. Some biographers believe that in the years 1868 to 1870, when she was a trainee teacher in the Puddletown school, she had a romance with Hardy, although there is too little evidence of their relationship. Nevertheless, Tryphena must have exerted some profound effect on Hardy’s life since she appears in disguise in many of his novels and poems. After her death Hardy wrote a poem pervaded with personal memories, entitled “Thoughts of Phena”.

First novels

Under the inspiration of George Meredith’s prose, Hardy began to write his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which he submitted to the publishing house of Alexander Macmillan. Although Macmillan did not publish it, he encouraged Hardy to keep writing. Meredith advised him to write novels with more plot. In 1869, John Hicks died and Hardy moved to Weymouth to seek employment as an architectural assistant. At the same time he began to write another novel, *Desperate Remedies*, which was also rejected by Macmillan but published anonymously in three volumes by the publisher William Tinsley in 1871. After the publication of *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy decided to devote himself fully to writing, although he could not yet achieve a literary or financial success. In 1872, he published his second novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Encouraged by favourable reception Hardy published *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), the most autobiographical of all his novels, which introduced some of the themes he would develop in his later works. The fourth novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) gained public notice and eventually brought him financial success. In 1878, *The Return of the Native* brought Hardy another publishing success. The ensuing years would bring him a constant rise in literary popularity. Hardy set all his novels in the fictional part of south and south-west England which he called Wessex.

Love and marriage

When Hardy was occupied in the restoration of a church in St. Juliot, near the site of the legendary Castle Tintagel, King Arthur's Camelot in Cornwall in 1870, he met for the first time Emma Lavinia Gifford, the local rector's sister-in-law. He was captivated by both her looks and admiration for him. Emma, who was attracted by Hardy's literary interests, encouraged him to write fiction and poetry. They soon fell in love with each other but waited four years to be married at St Peter's Church, Paddington, London, on 17 September 1874. Curiously enough, none of Hardy's family attended the wedding ceremony, which was performed by Canon Edwin Hamilton Gifford, Emma's uncle, who later became Archdeacon of London. When they married, they were both thirty years old, but Hardy thought she looked much younger and she thought he looked much older. The first years of their marriage were quite happy. The couple spent their honeymoon in Paris and travelled extensively in England and on the Continent. However, in later years, Emma felt more and more estranged from her husband. She did not entirely approve of the content of his fictions, and last but not least, his romantic attachments to young artistic ladies, such as Florence Henniker, Rosamund Tomson, and Agnes Grove. Emma kept a secret diary in which she recorded her remarks and her complaints about her husband.

Max Gate

In 1885, the couple settled near Dorchester at Max Gate, a large mid-Victorian villa, which Hardy had designed himself where he lived for the rest of his life. In 1895-96 and 1907, Hardy made significant extensions and alterations to the house, including enlarging the kitchen and refurbishing his study. Hardy felt extremely comfortable at Max Gate, which he often called his country retreat. In 1886, his second tragic novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, was published. Its fictional setting resembles old Dorchester, a market town which Hardy knew very well. In 1887, Hardy and his wife Emma took a trip to Italy. They returned to Max Gate via Paris and London. In 1896, Emma introduced Hardy to the new fashionable sport of cycling. Hardy bought himself an expensive Rover Cobb bike, and the couple frequently toured the Dorset countryside. Apart from cycling, Hardy and his wife used to make annual visits to London in spring or summer. They attended theatres, operas, and social gatherings. After spending the summer 1896 in London, the Hardys extended their holidays and visited three English towns: Worcester, Stratford and Dover. Next they went to Belgium. Hardy saw the historic Field of Waterloo, where Napoleon was defeated. He had already made a plan of his epic drama *The Dynasts*, devoted to the history of Napoleonic wars.

Return to poetry

The publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1891 shocked and dismayed the Victorian public with its presentation of a young beautiful girl seduced by an aristocratic villain. In order to have the novel published, Hardy made some concessions about its plot; extensive passages were either severely modified or deleted outright. The same happened to his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, published in book form in 1895. In 1898, disturbed by the public uproar over the reception of his two greatest novels, Hardy announced that he had

a young man he could not make enough money to live on by writing poetry, so he had decided to write novels. However, after giving up the novel in adulthood, Hardy published a collection of his earlier poems under the title *Wessex Poems* (1898).

Between 1903 and 1908 Hardy wrote mostly in blank verse a great panorama of the Napoleonic wars, the epic drama *The Dynasts*. His literary authority was beyond dispute. In 1905, he was awarded an honorary degree at the University of Aberdeen and recognised as one of the most outstanding British authors. In 1910, King George V conferred on him the Order of Merit, and in 1912 he received the gold medal of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1913, Hardy, who had never graduated from college, received Cambridge honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. His popularity grew immensely and his novels were reprinted, some of them being dramatised and performed on stage. In 1914, the adaptation of *The Dynasts* was performed at the Kingsway Theatre, London. Between 1911 and 1914 Hardy disposed of most of his manuscripts; some of them were deposited in public libraries and museums, others were purchased, mostly by American dealers and collectors.

Emma's death and second marriage

The sudden death on 27th November 1912 of Hardy's wife Emma, with whom he had long been estranged, threw him into a complete disarray. After her funeral and burial in Stinsford churchyard, Hardy reproached himself that he had not realised how seriously ill she was. The death of his wife prompted him to write a number of poems that recalled his happy time with Emma when they were young. After Emma's death Hardy did not remain alone at Max Gate. He was taken care of by his niece and a young woman, Florence Dugdale (1879-1937), who had been introduced to him while Emma was still alive. Florence was a Dorset schoolmaster's daughter. She was a shy, charming woman with some literary aspirations who had published a few books for children and also written poetry, though with little success. Occasionally she did research for Hardy in London when he could not do it himself. Hardy became infatuated with the young woman who admired him as a great writer, and on 6 February 1914, he married Florence, who was almost forty years younger than he. Sadly, his second marriage soon proved to be disappointing as the first one, mainly due to the fact that Hardy was fond of "spending much of each day closeted in his study". (Page, 166)

Final years

During the First World War Hardy was in his seventies. In spite of advanced age, he took an active part in campaigns defending Britain's involvement in the war. He visited military hospitals and POW camps. In his last years Hardy rarely left Max Gate although he remained vital; he was still interested in world affairs. Regarded as the most outstanding writer of his time, he was frequently visited at Max Gate by writers, artists and politicians. His guests included James Barrie, [Robert Louis Stevenson](#), [Rudyard Kipling](#), [A. E. Housman](#), Siegfried Sassoon, H. G. Wells, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, George Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, and many others.

From 1920 until 1927, he worked secretly on his autobiography, which was published in two volumes (1928 and 1930) as the work of Florence Hardy. It was later alleged that Florence had only typed the manuscript and added some minor corrections, but in fact, Florence's emendations into the text seem to have been extensive. She probably reduced the number of references to Emma, included some anecdotes related to Hardy and added a few letters. Hardy destroyed almost all papers which he did not want to leave after his death. In 1924, he watched a dramatised version of his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* given by the Hardy Players, an amateur group from Dorchester. The performance was so impressive that Hardy, despite his eighty years, became infatuated with the young actress who played Tess.

After his eighty-seventh birthday Hardy seemed much weaker than before. He did not leave Max Gate and stayed long in bed. He became increasingly reclusive and reticent about his past life. In the autumn 1927 he fell seriously ill. He died on the evening of 11 January 1928. Before he died he asked his wife to read a verse from *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam (Gittings, 640):

Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And ev'n with Paradise devise the snake:
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blackened — Man's forgiveness give — and take!

Strangely enough, Hardy had two simultaneous funerals. His body was cremated and placed (probably against his will) in the Poet's Corner ([image](#)) in Westminster Abbey in London. The official funeral was attended by the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and the Leader of the Opposition Ramsay MacDonald, heads of Oxford and Cambridge colleges, where Hardy was an honorary fellow, and some outstanding literary figures like James Barrie, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Edmund Gosse, A. E. Housman, Rudyard Kipling and George Bernard Shaw. At exactly the same time Hardy's heart was buried alongside his first wife in Stinsford churchyard, Dorchester. The private service at Stinsford Church was attended by his brother Henry and local people who resembled characters from Hardy's novels. Hardy left an estate of nearly 100,000 pounds which was divided among his wife, relatives, various libraries, museums and charities. As Evelyn Hardy wrote:

Hardy's life was not primarily one of action. He was by nature a scholar and a writer: it is what goes on in the mind that holds us, and Hardy's was rich with stored impressions.

In his long and uneventful life Thomas Hardy wrote 14 novels, more than 40 short stories published in four volumes, over 900 poems and two dramas. Apart from his prose works and poetry, Hardy left a great number of letters, notebooks, pocket-books, diaries and memoranda, but most of them were burned in accordance with his last will. Only twelve of them survived. They are the "Architectural Notebook", the "Trumpet Major Notebook", the "Schools of Painting" notebook, the "Studies, Specimens, etc.", the "1867" notebook, the volumes of "Literary Notes", "Memoranda" and the "Facts" notebook. All have been published over the last fifty years.

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