

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

1. **Biography**

- a. Son of a stone-mason and a servant mother. Late in life, he tried to deny his humble origins.
- b. Educated at village schools and in Dorchester, but no university training.
- c. Early affair with cousin, Tryphena Sparks, didn't last but impressed him.
- d. Trained in London with an architect who specialized in restoring old churches. Released from this occupation in 1874 by the success of *Far From the Madding Crowd*.
- e. In 1874, at 34, meets Emma Gifford, courts and marries her; later the marriage is marred by division and bitterness, which he charts in his poems after 1912. Apparently she felt she was his social superior, like Sue Bridehead in *Jude*.
- f. In 1914, after Emma's death, he marries a second time, to his secretary Florence Emily Dugdale. He writes his autobiography, which is published as a biography under her name.

2. **Writing career**

- a. Started writing poetry in 1860, but much of his early stuff is lost (except the early poem "The Bridge Night Fire") or went unpublished till it was revised much later, at the end of the century.
- b. Novel-writing career begins in 1871 with *Desperate Remedies*, and ends, after Hardy vows to give it up because of critical disapproval and censorship, with *Jude the Obscure* (1895-1896). He also noted that he felt he had used up the possibilities of the novel form and needed to move on to a new genre.
- c. Returns to writing poetry full-time after the turn of the century, publishing several books of poems and *The Dynasts*, which people think is either his best or his worst.

3. **Themes:**

a. **celebrating a rural way of life that is being erased by city life**

- i. Hardy had deep roots in the soil. Renamed Somerset/Wiltshire/Dorset "Wessex," its original name (matching Sussex, Essex and Middlesex), and uses it as the landscape for most of his most famous works. The breadbasket and dairyland of England, as well as the locus of its primeval heritage (neolithic stone sculptures, barrows, middens, tumuli, and the "earthworks of Old Melchester" in the story.) Hardy had a strong sense of local tradition "punctuated by secular or ecclesiastical festivals, and maintained by practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time"

(1) "Casterbridge was a place deposited in the block upon a cornfield. There was no suburb in the modern sense, or transitional intermixture of town and down. It stood, with regard to the wide fertile land adjoining, clean-cut and distinct like a chessboard on a green tablecloth. The farmer's boy would sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office-window of the town-clerk; reapers

at work among the sheaves nodded to acquaintances standing on the pavement corner” (from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*)

- ii. Tried to capture local accents and modes of speech by writing “dialect poetry,” but ultimately gave this up, noting that “if a writer attempts to exhibit on paper the precise accents of a rustic speaker, he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque element.”
- iii. Was repeatedly punished by critics for focusing on - and accepting - biological realities that farm residents took for granted, but Victorian city dwellers would not stomach - big things like illegitimate pregnancies; small things like Arabella’s egg, the pig’s pizzle, etc.

b. questioning of faith

- i. Less a loss of faith in God than a sense, old as the pagan religions of Wessex, that God was a pitiful cultural construct and that the really powerful sources were chthonic and fatalistic. Nature, not God, is an inexorable and blind force. (Analogues in naturalistic American literature of the same period.)
 - (1) Hardy’s reading of classical literature reinforced his fatalism.
 - (2) Hardy’s profession until 1874, church-restoring, embodies his attitude. He attended church but was not reassured. (Note to students that the great Catholic religious landmarks of the first 1500 years of English civilization were largely destroyed after Henry VIII’s rejection of Vatican authority, so there are lots of ruined church landmarks in Hardy’s countryside.)
 - (3) Hardy believes, in a nutshell, that though humans have free will, the fatalistic forces that control us do not, so our noblest endeavors are in vain.

c. the return of the native/the divided consciousness

- i. For Hardy, education and higher consciousness (which Hardy called “the modern nerves”) tend to alienate humans from the earthy landscape and its people. “We are horribly sensitive, that’s what we are,” complains Jude Fawley.
- ii. Our carnal impulses are constantly at war with our “better angels of our nature,” resulting in unceasing conflict. People are tossed about by what Hardy called “the unfulfilled intention,” that which we know we should do, but which we for some reason cannot, will not, or do not.
- iii. When educated people (usually men) return to their native earthy roots, they tend to exploit the innocents they find there.