

THOMAS HARDY

1840 – 1928

Thomas Hardy, novelist and poet, was born in 1840 in Dorset, which was to become the setting of much of his fiction. A frail child, he did not attend the local school until the age of eight. His ill health did foster in him, however, a love of reading. In his walks in the area, Hardy also came into contact with the local farmers and labourers, whose hardship and poverty deeply touched him. At the age of 15, he was apprenticed to a local architect, a career that would sustain him until he became established as a writer.

In 1862 Hardy moved to London to work with another architect. Always driven, he would rise at five in the morning to complete three or four hours of reading—in Homer, the Greek Testament, the Renaissance poets—before going into the office. On his return from work, he would often stay up reading and writing until midnight. It was during this time that he began writing poetry and short stories. Although he submitted many pieces to various magazines and the editors often wrote that he showed promise, his work was consistently rejected. The hectic schedule that Hardy was following caused his health to deteriorate, and he was forced to return to the countryside in 1867 to recuperate. In Dorchester, he worked as an architect during the day, writing in his spare time. It was in the course of his employment that he met his first wife, Emma Gifford. He had been sent to St. Juliot to draw plans for a church restoration, and Emma was the sister-in-law of the rector. The two struck up a close friendship and Emma was very supportive of his writing. With Emma's encouragement, Hardy published his first novel *Desperate Remedies* (1871). The novel, which has much in common with sensation fiction, a popular sub-genre of the 1860s, met with mixed reviews, but he continued writing and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, published in 1872, brought him popular acclaim.



In his early novels Hardy began to include real places from the Dorset area, renamed Wessex—and to be praised for his portrayal of the countryside and the people of the region. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* appeared in 1873, and mirrored his own courtship with Emma. The two were married in 1874. That year also saw the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the first of what are now regarded as his classic novels. It depicts the life and loves of Bathsheba Everdene, and provides a convincing portrait of rural life. The novel also includes one of Hardy's "fallen women": the case of Fanny Robin, who is seduced and eventually dies in a workhouse, shocked many readers. Despite this, the novel was very popular, and allowed him to give up his architectural work and concentrate solely on writing.

The Return of the Native, published in 1878, was also very successful. All of Hardy's novels were by now appearing in serialized form in monthly family magazines—a development which affected both the way that he wrote and the content of his fiction. Like most serialized writers, Hardy incorporated a steady flow of incidents in his novels; he was catering to an audience that needed to be encouraged to keep reading and buy the next issue. The "family" nature of the magazines often led his editors (one of whom was Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf) to caution him to tone down the racier scenes and rewrite large sections. Because of the strict morality that dominated

editorial policy, for example, Hardy could not state explicitly that some of his characters might have been involved in extra-marital activities. Instead, such situations are written vaguely and readers are left to decide for themselves whether or not something illicit has taken place.

Censure of Hardy's depiction of "immoral" subject matter reached its peak with the publication of his next two major novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). In the first of these, Tess is raped by and bears an illegitimate child to Alec D'Urberville. Both the "seduction" itself and Tess's attempt to have the illegitimate child baptized shocked readers of the time. Tess eventually marries Angel Clare but is forced back into a relationship with D'Urberville when Clare discovers the truth about her past and abandons her. Her husband eventually forgives her, but she kills D'Urberville and is hanged for it. Hardy rewrote many of the novel's explicit or controversial sections for serialization in *Longman's Magazine*, but when the novel was published as a complete volume the controversial sections were restored.

From the mid 1890s, Hardy concentrated on composing poetry, continuing in a different genre the portrayal of the Wessex region he had made famous in the novels. *Wessex Poems* appeared in 1898, *Satires of Circumstance* in 1914, and *Moments of Vision* in 1917. Hardy's poems form a body of work strongly rooted in the physical details of place—but even more than that, one strongly rooted in the past. Hardy often borrows from traditional poetic forms (such as the ballad), and he often employs archaic diction. In subject matter, too, the poems tend to be strongly rooted in the past—more often than not a very personal past, with love and the loss of love being recalled by the speaker; in very many of Hardy's poems an elegiac tone is pervasive. Hardy's poetry is sometimes discussed as constituting a reaction to modernism; perhaps it would be more accurate to think of it standing as a strong counterweight to modernism. Certainly the strong simplicity and emotional resonance of his poetry have exerted a strong influence on the works of many subsequent poets (Philip Larkin perhaps most prominent among them). So too has Hardy's formal approach. His rhythms, his rhymes, and the way in which he varies quantity are all tightly controlled and finely modulated; the extraordinary degree of technical accomplishment in much of Hardy's poetry does not call attention to itself, and is perhaps all the more impressive for so often being unobtrusive.

Hardy's reputation continues to rest on his lyrics and ballads—most of them tightly compact works. His most ambitious poetic work is much longer; *The Dynasts* is an extraordinary epic poem set in the Napoleonic Wars. It was published in three parts between 1903 and 1908.

The death of Emma in 1912, and Hardy's subsequent remorse for what had become of their relationship, resulted in some of his finest poetry and love poems, which appeared in *Satires of Circumstance* (1914). Hardy remarried in 1914; his second wife, Florence, is listed as the author of a two-volume biography that appeared in 1928 and 1930, but it has since been established that Hardy wrote the work himself. Hardy was awarded the Order of Merit in 1910 and the Gold Medal of the Royal Society of Literature in 1912. When he died in 1928, his body was buried in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, but his heart was buried with Emma in Stinsford, in southern England.



Hap °

chance

5

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
 Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
 Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
 Had willed and meted° me the tears I shed.

allotted

If but some vengeful god would call to me
 From up the sky, and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
 Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
 That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
 10 And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
 —Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
 And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan . . .
 These purblind Doomsters¹ had as readily strown
 Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.
 1866
 —1898

Neutral Tones

We stood by a pond that winter day,
 And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
 And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
 —They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

5 Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
 Over tedious riddles of years ago;
 And some words played between us to and fro
 On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
 10 Alive enough to have strength to die;
 And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
 Like an ominous bird a-wing . . .

Since then, keen^o lessons that love deceives, *sharp*
 And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
 15 Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
 And a pond edged with grayish leaves.
 1867
 —1898

The Darkling^o Thrush *in the dark*

I leant upon a coppice gate²
 When Frost was spectre-grey,
 And Winter's dregs made desolate
 The weakening eye of day.

¹ *purblind Doomsters* Half blind judges.
² *coppice gate* Gate leading to a thicket or small forest.

5 The tangled bine³-stems scored the sky
 Like strings of broken lyres,
 And all mankind that haunted nigh
 Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
 10 The Century's corpse outleant,⁴
 His crypt the cloudy canopy,
 The wind his death-lament.
 The ancient pulse of germ and birth
 Was shrunken hard and dry,
 15 And every spirit upon earth
 Seemed fervorless as I.

At once a voice arose among
 The bleak twigs overhead
 In a full-hearted evensong
 20 Of joy illimited;
 An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
 In blast-beruffled plume,⁵
 Had chosen thus to fling his soul
 Upon the growing gloom.

25 So little cause for carolings
 Of such ecstatic sound
 Was written on terrestrial things
 Afar or nigh around,
 That I could think there trembled through
 His happy good-night air
 Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
 And I was unaware.
 31st December 1900
 —1901

The Ruined Maid

“O’Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!⁶
 Who could have supposed I should meet you

³ *bine* Hop, a climbing plant.
⁴ *The Century's corpse outleant* I.e. As if the century were leaning out of its coffin. (The poem was composed on 31 December 1900.)
⁵ *plume* I.e., feathers.
⁶ *this does everything crown* This beats everything.

in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?—
“O didn't you know I'd been ruined?” said she.

5 —“You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;¹
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!”—
“Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined,” said she.

10 —“At home in the barton° you said ‘thee’ and ‘thou,’ *barnyard*
And ‘thik oon,’ and ‘theäs oon,’ and ‘t'other’; but now
Your talking quite fits ‘ee for high compa-ny!”—
“Some polish is gained with one's ruin,” said she.

15 —“Your hands were like paws then, your face blue
and bleak
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,
And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!”—
“We never do work when we're ruined,” said she.

—“You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock;² but at present you seem

20 To know not of megrims° or melancho-ly!”— *depression*
“True. One's pretty lively when ruined,” said she.

—“I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!”—
“My dear—a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined,” said she.
1866
—1901

A Broken Appointment

Y ou did not come.
And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb.—
Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
Than that I thus found lacking in your make

¹ *spudding up docks* Uprooting weeds.

² *sock* Mouth your displeasure.

5 That high compassion which can overbear
Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake
Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,
You did not come.

10 You love not me,
And love alone can lend you loyalty;
—I know and knew it. But, unto the store
Of human deeds divine in all but name,
15 Was it not worth a little hour or more
To add yet this: Once you, a woman, came
To soothe a time-torn man; even though it be
You love not me?
—1902

Shut Out That Moon

C lose up the casement, draw the blind,
Shut out that stealing moon,
She wears too much the guise she wore
Before our lutes were strewn
5 With years-deep dust, and names we read
On a white stone were hewn.

Step not out on the dew-dashed lawn
To view the Lady's Chair,
Immense Orion's glittering form,
10 The Less and Greater Bear:³
Stay in; to such sights we were drawn
When faded ones were fair.

Brush not the bough for midnight scents
That come forth lingeringly,
15 And wake the same sweet sentiments
They breathed to you and me
When living seemed a laugh, and love
All it was said to be.
Within the common lamp-lit room
20 Prison my eyes and thought;
Let dingy details crudely loom,
Mechanic° speech be wrought: *low, vulgar*

³ *Lady's ... Bear* Constellations.

Too fragrant was Life's early bloom,
 Too tart the fruit it brought!
 1904
 —1909

The Convergence of the Twain
 (Lines on the Loss of the "Titanic")¹

1
 In a solitude of the sea
 Deep from human vanity,
 And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

2
 Steel chambers, late the pyres
 5 Of her salamandrine fires,²
 Cold currents thrid,³ and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

3
 Over the mirrors meant
 To glass the opulent
 The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb,
 indifferent.

4
 10 Jewels in joy designed
 To ravish the sensuous mind
 Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

5
 15 Dim moon-eyed fishes near
 Gaze at the gilded gear
 And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down
 here?" ...

¹ *the "Titanic"* At the time the largest ship ever built, the ocean liner Titanic had been described as unsinkable, but on its maiden voyage it collided with an iceberg; over 1,400 people drowned when it sank.

² *salamandrine fires* According to mythology salamanders are able to survive any heat.

³ *thrid* Thread.

6
 Well: while was fashioning
 This creature of cleaving wing,
 The Immanent Will⁴ that stirs and urges everything

7
 20 Prepared a sinister mate
 For her—so gaily great—
 A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

8
 And as the smart ship grew
 In stature, grace, and hue,
 In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

9
 25 Alien they seemed to be:
 No mortal eye could see
 The intimate welding of their later history,

10
 Or sign that they were bent
 By paths coincident
 30 On being anon twin halves of one august event,

11
 Till the Spinner of the Years
 Said "Now!" And each one hears,
 And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.
 —1914

*Channel Firing*⁵

That night your great guns, unawares,
 Shook all our coffins as we lay,
 And broke the chancel⁶ window-squares,
 We thought it was the Judgment-day

⁴ *The Immanent Will* The force that pervades and determines human existence.

⁵ *Channel Firing* In the months leading up to the First World War both the British and the German Navies would practice firing in the English Channel. (This poem was written in April 1914; the First World War began in August of the same year.)

⁶ *chancel* Eastern part of a church, used by those who officiate at services.

5 And sat upright. While drearishome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumbs,
The worms drew back into the mounds,

The glebe¹ cow drooled. Till God called, "No;
10 It's gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be:

"All nations striving strong to make
Red war yet redder. Mad as hatters²
15 They do no more for Christ's^o sake
Than you who are helpless in such matters.

"That this is not the judgment-hour
For some of them's a blessed thing,
For if it were they'd have to scour
20 Hell's floor for so much threatening . . .

"Ha, ha. It will be warmer when
I blow the trumpet (if indeed
I ever do; for you are men,
And rest eternal sorely need)."

25 So down we lay again. "I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,"
Said one, "than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!"

30 And many a skeleton shook his head.
"Instead of preaching forty year,"
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,
"I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer."

35 Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,

And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge.³
April 1914
—1914

The Voice

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Christ's 5 Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
10 Travelling across the wet mead^o to me here, *meadow*
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
15 Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.
December, 1912
—1914 (WRITTEN 1912)

Transformations

Portion of this yew⁴
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
5 A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.

¹ *glebe* Field, especially a field belonging to a church.

² *Mad as hatters* Makers of felt hats in the late 18th and early 19th century frequently went insane as a result of breathing in mercury compounds used in the manufacture of the hats.

³ *Stourton Tower ... Stonehenge* Stourton Tower was built to commemorate the victory of King Alfred over the Danes; Camelot was the site of King Arthur's court; Stonehenge is the famous prehistoric stone monument near Salisbury.

⁴ *yew* Traditionally yew trees have been planted beside churches and near graveyards.

These grasses must be made
 Of her who often prayed,
 Last century, for repose;
 10 And the fair girl long ago
 Whom I vainly tried to know
 May be entering this rose.

 So, they are not underground,
 But as nerves and veins abound
 15 In the growths of upper air,
 And they feel the sun and rain,
 And the energy again
 That made them what they were!
 —1915

*In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"*¹

1
 Only a man harrowing clods
 In a slow silent walk
 With an old horse that stumbles and nods
 Half asleep as they stalk.

 2
 5 Only thin smoke without flame
 From the heaps of couch-grass;
 Yet this will go onward the same
 Though Dynasties pass.

 3
 10 Yonder a maid and her wight²
 Come whispering by:
 War's annals will fade into night
 Ere their story die.
 1915
 —1916

The Photograph

The flame crept up the portrait line by line
 As it lay on the coals in the silence of night's profound,
 And over the arm's incline,
 And along the marge of the silkwork superfine,
 5 And gnawed at the delicate bosom's defenceless round.

 Then I vented a cry of hurt, and averted my eyes;
 The spectacle was one that I could not bear,
 To my deep and sad surprise;
 But, compelled to heed, I again looked furtivewise
 10 Till the flame had eaten her breasts, and mouth, and hair.

 "Thank God, she is out of it now!" I said at last,
 In a great relief of heart when the thing was done
 That had set my soul aghast,
 And nothing was left of the picture unsheathed from
 the past
 15 But the ashen ghost of the card it had figured on.

 She was a woman long hid amid packs of years,
 She might have been living or dead; she was lost to
 my sight,
 And the deed that had nigh drawn tears
 Was done in a casual clearance of life's arrears;
 20 But I felt as if I had put her to death that night!...

 —Well; she knew nothing thereof did she survive,
 And suffered nothing if numbered among the dead;
 Yet—yet—if on earth alive
 Did she feel a smart, and with vague strange anguish
 strive?
 25 If in heaven, did she smile at me sadly and shake her
 head?
 —1917

During Wind and Rain

They sing their dearest songs—
 He, she, all of them—yea,
 Treble and tenor and bass,

¹ *In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"* See Jeremiah 51.20: "Thou art my battleaxe and weapon of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations."

² *wight* I.e. man.

5 And one to play;
 With the candles mooning each face
 Ah, no; the years O!
 How the sick leaves reel down in throngs!

 They clear the creeping moss—
 Elders and juniors—aye,
 10 Making the pathways neat
 And the garden gay;
 And they build a shady seat. . . .
 Ah, no; the years, the years;
 See, the white storm-birds wing across.

15 They are blithely breakfasting all—
 Men and maidens—yea,
 Under the summer tree,
 With a glimpse of the bay,
 While pet fowl come to the knee
 20 Ah, no; the years O!
 And the rotten rose is ript from the wall.

 They change to a high new house,
 He, she, all of them—aye,
 Clocks and carpets and chairs
 25 On the lawn all day,
 And brightest things that are theirs. . . .
 Ah, no; the years, the years;
 Down their carved names the rain-drop ploughs.
 —1917

The Oxen

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
 “Now they are all on their knees,”¹
 An elder said as we sat in a flock
 By the embers in hearthside ease.

5 We pictured the meek mild creatures where
 They dwelt in their strawy pen,
 Nor did it occur to one of us there
 To doubt they were kneeling then.

 So fair a fancy few would weave
 10 In these years! Yet, I feel,
 If someone said on Christmas Eve,
 “Come; see the oxen kneel,

 In the lonely barton° by yonder coomb° *farmyard / valley*
 Our childhood used to know,”
 15 I should go with him in the gloom,
 Hoping it might be so.
 1915
 —1917

Going and Staying

1
 The moving sun-shapes on the spray,
 The sparkles where the brook was flowing,
 Pink faces, plightings, moonlit May—
 These were the things we wished would stay;
 5 But they were going.

2
 Seasons of blankness as of snow,
 The silent bleed of a world decaying,
 The moan of multitudes in woe—
 These were the things we wished would go;
 10 But they were staying.

3
 Then we looked closelier at Time,
 And saw his ghostly arms revolving
 To sweep off woeful things with prime,
 Things sinister with things sublime
 15 Alike dissolving.
 —1920

¹ *Now they are all on their knees* It was once widely believed that oxen would kneel at the appointed time on Christmas every year in imitation of the ox in the manger kneeling when Christ was born.

IN CONTEXT

Hardy's Reflections on the Writing of Poetry

The Life of Thomas Hardy, published under the name of his second wife, Florence Hardy, was later discovered to have been written by Hardy himself. When this third-person autobiography discusses Hardy's poetic career in relation to his fiction writing, the author reveals his sensitivity to suggestions that he had taken up poetry only as a result of the reaction against his later novels:

In the early weeks of this year [1899] the poems were reviewed in the customary periodicals—mostly in a friendly tone, even in a tone of respect, and with praise for many pieces in the volume; though by some critics not without umbrage at Hardy's having taken the liberty to adopt another vehicle of expression than prose fiction without consulting them

Almost all the fault-finding was, in fact, based on the one great antecedent conclusion that an author who has published prose first, and that largely, must necessarily express himself badly in verse, no reservation being added to except cases in which he may have published prose for temporary or compulsory reasons, or prose of a poetical kind, or have written verse first of all, or for a long time intermediately In the present case, although it was shown that many of the verses had been written before their author dreamt of novels, the critics' view was very little affected that he had "at the eleventh hour," as they untruly put it, taken up a hitherto uncared-for art.

A few pages on the account is again at pains to emphasize the purity of Hardy's motives in abandoning prose fiction and devoting himself to poetry:

When one considers how he might have made himself a man of affluence by taking the current of popularity as it served, writing "best sellers," and ringing changes upon the novels he had already written, his bias towards poetry must have been instinctive and disinterested.

Hardy includes few reflections on the nature of his own poetry, but he does take issue with Wordsworth's famous strictures against poetic diction, asserting that Wordsworth "should have put the matter somewhat like this: in works of *passion and sentiment* (not 'imagination and sentiment') the language of verse is the language of prose. In works of *fancy* (or *imagination*), 'poetic diction' (of the real kind) is proper, and even necessary." Here and there Hardy also makes interesting comments on the origin of particular poems. Here, for example, are his remarks concerning "In Time of the Breaking of Nations:"

I believe it would be said by people who knew me well that I have a faculty (perhaps not uncommon) for burying an emotion in my heart or brain for forty years, and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as when interred. For instance, the poem entitled "The Breaking of Nations" contains a feeling that moved me in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian war, when I chanced to be looking at such an agricultural incident in Cornwall. But I did not write the verses till during the war with Germany of 1914, and onwards.