

## A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THOMAS HARDY'S FICTIONAL WORKS

**Dr. Naveen K Mehta**  
Associate Professor & Head  
Communication Skills Department  
Mahakal Institute of Technology, Ujjain (MP) India

### Abstract

Thomas Hardy was born on June 2, 1840 at Higher Bockhampton, a village near Dorchester. He was the son of a builder and it would have been natural if Hardy had followed the footsteps of his father and become an architect. In fact, he was trained as an architect and for some time he practiced as an architect. His earliest printed material is naturally an account of the building of a house published in a journal in 1865. The present paper is an attempt to study fictional works of Thomas Hardy.

**Keywords:** Fate, Chance, Character, Plot, Philosophy.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1862 Hardy went to London from his native Dorset, working there at first as an architect but he had always been under the spell of literature. Poetry, that eternal charmer had cast its spell upon this young man. In eighteen sixties, he wrote a number of poems which remained for the most part unpublished for nearly thirty years. Literary London was still unprepared to accept this new intruder. But he wanted to "Be something", to gain fame, 'that last infirmity of noble mind'. And so he turned to novel writing.

According to Thomas Hardy himself his novels may be classified under three heads:

#### I Novels of Ingenuity

- |                           |      |
|---------------------------|------|
| 1. Desperate Remedies     | 1871 |
| 2. The Hand of Ethelberta | 1876 |
| 3. A Laodicean            | 1881 |

#### II Romances or Fantasies

- |                        |      |
|------------------------|------|
| 1. A Pair of Blue Eyes | 1873 |
| 2. The Trumpet Major   | 1880 |
| 3. Two On a Tower      | 1882 |
| 4. The Well Beloved    | 1892 |

### **III Novels of Character and Environment**

1. Under the Green Wood Tree	1872
2. Far from the Madding Crowd	1874
3. The Return of the Native	1878
4. The Mayor of Casterbridge	1886
5. The Woodlanders	1887
6. Tess of D'Urbervilles	1891
7. Jude the Obscure	1896

The last category that is the novels of character and environment are easily the best.

#### **THE POOR MAN AND THE LADY**

His first novel was *The Poor Man and the Lady*. Like most beginners of his days, Hardy also wanted to appear in print regardless of profit or loss. He sent the manuscript of the *Poor Man and the lady* to Macmillan. The publisher rejected the book. He then sent it to Chapman and Hall and it was Meredith who advised him to withdraw the novel. The book was never published and was later destroyed at the author's request.

#### **DESPERATE REMEDIES**

*Desperate Remedies*, published in 1871, was the first of Hardy's published novels. Hardy classifies it as a 'novel of ingenuity'.

The heroine Cytherea Graye, in love with a young architect Edward Springrove, has to accept a post of a lady's maid to Miss Aldclyffe, whom her father loved in his young days. Then follow intrigues. Cytherea learns that her lover Edward was engaged to some other woman. Moreover, she had to support a sick brother; so she accepts the hand of Aeneas Mauston, an illegitimate son of Miss Aldclyffe. After the marriage Cytherea finds that Edward was free from his first entanglement. She also finds that Mauston's first wife is alive. So, she escapes and then it is brought to light that Mauston had murdered his first wife in order to get Cytherea. Mauston hangs himself in the cell and the lovers are at last united. This novel full of detection and intrigue is worth reading for some fine passages. Of course there are absurdities of plot but it by no means the worst of Hardy's novels.

#### **UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE**

This delightful little novel was published in 1872 and gives as the most endearing of Hardy's pictures of Wessex village life. Hardy calls it a rural painting of the Dutch school. The plot of the novel is very slight but the details of rustic speech and character are finely observed. This novel is the first great novel of Hardy. It can be called an idyll. It deals with the life of two young lovers named Dick Dewy and Fanny Day. Their love runs in a serpentine way. Fanny Day is engaged to Dick, yet she accepts for sometime the temptation of an offer of marriage by the vicar. But soon both realize their mistakes and withdraw. Thus, the story ends in happiness and reunion.

### **A PAIR OF BLUE EYES**

This novel was published in 1873 is Hardy's first expedition into the real jungle country of sex and marriage. It deals with the story of a young architect who comes to Endelstow to restore to a Church tower. He falls in love with Elfride Swancour, the blue-eyed daughter of the Vicar. Stephan Smith is the son of the ordinary parents and the Vicar does not like the idea of his daughter marrying him. Both lovers run away and plan to be married but their attempt fails. The lover feels frustrated. Elfride shows her love, than to the Henry Knight. But the Henry Knight leaves Elfride broken heart. Stephen and Henry Knight meet and come to know of the real facts. Both follow Elfride but find her dead body. This novel has laid special stress on characterization. From the point of view of style and technique, it is not very artistically finished novel.

### **FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD**

With the publication of this novel in 1874, Hardy struck the true vein of his talent. Its hero is Gabriel Oak, a shepherd. He loves Bathsheba Everdene. He loves her with unselfish devotion. But Bathsheba Everdene gives not positive response of the love of Gabriel Oak. Sergeant Troy, a gallant fascinating soldier, who deserts Fanny Robin and lets her die in a work house, wins Bathsheba for his wife and then ill-treats her. Troy is murdered by farmer Boldwood becomes mad, and Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba are at last united.

### **THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA**

This novel was published in 1876. In this novel, Ethelberta is the daughter of a Butler. She is a second Becky Sharp and she manages to marry the son of the house where she is a governess. She becomes a widow at twenty one and her attempts are to maintain her social position, not to leak out her relationship with the Butler, her father and help her brother and sister. At last she marries an old peer and her admirer, Christopher Julian, is left to marry her younger sister Picote. It cannot be considered anything but a diversion. It does not call for much comment.

### **THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE**

The Return of the Native, one of the great Wessex novels, published in 1878. "If any single novel may be taken as the keynote to Hardy's mind and art it is probably The Return of the Native."<sup>1</sup> It is the book of Egdon Heath: without Egdon it would not hold together. It is extremely simple in plot, a tragic love story, like almost all his fictions. The whole story is animated by Hardy's sense of revolt. The motives of the action are "fatal misunderstanding' and 'subtle yielding to temptation'.

### **THE TRUMPET MAJOR**

This historical romance of the Napoleonic wars, published in 1880. It is a simple story, pleasant to read. It has hardly a trace of irony or bitterness through even here, the unworthy suitor wins the heroine and the worthier one dies on the battle fields of Spain. Although there are some sad shades of romantic disillusion in The Trumpet Major, it holds none of the threatening gloom of The Return of the Native. An air of boisterous conviviality is about. Although the darker implications of war and military service are not ignored, this tale of the Napoleonic.

### **A LAODICEAN**

This novel was published in 1881. It is the weakest of Hardy's novels. It has fewer excellences, less interest, more faults than any other of the Wessex novels, but is perhaps sufficiently accounted for by the author's statement that it was in large part composed during convalescence from severe illness. The novel has its faults: but there is, nevertheless, some food basic Hardy.

### **TWO ON A TOWER**

This novel was published in 1882. The whole story falls into five parts. In the first part Lady Constantine's love grows till feeling that Swithin was dying she kisses him. But Swithin is immersed in his astronomy so far. In the second part a rustic's remark reveals the situation to Swithin and he tries to marry Lady Constantine.

The third stage creates complication. Lady Constantine's brother wants her to marry the Bishop. Her secret visit to the cabin is exposed. Then there is more news of Sir Blount's death which makes Swithin's secret marriage null and void, Lady Constantine knows how she was depriving Swithin of the chances and so she sets free.

In the fourth part, it was discovered that she was pregnant. She had to get married to the Bishop. In the fifth part we see Swithin back from the Cape; the Bishop was dead but he saw how aged Lady Constantine was. He is about to go away but he returns to Lady Constantine who overcome with joy dies of joy.

### **THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE**

This novel was published in 1886. It is one of the greatest novels in English Literature. Its subtitle, "the story of a man of character," indicates that in it the attention is focused on single character, the hero, who is a power, dominating personality. Just before writing this novel Hardy read a book on 'Character' by 'Novalis', a German Romantic poet. One sentence struck in his mind and Hardy quotes: "Character is Fate." "In terms of Hardy's own book, then Henchard's tragedy is an inevitable product of his own nature and not as, Henchard supposes, something inflicted on him intelligence bent on punishing."<sup>2</sup> The novel opens with Henchard and wife, Susan, approaching Weydon—Priors.

Henchard is drunkard, who sells his wife to a navigator named Newson, because Henchard fails to pay off the bills of wine in a restaurant. After some time a great change takes place in the life of Henchard. He becomes a man of strong determination and leaves all bad habits forever. One day he becomes one of the most prosperous corn-traders of Casterbridge and later becomes the Mayor of Casterbridge. Farfrae, who comes first in Henchard's services, becomes his rival. Due to the change of fate, Henchard become a poor man and Farfrae becomes the Mayor of Casterbridge. Later, Elizabeth-Jane is married to him and Lucetta's love affairs with Henchard are converted into another direction. Thus, this novel, deals with Hardy's popular theme—the role of Fate in life.

### **THE WOODLANDERS**

This novel was published in 1887. The hero of this novel is Giles Winterbrone who deals in apple and cider trade. He is betrothed Grace Melbury, the daughter of a timber

merchant. Grace Melbury is proud of her schooling. Some financial obstacles if Gile's life put this engagement to an end. Grace's father marries his daughter to Elred Fitzpiers, who is a fascinating doctor. Grace sees some illicit intimacy between Fitzpiers and Suke Damson, a village girl. Fitzpiers being a shrewd tries to leave his wife finding money from a widow named Felice Charmond, later Giles dies. Mrs. Charmond also dies. Grace and Fitzpiers are reconciled in the end. The novel is full of profound penetration of humanity by nature.

### **TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES**

And now we come to Hardy's masterpiece—Tess of the D'Urbervilles which was published in 1891. Tess of the D'Urbervilles is one of the greatest tragedies in English fiction. It is the story of a young beautiful girl, Tess. "Mr. Hardy's heroine (Tess) is simple, sincere and passionately faithful and as different as possible from those fickle and elusive young women who display, in some of his other tales, affection as veering as whether-cocks."<sup>3</sup>

Its heroine is Tess, who belongs to a very poor family. Her father named John Durbeyfield seeks kinship with D'Urbervilles descent and sends Tess to the rich lady, D'Urbervilles in order that she could get an employment there. But Alec, the corrupt son the lady seduces Tess, the innocent pure girl. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to child. She is socially ostracized. Poor Tess goes to another dairy farm and gets an employment. But, there Angel Clare becomes a prey to her love. Clare wants to marry Tess. But Tess is remindful of her past. In the end, both are married. Clare comes to know of Tess's past and he leaves her and goes to Brazil. Tess has to work hard for her physical existence. Tess' father dies and her family suffers from other monetary hardship. Being pressed, Tess marries again Alec. But later Clare comes and finds Tess. Tess kills Alec and thus a tragic end comes to Tess.

### **THE WELL-BELOVED**

Publish in 1892; this novel deals with weird adventures in the 'Love-World' of a sculptor. He finds his love successively in three generations of a neighboring family. A poor curiosity this novel is in a way, ridiculous.

It is a fanciful novel, but it is not trivial. "It seeks to show that the beautiful appearances which glamorize our lives are devices of Cowardice and that reality is life and life is courage."<sup>4</sup>

### **JUDE THE OBSCURE**

Jude the Obscure is Hardy's last novel. It was published in 1896. In this novel there is no hope on cleansing of the passion, no sense of "calm of mind all passion spent."

Jude was a young stone-mason. His ambition was to become a scholar at Christminster. But that was not to be. He was ensnared by a dangerously voluptuous village girl named Arbella Donn who tricked him into marriage, thus keeping him at this village for some time. But Jude realized before long that Arbella was a coarse and vulgar girl, notwithstanding her provocative charms. He came to know from his aunt that his cousin, Sue Bridehead, lived at Christminster Jude was meanwhile deserted by Arbella and he felt free to go Christminster, the place of his dreams. He was struck by the



intelligence and quiet beauty of his cousin and promptly feels in love with her. But his love came to naught when she married to an old, repulsive schoolmaster, Philloston. Jude continued hovering around her, however. But then he went to Merrygreen.

Sue soon got fed-up with Philloston and flew into the arms of Jude started living as wife and man without any regular marriage ceremony. She, indeed, had very unorthodox views. But the two lovers had to face public disdain and ostracization. They were driven from place to place and lived in utter poverty. They had two children of their own and a third of Arbella's with them, still another was on way. One day Arbella's child hanged the other two and then himself. Sue shocked to the extreme, gave birth to a dead baby.

Sue was now feeling repentant. She left Jude and went back to live with Philloston, her 'real' husband. Jude started feeling most miserable and completely lost. He took to drinking heavily to forget his miseries. In a drunken spell he was inveigled back By Arbella into marriage. His health was fast deteriorating, his lungs failing. He expressed his wish to meet Sue for the last time. But Arbella would have non of it. Jude, however, travelled in torrential rain to meet her, The lovers had the last meeting. But later Jude learned that Sue would go on living with Philloston. It shattered him completely and he died in excruciating agony of spirit. He remained from beginning to end, an 'obscure man.' D.F.Hannigan calls the novel as "human in the widest sense of the word" and Havelock Ellis calls it 'the greatest novel written in English for many years.'<sup>5</sup> Yet its publication provided an outcry as noisy as that, which greeted D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterlee's lover.

## CONCLUSION

In the novels of Thomas Hardy, we find a new beauty and a new philosophy. A philosophy which is neither optimism nor pessimism but something in between. Hardy himself called it meliorism, an effect to a better a world which is pretty bad but which has the possibility of being pretty good.

His ancestor's and parents have great deal of influence on his thoughts and on his literary work, throughout his mature years Hardy struggled to achieve a rational vision of existence, the imaginative ties and his vision was troubled by an obscure consciousness of guilt and doubt.

To quote F.R. Southrington- "In his life and in their between inconsistencies and hidden secrets and as he probed the records of his family past, flashes of intelligence could gleam from the musty pages of Church and legal records. On both sides of his family there were traces of illegitimacy, over hasty marriages and barely suppressed dissension and these found their way into his work."<sup>6</sup>

"Historically speaking, Hardy the novelist is a major transitional figure between the popular moralists and popular entertainers of Victorian fiction and the serious visionary, often symbolizing novelist's of today."<sup>7</sup>

Richard Church says, Hardy "A Dorchesterman, he wrote of the renamed Wessex and succeed in building up, through his novels and his poetry, an immortal region which, though since dating in small particulars, will be likely to remain as the realm into itself, where time is arrested at the command of art, and every day human gesture are as immortal as the processional figures of Keats' Greek Vase."<sup>8</sup>

It was Hardy who for the first time used the word ‘Wessex’ in the special sense which it has since acquired. Before 1874 Wessex was an ancient Saxon Kingdom, and nothing more. Thanks to Hardy the word in its popular sense now signifies the English Middle West, roughly speaking, Dorset and the countries to its North and West coloured with the slightly fabulous tints of Hardy’s imagination.

In thus calling the land of his birth after its ancient name, Hardy wants us to feel a sense of historical continuity: The Roman Legions, The Danes, The Angles Celts, their bloody fights, cruelty, wars and a host of other associations are called up by the name of Wessex the land of the West Saxons.

They all are novels of provincial, and even rustic life; for it’s the scene is sometimes shifted from the country to the towns, these are sleeping boroughs or cities, flooded by the influences of the fields. Oxford, the great university, which lifts its towers and spires on the horizon is to the north, the boundary of the agricultural country, hardly eaten into by the fever of modern manners whose heart is Hardy’s own Dorsetshire, and for which he has kept its old name of Wessex. Through this land of memories, where hills are crowned with Roman Camps, and where barrows hide even more ancient remains, the fates are unrolled of heroes placed in a lower or middle condition.<sup>9</sup>

Hardy knew his Wessex by heart. The Wessex region with its streams, heaths, Roman monuments, tales of sorrow and superstitions tends an enchanting and highly romantic background to the novels of Hardy.

Hardy had won reputation and public recognition. Honour after honour was showered upon him. Besides several Doctorates, he got the Order of Merit and the Freedom of the city of Dorchester in 1910. The younger generation of poets and novelists paid him their homage and freely acknowledge him as their guide and teacher. Hardy died on January 11, 1928; on January 16 his ashes were laid away in the poet’s corner of Westminster Abbey. The Abbey funeral was profusely attended. At the same hour the heart of the novelist was buried in the graveyard of Stinsford Church, the Mellstock of the Wessex novels. Thus, ended the life of a great genius but who is still living among us, through his great novels.

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