

Bruce Hugman

HARDY

**Tess of the
d'Urbervilles**



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HARDY:
TESS OF THE
D'URBERVILLES

by
BRUCE HUGMAN



EDWARD ARNOLD

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General Preface

The object of this series is to provide studies of individual novels, plays and groups of poems and essays which are known to be widely read by students. The emphasis is on clarification and evaluation; biographical and historical facts, while they may be discussed when they throw light on particular elements in a writer's work, are generally subordinated to critical discussion. What kind of work is this? What exactly goes on here? How good is this work, and why? These are the questions that each writer will try to answer.

It should be emphasized that these studies are written on the assumption that the reader has already read carefully the work discussed. The objective is not to enable students to deliver opinions about works they have not read, nor is it to provide ready-made ideas to be applied to works that have been read. In one sense all critical interpretation can be regarded as foisting opinions on readers, but to accept this is to deny the advantages of any sort of critical discussion directed at students or indeed at anybody else. The aim of these studies is to provide what Coleridge called in another context 'aids to reflection' about the works discussed. The interpretations are offered as suggestive rather than as definitive, in the hope of stimulating the reader into developing further his own insights. This is after all the function of all critical discourse among sensible people.

Because of the interest which this kind of study has aroused, it has been decided to extend it first from merely English literature to include also some selected works of American literature and now further to include selected works in English by Commonwealth writers. The criterion will remain that the book studied is important in itself and is widely read by students.

DAVID DAICHES

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Contents

I Beauty and sadness of existence—individual life in the contexts of time and space—time-span of novel	7
II Apparent exclusiveness of the world of Wessex—artistic ‘seriousness’—truth of Hardy’s vision	11
III The ‘President of the Immortals’—fate and doom—confusion of existence—superstition and ill-omens—coincidence and man’s relation with Nature—the pagan view—personal responsibility—classical references	12
IV Rejection of pessimism—supremacy of present experience—morality of the novel—Tess’s purity—innocence and Nature—conventional attitudes and guilt—Tess and Alec’s death	20
V Angel Clare—relativity of moral standards	29
VI Social comment—education—observation and action—the urban world—satire of Christianity	34
VII Descriptive accuracy—selection of appropriate seasons and times—pathetic fallacy—structuring of events—transformation through love	42
VIII The Phases—Hardy as commentator and historian—coincidence—Hardy’s artistic purpose—the d’Urbervilles—sensual detail—linguistic detail—Clare’s influence—music—style and vocabulary	48
IX The last pages	59
X Fulfilment through suffering	60
XI Conclusion—claims for the greatness of the novel	61
Select Bibliography	62
Index	63

I*

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is rich in the beauty and sadness of existence.

Pathos and beauty are Tess's recurring experiences. She is an unusually sensitive and passionate girl who suffers cruelly at the hands of a harsh world and a narrow-minded lover, and it is only through the suffering that she is able to find perfect, though brief fulfilment.

In the novel we see reflected Hardy's awareness of the harsh truths of life: that Tess is more responsive a creature when 'pale and tragical'; that happiness comes as an infrequent contrast to misery; that personal fulfilment is rare; that death is inevitable. These are not the observations of a fatalistic pessimist but of a man who sees that an awareness of such truths is essential if man's brief portion of life is to be lived to the full, and if men are conscientiously to avoid wasting life's opportunities.

These perceptions are balanced throughout the novel. We are constantly aware of the grand time scale of the centuries at the same time as the tiny time scale of individual human life. We are intensely aware of time: not so much of specific months or periods but the progress of time and the continuous rhythms of change.

From the beginning the story is shown against a backcloth of the centuries. Parson Tringham's revelations of the ancient d'Urberville family take us back to the middle ages. The d'Urberville motif (which recurs throughout the book), as well as serving several other artistic purposes, keeps us constantly in mind of the grand sweep of time of which the brief moments of present existence are a small and fragile part.

There is a sad suggestion in a sight seen by Tess and Angel during a moonlight walk:

Gnats, knowing nothing of their brief glorification, wandered across the shimmer of the pathway, irradiated as if they bore fire within them, then passed out of its line, and were quite extinct. (XXXII)

The blindness of the lovers' faith in their continued happiness is sadly reflected by the brief glorification of those fragile creatures.

The fullness of summer in the Var Valley is a substantial reality; it has a completeness which makes it imaginatively eternal. In reality of course,

* A synopsis of the contents of each chapter appears on p. vi.

it passed, and inevitably turned to autumn and winter. Hardy points out that even the apparent solid continuity of the seasons is made up of numerous frail and short-lived elements:

Another year's instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches and such ephemeral creatures took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles. (XX)

If Nature's creatures are transitory, so are men and women. Tess perceives the smallness of her own fate in a historical context:

She would be able to . . . think not only that d'Urberville like Babylon, had fallen, but that the individual innocence of a humble descendant could lapse as silently. (XV)

The pagan view provides an even larger time scheme into which present experience can be fitted. Christianity goes back only two thousand years and measured against the history of mankind is very young. The old pagan religions existed thousands of years prior to this. With Hardy's use of pagan references (e.g. Druidical mistletoe; Stonehenge; heliolatry), a much larger view of history is introduced. We are given a sense of the continuity of events from millennia before Christ, events which are the property of this country and, indeed, especially of Wessex. This gives a timelessness to the experiences of the novel which are seen as part of an ancient and continuing series.

Such a sensitivity to the past leads to an acute awareness of the extent to which the individuals of the past have sunk into oblivion, and so to the realisation of how completely we shall be forgotten after our (relatively) rapid deaths. This is given its most poignant expression through Tess during the time of 'payment':

The wife of Angel Clare put her hand to her brow, and felt its curve, and the edges of her eye-sockets perceptible under the soft skin, and thought as she did so that a time would come when that bone would be bare. (XLI)

This is developed in the description of Clare after his return from sickness and disillusionment in Brazil:

You could see the skeleton behind the man, and almost the ghost behind the skeleton. (LIII)

Physical decay is the outward sign of the painful acquisition of spiritual

truth, which is a milestone on the road to death. We are reminded that men in all their variety walk their own individual ways '... the road to dusty death'. We see too that the apparently endless variety of humanity is not endless at all. Our tragedies and joys which loom so large are only the repetitions of events familiar to time. Tess does not wish to investigate this depressing truth:

... what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'. (XIX)

Even our 'modern' thoughts are not so original as we may like to think:

... what are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in 'logy' and 'ism', of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries. (XIX)

Man's relation to space is no less sobering than his relation to time. Abraham observes the stars as he and Tess make their way to Casterbridge with the hives:

He leant back against the hives, and with upturned face made observations on the stars, whose cold pulses were beating amid the black hollows above, in serene dissociation from these two wisps of human life. (IV)

Talbothays becomes a place of the greatest importance to Tess and Clare, so much so that, to them, and through them to the reader, it seems as if Nature is actively on their side. It is quite otherwise: when Tess arrives, her insignificance to the environment is shown in a vivid image:

... Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly. (XVI)

The expansive uplands of Flintcomb-Ash throw Tess and Marian into a similarly depressing perspective between sky and earth:

So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown

face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the face of the former like flies. (XLIII)

Their lives become frail and insignificant in this view.

In relation to society the individual is also only a passing phenomenon:

She might have seen that what bowed her head so profoundly—the thought of the world's concern at her situation—was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a structure of sensations, to anybody but herself. To all humankind besides Tess was only a passing thought. Even to her friends she was no more than a frequently passing thought. (XIV)

This view of life, if it were Hardy's complete view, would indeed be a miserably gloomy one. But it is not his complete view. He shows us the objective smallness and fragility of the individual when measured against the grand time scale of remote past and distant future, but he also takes great care to show us the subjective intensity with which one brief life can be lived.

Part of the glory of the novel is that we believe in the lovers' fulfilment in spite of our knowledge of the larger truths of the human predicament. Out of the pathos and ultimate sadness rises perfect, though brief happiness.

The time scale within the novel—between four and five years—is of little importance in its particular length. We are aware of the passage of time—usually through a simple indication of the month or season in which the new events are to take place—but are much more aware of the periods of weeks and months in which events occur. We remember the roses and strawberries of Tess's first visit to the 'Slopes' rather than that it was early summer, two years before her move to Talbothays. The easiness of the movement through time withholds knowledge of Tess's pregnancy from us until after the child appears, when a new series of events is to begin. This is the only occasion on which the passage of so many months is of particular significance. The significance is otherwise found not so much in the months passed over, but more in the choice of seasons in which developments are to take place.

A reader's final impression of the novel in its temporal dimension is likely to be that of an immense corridor stretching dimly and indefinitely before and behind in which a few brilliantly illuminated scenes take place. The sense of the length of that corridor in both directions is

acute. But within the novel the passage of time is of subsidiary interest to the detail and intensity of the spaced events. Each leap of weeks or months brings us to a new point of development, the interest of which is in its implications for the future, rather than its inferences of the past.

II

The story is exclusively developed. We are aware only occasionally and dimly of the rest of the world beyond the narrow boundaries of the parts of Wessex frequented by Tess. We learn very little even of the people within those boundaries except where such knowledge is of direct relevance to the central story. Reference to the outside world is confined to a brief mention of the Stoke-d'Urbervilles' northern history, of Cuthbert Clare's Cambridge fellowship, of the urban steam train, of the fashionable town of Sandbourne—and some other passing, almost irrelevant matters. Our interest is intensely centred on a few square miles of country, and on a handful of people, who, for the duration of the novel take a significance which excludes the rest of the world. Our experience of the novel is much the same as Angel Clare's at Talbothays:

What had been the engrossing world had dissolved into an uninteresting outer dumb-show. (XXV)

The elevation of the story of simple rural love to the level of poetry and tragedy—and by implication even to divinity—results from the 'high seriousness' with which Hardy writes, and the unusual passion and sensitivity of the actors. They suffer sadness and joy of which our lives offer only weak reflections. For Tess, cut off from the sophisticated and diverse distractions of urban life, love and friendship are all—or nothing. It is much the same for Clare who has severed himself from urban life. So it is that the pathos of failure is much profounder, and the joy of fulfilment far purer than we can expect to know.

The seriousness of Hardy's approach is an important factor in the achievement of this artistic elevation. It is serious in the sense of the Latin 'gravis', and in the sense that it is unrelieved by triviality or humorous diversion. Such 'comic' incidents as there are (Dairyman Crick's anecdotes, for example) are not comic to us (nor to Tess) who have been

led to see deeper than the comedy of situation. Hardy makes this clear when describing the drunken wanderings of John Durbeyfield on his return from Rolliver's Inn:

. . . [they] produced a comical effect, frequent enough in families on nocturnal homegoings; and, like most comical effects, not quite so comic after all. (IV)

We are led much deeper into the incidents of life than we are accustomed—or perhaps find comfortable—to go. We feel that we are near the nerves of existence.

Without question, Hardy's view of life as seen in *Tess* is a partial one. But it is not exclusive or irrelevant—it is too just a view. Its truth reaches far beyond the narrow geographical boundaries of Wessex. Its limitations—even its misrepresentations—are insignificant within the artistic framework. The claim for the greatness of the novel does not rest on its accuracy as a sociological survey, nor in its breadth of vision, but in the truth and beauty of its perceptions of certain aspects of the human predicament.

III

It is sometimes suggested that Hardy's perception of the pathos and misfortunes of life arises from a gloomy fatalism. This is inferred from the fatalistic language he uses and from a sentence in the last paragraph of the book:

. . . the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. (LIX)

This suggests that Hardy is taking the easy view that Tess's misfortunes are the result of the malevolent play of a supernatural being. Its position so near the end of the book gives it considerable weight. But this is not what the book as a whole suggests. Hardy made it clear in a reply to critics, that the 'President of the Immortals' was a personification of the vicissitudes of life, a symbol, a secular reinterpretation of the Aeschylean deity.

In spite of its position in the book, and even without Hardy's dismissal of the suggestion, it is unreasonable to interpret this as a last minute

succumbing to a supernatural explanation. Nowhere else in the book is reference made to malevolent deities, and there are no hints of divine intervention for which this sentence would be the final summary. There is much talk of fate and doom—but those are different matters. Hardy relies on our responding to the spirit rather than the letter of the phrase, and in it we should see only the great unpredictability of life.

(We might note the possibility of a rejection of the Aeschylean scheme of things in a sentence at the end of the first Phase:

But though to visit the sins of the fathers upon the children may be a morality good enough for divinities, it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter. (XI)

Visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children was a characteristic of the Old Testament Yaweh and of Aeschylus's Zeus alike.)

Such 'fatalism' as there is, is more the property of the people's philosophy than of Hardy's. He records the

... fatalistic convictions common to field folk and those who associate more extensively with natural phenomena than with their fellow creatures . . . (XXXII)

and the

... lonely country nooks where fatalism is a strong sentiment. . . (XXIII)

The inference from such observations is that in remote situations there is a strictly limited number of choices—possibly no choice—owing to the absence of a variety of people and opportunities which would provide alternative courses of action. If there is only one bachelor within ten miles of a girl's home farm, presumably she feels 'doomed' to marry him.

After Tess's arrival at Flintcomb-Ash, when she has exhausted all other possibilities of employment in the neighbourhood she feels 'doomed' to have gone there. It is, of course, only a chance outcome. But chance for humanity is so often mischance: and for that there seems to be no explanation:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically as blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (XI)

The village people were

... never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way:
'It was to be.' There lay the pity of it. (XI)

Hardy does not subscribe to this fatalistic view, although the overall pattern is a pessimistic one. It is the story of individuals at the mercy of forces they do not understand, and in the case of Tess, which ultimately destroy. For her, these forces take the form of the lust of Alec d'Urberville, an arbitrary social law, and finally the criminal law. That Tess was unavoidably the victim of these forces does not imply a fatalistic philosophy. It is not fatalistic to say that if one cuts oneself one will bleed, nor that if one steps in front of a moving bus one will be knocked down. These are simply facts which rely on accident for their realisation. Similarly it is not necessarily an indication of a predetermined scheme when people act in accord with their normal behaviour patterns. Most of us are likely to live and act in a more or less predictable way—not because we are divinely or diabolically imposed upon—but because we remain single persons with certain limits of capability.

For Tess these personal characteristics include a certain indecisiveness (e.g. her failure to confess to Clare before their marriage), and a 'reckless acquiescence' to circumstance (e.g. her unquestioning acceptance of Clare's rejection of her). The chances are that she will act in a way more or less determined by those (and other) personal qualities, and that those dependent actions will (more or less) determine the pattern of her life.

To every action there is a reaction, which is inevitable in a certain sense, but strictly at the mercy of human choice and circumstance. Hardy suggests that human judgment often errs—owing to ignorance or prejudice—and that circumstances prove favourable or unfavourable for joy or tragedy in a quite unpredictable fashion.

Tess's ignorance of the 'danger in men-folk' and Alec d'Urberville's lust are the ingredients of tragedy:

Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man ... (V)

This 'doom' was determined by the very ordinary facts of her family's poverty, their vain faith in their ancient lineage, and Tess's self-appointed responsibility to earn some money. The question of why she did not

meet the 'right' man is simply answered: there are a great number of people on the earth, and the odds against the 'right' two meeting first time are very high. Her doom turns out to be a matter of human frailty and simple statistics.

This is a prosaic account of a highly charged subject. Tess feels herself to be the toy of a malevolent power which hurries her irresistibly from one misfortune to another. She is weighed down to the point of despair by what seems to be an inescapable fate.) But Hardy does not suggest that it is anything more than the result of the coincidence of miscellaneous factors. These are symbolically represented by the 'President of the Immortals' and by the occasional reference to 'doom' and 'fate'. (The part played by coincidence in the novel as a whole is discussed further on page 51.)

Human perception and judgment are not sufficiently refined to put to rights the confusion of existence:

In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. Nature does not often say 'See!' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply 'Here!' to a body's cry of 'Where?' till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game. We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will be corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the social machinery than that which now jolts us round and along; but such completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible. Enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment . . . (V)

The simple physical limitations of human beings 'doom' them to misfortune more often than to fortune.

The student interested in biography and psychology may speculate endlessly about the significance of events in Hardy's life—the possibilities of sexual adventures in London, the tensions of his childless marriage to Emma, and so on, and their relationship to the certain bleakness of his outlook. What little evidence there is—in diaries and poems—has been given widely differing interpretations by critics. Even if there were more evidence such speculation is probably not of much value. The novels have an independent life of their own: our concern is with the art of the creation of that life, and the assumptions underlying that creation which can be inferred from it.

No philosophical or theological answers to the problems of life are suggested. The religious overtones of the book are certainly non-Christian, and very often pagan. The country people are 'essentially naturalistic' in their outlook. With this view goes an instinctive superstitiousness. This results from the perception that there seem to be inherent correspondences between some separated events, and between action and result, which conform to a pattern which is more or less predictable. This arises from the occurrence of genuine coincidences and from the obvious fact that certain actions will almost inevitably provoke certain reactions. Furthermore it is often possible, in retrospect, to elicit what appears to be a predetermined pattern, from what was a random succession of events. Incidents to which no importance was attached at the time take an ominous significance when seen from the present; when similar incidents recur they are thought to herald similar results. This belief may contribute to the repetition of the pattern, and so reinforce the belief further.

There are many examples of such processes in *Tess* and while Hardy discounts the physical truth of many of them, their psychological effect cannot be disregarded.

Joan Durbeyfield with her *Compleat Fortune-Teller* and her

. . . fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads . . . (III)

is the most obviously superstitious character in the book. Far from weighing her down with foreboding, it seems to give her a remarkable elasticity of spirit which is equal to the greatest of disasters. Aided by the occasional excursion into the world of alcoholic fantasy, she faces life with exceptional equanimity.

In spite of Tess's 'Standard' education she retains much of her mother's superstitiousness without, however, her insensitive resilience. Tess is given to a belief in ill-omens, which is common to many of the country people. When one of d'Urberville's roses pricks her chin she is alarmed. (The sexual symbolism of this is powerful.) ' . . . she thought this an ill-omen—the first she had noticed that day.' The interesting thing is, that although the thorn prick is a fortuitous event, it happens on a day which contains events that, to anyone but Tess, were ominous in the most obvious and unsuperstitious way. Her interpretation of the event as an 'ill-omen' is an expression of her instinctive recognition of the strangeness and danger of Alec d'Urberville's behaviour. The stubbing of her toe,