Thomas Hardy

THE WOODLANDERS

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THE NEW WESSEX EDITION

General Editor P. N. Furbank

Far from the Madding Crowd
Introduction by John Bayley

Jude the Obscure
Introduction by Terry Eagleton

The Mayor of Casterbridge
Introduction by Ian Gregor

The Return of the Native
Introduction by Derwent May

Tess of the d'Urbervilles
Introduction by P. N. Furbank

The Trumpet-Major
Introduction by Barbara Hardy

Under the Greenwood Tree
Introduction by Geoffrey Grigson

The Woodlanders
Introduction by David Lodge

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THOMAS HARDY

INTRODUCTION BY

David Lodge

'Not boskiest bow'r,
When hearts are ill affin'd,
Hath tree of pow'r
To shelter from the wind!'

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Contents

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P. N. FURBANK

Biography

1840 Hardy born at Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester. His father and grandfather were master-stonemasons, also keen performers in the band or 'quire' of the local parish church.

1848 Attended school established by his local patroness Julia Augusta Martin. About this time his mother gave him Dryden's *Virgil*, *Rasselas* and *Paul and Virginia*.

1849 Transferred to school in Dorchester. Played fiddle at local weddings and dances.

1856–61 Articled to Dorchester architect, John Hicks. Studied Latin and Greek from five to eight in the morning. Began writing verse. Was introduced to modern thought by his friend Horace Moule, son of the Vicar of Fordington.

1862–7 In London, working for the architect Arthur Blomfield. Read widely; studied paintings in National Gallery; became an agnostic.

1867–70 Returned to Dorset for health reasons and was employed by Hicks, and his successor Crickmay, on church restoration.

1868 Completed draft of first novel, 'The Poor Man and the Lady' (later destroyed).

1870 Sent by Crickmay to St Juliot in Cornwall and met future wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford. Writing *Desperate Remedies*, his first published novel.

1873 Invited by Leslie Stephen to contribute serial (*Far from the Madding Crowd*) to *Cornhill*.

1874 Married and took rooms in Surbiton.

1876–8 Living at Sturminster Newton; writing *The Return of the Native*.

1878–81 Living in London. Was becoming well known in literary circles. Had serious illness while writing *A Laodicean*.

1881 Took house at Wimborne Minster.

1883 Went to live in Dorchester.

1885 Moved into the house, Max Gate, in Dorchester, which he had built for himself. He and his wife continued to make long annual visits to London.

1888–91 Writing many short stories. Publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1891 created furore.

1892 His father died.

1892–4 Worsening relations with his wife, the trouble being exacerbated by the writing of *Jude the Obscure*. In 1893 they visited Dublin at invitation of his friend Mrs Henniker, with whom he collaborated on a short story and perhaps fell in love.

1896 *Jude* published, causing scandal. He resolved to give up novel-writing.

1897–8 Writing and revising poems for his first collection, *Wessex Poems*.

1902 Began *The Dynasts*.

1904 His mother died.

1910 Received the Order of Merit.

1912 Making final revision of the Wessex novels. His wife died in November.

1913 In March made penitential pilgrimage to St Juliot and later to his wife's birthplace, Plymouth. Wrote flood of poems 'in expiation'.

1914 Married Florence Dugdale. At outbreak of war joined group of writers pledged to write for the Allied Cause.

1914–28 Wrote and revised the material for several more collections of verse.

1928 Died. His ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey and his heart in his first wife's grave in Stinsford churchyard.

Major Works

1871 Desperate Remedies
1872 Under the Greenwood Tree
1873 A Pair of Blue Eyes
1874 Far from the Madding Crowd
1876 The Hand of Ethelberta
1878 The Return of the Native
1880 The Trumpet-Major
1881 A Laodicean
1882 Two on a Tower
1886 The Mayor of Casterbridge
1887 The Woodlanders
1888 Wessex Tales
1891 A Group of Noble Dames
1891 Tess of the d'Urbervilles
1894 Life's Little Ironies
1896 Jude the Obscure
1897 The Well-beloved
1898 Wessex Poems
1902 Poems of the Past and the Present
1903 The Dynasts, pt 1
1905 The Dynasts, pt 2
1908 The Dynasts, pt 3
1909 Time's Laughingstocks
1913 A Changed Man and Other Tales
1914 Satires of Circumstance
1917 Moments of Vision
1922 Late Lyrics and Earlier
1923 The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall
1925 Human Shows
1928 Winter Words
1952 Our Exploits at West Polev

Introduction

IN the chronology of Thomas Hardy's fiction *The Woodlanders* (1887) comes between *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). In his later years Hardy often said that it was 'in some respects . . . his best novel',[1] yet of his major works it is probably the least well known, and has certainly attracted least attention from scholars and critics. It is difficult to account for this relative neglect, for if *The Woodlanders* is not quite 'the finest English novel', as Arnold Bennett roundly declared,[2] it is demonstrably a work of mature, original artistry and considerable charm. Perhaps the reason is that among the 'Novels of Character and Environment' to which it belongs in the canon of Hardy's work it keeps a fairly low profile. 'Subdued' was the word one of its earliest reviewers used.[3] Despite the hint in the first chapter that we are to behold a drama of 'a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean' (p. 40), *The Woodlanders* belongs to the genre of pastoral elegy rather than tragedy. There is no attempt to build the characters up into heroic proportions; the principal catastrophe (the death of Giles) generates pathos rather than pity and fear; and such violent, passionate deeds as the plot demands (like the death of Mrs Charmond) take place at a distance. Nature, as manifested in the woodlands, is shown to be a domain of ceaseless evolutionary struggle, but outwardly it is calm, temperate, almost idyllic, and seldom menacing to the human inhabitants except in their imaginations. *The Woodlanders* is, by Hardy's own standards, a novel in a muted key: quiet, meditative, as gentle-paced as Mrs Dollery's van; deliberately restricted to an enclosed, homogeneous environment which is observed with patient and eloquent attentiveness; not forcing the characters to represent more than they legitimately can; not (as Hardy was previously

[1] Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (1962) p. 185. Subsequently referred to as *Life*.

[2] Cited by Carl J. Weber, *Hardy of Wessex*, rev. ed. (1965) p. 159.

[3] *Athenaeum*, 26 Mar 1887. Reprinted in *Hardy: the critical heritage*, ed. R. G. Cox (1970) p. 141.

tempted to do) playing off high romantic drama against broad rustic comedy, but subtly blending the two, so that there is always a tinge of the comic, or potentially comic, about even the most sombre moments of the action (Melbury striking Fitzpiers, for instance, or the death of old South – even the death of Giles himself) and a grim sardonic strain in its lightest moments (for instance, the comments of Melbury's men upon the reconciliation of Grace and Fitzpiers, in the last chapter).

'Subtle' is not, perhaps, the word of appreciation that occurs most readily to readers of Hardy's fiction, but *The Woodlanders* is in many ways a subtle book (always excepting the character of Mrs Charmond and her rather stagey background of fast living and amorous intrigue). Like the woods themselves, the book encloses the reader and lays a strange enchantment upon him. We move through the story as though in a dream, led on irresistibly, but along unpredictable paths; sometimes we may feel, as one episode strongly reminds us of another, that, like Grace and Mrs Charmond in Chapter 33, we are travelling in circles; and when we finally emerge it is in a place at once familiar and unexpected. Hardy's development as a novelist – it is what makes him, in the last analysis, a modern rather than a Victorian – was directed towards a mode of writing in which every scene, gesture and image would function simultaneously on several different levels: as a vivid and precise imitation of actuality, as a link in a chain of causation, as symbolic action and as part of a formal pattern of parallels, contrasts and correspondences. In *The Woodlanders* he came closer to achieving this perfect fictional economy than in *Tess*, without – as in the case of *Jude* – sacrificing the lyricism, the sensuous celebration of Nature and the humour, for which his work is loved and admired.

As its title suggests, *The Woodlanders* is a novel especially characterised by 'unity of place'. From the very first paragraph Hardy saturates our senses with impressions of the woods, the abundance and variety of their foliage. 'Trees, trees, undergrowth, English trees! How that book rustles with them,' exclaimed E. M. Forster, whose appreciation of the novel was enhanced by reading it against the background of a bumpy, burned-up Indian landscape.[1] The woods and paths are deep in dead leaves, the interlocking branches make even summer noon into a kind of twilight. Like all Hardy's landscapes, this woodland is a little more intensely, vividly 'there' than any real wood could possibly be: it grows on the border

[1] E. M. Forster, 'Woodlanders in Devi', in *New Statesman*, 6 May 1939, p. 680.

between actuality and myth. The human habitations within it are almost buried in the vegetation, and the traditional work that goes on here – tree-planting and felling, barking, spar-making, hurdle-making and hollow-turning – makes little impression upon the organic, abundant life of the woods. Little Hintock is described in the first chapter as 'one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world' (p. 39), but the effect of the novel is rather to make us think of the world as being outside the leafy, rooted 'gates' of the woodland. As readers of the novel we are situated in the semi-wild heart of the woods, where human life corresponds more closely to the primitive, in the anthropological sense of the word, than perhaps anything else in Hardy ('primitive' is, indeed, a word used in the novel on certain important occasions). Around the woods there is a belt of ordered, cultivated nature in the form of apple-orchards; beyond the orchards there are country towns like Abbot's Cernel and Sherton Abbas, and beyond them Brighton, Cheltenham, London, the Continent – civilisation.

From out of this civilised world, into the woods, like the courtiers of Shakespeare's pastoral comedy *As You Like It*, come strangers, bringing with them habits, attitudes and values that disturb and unsettle the traditional life of the woodland. Hardy's original title for the novel, 'Fitzpiers at Hintock', indicates that this was, for him, the central source of conflict and interest in the story. But Fitzpiers, though the most important, is not the only interloper. There is Mrs Charmond, a landowner with no real roots in her property; and there is Mr Percomb, the barber, who in the superb opening chapters acts out an illustrative prologue to the main action.

Barber Percomb is a member of – or parasite upon – the 'civilised' world: 'not a journeyman haircutter, but a master-barber that's left off his pole because 'tis not genteel' (p. 39). His appearance in the Hintock woods excites considerable surprise among Mrs Dollery's passengers, and he is himself lost and ill-at-ease in that environment. 'How's Little Hintock folk by now!' he calls out to Melbury's party in the last chapter (a typical piece of Hardy symmetry, this reappearance); 'Never have I been over there since one winter night some three year ago – and then I lost myself finding it. How can ye live in such a one-eyed place?' (p. 370). His mission on that first occasion is to persuade poor hard-pressed Marty to sell her crowning glory to make a wig for Mrs Charmond – or, in mythical terms, he is a demonic figure (compared to Mephistopheles by Marty

and to the Scandinavian demon Loki by the narrator) who rapes the locks of the tutelary nymph of the woods. In many respects Percomb is a parallel figure to Fitzpiers (who is also ill-at-ease in the woods, excites attention from the local people, violates their values and their women, and is associated by them with the devil), while he acts as an agent for Mrs Charmond and her worldly preoccupations with physical vanity, money, social status and illicit sex. Typically, Hardy forges a causal as well as a symbolic link between Percomb and this mischievous pair, for it is partly through Percomb's success in obtaining Marty's hair that Mrs Charmond is later able to work her seductive spell upon Fitzpiers, and it is the latter's discovery of the truth about this hair that brings their affair to its violent conclusion.

Fitzpiers is a kind of third-rate Shelley (a poet he is fond of quoting): an idealist, a dabbler in science, philosophy, literature; idle, fickle, egocentric, selfish as a child. What attracts him, he must have; when he has it, he loses interest – especially where women are concerned. Preening himself on his superior birth and breeding, he is in fact crassly insensitive to the feelings of others, and never scruples to exploit their generosity (especially Melbury's). His 'modern, unpractical mind' (p. 148) has no real instinctive sympathy with the woodland or its denizens. The minute changes of appearance in the woods in winter do not register on his consciousness (p. 150) and he 'hate[s] the solitary midnight woodland' (p. 141) through which he is obliged to make occasional journeys. His transient impulse to settle down with Grace in Little Hintock, 'sacrificing all practical aims to live in calm contentment here ... to accept quiet domesticity according to oldest and homeliest notions' (p. 163), is a piece of pastoral affectation betraying equal ignorance of himself and of the woodlands. This ignorance and insensitivity is perhaps most dramatically manifested by his medical treatment of John South. Unable to appreciate the totemic significance of the tree for the old peasant, he briskly and confidently orders it to be felled. 'Damned if my remedy hasn't killed him!' is his somewhat callous response to the result. By causing the death of old South, Fitzpiers also indirectly causes the ruin of Giles Winterborne, and although this is unintentional it is not attended by any remorse, or even by an expression of regret when the opportunity offers itself (p. 143).

Mrs Charmond is in many ways like Fitzpiers. A slightly shop-soiled visitant from the *beau-monde*, she also dislikes the woods, finding them dull, depressing and, when she is lost in them, terrify-