

# THOMAS HARDY ANNUAL No. 5

Edited by Norman Page

*Professor of Modern English Literature  
University of Nottingham*

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## Editor's Note

Contributions for future volumes of the *Annual* are welcome at any time. There is no limit on length, and illustrations may be included where appropriate. All contributions should be typewritten (double-spaced throughout, including quotations and footnotes). References to Hardy's novels should be identified by chapter-number, thus: (*The Woodlanders*, ch. 10). Footnotes should be kept to a minimum, and brief references worked into the text wherever possible.

## Notes on the Contributors

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## Editor's Introduction

Significant Hardy centenaries loom abundantly during the next few years, for the late 1880s and 1890s were for Hardy a period of rich creativity: not every novelist has to his credit four major novels in ten years, to say nothing of a curious and haunting minor novel and three volumes of short stories. The first three essays in the present collection commemorate and celebrate the appearance in volume-form in 1887 (the serial version completed its twelve-month run in April of that year) of *The Woodlanders*, a novel that has sometimes been overshadowed by the other masterpieces of Hardy's final phase as a novelist and has received less than its due of praise and attention. Other contributions range widely over his fictional and non-fictional writings, and include consideration of a notable Hardy film, discussion of some of his short stories (a field that, despite Kristin Brady's valuable book, is still unfairly neglected), and an examination of Hardy's last major work, the so-called 'autobiography'. As usual, the contents of the volume represent the work of scholars of different countries and generations, and embody a variety of approaches, from textual editing to the application of recent critical theory. The reviews section, in conjunction with Richard H. Taylor's cumulative listings, indicate that major contributions continue to be made to Hardy studies: a year that has seen, among much else, a complete and authoritative edition of Hardy's notebooks as well as a recension of Florence Hardy's alleged *Life* that goes as far as is possible towards establishing what Hardy actually wrote is a notable one for serious students of Hardy.

His work now engages the attention of a striking number of critics of diverse persuasions, including some of the most distinguished now writing, and the reinterpretation and

reevaluation of some items in its considerable corpus – not to mention the establishing of satisfactory texts and the making available of essential ancillary material such as letters and notebooks – are well under way. Hardy's placing as a major author who merits this quantity and quality of attention seems so secure that it is easy to forget how relatively recent it is.

A version of Lionel Adey's essay was given at the 1985 conference of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada held in Saskatoon, and versions of the essays by Samuel Hynes and Norman Page were given at the Thomas Hardy Summer Schools held at Weymouth, Dorset, in, respectively, 1984 and 1980.

The editor and publishers wish to thank the Dugdale Trust for kindly giving permission to reproduce the previously unpublished folio 9 of Hardy's 'Saturday Night in Arcady'.

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# ESSAYS



# A Social Comedy? On Re-reading *The Woodlanders*

**John Bayley**

One of the pleasures of re-reading any great novelist is to see if and how perspective and proportion change. Developments and big scenes which impressed on first acquaintance may recede in later readings, and quite different impressions replace them. This is specially true of Hardy, in whose work the idea of 'impression', like the idea of 'passivity', is unusually important. And of none of his novels is it so true as in the case of *The Woodlanders*.

The reason is clear. As several critics have observed, *The Woodlanders* is a particularly rich mix-up of Hardy modes and moods. In *Thomas Hardy and Women*, Penny Boumelha points out that 'it draws on genres so widely disparate as to be at times incompatible'.<sup>1</sup> That is true, though incompatibility is not something that usually worries Hardy much. His imagination, his narrative, the texture of his consciousness and his prose, all take it in their stride. None the less it is true that the switch from one genre and one mode of feeling to another is something that strikes one more strongly with each re-reading, changing the impression and seeming to shift the emphasis. In the earlier novels, most notably in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the separate modes lived together, not so much in harmony with each other as in a happy state of natural indifference. Hardy himself seems neither to know nor to care that comic, pastoral, pathetic and tragic modes – to name only the most obvious ones – are all collectively at work, in spite of the fact that he was both self-conscious and ambitious in the matter of genre, not infrequently reminding the reader of his text's affinities with the traditions both of classic tragedy and of dramatic comedy. Yet the literary

Hardy does not himself seem aware of the alter ego who unknowingly observes and conveys – the perceiver who pays no regard to the literary craftsman who invokes literary models. It struck me once, and I tried to express the point in a suitable metaphor, that Hardy's text 'is like a landscape of which the constituent parts – cows, birds, trees, grass – pay no attention to one another'.<sup>2</sup> And the author himself often gives the impression of being in the landscape, and behaving like one of its denizens.

*The Woodlanders* was originally planned, so Hardy says, with the idea of a follow-up to *Far From the Madding Crowd*; the scenario being laid aside in favour of *The Hand of Ethelberta*, which the author thought would represent a new departure, daringly removed from what might become a pastoral stereotype. At that stage in his writing career the mixture of modes in *The Woodlanders* would have seemed natural enough. But by the time he came to write *The Woodlanders*, as it now appears, Hardy had not only more sense of his position as a novelist but an intention of speaking his mind on marriage and on society in general, as was done in the French novels he had been reading. The novel therefore had not only to carry the usual Hardyan mixture of modes, but several extra ones as well, and not the sort that would tend to live together and pay no attention to their fellows. Hence the impression of disparateness and incompatibility; hence, too, the special interest in re-reading, and feeling each time a different impression of the whole.

No one, I should think, is troubled at a first reading by the mixture of modes in the novel, and by what Penny Boumelha calls 'its interrogative awareness of the literary modes within which it is working'. The woodland itself no doubt impresses us most, its ancientness and its darkness, which are both grim and reassuring in their suggestion of unchanging ways of men locked into the pattern of the seasons, of growth and decay. Wood and man are at one, like the darkness which meets the woodlanders 'flatly on the threshold' as they open their cottage doors by night; and which, as Grace looks out from Giles Winterborne's hut at night, 'seems to touch her pupils like a substance'. The woodland suffers like man, lives and dies as he does in close and binding proximity to its own kind. Hardy's descriptions of the woodland – its greenness and blackness, its fungus and moss, its distortions of growth and its tangles of boughs

wounded by rubbing each other – are compelling and instantly accepted: as is the case with the background of memorable novels we feel as if we had lived in the place all our lives. Indeed we accept implicitly, and at first reading, what we may subsequently recognize as a true analysis when we read it in David Lodge's Introduction to the novel<sup>3</sup>: that Hardy has placed side by side a traditionally pastoral view of the woodland country and its denizens, and a Darwinian view, contemporary in its time, of both wood and woodlanders as locked in the same struggle for survival, participants and victims in the same unyielding process. In fact both wood and village are slums, the wood in particular a cramped tenement in which few individual trees will get their chance to develop and grow.

Complementing each other as they do, these 'impressions' are quite compatible. No one reading *The Woodlanders* for the first time would find the Darwinian and the pastoral wood incongruous with one another; rather the two seem natural aspects of Hardy's vision. In the same way the reader accepts the distinction between woodland life and polite society, and the way in which the story interweaves the two, with Grace as the passive prize or go-between in the middle. He is absorbed by the image of Marty South splitting gads by night in her cottage; by her and Winterborne planting the young pines together; or when she stands among the branches of a felled oak like a great bird, adroitly stripping off the bark into glove fingers with her simple tool made from a horse's leg-bone. Her image and Winterborne's personify woodland ways, like those of Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and at first reading the narrative seems balanced on the same axis between country pursuits and urban or worldly restlessness and guile, Sergeant Troy and Fitzpiers supplying the same sort of disruptive influence.

Episodes like Grace's skirt being clutched in the man-trap, and the foray of the maidens into the wood on St John's Eve, seem variations on memorable moments in the earlier novel, like the sword exercise in the dell of ferns, and Bathsheba catching her dress in the dark wood on Sergeant Troy's spur. Grace's flight and sojourn in Winterborne's hut parallels Bathsheba's night in the wilderness after the drama of Fanny Robin's coffin and Troy's departure. But in the earlier novel these scenes are done with the poetry of absolute conviction. In

*The Woodlanders* they seem more in the nature of ritual expedients. Or rather they come to seem so on re-reading.

This is not a weakness. Of all Hardy's novels *The Woodlanders* has the most curious kind of depth in it, a perspective of impressions that lengthens with each perusal. The most obvious explanation is that Hardy, like Grace, was in a divided state, divided between the kind of new, enquiring fiction he wanted to write, and the traditional kind which had been so successful and which had won him an admiring audience. But that is only the beginning of a more complex matter, involving, as we might expect, that element of day-dream and fantasy which was the most powerful in Hardy's creative temper. It is this element, more latent and indefinable here than in the other novels, which declares itself more openly with each re-reading.

The first impression is much more straightforward, the woodland itself more important than any of the characters, and personified in the figure of Winterborne, whose importance at first seems greater than that of the female characters. We are told at the beginning that in such an isolated woodland community 'dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein', though this may only happen 'from time to time'. But we may remember this promise on the last page of the novel, even if we have forgotten it in the meantime, when Marty South, as Sophoclean chorus, is uttering her requiem over the grave of Winterborne. Moving it is, deeply so, but to re-read the novel is to feel also how pre-determined it is. This at any rate, so Hardy seems to be assuring himself and the reader, is the note which will resolve any incompatibility in the genres which have come together more spontaneously, if more disconcertingly, in the second half of the novel. If it is given to Marty to have 'touched sublimity at points', in the steadfast part of Antigone, Grace, a few pages back, has 'slily' pointed out to her husband that in his efforts to win her back he has been quoting from *Measure for Measure*: 'Love talks with better knowledge, and knowledge with dearer love.' It is to that deeply unsatisfactory though in its own way no less touching world – the world in which Isabella asks no better man than the Angelo who has deserted and betrayed her – that Grace and her husband inevitably belong. It is a striking instance of the inspired literalism of Hardy's