

The art of Thomas Hardy

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

Essay written by Francis Bennion in October 1946 as an undergraduate at Balliol College Oxford when reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Modern Greats).

The stature of Thomas Hardy among the literary giants of the nineteenth century is very great; in many ways the greatest of all. As a portrayer of human emotions and the moods and mysteries of nature his position is pre-eminent. Impatient of convention, he assisted the reaction from Victorian strictness and in his supreme sympathy for human misfortune, he helped to secure recognition of the fact that labourers had human feelings and that the poor had other distresses than are merely brought about by poverty. His sympathy for the poorer classes of country-people, among whom he was brought up, and his understanding – sometimes fearful, always profound – of the ways of nature, are qualities which permeate his work and cause it to glow with life. He was eternally preoccupied with the concept of mankind as the sport of fate, striving to fulfil itself, yet always baffled and finally destroyed by ruthless, pantheistic gods. In the Christian idea of God he firmly disbelieved. The notion that some benevolent Being watched over its creatures on earth, guiding and strengthening, was incredible to the man who saw only the workings of nature's cruel, unmindful laws. Hardy's view of Christianity is indicated by the fact that he wrote a long poem about the legend of Panthera, a Roman soldier who claimed to have fathered Christ. The impact of this blasphemy on orthodox Victorian households can scarcely be imagined! In spite, however, of the fascination which human suffering seemed to hold for him, Hardy, particularly in his earlier work, usually tried to counterbalance sorrow with joy. In his novels he always aimed at telling a story, which, unlike life itself, was neatly rounded off. In this he followed the Fielding tradition of the novel, which attached much importance to the plot. Only very rarely is joy shown unalloyed, however, even when the plot dictates a happy ending. Hardy never lets his characters, or his readers, forget that human happiness seldom lives long.

Hardy's genius has been described as poetical in character, and we may well examine some of his poems before going on to consider other aspects of his work. In 1909 Hardy published a collection of his poems which he called *Time's Laughingstocks* – an odd title which illustrates his ironical humour. It is the poetry of the folk-song, and, although written at widely different dates, nearly all the poems are tinged with melancholy, emphasized to almost a morbid degree. As the eye passes down the contents page it encounters such grim titles as 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy', 'The Dead Man Walking', 'The Phantom', 'After the Last Breath' and 'The Man He Killed'. The theme is of death and decay, of the uselessness of earthly activity, of human failings and the inhumanity of fate. Nevertheless Hardy could overcome his sombre cast of mind, as when he wrote :

Sweet cyder is a great thing,
A great thing to me,
Spinning down to Weymouth town
By Ridgeway thirstily,
And maid and mistress summoning
Who tend the hostelry:
O cyder is a great thing,
A great thing to me!

Hardy to some extent explained his habit of dwelling on the harsher side of existence when he wrote:

. . . As, in looking at a carpet, by following one colour a certain pattern is suggested, by following another colour, another: so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe and describe that alone. This is, quite accurately, a going to Nature: yet the result is no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writer's own mind.

It was in his novels that Hardy's art showed to greatest advantage. In them his pen had room to draw the wide scenes, peopled with noble, troubled souls, so fitting to his genius. In the novel that was his first success, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy portrayed country life at its kindest and best. The parties, the carol-singing, the happy love-making, the whimsical country characters, all are gay colours in this patchwork of Wessex life in the nineteenth century. As Hardy grew older, however, he seemed less able to keep down the bitter, ironical side of his nature. His last novel, *Jude the Obscure* is a humourless drama of passion and disaster.

Hardy's characters are superbly drawn when they are simple, passionate, fundamentally good people, like Tess of the D'Urbervilles or Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge. His drawing of a sensuously attractive woman, of deep, complicated emotions, yet fundamentally as the sub-title has it 'a pure woman' makes Tess one of the great characters in literature. When Hardy draws characters of greater surface complexity, like the Lady Mabella Buttermead (a society debutante) or Sue Bridehead (a country-bred girl with an intellectual veneer) he begins to falter and we do not always believe in them. His villains are nearly always improbable, perhaps because Hardy's essentially pure nature made it difficult for him to enter into the full nature of villainy.

Another aspect of his novels must be touched on. This is his fertility in inventing incident, and unusual, arresting incident at that. What other author would have introduced two of the chief characters in his book to one another by having the girl attract the attention of the young man who interested her by hurling an unsavoury, but appropriate portion of a pig's bladder at him, as Arabella did to Jude? Again, who else could have imagined such an incident as the gambling-match between Wildere and the reddleman inside a circle of glow worms on haggard Egdon heath?

Mention of Egdon brings us to consider Hardy's descriptive powers; whenever a new scene is introduced to the reader a broad, yet detailed picture is given, usually with some piquant simile or arresting phrase to colour it. Hardy touches the heights in this respect when describing Egdon. The vision called up by the account of the bonfires scattered on the black heath in *The Return of the Native* is unforgettable:

Red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round. . . Some were distant, and stood in a dense atmosphere, so that bundles of pale straw-like beams radiated around them in the shape of a fan. Some were large and near, glowing scarlet-red from the shade, like wounds in a black hide. . .

Another description of Egdon tells how, when a wind blows over the heath 'treble, tenor, and bass notes' are given out by the different obstacles to its progress. In the heather the wind makes a sound like

the ruins of human song which remain to the throat of fourscore & ten. It was a worn whisper, dry and papery, and it brushed so distinctly across the ear that, by the accustomed, the material minutiae in which it originated could be realised as by touch. . . One inwardly saw the infinity of those combined multitudes; and perceived that each of the tiny trumpets was seized on, entered, scoured and emerged from the wind as thoroughly as if it were as vast as a crater.

That shows how exact was Hardy's knowledge of the countryside!

Hardy's humour is sometimes overlooked when his work is being discussed. Although it only appears as faint flashes on the sombre plain of his thought it deserves consideration. The rustics, like those of Weatherbury, Mellstock and Egdon provide much of his humour, which is none the worse for being of the simplest nature. It often becomes farce, indeed, as when the Mellstock choir visit the Vicar, Mr. Maybold. Sometimes the rustics are made to speak shrewdly, even cynically as 'Yes, matrimony do begin "Dearly Beloved," and ends wi' "amazement" as the prayer book says' or 'Enteren the Church is the ruin of a man's wit, for wit's nothen without a faint shadder o' sin' or 'Doom? Doom is nothing beside an elderly woman.'

Summing-up Thomas Hardy is no easy task. We have moved far enough away from his times to be able to say 'His work will live'. We are sure it will live because of its great understanding of the human heart and its descriptions of the woods and fields and country-people of Wessex, if for nothing else. As Hardy himself said, his art 'is to intensify the expression of things so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible'. The hearts of his poor heroes and heroines are made very plain to us by his genius. We understand that such tumultuous passions as they experience are inevitably destructive. In our sorrow for them we are almost convinced, with Hardy, that some 'President of the Immortals' is making sport of us all. Then, momentarily, we may come to doubt whether such people ever could have existed. Could there have been a Jude, to be so passionate, yet so intellectual; so clever with his hands and so stupid in securing his happiness? Surely there could never have been a child like 'Little Father Time', to murder his brother and sister and then hang himself? But there could be, and have been such people. One reads of them in a newspaper, or hears distant gossip of their tragedies. They are not everyday people, but in them seems concentrated all the ill-starred passion of the race of men. They are epitomes, and as such they will live as long as there are men to read of them.

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