THOMAS HARDY

LIFE
T. Hardy was born in Dorsetshire in a small village and grew up as a melancholy boy, fond of nature and solitude. His father transmitted him his love for music while he inherited by his mother his love for reading and for the classics. He chose architecture as a profession and worked first with a local practitioner and then for a firm in London. While in London he began writing poems but without any success. Unsatisfied with both his work and London life he returned to Dorset where he married Emma Gifford, who did not prove a very congenial wife. He then abandoned architecture and devoted himself to literature. His literary career is usually divided in three periods:

1) in the first period he wrote about fifteen novels. In the first ones the predominant element was irony; then irony and tragedy blended together till, in the last ones, the tragic element became more and more insistent. His last novel ‘Jude the Obscure’, the most pessimistic of his novels, caused a real scandal as he had treated the themes of sexual relation and religious belief in such an explicit way as to offend Victorian prudery. So he decide to stop writing novels.

2) The second period was mainly taken up by the composition of ‘The Dynasts’, a verse drama on the Napoleonic wars,

3) 3) the third period was devoted to poetry.

4) In 1912 his first wife died and in 1914 he married Florence Dugdale, who proved a more congenial wife. He spent the last years of his life in Dorchester and when he died his ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets’ Corner.

NATURALISM

T. Hardy is a ‘Late Victorian’, a term applied to the writers of the second half of the Victorian Age, who mostly lived during the last twenty years of Victoria’s reign and the first decade of the 20th century.

Though a great part of English society was still living according to the old Victorian codes, a spirit of rebellion began to gain ground, the so called Anti-Victorian Reaction, also due to the new scientific and philosophical theories. A new sort of ‘realism’ led the writers to reject any sentimental or romantic attitude and to focus above all on the clash between man and his environment, between illusion and reality. The ‘Late Victorians’ did not identify themselves with their age, they were very critical and attacked the optimism and self-confidence typical of the Victorian Age. This new movement, called Naturalism (inspired by Zola’s naturalistic novels) grew from the interest in the new scientific discoveries in consequence of which the Naturalists came to see man only as a creature conditioned by heredity, by his own environment and by the circumstances of the moment. At the mercy of an indifferent Fate, man was no longer responsible for his actions, determined by forces beyond his control.

In their wish to be realistic Naturalist writers applied scientific methods to literature and they tried to be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. They avoided any personal intrusion into their works and limited themselves to ‘photographing’ reality, without judging or commenting on it.

T. Hardy is considered a Naturalist writer because his concept of ‘predestination’ can be traced back to the naturalistic one of ‘heredity’ and hid belief in an ‘Immanent Will’ reproduces the Naturalists’ idea of Fate.

THEMES
He attributed great importance to the celebration of man’s emotional sphere and to the symbolic meaning of nature. His major works are all love stories that focus on characters and on the physical background around them; the main themes of these novels are: the problems and vicissitudes of sexual relationship inside and outside marriage. He reached a point in his fiction in which true love
is directly connected to disappointment and sorrow. Maybe it is possible to draw a parallel between Hardy’s treatment of this theme and the failure of his own marriage. While in his earlier novels he tends to lament the universe’s indifference to man, in his later novels he recognises that man-made laws are partly responsible for the unhappiness and sufferings inflicted on the individual. The theme of the whole of Hardy’s fiction is the struggle of man against a relentless fate, a blind and destructive will, a cruel anti-providence against which there is no revolting. All his novels are dominated by an obscure power which inexorably drives the characters to a tragic end. Nobody is master of his own destiny, he is at mercy of forces operating on him. Since men are not free to change their fate they are left only with the possibility of showing their strength of character by enduring their trials. All his heroes are denied happiness by the malign influence of a hostile destiny. They are the puppets of fate, doomed to failure and sorrow. Man is only a superior animal isolated in an indifferent, mechanical universe, living a life without meaning and without God. The author’s loss of faith was probably influenced by his reading both of the classics and of contemporary authors. From Greek tragedy he derived the notion of cruel Gods, indifferent Nature and hostile Fate. After reading Darwin’s ‘On the origin of Species’ he perceived the intellectual consequences of that scientific theory and denied the existence of God. He could see no intelligent direction of the universe and considered human life as a purely tragic process upon which man had no power. Moreover, in his novels Hardy criticises the most conventional, moralistic and hypocritical aspects of Victorian society. He is well aware of how an indifferent and hostile society can waste and annihilate human efforts and spiritual energy with its conventions, prejudices and class-consciousness. Also his attitude to religion is polemic: he believes Christianity is no longer capable of fulfilling the needs of modern man, which reflects the religious crisis he went through. Difficulty or failure of communication is another central theme and it frequently leads to tragedy.

**SETTING** All his major novels are set in ‘Wessex’, the south western region of England. Wessex is the name of the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Many of the place names in Hardy’s Wessex are invented, but others are real and it is often possible to identify the houses and landscapes he described with real places. His boyhood and youth spent in the region and his work as an architect in local towns and villages gave him an excellent knowledge of the whole area. Most of Hardy’s novels are set in the countryside and show his affection for the vanishing agricultural world in the place of increasing urbanisation. He considered himself as the spokesman of the values of the peasant class against the restricted views of the middle classes.

In his novels nature is far more than a mere background to the action. It is often an impersonal unfeeling force which influences the characters’ lives and emotions. Landscapes are used not merely as realistic backgrounds, but also as projections of the emotions and feelings of the characters.

**CONCEPT OF TIME** Hardy’s novels present a well-defined society standing in a specific epoch of its history. But the life of the individual is seen as occupying an infinitesimal position of the life of the universe. At the same time the living are surrounded by the dead and find themselves re-enacting scenes and re-living emotions that have been indefinitely repeated. The rhythm of life of nature is cyclical and parallel to the cyclical vision of the life of man in which there is a continuous repetition of events taking place so that what is happening now is the result of what happened before.

**CHARACTERS** The characters are mostly ordinary men and women, simple country folk or the inhabitants of the country ‘towns’.

**STYLE** Hardy uses symbolism in his novels: an object suggests a story and can evoke a whole way of life. He employs a third person narrator who knows everything about Tess and her feelings and sometimes steps into the story to comment. He also made use of the so called ‘cinematic technique’: the point of view is that of an observer who first looks at the figures from a distance and then moves in for a closer view. Another typical device used by Hardy is to let a scene be viewed through an open door, a window or a
hole in the wall, that is the ‘framing’ of a scene within a larger scene so that one of his characters is in a position to view the others through a limited field of vision. In this way a portion of the external world is cut off from the rest, for the special attention of the observer and the reader.

In terms of form his achievement is the ability to combine the tragedy and the novel, but his conception of the novel was rather traditional: in all his novels, in fact, he employs an omniscient third-person narrator and follows a straightforward chronological narrative with occasional jumps in time.

TESS OF THE D’UBERVILLES
First ‘Tess’ appeared in serial form in a magazine and was published as a book in 1891. Though the novel was described as immoral by some critics, it sold well and has remained popular.

In this novel Hardy succeeds in integrating the personal emotions of a country girl with an intense study of nature and the meaning of man’s existence; all this within a realistic historical framework. So, while Tess is about love and nature, it is also a survey of 19th century beliefs about morality and religion. In this way it is possible to read it from various points of view: as a simple love story, as a pastoral romance, as a tragedy or as an allegory of man’s progress through the world.

‘Tess’ has the typical structure and content of the tragic novel and Tess is a perfect example of a tragic heroine, even if she is a credible character. Her main characteristic is certainly her ‘fatal passivity’: she is submissive to people even if sometimes she shows herself to be a proud woman. These fundamental aspects of Tess’s personality do not change throughout the novel; she is always the same and her tragedy seems to come out more by her suffering the consequences of people’s actions and conventional values than by actions performed by herself. She is tempted by Alec’s passion and Angel’s love. Tess is by nature intelligent, sensitive and innocent. She is profoundly moral and has natural dignity. Yet she is a victim of fate. There is in her a sense of doom, of the uselessness of protesting against the inevitable that is strengthened by their primitive country fatalism and superstition. Man’s own actions cannot alter the course of events: he can only conform to the dictates of fate. Tess’s view of the future is conditioned by superstition and by the sense of predestination. The life of an individual is only partly determined by his own efforts: the most part depends on fate, that is on the pressures of things over which he has no control. Life is governed by a malevolent power whose main aim is to destroy the ambitions and desires of man. But even though conventions and laws condemned her as a sinner, hardy depicts her as a ‘pure woman’. She is a tragic victim of circumstance and hypocrisy, a victim of her seducer and a victim of Angel’s narrow-mindedness.

Tess can be seen also as the victim of the social conventions, of Victorian hypocrisy, of the abject treatment of women in general and lower class women in particular. Tess’s tragedy is caused by two men: Alec d’Urbervilles and Angel Clare, whose behaviour derives from the social and moral attitudes prevalent at the time. Alec is one of Hardy’s diabolical characters: he is the middle-class villain of Victorian melodrama and the familiar seducer of popular songs and ballads, the rich man whom the law will not punish for seducing a peasant girl. But even though he has no scruples he has also good qualities and he cares for Tess’ welfare. Angel, instead, seems to be open-hearted and reliable but he fails to show charity. He is the young man of progressive views who is still slave to sexual hypocrisy and cannot forgive a ‘fallen girl’ even though he has fallen himself. He is slave to the conventions of society and he idealizes virginal purity.

Tess’s arrest takes place at Stonehenge where, according to popular belief, sacrifices were made in prehistoric times. This final scene has a symbolic meaning: it reminds us of the ritual of a sacrifice where the victim is Tess. She has fallen asleep on a stone like the victim lying on the sacrificial stone, while the policemen standing around her are like the priests waiting to perform a sacrifice. In this way she becomes a victim of fate: men’s justice punishes her for a crime that she has committed against her will; she was led to do it by a series of unfortunate circumstances. The fate of the ‘fallen woman’ was a key issue of the time both because Victorian society was fanatical about morality and chasteness was
considered the greatest virtue and aspiration of young unmarried women, and because the question of women’s rights and roles within society was gradually gaining ground. Nature, too, is integrated by Hardy in his picture of man’s tragic fate. Nature forms one of the pressures upon characters and though they may sometimes feel a sympathy with it, yet it remains passively indifferent to their sufferings. No sympathy, then, no connection between man and nature, only indifference.

In this way we can say that Hardy has written the modern version of a classical tragedy in which man struggles with the gods, with fate or destiny and with the way things are. The pervading tone of the novel is one of irony, the irony of coincidence and of the triumph of adverse fate over human effort. It’s useless to protest against the inevitable, man’s own actions cannot alter the course of events; he can only conform to the dictates of fate. The life of an individual is only partly determined by his own efforts, the most part depends on fate over which he has no control. Life is governed by a malevolent power whose main aim is to thwart the ambitions and desires of man.