

Thomas Hardy

Author(s): Louise Collier Willcox

Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 201, No. 712 (Mar., 1915), pp. 423-429

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25108404>

Accessed: 22-04-2020 17:45 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*University of Northern Iowa* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The North American Review*

JSTOR

# THOMAS HARDY

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX

---

"To read *Tess* here in America and to read it in Wessex," some one told me, "are not comparable experiences." When, two months before war was declared last year it was my great privilege to visit Mr. Hardy at Maxgate, near Dorchester, I fully understood what my friend meant.

It is with bated breath that I speak of stopping at Maxgate; almost with the same awe that I might say "I once saw Shakespeare in Avon." Greatness of course gains glamour with the passage of time, and the added centuries make it mysterious and inaccessible, and therefore more to be prized, but even at the present moment I still feel the thrill with which I looked at the every-day life of one of the greatest of English writers. No matter how we may rank Mr. Hardy, whether we put him before or after George Meredith or George Eliot or Thackeray or Dickens, his place in the history of English literature is secure. He has made a locality live; he has immortalized its towns and villages, its sea-coasts, heaths, and hills; he has created a whole army of men and women and sent them living, breathing, acting down the highways of eternity; he has given us an arraignment of certain social conditions, aye, in despite of himself he has given us an interpretation, if not a philosophy, of life. The life he set himself to portray he has recorded with something akin to the Shakespearian irony and detachment; somewhat the same patient, quiescent contemplation, and if not with the same, at least with a related beauty of expression.

In the preface to the final edition he deprecates the idea that either in the novels or the metrical section of his compositions he has offered any positive views on the Whence and the Wherefore of things.

Nor is it likely [he writes] that imaginative writings extending over more than forty years would exhibit a coherent scientific theory of the Universe even if it had been attempted—of that Universe concerning

which Spencer owns to the "paralyzing thought" that possibly there exists no comprehension of it anywhere.

Again he defends himself against the frequent charge of pessimism.

It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics—which is truth. Existence is either ordered in a certain way, or it is not so ordered, and conjectures which harmonize best with experience are removed above all comparison with other conjectures which do not so harmonize. So that to say that one view is worse than other views, without proving it erroneous, implies the possibility of a false view being better or more expedient than a true view; and no pragmatic proppings can make that *idolum specus* stand on its feet, for it postulates a prescience denied to humanity.

And there is another consideration. Differing natures find their tongue in the presence of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer's instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond.

Thomas Hardy's much-proclaimed pessimism is really, then, due to the fact that he does chiefly become vocal at the sight of tragedy. In speaking to him of one of his most pessimistic short poems I mentioned how widely it had been copied in the American magazines and papers: "And that," he said, "goes out as one of my final utterances upon the Universe!" He then told me that the poem in question had lain in a drawer for some twenty years, and when an importunate editor asked for something, anything, from his pen, he had unearthed it. It is an undoubted pleasure, when one realizes how rarely Mr. Hardy's novels give us the sense of relief and ease that go with a happy ending, to look back at the peaceful simplicity so full of honors and rewards that Fate has granted to him. The little City of Casterbridge, which he has endowed with immortality, has given him the "Freedom of the City," the key laid in a beautiful, inscribed shrine. His years are crowded with the recognition from all sides so rarely given to the living, and with complete devotion and loyalty in his own household.

Of his fourteen novels, only three—*Under the Greenwood Tree*, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, and *The Well-Beloved*—touch upon the lighter side of life. These are delightful comedies, so permeated with gentle, ironic laughter, so devoid of the sense of a cruel destiny waiting to swallow its puppets, that it is hard to reconcile oneself to the fact that there are not more of the same kind.

But as Mr. Hardy progressed he dealt with subjects more and more austere. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, first published in 1886, and *Jude the Obscure*, published in book form in 1895, are tragedies to set beside "King Lear" and *Père Goriot*. They are unrelenting accounts of the cruelty of life. Nor does Mr. Hardy deign to explain or to fix the blame upon any culprit whatsoever. With the greatest artists and thinkers he merely says, "Life can be like this." He is accused sometimes of trying to justify the ways of man to God. On the contrary, if in his supreme detachment of disinterested observer any purpose can be divined, it is rather that he would show what "Man has made of Man." *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, he says in his preface, is a study of "one man's deeds and character." It shows how in the self-same character may be the forces that build up and then destroy utterly. And yet had there been one living soul near Henchard who had had imaginative sympathy, the tragedy might have been averted.

Of *Jude* Mr. Hardy writes:

For a novel addressed by a man to men and women of full age, which attempts to deal unaffectedly with the fret and fever, derision and disaster, that may press in the wake of the strongest passion known to humanity, and to point, without a mincing of words, the tragedy of unfulfilled aims, I am not aware that there is anything in the handling to which exception can be taken.

But of course exception was taken of *Jude*.

It has long been my contention that the reason America has not and apparently cannot produce a great, original literature, such as Russia, France, England, Germany, and Italy have done, is twofold. First, we are suffering from nervous exhaustion brought about by Puritan intensity and strain, and we have not the vitality or vigor to face reality. Owing to over-refinement and tension of the nerves, we are too depressed to enjoy any painful picture of life, however true it may be. Compare the tragedies to which the Greeks of the great dramatic period and the lusty Elizabethans could enjoy with our wincing and aversion to-day. Terror and Pity no longer purge; they wound to the death! Secondly, the struggle for comfort and ease has been so strenuous that we are tired and dislike mental effort. Only youth and vitality are willing to make the effort that translates them into an alien atmosphere or a new conception of life. Mr. Hardy was entirely uncompromising. He would not placate an audience. He offered no current, ob-

vious views of life. He chose his setting and abode in and by it.

It has sometimes been conceived of novels that evolve their action on a circumscribed scene [he says] that they cannot be so inclusive in their exhibition of human nature as novels wherein the scenes cover large extents of country in which events figure amid towns and cities—even wander over the four quarters of the globe. I am not concerned to argue this point further than to suggest that the conception is an untrue one in respect of the elementary passions. But I would state that the geographical limits of the stage here trodden were not absolutely forced upon the writer by circumstances; he forced them upon himself from judgment. I consider that our magnificent heritage from the Greeks in dramatic literature found sufficient room for a large proportion of its action in an extent of their country not much larger than the half-dozen counties here reunited under the old name of Wessex. That the domestic emotions have throbbed in Wessex nooks with as much intensity as in the palaces of Europe, and that, anyhow, there was quite enough human nature in Wessex for one man's literary purpose. So far was I possessed by this idea that I kept within the frontiers, where it would have been easier to overleap them and give more cosmopolitan features to the narrative.

This deliberate circumscription of environment has indeed been one of Mr. Hardy's chief gains. The counties of Dorset and Somerset, Wilts, Berkshire, Oxford, and Hants, are full of literary associations. Here are found traces of Keats, Shelley, Voltaire, Young, Browning, Gibbon, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Raleigh, Shorthouse, and the scenes of William Barnes's poems; yet it is, and will always be, Thomas Hardy's country. When I drove across Egdon Heath from Dorchester through Cerne-Abbas and Piddletown to Wareham, with Mr. Hardy's written directions in hand, it was to see the farm where Clym Yeobright lived, and the hill upon which Eustacia Vye stood. Passing Wellbridge, one remembers Tess and Angel on their honeymoon. And the inn at Wareham where I passed a night was the same in which Ethelberta and Lady Petherwin were stopping at the opening of that story. No English author has so made a locality his own or given so many haunting descriptions. Who has read *Under the Greenwood Tree* knows the Yalbury woods as he knows his own garden.

Not only has Thomas Hardy made a locality live, but in the portrayal of women he has but two rivals in English literature—Shakespeare and George Meredith. His women stand out more real than the people of our every-day inter-

course; *Ælfride* the timid, Bathsheba the vacillating, Viviette the fond and impassioned, and yet self-abnegating; there is Anne Garland, all sweetness and dignity; Thomasin the submissive, Tess the puppet of fate, and Ethelberta, fate's manipulator. There is Sue, a study in temperament unmatched by anything similar in English literature. It is hard to classify these heroines. Mr. Hardy has a special touch, a particular tenderness, for the timid and the impulsive, a profound understanding of the passionate and egoistical—the Eustacia, Lucetta, and Felice type. But no less than his predecessors Dickens and Thackeray, he knows how to value what is still, and will perhaps remain, the highest type of womanhood, the long-suffering, patient, restrained, and faithful type, like Marty South and Anne.

If one singles out portraits of women it is that this is a rarer achievement in English literature than portraits of men. But when one remembers the subtlety, fineness, and wealth of detail which Hardy has expended upon such portraits as Swithin St. Cleeve, Smith, Gabriel Oak, Farmer Boldwood, Clym Yeobright, the faithful reddeleman, and charming Dick Dewy, one sees that he does not fall behind in portraits of men. But above all other English novelists and, if one except Shakespeare, without rival in our literature, Hardy stands in delineation of the English peasant. One can only remind the reader to turn again to the scene in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, where the Mellstock choir visits Vicar Maybold; the scene of the bonfires on Egdon Heath guarded by Granfer Cantle, Fairway, Humphrey, Olly Dowden, Christian, and other turf-cutters; and the chapter in *Two on a Tower* where Viviette and Swithin, imprisoned in the tower, overhear the desultory talk outside of Haymoss, Hezzy Biles, and Sammy Blore, to prove the point. Irony, humor without caricature, truth, and delicacy of observation fairly riot in these scenes, giving to English-speaking peoples an historic record without parallel. Self-consciousness and the rapid spread of general information is robbing the world of its rustic and ingenuous characters. Originals of portraits such as these will hardly be found a half-century from now, and the very swiftness of their passing lends a value like that of Greek sculpture to the passing type.

One novel far too often overlooked by Mr. Hardy's critics, *Two on a Tower*, seems to me to deserve far greater praise than it has ever won. Who else has dared so majestic a setting as the whole northern sphere of the starry heavens against which

to set the capricious destinies of a young student and a lonely woman? Just by this amazing contrast one gains a sense of proportionate values so rarely found in any story.

By common consent the five greatest novels are *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and yet very close to these in the matter of charm, beauty of description, character drawing, and fine artistry come *Two on a Tower*, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

Every one who has ever written of Thomas Hardy has stopped to quote the moving words of Marty South which form the final paragraph of *The Woodlanders*. But Mr. Hardy's special genius for closing a book on a fine and haunting note has not been noted. Yet *Jude*, *Tess*, *Two on a Tower*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* sum up with perfect poetic beauty the mood of the whole book. Some of these endings are as felicitous and impressive as the famous touchstone:

O, good Horatio, what a wounded name  
 Things standing thus unknown shall live behind us!  
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
 Absent thee from felicity awhile  
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
 To tell my story.

Mr. Hardy himself warns us that although he believes his metrical work to contain his most individualistic utterances, we must still not make the mistake of taking his philosophy therein expressed to be other than dramatic or impersonative. Since he himself forbids us to make any ultimate statement of his philosophy of life, we can only agree that despite his great gift of humor, poetic fancy, and keen perception of the beautiful, his is a nature that most often finds tongue at the aspect of tragedy.

His "Spirit of the Pities" looks down upon life and exclaims in the words of Sophocles of the gods:

Such gross injustice to their own creation  
 Burdens the time with mournfulness for us,  
 And for themselves with shame.

And the "Spirit of the Years" defends the *élan vitale* thus:

Nay, blame not! For what judgment can ye blame?  
 In that immense unweeting Mind is shown

One far above forethinking; a clairvoyancy  
That knows not what it knows, yet works therewith.

O heap not blame on that inbrooding will;  
O pause, till all things all their days fulfil.

And how widely echoed in human hearts is the cry:

Crass casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan—  
Where purblind doomsters had as readily strown  
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.

Less read, perhaps, than any of Mr. Hardy's work is his great dramatic epic, *The Dynasts*, but fated to be more and more read as the world takes profounder interest not only in the author's own view of life, but in the philosophy and significance of history.

The Wessex edition, which is final and definite, is as handsome, well printed, well bound an edition as one could ask for. The maps of the famous Wessex country are entirely appeasing to the curious, and we have the great gift of a great author's final words in the introductions on his own creation.

If he can afford to exclaim,

The little done, the undone vast,  
we at least can only bow in gratitude and recognition for so noble a life-work.

Louise Collier Willcox.