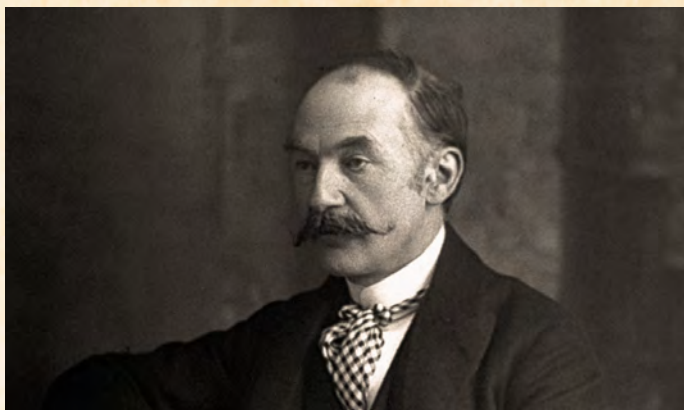


# THOMAS HARDY

FATE, EXCLUSION AND TRAGEDY





Thomas Hardy is not the man he appears to be. Combining radical instincts, a hatred of hypocrisy, poetic brilliance and a deep and gloomy sense of the tragic basis of life, Hardy is a man of enormous depth, with a quiet external appearance but internally a seething, gloomy darkness. He evokes with brooding power the inner life of characters struggling against their birth, their fate, their passions and the society in which they live. Though Hardy was deeply critical of the hypocritical values of Victorian society, he himself had an uncomfortable secret that was to be revealed later in his life.

Thomas Hardy was the son of a sensitive, literate mother and a builder father. With a love of books, Hardy initially trained as an architect, working on church restoration projects. Inextricably associated with the landscapes of Dorset and the West Country, Hardy's love of nature sent him back to Dorset after a period in London to concentrate further on his writing. His novels became enormously successful, fearlessly portraying the power and strength of sexuality in human life and the fate of human instincts battling against repression. Becoming a national celebrity, on his death in 1928, Hardy left over six million pounds in today's money.

Despite his respectable outward appearance, Hardy's life was more complex than it seemed. He married his first wife Emma Gifford in 1874 and became estranged from her for the last 20 years of their life together. They hardly spoke. Claire Tomalin in her biography of Hardy describes Emma Hardy living virtually alone in a small upstairs room in Max Gate, a house Hardy designed himself and built by his brother. Hardy was unexpectedly called by a maid on 27th November 1912 to go to Emma's room. Emma Hardy was 'moaning and terribly ill'. He spoke her name "Em - don't you know me?" It was too late. Emma Hardy was dead. He had ignored her for half their married life. Hardy was overcome with grief and sadness.

Hardy's uncomfortable secret was that for the last years of his wife's life he had been deeply in love with a young woman - his secretary. Though intensely remorseful of the way

that he had treated Emma, he still married the woman he loved, Florence Dugdale, 39 years younger than himself. To the considerable discomfort of his new young wife, Hardy revisited the time and the places where he and Emma had been happy together - where he had loved Emma so much.

Emma's death in that fateful year was to occasion a remarkable change in Thomas Hardy. Quite simply and rather suddenly, Hardy's acts of mourning and regret released a greater poet within himself. The work he created made Hardy one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. Deeply shocked by both the Boer War and the First World War, Hardy created poetry that was admired and loved by Philip Larkin, Robert Frost, W H Auden, Dylan Thomas and many others. In the Oxford Book of 20th Century English Verse published in 1973, Philip Larkin included 27 poems by Hardy and only nine by T S Eliot and fewer still by W B Yeats.

At the heart of Hardy's writing is the intersection of fate and chance with human tragedy, the interplay of passion and hostile social environments, set in a landscape that Hardy called Wessex. This is so clearly seen in his most popular novels. The drama of *Far from the Madding Crowd* with its remarkable characters of Bathsheba Everdene and Sergeant Troy, the fate of the doomed Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, captured by the police at Stonehenge and hung as a fallen woman, the struggles of Jude in *Jude the Obscure* - all unforgettable, and vividly portrayed in popular feature film and television adaptations.

Virginia Woolf wrote in 1928, the year of Thomas Hardy's death: "We have been made to enter the shade of a sorrowful and brooding spirit which, even in its saddest mood, bore itself with a grave uprightness and never, even when most moved to anger, lost its deep compassion for the sufferings of men and women. Hardy's is a vision of the world and of man's lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination, a profound and poetic genius, a gentle and humane soul."

