

Thomas Hardy's Philosophical Outlook

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Introduction

Hardy's conception of human life was shaped in part by his extensive critical reading of the Bible, study of ancient tragedy, contemporary philosophical and scientific works, and in part by his rural environment. Ernest Brennecke, who wrote one of the earliest appraisals of Hardy's philosophy of life, argued that Hardy developed "a consistent world-view through the notions of Chance and Time, Circumstances, Fate, Nature, Providence, Nemesis and Will tinged with metaphysical idealism" (49). This opinion has hardly changed throughout the years although critics interpreted Hardy's view of life from a number of various philosophical and ethical perspectives.

The Bible

Although an agnostic in later years, Hardy was a devout reader of the Bible which exerted a profound influence on his writing. When he arrived in London in 1861, he brought with him with two letters of introduction, a Bible and a copy of the [Book of Common Prayer](#) (Evelyn Hardy 57). Hardy admired biblical stories, particularly those from The Old Testament, thanks to their simplicity and intellectual dexterity. Biblical allusions permeate almost all his novels. Timothy Hands estimates that there are as many as 600 biblical allusions in Hardy's novels, including over 60 in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *Jude the Obscure*; the highest number can be found in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (28-29).

Castigation of religion

Hardy had been brought up as a Christian, but by the age of 27 he had lost his faith, mainly under the influence of Darwin's [The Origin of Species](#), and he never regained it. Darwin's work undermined the prevailing concept of the divine creation of man. As he put it later, "I have been looking for God for fifty years and think that if he had existed I should have discovered him" (Duffin 196). Hardy's loss of faith led to the pessimism that permeates his fiction and poetry. Hardy believed the universe (symbolised by desolate Egdon Heath in his novels) devoid of divine meaning. In place of Christian God he put a blind unconscious will. As Brennecke observed, "He cannot reconcile the idea of an omnipotent and merciful Deity with the human sufferings that he witnesses daily" (79).

The [Church of England](#) appears throughout Hardy's novels, but its authority has waned, and it has no longer relevance for his representation of the condition of man. Although Hardy admitted in his autobiography that he was 'churchy', his novels seem to suggest that the old Christian religion practised in churches is redundant in the modern world. As Lennart A. Björk noted, "Hardy's castigation of traditional religion is an integral part of his social criticism" (26). Particularly, in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Christian faith appears

irrelevant because it cannot offer help in suffering. Religion appears as a factor that only misleads and deludes Hardy's characters and causes their final fall. However, as Robert Schweik has pointed out,

although Hardy became an agnostic, he remained emotionally involved with the Church: many of his writings dramatize aspects of the pernicious influence of religious doctrines or the ineffectuality of institutional Christianity, but he could also evoke a wistful sense of the loss of an earlier, simpler faith, or affirm the lasting value of Christian Charity. [Kramer 55-56]

Hardy's attitude to religion was therefore very complex, if not contradictory. It seems that his rejection of contemporary Christianity was largely due to his ethical views incompatible with the practices of the institutional Church. Hardy came to a conclusion that religion had become grossly institutionalised and thereby lost its original value, which was based on compassion. At the same time, Hardy believed that the church is an important social institution. He is quoted by Edmund Blunden to say: "If there is no church in a country village, there is nothing" (372).

Hellenic and pagan sympathies

Hardy's critical vision of life was deeply rooted in his Hellenic and pagan sympathies. His fiction and poetry reflect the classical tradition of Greek and Roman literature. The pagan world had more charm for Hardy than did Christianity. In his Wessex novels and stories, Hardy promulgated a vision of an old, rustic England that was essentially pagan. For example, Angel in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* embodies the ideas of Hellenism and paganism, which Hardy derived from [Matthew Arnold](#), who cherished hope for cultural regeneration of England through Greek revival. He shared Arnold's ideal of Hellenic paganism, with its emphasis of the development of a complete man with the harmonious body and soul. Hardy advocated rural and Hellenic paganism in *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* as an alternative for Christianity in England.

Early influences

As a young man Hardy was, as he called himself, a 'born bookworm' (Tomalin 40), who read voraciously in classical and contemporary authors. As an autodidact Hardy taught himself Greek, Latin, French and German. Under the influence of his older friend and mentor, Horace Moule (1832-1873), a classical scholar, he read fragments of *Iliad*, Horace, Ovid and Virgil in the original. Hardy's tragic vision, expressed in his major novels, was greatly influenced by the reading of Aeschylus and Sophocles. His second major novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, bears influence of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Allusions to Aeschylus can be found in *The Return of the Native*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Dynasts*. The famous phrase: "The President of the Immortals has ended his sport with Tess" is a paraphrase of a sentence in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. Hardy, who was also familiar with English classics, studied Shakespeare intensely, making notes from *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Love's Labours Lost*. (Pite 140) He also had an extensive knowledge of John Milton's life and poetical works.

Hardy was very sensitive to contemporary intellectual debate. Horace Moule introduced him to the *Saturday Review*, where he could find articles concerning the controversy between science and Christian orthodoxy (Bloom 18). Some of the most prominent intellectuals of the

Victorian age, such as [Charles Darwin](#) and [Thomas Huxley](#), directly inspired the development of Hardy's ethical and philosophical views. Hardy described himself as “among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*, which was a major challenge to the Christian view of creation” (Mallett 316). He learnt from Darwin that natural order is indifferent to man's desires and aspirations. As a consequence, he broke with Victorian optimism and self-complacency.

In the mid sixties, he read and made extensive notes from the works of the French radical reformers and philosophers, Charles Fourier, Hippolyte Taine, and [Auguste Comte](#). He read a translation of *A General View of Positivism* by Comte, which helped him to find a rationale for his loss of faith. He was also attracted by Comte's Religion of Humanity as a substitute for Christianity. Besides Comte, Hardy also showed interest in Arthur Schopenhauer's idea of blind, irrational universal will and in Eduard von Hartmann's (1842-1906) view of the unconscious mind. James O. Bailey distinguished two major phases in Hardy's philosophical evolution.

In the first phase, Hardy expressed views of the world that echo his reading in Darwin, [Huxley](#), [Spencer](#), and [J. S. Mill](#). This phase extends from the time Hardy read Darwin about 1862 to the time he read Schopenhauer about 1886. In the second phase, extending from about 1886 until his completion of *The Dynasts* in 1908, Hardy's speculations exhibit the metaphysics of [Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard Von Hartmann](#). He tended to personify natural law as the universal Will postulated by Schopenhauer or as an Unconscious Mind, postulated by Von Hartmann, capable of being wakened into consciousness through human agency. [570]

Hardy's other influences were John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, and above all Leslie Stephen, who wrote *The Science of Ethics* (1882), in which he developed an ethical view based on Darwin's theory of evolution. Hardy also read essays by [Thomas Carlyle](#), [Walter Pater](#) and [John Ruskin](#), as well as the poetry of [Robert Browning](#) and [Algernon Charles Swinburne](#). Thus, Hardy's philosophical outlook, as Pamela Gossin asserts, has been developed under the influence of various authors, both classical and contemporary:

Hardy's eclectic reading of the classics of medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment literature as well as contemporary works, both verse and prose, exposed him to a variety of authors who had created fictional, dramatic or poetic accounts of human life in the cosmos, on minute to magnificent scales. The influence of Dante, Milton and Shakespeare on his conception of the human relation to the natural, social and supernatural can hardly be overemphasized. [44]

Following the teachings of his intellectual mentors, Hardy questioned the established moral and religious principles of Victorian society. His pessimistic view of society is derived largely from the philosophy of determinism. Hardy was a determinist who was aware that man's life is controlled by some inexplicable external force, which he sometimes calls the Fate of Circumstances (in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), the President of Immortals (in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) or the Immanent Will (in *The Dynasts*). Man is, according to him, determined by both heredity and environment.

Pessimism

The intellectual climate and the social and economic transformations in the nineteenth century created in Hardy a deep pessimism. Tragic coincidence and the irony of fate are deeply rooted in his vision of life. His pessimism was largely a reaction to Victorian optimism. Hardy's pessimism had several sources: (1) popular Calvinism, 2) Darwin's theory of natural selection, 3) Schopenhauer's philosophy, and 4) traditional folk fatalism. In his fiction and poetry Hardy expressed the inability of man confronted with 'the blind forces of nature', and the loneliness of the individual in dehumanised society which had lost touch with timeless and organic order.

Hardy expressed his deep pessimism when he wrote about the universal order. He held both a deterministic and tragic view of human existence, accepting the inevitability of suffering and evil. Human existence has little or no sense in absolute terms; its strength lies in individual relative virtue. Virtue is thus man's own reward in this world. In Hardy's view tragedy is created by the blind forces of nature which man opposes in vain. As R. M. Rehder pointed out, "His idea of tragedy represents a combination of Greek, Shakespearean and Biblical tragedy" (Butler 23).

Hardy's vision of life controlled by fate, blind chance, heredity and environment differed from Emile Zola's biological determinism. Zola wanted to reveal the animal side of man (*bete humaine*) in his naturalistic fiction, such as *Therese Raquin* (1867). Hardy, on the contrary, aimed at revealing the higher human aspects of man's existence: its essentially tragic character and distinct individualism. The course of individual human existence was his main preoccupation in the Wessex novels. His major fiction shows that human existence is intrinsically tragic because people are trapped by the laws of Nature and the laws of civilisation. Hardy admired his tragic characters who strove in vain to live with dignity and a sense of perennial values.

A philosophical novelist

Hardy was not a philosopher, but certainly a philosophical novelist. His novels are in essence ethical reflections on both the universe and the social world. According to Ernest Brennecke,

Thomas Hardy is not a novelist who tells stories merely for the diversion of his audience, nor a poet who delights merely in the sensuous and suggestive appeal of cleverly built emotional word-structures, is apparent even to the most superficial of his readers. One recognizes, inevitably, that Hardy's underlying aim has always been the conveyance of ideas, and that he has throughout his literary career drawn from the depths of a definite and fairly consistent world-view. [13]

The Universe is always present in his fiction. Hardy developed his ethical view of the universe in general, and of Victorian society in particular, in his early novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and in the major novels, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, as well as in his epic drama *The Dynasts*. Hardy's characters serve as metaphors for his tragic vision of the human condition.

Chance

Chance, mishap and accident are Hardy's favourite fictional devices. "In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, as well as in *The Return of the Native*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, chance becomes a universal symbol of Hardy's personal philosophy" (Karl 196). His plots were frequently accused of being improbable because they juxtapose a series of unlikely and accidental events. The accidentalism of his literary universe embodies or dramatizes his pessimistic philosophy. Hardy strongly believed in the incoherence of the empirical world.

In his major fiction Hardy illustrated his personal philosophy of chance, a belief that chance, a blind force of Nature, can change man's destiny. Chance is for Hardy everything for which man has no control. Man's will is not nullified by chance completely, but man's will cannot overcome chance, either, since chance is the Immanent Will of the universe. Tragedy occurs when the will of man clashes with chance. This clash is not caused by a conscious design. Hardy claimed that chance is neither sinister nor good. It is an indifferent force of the universe. He depicted a chance-filled world in which men and women become its tragic victims. For Hardy chance determines life which renders it futile; the universe is a rigid mechanism which has no understanding or pity for people's suffering.

Evolutionary meliorist

Brought up in a community with its own old rituals and traditions, Hardy viewed modernity and industrial change as a hazard. He developed, it seemed to early critics, a pessimistic view of life, where fate or chance is responsible for human misery. However, Hardy did not call himself a pessimist, for he preferred to view himself as an 'evolutionary meliorist'. (Bailey 569) In a conversation with William Archer, Hardy claimed that his "practical philosophy had been melioristic (rather than pessimistic)," and said that his books had been a plea against "man's inhumanity to man — to woman, and to the lower animals" (319).

On close reading of his major fiction, it becomes apparent that Hardy's view of life is not wholly deterministic and pessimistic. He offered, though not explicitly, some resolution of the tragic condition of man. Virginia R. Hyman points out that "by emphasizing the power of chance to affect men's lives, he was also emphasizing the correspondingly increased need for moral responsibility among men" (13). Hardy saw at least one hope for mankind, which is expressed in his view of evolutionary meliorism, — that is, that the world can be improved by human effort. Carl J. Weber quotes his remark:

I believe that a good deal of the robustious, swaggering optimism of recent literature is at bottom cowardly and insincere. My pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. Whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life, it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be. When we have got rid of a thousand remediable ills, it will be time enough to determine whether the ill that is irremediable outweighs the good. [191]

Hardy claimed that the Immanent Will becomes gradually conscious and acquires a positive purpose, which finds reflection in the formation of a more rational, social world. He believed that traditional societies' socio-sexual conventions and taboos oppressed the individual. Although he wanted a reorganisation of society, he never explained what the new society

should be. Ultimately, he had little faith in society but he had a lot of compassion for the helpless individuals struggling within its restrictive and oppressive laws.

An existential point of view

Hardy, like many writers before and after him, was deeply concerned in his novels with existential questions, such as the human condition, personal freedom and determinism, the attitude to God and religion, the role of destiny, failed human relationships and the alienation of human beings in the modern world. Hardy's view of life is a counterbalance to both the rationalistic tradition represented by René Descartes (1596-1650), and by Christian humanism. As J. Hillis Miller has pointed out,

In Hardy's world there is no supernatural hierarchy of ideals or commandments, nor is there any law inherent in the physical world which says it is right to do one thing, wrong to do another, or which establishes any relative worth among things or people. Events happen as they do happen. They have neither value in themselves nor value in relation to any end beyond them. Worse yet, suffering is certain for man. In place of God there is the Immanent Will, and this unthinking force is sure to inflict pain on a man until he is lucky enough to die. [13]

In Hardy's world, which lacks the stability and confidence of Christian belief, man is both a perpetrator and a victim. Hardy was probably the first Victorian writer who gave vent to his existential preoccupations and showed persuasively and penetratingly the sense of loneliness of people living in an uncaring universe and the concomitant evolution of their painful self-consciousness. In this respect, his view of life foreshadows the [existentialism](#) of twentieth-century writers.

Conclusion

In his fiction and poetry Thomas Hardy depicted the frailty of man in an occasionally malevolent always indifferent universe. He also showed the discrepancy between human desire and destiny. His philosophical outlook was certainly deterministic, pessimistic and tragic, yet it offered a possibility of positive morality, since pity and compassion are the foundations of Hardy's humanism. There is also some room for a limited personal freedom in Hardy's universe. For Hardy, man as part of Nature is subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, hence in important ways he is unfree; yet when man transcends his natural bondage, he may achieve personal freedom, which means that he is free to make his own choices – but he will have to pay dearly for them.