

Thomas Hardy as a Great Novelist

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 A.D. in the Dorset which is the part of South-western area of England (known as Wessex). Most of the Hardy's novels are set in his homeland, which, he says, has railways, mowing and reaping, machines illiterate laborers etc. Following are the main features of the works of Thomas Hardy.

Regionalism

Regional novel writing was one of the features of England in the 19th century that was trending and thus the scope of 19th century English Novels is quite narrow as compared to the works of Russia. Hardy wrote regional novels-they are confined to his district. This is because he was well aware of this area.

Importance of Wessex

Hardy's novels were confined to Wessex as for Hardy what happens in Wessex is what happens everywhere in the world. The problems faced by the people of his district are common to the whole of mankind. Thus his novels, though confined to Wessex, have universal application.

Another reason for confining the outlook of his novels was that his district is timeless and unchangeable. It has its own history, culture, superstitions, and dialect. Thus Wessex is itself a character.

Unity of Time and Place

As Hardy's novels have been set in a small area, the characters live near one another and often meet each other. They do not meet accidentally but because they desire to meet each other. Thus one witness various co-incidences in Hardy's novels which have often been criticized by the readers. By limiting the action of the novel to a small and confined area he creates a unity of place. Hardy has even provided the map of the area the here plot of his novels is set. He also wants a unity of time because the action was to take a year and a day.

His Idea of Writing

Hardy, in his novels, does not try to prove anything. He believes that a novel should not argue a case for or against something. But instead, it should be an impression i.e. the writer's impression of life.

The impression of Hardy in The Return of the Native is that family relationships are tragic and that the people who try to rise above their class have to suffer.

Human Relations and Aspirations

Instead of criticizing society, Hardy is interested in human aspirations and relationships. Love, marriage, and family form the central themes of his novels. Hardy was the first novelist to explore the man-woman relationship out of the marriage that caused a scandal in the Victorian Age.

Other Features

His novels were mostly read in the Victorian Age as they portrayed the life and culture of the middle class who had acquired money and had the leisure to read. We also find ample references to Classical writers like Homer, Oedipus, and Sophocles.

Hardy as Naturalist

Naturalism is the depiction of the physical environment, especially landscape or the rural environment. It is the treatment of forms, colors, space and words, as they appear in Nature. Hardy presents an emotional connection between Nature and human beings. Sometimes Nature is affected by human emotions and sometimes man is affected by Nature's feelings. In Tess, we see a change in Nature's feelings in accordance with the emotional change in Tess's life with the progressive work of Tess's happiness, there is also symbolic change in the climate and atmosphere of the place where she goes, from the secluded value of Black moor to the silent value of the Great Dairies the bleak land of Flintcomb-Ash... and at last the temple of Stonehenge. The hostile weather is perfectly in harmony with Tess's mental state of depression, despair, gloominess, misery and melancholy. Nature may be regarded as a chorus to the human tragedy in Hardy's novel. Nature does not come Tess's or Eustacia's help at any stage. Nature is indifferent. Thus Nature becomes a tool in the hands of destiny in inflicting sorrows and sufferings on human beings. Hardy has left innumerable descriptions of birds, grass, flowers, gardens, bridges and sunset in his novels. Hardy is the micro observer of nature and he has an acute sense of nature.

Tess as victim of social standards and male domination and self-mortification

Hardy conveys male dominance through his portrayal of men and their dominance over women in society, primarily Tess. Their dominance is shown in how the men act as the masters of society, but it is also seen in how the women in Tess unquestionably view the men as the dominant gender. The first male to cause Tess injustice is her father, John Durbeyfield. An incident occurs when Tess is forced to take the family's horse to market after her father comes home drunk and doesn't fulfill his gender role of going to work, and the horse dies after a collision. As a result, Tess feels heavily responsible for the death of the horse, "Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself." Alec's dominance over Tess is obvious from his 'insisting. This portrays Alec as forceful and assertive. The strawberry episode is obvious foreshadowing on

Hardy's part, Alec bold sexual advances. Another man who lets her down is the priest, as after her baby dies, she begs him to give her baby a Christian burial even though Tess is fully aware that her baby was born out of wedlock. The priest refuses, and this further supports the argument that females struggle to find justice under the rulings of male dominance, as Tess believes she can depend on the priest but he disappoints her.

Character of Angle Clair

The intelligent, idealistic son of the parson James Clare. He rejects his father's and brothers' profession to instead study agriculture, and remains skeptical of religion. Tess, Izz, Retty, and Marian all fall in love with him at Talbothays, but he chooses Tess. He loves an idealized, "child of nature" version of Tess, however, and is shocked to learn about her past sexual experiences (even if they were done to her rather than of her own volition). Angel cares more than he would like about the approval of his family and society, and he rejects Tess despite his own sexual transgressions in his past.

