

HARDY'S PHILOSOPHY AND IDEAS

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Hardy is primarily a storyteller and should be viewed more as a chronicler of moods and deeds than as a philosopher. Yet a novel such as *Tess*, which raises many questions about society, religion, morals, and the contrast between a good life and its rewards, is bound to make the reader curious about the author who brings them up.

Hardy lived in an age of transition which added to his natural disposition toward a melancholy view of life. The industrial revolution was in the process of destroying the agricultural life and the subsequent shifting of population caused a disintegration of rural customs and traditions which had meant security, stability, and dignity for the people. It was a period when fundamental beliefs—religious, social, scientific, and political—were shaken to their very core and brought in their stead the “ache of modernism.”

The new philosophies failed to satisfy the emotional needs of people as religion had done. Hardy as a young man read Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and *Essays and Reviews* (the manifesto of a few churchmen who held radical theological opinions), both of which were to influence his views toward religion. He found it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the idea of a beneficent, omnipotent, and omniscient deity with the fact of omnipresent evil and persistent tendency of circumstances toward unhappiness. And so we find in *Tess* the great conflict is between her inherent will to enjoy and the circumstantial forces which are indifferent to her wishes and efforts.

Hardy considered himself a “meliorist” until 1914, when the absurdity and horror of war shattered his belief that the universal scheme was gradually changing for the better.

FATALISM

When one thinks of Hardy the novelist, that aspect of his work which comes to mind most readily is his frequent use of chance and circumstance in the development of his plots. But the reader must view his stories, and *Tess* specifically, in the light of the author's fatalistic outlook on life.

setting for the action. "The night came in, and took up its place there, unconcerned and indifferent; the night which had already swallowed up his happiness, and was now digesting it listlessly; and was ready to swallow up the happiness of a thousand other people with as little disturbance or change of mien" (Chapter 35).

Time, also, is used as a motif of Fate. There is tremendous importance placed on the moment, for time is a great series of moments. The joys of life are transitory and the moments of joy may be turned to bitterness by time. Love, that universal symbol of happiness, may be changed by time. For example, when Angel and Tess knew that "though the fascination which each had exercised over the other... would probably in the first days of their separation be even more potent than ever, time must attenuate that effect" (Chapter 36).

When Tess meets Alec: "Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was *doomed* to be seen and coveted *that day* by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects" (Chapter 5).

Woman is Fate's most potent instrument for opposing Man's happiness. Closer to primitive feelings than Man, Woman is helpless in the hands of Fate and carries out Fate's work. In her search for love, the motivating passion of her life, Woman becomes an agent in her own destiny. Tess and the dairymaids are vessels of emotion: for example, "The air of the sleeping-chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law—an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired.... The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called sex" (Chapter 23).

Perhaps the most ironic manifestation of Fate as used by Hardy is that of convention. Convention and Law can work as effectively against Man as the other aspects of Fate, yet these are devised by Man himself. Man is powerless to change the other workings of Fate; but those which are contrived by Man and which work against him can be changed by Man. Thus we see in *Tess* a desperate cry against those evils which can and must be corrected. The social laws must be brought into accord with natural law. There are many examples of Hardy's rebukes against society and conventions. "She might have seen that what had bowed her head so profoundly—the thought of the world's concern at her situation—was founded on an illusion. She was not an existence, an experience, a passion, a

structure of sensations to anybody but herself. To all humankind, Tess was only a passing thought.... Moreover, alone in a desert island would she have been wretched at what had happened to her? Not greatly. If she could have been created, to discover herself as a spouseless mother, with no experience of life except as a parent of a nameless child, would the position have caused her to despair? No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein. Most of the misery had been generated by her conventional aspect, and not by her innate sensations" (Chapter 14). "She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature" (Chapter 41).

Angel Clare personifies the role convention can play in shaping one's destiny (for a discussion of this character, see "Character Analyses").

To the Wessex rustic, Fate is also revealed by means of many omens and signs. Joan lives by her fortune-telling book, although she is afraid to have it in the house while she sleeps. Almost everything has significance: the cows will not let down their milk, the butter will not come in the churn, the cock crows in the afternoon. The vision of the d'Urberville Coach is a bad omen, as is the stone of the "Cross-in-Hand." Fate is a part of life, and hence much can be explained away. Angel chooses Tess, but it is really Fate which has made the choice; therefore, the dairymaids do not blame Tess for any part of it. Marian says it must be something outside both Angel and Tess which has caused their separation, for she knows neither of them has any faults. It "was to be" that Alec should seduce Tess, that is, she is not to blame.