

Context: Thomas Hardy and 'The Ruined Maid'

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

Thomas Hardy was born in Dorset in 1840 to a father, also named Thomas, who was a stonemason and builder, and a mother, Jemima, who encouraged Hardy's love of learning and story-telling. At 16, he left school and trained as an architect in Dorchester before moving to London where he became a student at King's College and gained several awards for architecture. After five years in London, Hardy became concerned about his health and returned to Dorset where he began to write seriously. While planning a church restoration in Cornwall, Hardy met Emma Lavinia Gifford whom he married in 1874. Despite his later estrangement from her, Emma's death in 1912 had a profound effect on Hardy. In *Poems 1912–13* Hardy reflected on his bereavement and he continued to be consumed with thoughts of Emma's loss even after his marriage to his secretary Florence Emily Dugdale in 1914.

Hardy wrote 15 novels, many short stories, an epic drama and various collections of poetry. In 1910 he was awarded the Order of Merit, for services to literature.

He died in 1928 after becoming ill with pleurisy (an inflammation of the lungs). Although he had wished to be buried beside his first wife, Emma, at Stinsford in Dorset, he was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. This conflict was eventually resolved with Hardy's heart being buried at Stinsford with Emma, and his ashes in Poets' Corner.

Work and themes

Although a prolific writer of poetry, Thomas Hardy is probably better known for his novels which are set mainly in the semi-fictional region he named Wessex, after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom that existed in the south and south-west of England before the Norman Conquest. His novels portray rural life just before the Industrial Revolution, and his central characters are usually working class people who struggle for love and survival against circumstances and fate.

Hardy's writing often exposes the inequalities and hypocrisy of Victorian society and shows how its constraints can lead to unhappiness. Other themes important to Hardy's work include:

- disappointment and suffering
- love
- nature
- injustice and inequality
- education
- fate and the supernatural
- war (particularly the impact of the Napoleonic wars).

Although Thomas Hardy achieved success and acclaim for his writing before and after his death, two of his greatest novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), met with a hostile reception from the Victorian public. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which was subtitled *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*, was criticised because it was clear that Hardy felt sympathy for Tess, even though she was a 'fallen woman' (a woman who has had sex outside of marriage). In *Jude the Obscure* Hardy scandalised contemporary society because two of the main characters have a sexual relationship without being married, which was considered shocking at the time it was written. The scandalised reaction to both novels was enough to make Hardy give up writing fiction. *Jude the Obscure* was to be his last novel although he continued to write poetry until his death.

'The Ruined Maid'

'The Ruined Maid' was published in 1901 in *Poems of the Past and Present*. The poem is written in the form of a dramatic dialogue between an unnamed speaker and a young girl called 'Melia' whom she chances upon in town. The unnamed speaker remarks on how much 'Melia' has changed since she was a country girl. It is clear that 'Melia' is now a prostitute but, far from being shocked or disgusted, the unnamed speaker seems to envy her fine clothes and what seems to be a more comfortable lifestyle. Hardy satirises conventional attitudes towards prostitution by emphasising the ironic contrast between what might typically have been expected of a woman who is 'ruined', a word which is repeated in the last line of every stanza, and 'Melia's' apparent refinement and contentment.

Bibliography

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