

MASTERPIECE.

Thomas Hardy: Biography

Thomas Hardy was born on June 2, 1840, near Dorchester in Dorset. His father was a stonemason and a violinist, and his mother enjoyed reading and music. Between his parents, Hardy gained all the interests that later appeared in his novels: a love for architecture, literature and music, and an interest in the lifestyles of the country folk.

At the age of eight, Hardy attended school. However, most of his education came from books. He learned French, German and Latin by teaching himself. When he was 16, he was apprenticed to a local architect, John Hicks.

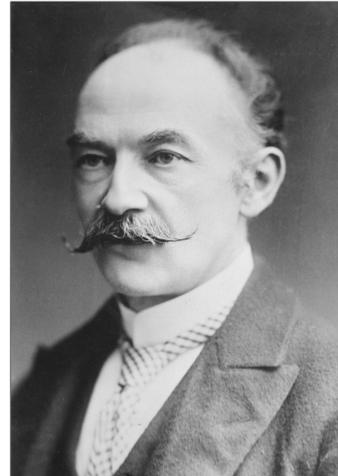


Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

In 1862, Hardy went to London to work with architect Arthur Blomfield, and immersed himself in the cultural scene. Hardy began writing poetry that idealized rural life, but could not find a publisher. Hardy left London in 1867. He also entered into a temporary engagement with Tryphena Sparks, a 16-year-old relative.

Not finding an audience for his poetry, novelist George Meredith advised Hardy to write a novel. Hardy wrote *The Poor Man and the Lady*, but publishers rejected it and he destroyed the manuscript.

His first popular novel was *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872). At first, Hardy wrote anonymously, but as his popularity increased he used his own name. Like Dickens, Hardy's novels were published in serial form in magazines.

The novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) was so popular that the profits enabled Hardy to give up architecture and marry Emma Gifford. Although the marriage was not happy, Hardy grieved her sudden death in 1912.

More novels followed in quick succession: *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Hardy's novels became progressively bleaker, reflecting his pessimism at nature's cruelty and the tragedy of human life. "The business of the poet and the novelist," he said, "is to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things." Hardy challenged many of the sexual,

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religious, and societal conventions of the Victorian age. So though his fiction received much praise, many critics and readers found his works shocking, especially *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

The negative reviews of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and the great outcry against *Jude the Obscure* inspired Hardy to stop writing novels and return to poetry. Before his death, he had written over 800 poems, many of them published while he was in his 80s. By the last two decades of his life, Hardy had achieved as much fame as Dickens.

Hardy ultimately found happiness in his personal life. In 1914, he married Florence Dugdale, a woman in her 30s and almost 40 years younger than him. From 1920 to 1927, Hardy worked on his autobiography, and after his death, his devoted wife published it in two volumes under her own name.

Hardy died on January 11, 1928, at the age of 87. His ashes were buried in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Hardy." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'y'.

Signature of the English writer Thomas Hardy on a letter to James M. Barrie. Image courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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