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CRITICAL APPROACHES

THEMES

PESSIMISM

It was Hardy's apparent preoccupation with the passing of time, the loss of loved ones, failed hopes, and the decline of religious faith that led contemporary reviewers of his poetry to complain about his pessimism (see **Critical perspectives: Original reception**).

Certainly the passage of time is a central theme in Hardy's poetry: he seems to have believed that it was the source of all the unhappiness in the world. A related theme concerns his perception of the indifference of the enduring landscape to the short lives of human beings. Hardy thought that humanity was dwarfed by the forces of the universe and, like many others in the latter years of the nineteenth century, he felt a deep sense of **alienation** and personal insignificance. But this is not all we find in Hardy's work, and it is vital to understand that the pessimism evident in dark poems like 'Wessex Heights', which includes **ironic** reflection on his youthful hopes and his mental crisis in 1896, is offset by resistance. In many of his most memorable poems (for example, 'At Castle Boterel', 'During Wind and Rain' and 'Afterwards') the same consciousness that feels pain also struggles against the meaninglessness of space and time, and seeks to reassert the essentially human against the forces of the universe. Acts of memory – attempts to reclaim the past – strive to resist the processes of change and loss in these poems. Related to this, Hardy's visionary insight seeks to imbue the indifferent landscape with human meaning. More generally, the charge that Hardy can only see the **tragic** in human affairs does not take sufficient account of the wry humour, the creative vitality and the commemoration of the simple things of life that permeate his novels and poetry.

Of an innately melancholic disposition, and prone to bouts of black depression, Hardy's outlook on life was shaped by the emerging crisis of confidence in the **Victorian** world in the 1860s and 1870s. Part of the problem was middle-class society itself and its obsession

CONTEXT

Hardy himself said that he was not as gloomy as some assumed he must be. Claire Tomalin records that the older Hardy 'laughed with friends, enjoyed the company of younger poets and other admirers, and gave his time generously to visitors, who found him spruce, lively, cheerful and vigorous, and took away an impression of charm and simplicity' (Thomas Hardy, 2007).

with 'Progress'. It seemed to Hardy that such an **ideology** only intensified individuals' vulnerability to the destructiveness of time because it denied older beliefs, values and customs that conferred a measure of communal security. He could not accept the Victorian notion of divine Providence, a God-given plan for the world, which worked towards good. But for many of his contemporaries in the middle years of the century, the march of time and the development of Victorian middle-class civilisation seemed to be running reassuringly in parallel. Hardy didn't share this optimism (see **Background: Historical background** for further discussion). For him, there was a depressing inevitability about the way middle-class society was making inroads into all areas of life, and it seemed to bring with it a growing sense of loneliness and emptiness. Hardy often used the phenomenon of the railway (reaching into Dorset when he was a young man and dislocating long-established communities and customs) as a **symbol** for this process – running like time itself, inexorably onwards and crushing everything human in its path.

The complacency of the Victorian middle classes was shattered by the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection: or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* in 1859. Ideas about evolution had been around for many years. The difference in Darwin's case was that he developed a powerful theory to explain it: in the competitive struggle for existence, chance mutations could confer particular advantages on some creatures, which might then develop into new species. The randomness of the process of natural selection made it difficult to believe that history had a design and purpose. Middle-class ideology and Darwinism were allied in Hardy's view: one had drained reality of meaning by putting the doctrine of 'Progress' before human relationships; the other had generated a view of the environment which had reduced human beings to insignificant victims.

Nevertheless, until the mid-1870s, Hardy seems to have remained relatively optimistic about the future. In 1867, his poem '1967' could still envisage a better world by that year – 'A scope above this blinkered time' (9). But it would appear that his view of life became

CONTEXT

Charles Darwin delayed publishing his ideas – fearing the religious controversy that would follow. He recognised that his theory removed humankind from its hitherto central place in the natural order and challenged the ancient narratives of Genesis. When he discovered that Alfred Russel Wallace had reached similar conclusions to his own he rushed to finish *The Origin of Species*. Hardy claimed to be an early admirer of the work, and subsequently attended Darwin's funeral.

World events

1859 Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*

1870 Forster's Elementary Education Act sets up school boards in Britain

1871 Darwin publishes *The Descent of Man*

Author's life

1856 Apprenticed to ecclesiastical Dorchester architect John Hicks; meets dialect-poet William Barnes

1857 Meets Horace Moule; begins to write poetry

1862 Moves to London to work as an assistant architect for Arthur Blomfield

1865 Abandons plan to train for the Church due to religious doubts

1867 Returns to Dorchester to work for Hicks again; forms relationship with Tryphena Sparks

1869 Works as architect for G. R. Crickmay in Weymouth; possibly engaged to Tryphena Sparks

1870 Meets Emma Gifford while on architectural business in St Juliot, Cornwall; moves to London again to pursue career as architect

1871 Publication of *Desperate Remedies*; returns to Weymouth to work as architect; trips to Cornwall

Literary events

1857 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

1859 George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

1860 Browning, *Dramatis Personae*

1865 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Atalanta in Calydon*; birth of William Butler Yeats

1866 Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*

1867 Matthew Arnold, *New Poems*

1869 Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*; Tennyson, *The Holy Grail and Other Poems*

1871 Swinburne, *Songs before Sunrise*

World events

1877 Queen Victoria assumes the title of Empress of India; Thomas Edison invents the phonograph

1879 Edison produces incandescent electric light

1880–1 First Boer War in southern Africa, ending in defeat for the British

1882 Death of Charles Darwin

Author's life

1872 Works as architect in London; publishes *Under the Greenwood Tree*

1873 Publication of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*; becomes engaged to Emma; Moule commits suicide in Cambridge

1874 Marriage to Emma; decides to become full-time writer following success of *Far from the Madding Crowd*

1876 Publication of *The Hand of Ethelberta*

1876–8 Lives in Sturminster Newton

1878 Publishes *The Return of the Native*; becomes a figure on the London literary scene

1879 Birth of Florence Emily Dugdale

1880–1 Publication of *The Trumpet Major*; bedridden, dictates *A Laodicean* to Emma

1882 Attends Darwin's funeral; publication of *Two on a Tower*

1883 Moves to Dorchester; publishes *The Dorsetshire Labourer*

1885 Moves into Max Gate (the house Hardy had designed himself)

Literary events

1876 Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

1879 Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*

1880 Tennyson, *Ballads and Other Poems*

1882 Swinburne, *Tristram of Lyonesse and Other Poems*

1883 George Moore, *A Modern Lover*

1885 Birth of Ezra Pound; Emile Zola, *Germinal*