INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy, the novelist, has received greater literary and critical attention than Thomas Hardy, the poet, although by nature and choice, Hardy was first a poet. He considered verse a superior art-form that "contained the essence of all imaginative and emotional literature". But it was only after the controversy which *Jude The Obscure* (1895) aroused, that Hardy turned exclusively to poetry. Moreover, the novels represent, interestingly, an interruption of only about two and a half decades to a poetic career begun in his early twenties and continued till his death in 1928 at the age of 88. He published 918 poems in eight volumes during this period. At the height of his involvement with novel writing, Hardy wrote and published poetry, eventhough the popularity of his novels overshadowed the worth of his poetry.

Following Lionel Johnson's study of the novels in 1894, there have been many books written on Hardy, but they have concentrated on his fiction, to the virtual exclusion of his poetry. H.C. Duffin, in the first edition of his critical study on Thomas Hardy (1916), took no notice of the poems at all, although five volumes of verse and three parts of the *Dynasts* were already published. In the second edition, Duffin observed:
"... from the point of view of literary value ... it is probable that not one of the 8 volumes of Hardy's poetry is worth a single chapter from one of his major novels".2

Duffin finds endorsement in W.R. Rutland who in his book on Hardy states that "... the poetry is in the nature of a commentary on the novels".3 This view of the poems as by-products of the novels runs through Hardy criticism from the earliest reviews until quite recent times. This dominance of Hardy's reputation as a novelist over his poetic achievement is ironic in view of his own attitude towards his two vocations. His biographer, the second Mrs. Hardy, records Hardy's ultimate literary ambition as the distinction of having a poem included in a prestigious anthology like "The Golden Treasury".

Hardy obviously considered his poetry with greater seriousness than his novels; he told Sir Sydney Cockerall (who was the executor after Hardy's death) that he would have never written a line of prose if he could have earned his living at poetry. It is thus the endeavour of this study to view Hardy's poetry as a complete and exclusive body of creative work; reference to his novels has been deliberately avoided on the premise that his poetry is not dependent on the novels for understanding, or for critical evaluation, explication and or interpretation.
In fact, for a clearer and a deeper understanding of his poetry, it is not to the novels but to the life of the poet that one must turn. Delivering the Warton Lecture on Poetry on 6th June 1951, C. Day Lewis began with this apologetic declaration that "... there is another reason why personality must enter any discussion of Hardy's verse. Almost all his finest poems are deeply, nakedly personal."

In *After Strange Gods*, T.S. Eliot made the following observation:

"The work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas, or even by what acts as a partial restraint upon inferior writers, the desire to please a large public ... He seems to me to have written nearly for the sake of self-expression as a man well can."^4

This comment from the apostle of the impersonality of Art, is a stricture against Hardy. Nevertheless, with reference to the present study, it emphasises all the more the need for a Hardy reader to refer to the poet's life and the decisive incidents that shaped his personality, particularly those that went into the making of his interesting, though complex, image of Woman. If any further justification was necessary for the inclusion of relevant biographical references, we have Hardy himself asserting that there is more autobiography in a hundred lines of his poetry than in all his novels.^5
Hence it becomes necessary to refer the multi-faceted image of Woman that emerges from his poems to the three major kinds of feminine influence in the poet's life. To see the exact importance, as well as the degree of influence asserted by them, the women's roles must be seen against the proper biographical background.

When Thomas Hardy was born on 2nd June 1840, at Higher Bockhampton, in the county of Dorset, Queen Victoria had been on the throne nearly three years, and the Industrial Revolution was well under way in England. However, throughout Hardy's boyhood years Dorset continued to maintain the rural, agricultural climate and remained relatively unaffected by the rapid industrialisation that surged over the North and the Midlands. Dorset carried on its age-old pattern of life of small market towns and villages that later provided that rural flavour to the writings of Thomas Hardy.

Hardy's father was a self-employed mason living in the large and comfortable cottage left to him by his grandfather. This put the Hardys amongst the 'cottager-class' in the very class-conscious country society. This enabled them to live a life not only of decent respectability but conferred a definite social status on the family. The Hardys, for example, were the backbone of the cultural activities of the village of Higher
Bockhampton and were deeply involved in the church and choir activities.

Thomas Hardy was the eldest of four children, with two sisters and a brother after him. His father, from the account given by Hardy in his Life, appears to have been a fairly successful mason with several employees under him, and was apparently an easy-going man, fond of music. He played the violin at home for his family, and was much in demand in social gatherings and local festivities. Thomas Hardy learnt the art at an early age and often accompanied his father at these occasions.

It was Hardy's mother, Jemina Hand, who was the driving force in the family, continually encouraging the young Hardy to set high goals for himself, and with the same indefatigable energy smoothing the path towards their realization. The Life describes her as "a 'progressive' woman, ambitious on his account though not on her own". She encouraged him in his early reading, gave him the opportunity to join the best possible schools at a time before Education was free, and later helped him secure the valuable apprenticeship under John Hicks, a Dorset architect.

Hardy's love for his parents, his family, and his acknowledgement of the key role played by his mother in
their happy, close-knot family, are evident in a number of poems, particularly in "The Self-Unseeing", "Logs on the Hearth", "Sacred to the Memory", "A Church Romance". In fact, many of the poems and the stories had their source in the Bockhampton cottage.

Hardy possessed a remarkable memory and power of total recall that enabled him to draw on these early experiences again and again for the subject of his poems. About this unusual gift Hardy himself wrote:

"... I have a faculty (possibly not uncommon) for burying my emotion in my heart or brain for forty years and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as ehen interred".  

Scattered over a poetic career spanning nearly four decades, are numerous poems whose origins lie in real experiences undergone in early years ("Childhood Among Ferns", "For Life I Never Cared Greatly", "The Self-Unseeing"). One such remarkable example is "He Never Expected Much". The poem contains a childhood experience exhumed from memory after an incredible period of eighty years. Such "memory" poems, or poems on events long past written with all the vividness and freshness of an immediate experience, are important in so far as they reveal the importance of some of the crucial feminine influences on his life.

His mother, though easily the most important of such a feminine influence on Hardy, figures in a relatively fewer
number of such poems. Nonetheless, such poems as there are, where she is the subject ("The Self-Unseeing", "A Church Romance"), as well as the evidence of the biography by Florence Hardy, point to her being, for Hardy, the role-model of Woman as a constructive, life-generating influence. Emphasising this facet of Hardy's image of Woman, are also the poems addressed to his sister, Mary, with whom he shared a special closeness, an almost boyish comraderie.

An overspill of this dimension can be discerned in his relationship with Florence Hennicker. The daughter of an aristocrat, and wife of an army officer, Florence Hennicker herself had literary inclinations, though her attempts in that direction were slight and amatuerish. Her interest in Hardy, the poet as well as the person, flattered Hardy and bound him to lifelong relationship of warmth and friendship. On first seeing her, Hardy noted that she was "a charming intuitive woman" — an opinion he held till the end. The poem "A Broken Appointment" is generally referred by critics to her. Through Florence Hennicker began his various friendships with the socialites of the time whom he referred to as his "Noble Ladies". Thus began his climb to the higher reaches of society and to the subsequent social fame.

The two other women who played important roles in the poet's life, and so acquainted him with the other facets of
Woman, were his wife, Emma Lavinia, and his cousin Tryphena Sparks.

By nature a romantic, Hardy must surely be amongst the very few who become aware of the romantic aspect of Woman as early as he did. He was all of ten years old when he formed an attachment with a local landowner's wife, Louisa Augusta Martin. Recalling the incident, he says in his Life⁹(p.19) that "... though he was only 9 or 10 and she must have been over 40, his feelings for her was almost that of a lover."

There followed several other infatuations through his adolescence. The pages of his Life revive various childish loves the memory of which inspired him from time to time. The figures of Lizbie Brown, the daughter of a gamekeeper, and the farmer's daughter, Louisa Harding of Stinsford, were revived later in his poems; the passing of these figures in their maturer years was like the passing of old friends.

These infatuations ran through his early years to culminate into that passionate, though little known, relationship with his cousin, Tryphena Sparks. Lois Deacon, the Hardy critic who has devoted years to energetic sleuthing of this incident of Hardy, gives us reason to believe that his relationship with his cousin might have
have been more serious than usually believed. She has unearthed evidence, through extensive interviews with Tryphena Sparks' daughter, Mrs. Bromwell, to indicate that a son, Randall, might have been born of this relationship.

On his 25th birthday, with a rejected proposal behind him (in 1862 Hardy had proposed to a girl named Mary Wright, the daughter of a Stinsford printer and bookseller), Hardy wrote in his diary "Wondering what woman, if any, I should be thinking of in five year's time..." and exactly two years later, on his return to Dorset, he fell in love with Tryphena Sparks, his distant cousin from Puddleton, and became engaged to her despite her being 11 years his junior - 16 years to his 27. Her character is difficult to assess due to the reticence of the poet and the entire Hardy-Sparks families on the subject, but there can be little doubt that she was talented, strong-willed, probably capricious and impulsive as well (a stray comment in his Life reveals the deep-seated connection in his mind between woman and capriciousness: "... a feminine nature which first decides and then finds reason for having decided").

The brevity of the relationship notwithstanding, it obviously left a deep impression on Hardy. F.R. Sutherington, in fact, is convinced that "her influence upon Hardy's work and personality were crucial and it is
scarce an exaggeration to say that each of Hardy's work contains her portrait. Much to Hardy's bitterness, the relationship came, however, to an abrupt end due to his family's strong objection to her on grounds of her morality, it is conjectured. His poems, "On a Forgotten Lock of Hair" is traced to Tryphena Sparks, and his wistful, but very reticent, "Stray Thoughts on Phena" makes a sad reference to her having come down in life through her subsequent marriage to an innkeeper.

Hardy's recovery from this breakup was completed when he met Emma Lavinia Gifford in March 1870, while on a restoration job at the church of St. Juliot in Cornwall. A daring horsewoman and a charming companion and helpmate, Hardy fell in love with Emma, and after 4 years of courting, married her in September 1874. The four years of companionship, the country-rambles, the stimulating literary discussions between them, was a period that the poet delved into often for much of his later 'memory' poems of Emma. The side of her nature seen by Hardy during this period epitomised, as did the early Tryphena Sparks, the more romantic image of woman as beloved. However, a difference between these two experiences might be mentioned - with Tryphena the relationship was more impetuous, with an undercurrent of secrecy, perhaps even bordering on the illicit, while with Emma it was a gay, cheerful and
socially acceptable wooing (although her father took great exception to Hardy's humble origins). She opened up vistas of a hitherto unknown world for the poet at this period, an experience he was later to acknowledge in his poem "She Opened the Door".

Ironically, the same Emma was to provide Hardy with the archetype for that final facet to his Image of woman as betrayer. The gradual erosion of love between them, the total withdrawal from each other that led them at the end of their 30-odd years of marriage to a complete breakdown of communication awakened Hardy to the more negative side of Woman. This, concurring as it did with a period exclusively devoted to writing poetry, is perhaps why this negative aspect of Woman as the inconstant, the tormentor, the betrayer, figures in a relatively larger number of his poems.

It is interesting to note that an entry made in Life as Hardy making a profound discovery, probably with the enigma of Emma's loyalty in mind: "... I am more than ever convinced that persons are successively various persons according as special strand in their character is brought uppermost by circumstances." 10

By making such an observation, Hardy has, one may say, in a way absolved Woman of her crime, making her more a creature cornered and challenged oftener by circumstances than as intrinsically false.
END-NOTES


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


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