INTRODUCTION
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Thomas Hardy was a writer of a wide creative range. In his long literary career he produced work which varied greatly in kind and quality. He wrote essays, novels, poetry, drama and short stories. It is said that the better part of his biography written by his second wife Florence Emily Hardy was dictated by Hardy himself. Most of Hardy's writings have received scholarly attention and acclaim. His novels have been the subject of scrutiny ever since they first appeared. His poems have received the recognition he always wanted them to have. His philosophic poetic drama *THE DYNASTS: A DRAMA OF THE NAPOLEONIC WARS* has received its share of attention and is considered to be a major achievement in English literature for its technical competence. And as for Hardy, the man, his life and personality have been considered interesting enough to continue to be explored by critics and biographers.

Comparatively, Thomas Hardy's short stories have been treated rather gingerly. They have been ignored by readers and have received very little attention and dismissive treatment at the hands of most commentators. The fact
that Hardy wrote short stories is seldom quoted in the histories of literature. His short stories are not often read by the general reading public today. This is amazing as Hardy's short stories are very interesting and readable and can be easily obtained. So it is hard to understand why Hardy's stories are overlooked considering that the short story has established itself as a popular and an important form of literature. It is not that Hardy wrote sub-standard short stories undeserving serious attention. In fact, Hardy's short stories constitute an important and sizeable portion of his *ouvre*.

Then why is it that Hardy's short stories are hardly ever mentioned in studies of his fiction? During Hardy's time his short stories were much in demand although then the short story "was very unpopular" in England and "library customers would refuse collections of them with something like indignation or disgust". But what is remarkable is that even during such times his stories were popular, especially in America, as is obvious from the fact that almost all his short stories were written in response to requests from the editors of well known magazines. That Hardy wrote so many short stories and got them published is proof enough of their quality and popularity.

There has been a general tendency to consider Hardy as a short story writer *manqué*, a writer who was experimenting with an unfamiliar genre. This impression is entirely
baseless since some of Hardy's first attempts in fiction were short stories and he began to write more and more short stories as he felt increasingly free to write whatever he pleased after he had established himself as a novelist.

Hardy wrote over forty short stories of great diversity in length simultaneously with his major fiction in between the years 1874 and 1900. Most of the stories he later collected in four volumes of the Wessex editions. The four volumes are **WESSEX TALES, A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES, LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES** and **A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES**. Hardy took great care in organising his stories into volumes. He did not choose stories at random and place them in different volumes. His collections demonstrate his awareness of the themes and techniques that draw together and unite his otherwise different narratives into artistic wholes. Commenting on the collection of the short stories into volumes, Hardy wrote in a cancelled prefatory note to **A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES**: "...They would probably have never been collected by me at this time of day if frequent reprints of some of them in America and elsewhere had not sent many readers enquiring for them in a volume".2

Hardy's comment is proof enough of the widespread popularity of his short stories.
Writing about his stories some critics have said that Hardy himself did not rate them very high. Irving Howe wrote that Hardy seemed to have regarded the writing of his stories as a means to earn a living and his sole desire in writing them was to please a large and varied audience. He had to keep in mind the susceptibilities of his Victorian readers and exercise great caution so as not to offend their taste. He had to take care that the stories were not only commercially successful but also artistically satisfying to the creator in him. Hardy had to face a lot of difficulties initially in getting his stories accepted but not only did he overcome these difficulties and get his stories published but he also got intelligent response from the readers. Because Hardy wrote his stories in response to requests made by the editors of magazines and for money critics find them very hastily and carelessly produced. But a study of the history of the publication of his stories reveals that this is not true. Hardy was in the habit of sketching an outline for his stories which he would later expand. Besides he took great care in revising and arranging and re-arranging his stories. He took as much interest in writing his short stories as he did in writing his other works. He very reluctantly responded to the demands made on him by the "Grundyist" and readers to bowdlerize his stories. If ever he was asked to make alterations of any sort in his stories he spared no pains to tell his readers
that he had been forced to bring about the changes much against his will. Therefore, it would be wrong to treat the stories as mere hack-work. That Hardy did not take his short stories seriously is indeed a myth. On the contrary he rated his stories quite high as can be seen in the following information:

"...with somewhat uncharacteristic aplomb Hardy inscribed copies of each of the four volumes of short stories to his literary friends. He presented copies of WESSEX TALES to Browning on his birthday and to Meredith. Similarly, he inscribed copies of A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES in the first week of its publication to Edward Clodd, sir George Douglas, Theodore Watts and Edmund Gosse; copies of LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES to Gosse, the Earl of Pembroke and Sir Francis Jeune and of A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES to Edward Clodd and Edmund Gosse. This at least establishes the respectability of the stories in Hardy's own reckoning."

Irrespective of Hardy's own opinion of his short stories there has been a general tendency to ignore them. Hardy wrote nearly fifty short stories and most of these stories are entertaining and worth reading as imaginative and vivid comments on the human situation. But the stories are not uniformly good. No one can quarrel with the view that some of the stories "resemble anecdotes and others are like the synopses of full length novels" and often there are to be found in them passages which have been carelessly written. Within his short stories there are subjects, images, themes, patterns and techniques which are repeated over and over again. His stories have been considered to be serviceable products for magazines only and not worth considering.
in terms of literary merits. But if we approach them with an unbiased mind we will find that some of his stories - "Our Exploits at West Poley", "Old Mrs. Chundle", "An Imaginative Woman", "The Withered Arm" to name a few - are fine examples of this genre and deserve serious consideration. There are others like "The Son's Veto", "The Three Strangers" and a few of the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters" which are masterpieces of this form. So it is rather regrettable that Hardy's short stories have been ignored on the grounds that they are not uniformly good especially since some of them have found their way into anthologies of short stories along with the greatest writers of this form - masters like Chekhov, Poe, Maupassant, Hemingway and Joyce.

Why is it then that the short stories of Hardy have remained obscure? One of the reasons could be that they have not received the critical attention that they deserve. They have been treated rather summarily. In contrast to the whole body of criticism in existence today on Hardy the man, novelist and poet there is very little on his short stories. His stories have never been seriously considered except as an annexe to his major fictional works. Of course, references have been made now and then to his stories ever since they first appeared. One such comment reads:

"...if he produced nothing but the stories what an abounding legacy of human histories he would have left behind him".6
George Wing, A.J. Guerard, Norman Page, Douglas Brown, Irving Howe, Kristin Brady and Dr. Noorul Hasan are a few critics who have touched upon the short stories. But even their studies have certain limitations. They have restricted their discussions to the study of only a few of the more popular stories and they do not offer more than a few suggestive remarks. Their studies consist at best of a single chapter in an otherwise book length study of Hardy and his novels. Douglas Brown devotes a section to Hardy's short stories but sparingly refers only to "The Son's Veto", "Our Exploits at West Poley" and "The Fiddler of the Reels". A.J. Guerard has treated the stories illuminatingly and purposefully but he has not handled the stories systematically. His references to the stories are somewhat casual, random and scattered. While Norman Page, Douglas Brown, George Wing and Irving Howe have discussed the stories seriously and have pointed out their importance their discussions however are restricted to a detailed analysis of very few of the stories, leaving the majority of them untouched. Dr. Noorul Hasan has treated with deference and very comprehensively the few stories that he has selected for discussion, but he has also restricted himself to only eight out of the forty odd stories that Hardy wrote, choosing five stories from *Wessex Tales*, two from *Life's Little Ironies* and the uncollected piece of children fiction, "Our Exploits at West Poley" leaving completely
untouched the two volumes A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES and A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES. Kristin Brady's THE SHORT STORIES OF THOMAS HARDY is the only book length study in existence today on this neglected sphere of Hardy's work.

Whatever be the attitude of the critics towards his stories, one thing is obvious - Hardy's stories deserve far more attention than they have been getting not merely on the basis of their individual merits but also because they throw a reflective light on the rest of his works. The influence of the novels which he was writing simultaneously with his short stories is distinctly visible in them. Themes found in the novels are repeated and Hardy's interest in the grotesque, macabre, ironic and supernatural is to be seen over and over again in the stories. Many of his stories foreshadow or echo his novels and they read like fragments off them. Sometimes they are like exercises in sketching the figures and locale of his more ambitious books. Even those stories which are considered to be failures are interesting because they have all the traits characteristic of Hardy and fail in such a typically Hardyan way that they contribute towards a better understanding of his art and technique. But this does not mean that we should read the stories only because they make us understand his other works better. The stories deserve to be read because they are good reading material and because they are good literature in their own right.
Hardy is a very good story teller and even in those stories where he fails he has an interesting narrative. His story telling capacity is such that he can hold the attention of children and adults alike. But what is best about Hardy's stories is that they do not intimidate the reader. The philosophising, the syntactical mannerisms, the archaisms, the convolutions and the abstract and learned references which are found in abundance in his novels are entirely absent from his stories. The thing he is concerned with most in his stories is telling a tale and he does this incredibly well, in a manner which is in keeping with his subject. The style is direct and lucid and is capable of captivating the reader's attention. Characterisation is as good as the short story form permits. There is to be found in these stories descriptive writing and scene painting which will compare with the best in English literature. The stories are marked by economy, restraint and simplicity. He tells stories of rural life, mostly, but with a kind of sophistication which is peculiarly his.

Hardy did not have to grope and struggle to establish himself as a short story writer as he had to do as a novelist. He wrote his first short story "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" as early as 1874 and his last "Enter a Dragoon" was written in 1900. Thus we can see that Hardy's career as a short story writer extended over a period of twenty six
years. Although his short stories are considered to be his "minor" works he did not write them towards the beginning of his career. Nor were his best stories concentrated towards the end of his career. We find good as well as bad examples of short stories scattered throughout his career. "The Distracted Preacher" (1879) one of the earliest of Hardy's short stories is also one of the most flawless. When Hardy was struggling to discover the art of writing novels he was writing authentic short stories. There are fine moments even in his most flawed stories.

In essence, Hardy's short stories are closer to the expansive and oral tradition than to the modern form. At the time when Hardy was writing his short stories this genre was just beginning to be accepted in England. Hardy was writing during a period which had just switched from the myths, legends, fables, parables, allegory, tales and ballads to what we have come to know as the short story proper. The short story as a literary form was still in the process of development. It is, therefore, only natural to find in Hardy's short stories elements of the tale and the ballad.

It is difficult to classify Hardy's short fiction. Are they tales, ballads or short stories? Hardy himself used the terms story and tale interchangeably and he was not wrong in doing so for as Irving Howe says, "Between story and tale there is, of course, no insuperable barrier...." But for the sake of discussion Howe points
out the following differences. A tale is usually addressed by a speaker to "an audience that form a natural or social community". It is generally spoken while a short story is generally read. The mode of narration of a tale is more leisurely than that of a short story. A tale stops, starts up again and wanders. It usually evokes a spirit of wonder and awe before the strange and the marvellous. The story, on the other hand, is more inclined to the workaday and the realistic. The tale may end in moral or philosophical reflection about the inscrutability and mystery of life. The story ends in a climax of revelation. The tale compresses a lengthy or complicated action into a brief action. According to the above differentiation laid down by Howe, we can see that some of Hardy's stories can definitely be called Tales. In fact, Hardy called his first published collection of short stories WESSEX TALES.

In some of Hardy's stories we find distinct characteristics of the ballad:

"As in ballads, lovers are crossed and hopes destroyed, sometimes through impersonal agencies of fate or chance, sometimes through the inner unfolding of character. In the country world of Wessex what may seem to us extraordinary is looked upon with a credulous fatalism, as quite ordinary".

"The Three Strangers", "The Romantic Adventures of a Milk-maid" and the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters" are ballads in essence. They narrate cheerfully humorous incidents most of the time but they are enclosed within an elegiac framework typical of the ballad. The view presented
is usually ironic. The humour is wry and folk-like. While reading Hardy's short stories we feel as if we are hearing a ballad being sung by some ancient bards; we feel as if we have come to grips with life in a powerful way.

Then there are stories like "Our Exploits at West Poley", "The Son's Veto", "An Imaginative Woman", "Absent Mindedness in a parish Choir" which are examples of the short story in the modern sense of the term. There is in these narratives a boldness and economy which is characteristic of the modern short story. But as Dr. Noorul Hasan puts it,

"...Unlike most modern short stories they (Hardy's stories) are not exploratory but evocative. They do not take the reader forward into an unsuspected unique eventuality, but refer him back to local legend or tradition or actual history. The stories show Hardy fully engaged with the unwritten history of an old agrarian culture."9

Hardy was a very good story teller and in his short stories he is dedicated first and foremost to the task of telling a good, unusual tale as best as he can. Hardy had a keen sense of the fundamental qualities of a story. Like Henry James he believed that a story must be interesting to be worth telling. A tale is worth telling only when it is an account of something noteworthy that has occurred and it is well and successfully told only when the author is able to convince the reader that the incident narrated did really come to pass. In other words, the author must be able to create what Coleridge called a "willing suspension
of disbelief”. All tale-tellers according to Hardy are "Ancient Mariners" and they are "not warranted in stopping Wedding Guests" unless they have "something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of the average man or woman". The following passage by Hardy sums up the aims and achievements of his fiction:

"A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man or woman.

The whole secret of fiction and the drama—in the constructional part—lies in the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal. The writer who knows exactly how exceptional and how non-exceptional his events should be made, possesses the key to the art."

The explanation of his ability to hold the readers attention thus lies in the nature of the stories he chooses to tell. We read Hardy so as to hear a rare tale, to be disturbed, intrigued and amazed and it is in his choice of the extraordinary that we find his stories deeply rooted in the past tradition of the tale and the ballad.

Although Hardy wrote such a large number of short stories, his work did not in anyway inspire or anticipate the works of Joyce, Hemingway and Chekhov, all masters of the short story form. Hardy was not as conscious a writer as these great masters of the short story form. But his stories do merit consideration. Besides yielding great pleasure and contributing towards a better understanding
of his works, Hardy's short stories have an important place in the development of the narrative powers of the short story form.

Nearly all the short stories of Thomas Hardy centre around the idea of life's little ironies. It is this theme that he explores continuously in his first two collections of short stories, WESSEX TALES and LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. The anecdotes of long ago told by the ancients in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES express Hardy's belief in the presentness of the past. He writes about things which are universal in nature - ambition, greed, love, jealousy, thirst for knowledge and conflict of wills guided by feelings. His central theme is man.

"Man is the story and the story is man, man embracing woman both literally and figuratively, with his localised setting and universal problems is presented often satirically, occasionally benignly but always entertainingly".11

It is said of Hardy that he was essentially a country-man who wrote almost exclusively of country life and all his characters belong to the unlettered, unskilled, agricultural class. This, however, is not true of the stories. In the stories we meet the professional middle class consisting of teachers, lawyers, businessmen and the clergy. Often he wrote of the rise of the people from the humblest and more deeply rural origins to the professional classes. The reason for Hardy writing about these people so frequently may be found in his life itself. Hardy himself
rose from the agrarian class to the professional like most of his heroes and heroines and people of his time. This inclination towards an urban life was a result of the Industrial Revolution whose influence was being felt not only in England but also all over Europe. In "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", he writes about this ambition for professional education, wealth and social status and the tensions and unhappiness which such ambitions gave rise to.

So the belief that he wrote only about the uneducated agricultural class is false. Of course, Hardy preferred to write about the uneducated working class because:

"...The conduct of the upper class is screened by conventions, and thus the real character is not easily seen, if it is seen it must be portrayed subjectively; whereas in the lower walks, conduct is a direct expression of the inner life; and thus character can be directly portrayed through the age. In one case the author's word has to be taken as to the nerves and muscles of his figures; in the other they can be seen." 12

The Wessex society portrayed in the stories consisted not only of the agricultural and middle class but also covered a complete group of the county aristocracy. Hardy wrote of the skeletons in the cupboards of these aristocrats in the form of illegitimacy, murder, insanity, incest. They have always been at the top of the social ladder and they continue there. A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES is from the first to the last about the Wessex aristocrats.

Hardy understood women intuitively and thus was able to reveal very convincingly not only their outward
appearance and behaviour but also their inner natures and psychological subtleties. He was very good at portraying women and this has been used to emphasize that his men are weak, 'flat', two dimensional characters existing in the shadow of their women. It is said that Hardy was really interested in women and thus wrote about women only. This may seem true if we concentrate on his novels only. If we look at the whole of his work the balance is restored, and the short stories contribute towards restoring this balance for they are dominated here by men and here by women of a large variety though there are certain types which keep recurring. Ella Marchmill, Lizzy, Edith Hardham are restless, lively, educated, intelligent and therefore bored. They are revolutionary in spirit and long to break out of the confines of limited and conventional rural society. They are familiar Hardy figures whom we encounter very often. Their personalities provoke a behaviour which leads to misfortune. Hardy also writes about single girls who become victims of clever but insensitive, sophisticated men. When Hardy is portraying men he very often paints their insensitivity and hypocrisy. In some stories he also writes about the plain good man in a beautiful way. In fact he does this as well as he does the rogue, the eccentric, the fool and the bully. Ned Hipcroft of "The Fiddler of the Reels" and Sam Hobson, the faithful and loveable lover of "The Son's Veto" both leave long enduring impressions.
though they are not in the least like each other - the former a regular rogue and the latter a perfect gentleman. Hardy thus shows his skill in character portrayal.

The man-woman relation is the subject that Hardy is most preoccupied with in almost all his stories. He writes about the affairs of the heart of men and women; of love returned and frustrated, fulfilled or doomed. He writes about meetings, partings, deceptions of lovers, the business of courtship, romance, disillusionment, distress and tediousness of marriage. But what interests Hardy most is the evolution of "an incongruous love situation in a peculiar setting". Hardy loved to set up "...couple after oddly assorted couple studying the perverseness of human nature in romantic and sexual matters from various angles and pursuing its outcome to many bitter conclusions".

In these relationships there are always discrepancies of social class, age, temperament, character, intelligence, education and nationality.

Nature plays an important part in Hardy's work. It is not just the background to his works but is also a leading character. It sometimes exercises an active influence on the course of events. More often it acts as a spiritual agent and colours the mood and shapes the disposition of human beings. Human beings are mere microcosms moving around in the huge world of Nature. In the short stories Nature does not play as important a role as it does in his novels. It is noteworthy that even though
individual scenes may appear extremely peculiar, in general the backgrounds are less extraordinary here than in the novels. In describing his scenes Hardy is simply an observer who describes the natural background against which a fascinating human history occurs.

Hardy's fascination with the unusual, the bizarre, the grotesque, the morbid and the macabre is one of the outstanding characteristics of his short stories. This tendency of the writer and its implication in his work has been overstressed. Hardy's obsession is not unique. Almost all imaginative writers make use of the bizarre, the grotesque, the macabre and the unusual. What should be noted is his inclination towards the weird and his careful and successful handling of this. He inserts a grotesque and morbid incident or detail at the right moment so as to achieve maximum effect. It is only occasionally that he piles up horrors and peculiarities as in "Barbara of the House of Grebe" (A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES) and the uncollected "The Doctor's Legend", and it is when he does this that his stories become unbalanced and unsatisfactory. On the whole Hardy the writer of short stories is more balanced than he is made out to be.

It is not the occasional morbid touch that has alienated the critics and readers but rather the improbability of his stories in general, especially those with the strikingly unusual characters and plots. But I have already
explained Hardy's views regarding this matter. Hardy did not believe that a fiction writer should write about everyday life. Therefore, some of his stories do appear rather extravagant but if we think about what Hardy has written we will discover that the extravagance is more apparent than real. The extravagant action lies well within the bounds of both psychological and practical credibility. The secret of fiction lies in the adjustment of the exceptional to the universal. If a writer is able to create even momentary credibility he is successful. Even though Hardy wrote about rather exceptional and emotional things we must admit that most of the time he wins our assent.

The explanation of Hardy's ability to arrest and retain the reader's attention lies partly in the nature of the stories he chooses to tell as also in his mode of narration. The success or failure of a short story depends a lot on its opening. If a story has a powerful, effective and gripping beginning it can be sure of success. A short story can rarely overcome a weak start. Most of Hardy's stories have apt and masterly openings as we shall see in the course of this dissertation.

When Hardy is writing a novel he uses a relaxed method for introducing his plot. He sets his story at an easy pace. He starts with a large description and slowly narrows his focus on the few central characters around whom the plot is to centre. He, however, has to avoid using this
relaxed method for writing his short fiction but he has an equally appropriate method for his short stories. With a few swift, economical and sparing strokes he describes a scene exactly and draws a satisfying picture leaving a certain gap for the reader to fill up with his own imagination. For some stories he uses the narrator figure taking a pipe out of his mouth or setting down his glass, or clearing his throat sometimes to introduce his tales. The third type of opening that he uses is in style and spirit like the modern short story. Instead of being led slowly from a distance towards the setting and characters he puts the reader straight down in the midst of the plot when events are already underway.

Another salient feature of Hardy's short stories is the introduction of an intruder who plays a pivotal role in the story. This character usually comes from outside into the secure Wessex world in which the events occur and disrupts, disturbs, threatens and breaks up the established order of things.

Coincidence plays an important part in Hardy's fiction. It is so frequent in his fiction that it may be assumed to be a device by which he reaches a climax or brings about denouement. Hardy deliberately employs this method of using coincidences. Chance, bad luck and a malevolent fate alter life's courses, determine fates and resolve plots. The fact that Hardy uses coincidences has been the subject
of attack by many critics but there is in reality nothing unusual about this. Life has its share of coincidences and it is an important feature in the life of Hardy's people as it is in real life. The author has the licence to emphasize and underline any particular aspects of the raw material which he takes from Nature. As Hardy himself puts it in a note of August 5, 1890:

"Art is a disproportioning (i.e. distorting, throwing out of proportion) of realities to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventory [i.e. reported inventorially] might possibly be observed but would more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art".15

The author has the prerogative to give the raw material which he draws from nature a characteristic stamp by imbuing it with his own creative vision and personality so as to bring out those features which appeal most strongly to his idiosyncracy.

Thomas Hardy has left behind a lot of short stories of all sorts - tragedies, comedies, romances and extravaganzas and one cannot deny their existence even if one is not particularly fond of them. In this dissertation I shall critically discuss the short stories for they contribute in their own way towards the making of Hardy the writer.