Chapter - Six

CONCLUSION

Hardy’s philosophy and his attachment to Wessex have delimited
his range considerably but within this sphere he has achieved remarkable
success. Hardy is mainly concerned with man rather than with individual men.
He does not conceive character very variously. The characters of Hardy can be
grouped under a few broad categories. They form themselves easily into types
and herein we find that Hardy lacks the Shakespearean profundity and the
penetrating insight into private realms of individuality of a Lawrence. To quote
Lord David Cecil- “Here his talent is a narrow one compared with that of some
writers. His memorable characters—all have a family likeness. Most of them, indeed, can be grouped into a few simple categories. There is the staunch selfless tender-hearted hero, Gabriel Oak, Giles Winter-borne, John Loveday, and Diggory Venn. There is the dashing, fickle breaker of hearts-Troy, Wildeve Fitzpiers, D’urberville; there is the patient, devoted, forgiving women-Tess, Marty Elizabeth Jane; there is the willful capricious but fundamentally good-hearted girls- Bathsheba, Grace, Fancy, Anne; there is the passion-tormented Romantic enchantresses Eustacia, Mrs. Charmond, Lucetta, and Lady Constantine to these basic types he added a group conceived in a more intellectual vein. Angel and Knight are doctrinaires, sensitive men who come to grief through an inability to realize that human beings are not what their theories have taught them they should be.”

Hardy repeatedly demonstrates that the sexual impulse or ‘appetite for joy’ is more powerful than any social restrictions, moral scruples and qualms of conscience. Describing Tess’s consenting to marry Angel Clare, he says: “She had consented, she might as well have agreed at first. The ‘appetite for joy’ which pervades all creation, that tremendous force which sways humanity to its purpose as the tide sways the helpless weed, was not to be controlled by vague lucubration over the social rubric.” Hardy thinks that it is futile to try to check this natural appetite by categorical rules, rather it is the part of wisdom to guide when possible, and wink at it at other times.
So far about Hardy’s attitude towards the question of chastity and sex-relations his views are equally pronounced about the institution of marriage. True marriage is union of the hearts, and when the hearts have separated, let not bodies be held together by artificial rules. Rites and ceremonies cannot bind hearts together. The question is discussed by Hardy exhaustively in *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy is opposed to marriage as a permanent bond between persons. He says, “Lives are ruined by the fundamental errors of a matrimonial union—a permanent contract based upon a temporary feeling which has no necessary connection with affinities that alone render a lifelong comradeship tolerable.”¹

In another place he says: “If a marriage ceremony is a religious thing, it is possibly wrong; but if it is only a sordid contract, based on material convenience in house holding, rating and taxing and the inheritance of land and money by children, making it necessary that the male parent should be known—which it seems to be—why surely a person may say, even proclaim upon the house-tops, that it hurts and grieves him or her.” Again, “it is as culpable to bind one’s self to love always as to believe a creed always and as to vow always to like a particular food or drink.”²

Hardy pleads for as much generosity and indulgence towards a man who has been trapped into a foolish marriage, as for a woman who has been technically deprived of her chastity. He says, “There is something wrong in a social ritual which makes necessary a cancelling of well-formed scheme of
contributing one’s units of a momentary surprise by a new and transitory instinct which had nothing of the nature of vice, and which could be only at the most called weakness. One may inquire what the man has won or the woman lost that he deserved to be caught in a gin which would cripple him, if not her also, for the rest of a life-time.”

His last two great novels, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, deal in the detail with the problem of marriage. Hardy regards marriage not as a means of sexual satisfaction, but a step towards a higher kind of life. Therefore hasty marriages are not desirable. Marriage should take place after taking into account all things. Marriage based on ‘love at first sight’ is seldom successful.

At one place, Hardy wrote, “A marriage should be dissolved as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties—being then essentially, no marriage.” This clearly indicates that Hardy favours divorce when married life becomes irksome to any of the parties. This view is illustrated in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in which Henchard feels that by marrying Susan he has committed a great mistake. For this reason he offers his wife for sale. Henchard says, “I married at eighteen, like a fool that I was; and this is the consequence of it.” He further says, “For my part I don’t see why men who have got wives, and don’t want them, should not get rid of them as these gypsy fellows do to their old horses. Why shouldn’t they put them up and sell them by auction to men who
are in want of such articles. Why, I’d sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her.”

Hardy himself express his views in the same novel, “The conversation took a high turn, as it often does on such occasions. The ruin of good men by bad wives, and more particularly, the frustrating of many a promising youth’s high aims and hopes, and the extinction of his energies, by an early imprudent marriage, was the theme.”

Hardy does not consider marriage as a sacred bond, rather he regards it as a contract which can be broken at will. He holds that it is good to seek dissolution of marriage bonds if marriage has failed to make the partners happy. For such unconventional views Hardy was much criticised and condemned by the orthodox people who felt that Hardy was blasting the very foundation of morality. Though on account of the protests and propaganda against him, he gave up novel writing, but ultimately, as we find today, Hardy’s views are upheld by the modern divorce laws.

The Wessex novels are rich so far as female characters are concerned. Hardy is undoubtedly an expert character painter. He shows a great power of portraying his women. In many aspects he can be compared with Shakespeare so far as his heroines are concerned. There are such illustrious heroines as Tess, Elizabeth-Jane, Eustacia Vye, Bathsheba, Grace and Sue. There are such lesser women as Arabella, Lady Constantine, Mrs. Yeobright, Mrs. Melbury, Susan, etc.
Hardy’s women characters can be divided into four groups. The first group consists of those women who are drawn as full-length portraits. They are of a high order of personality. They are Tess, Sue, Eustacia, Bathsheba and Elizabeth-Jane. To the second group belong women of less personal significance, though they are also drawn as detailed portraits. They are Elfride, Ethelberta, Grace, Viviette and Anne. The third group consists of those women who are neither studied at length nor are of any great personal significance. To this group belong Paula and Fancy, Marty and Arabella, and Thomasin and Lucetta. To the fourth group belong those women who remain standing modestly in the background. They have of course an interesting personality. To this group such women characters as Tabitha, Matilda, Fancy, Charlotte, three milk-maids in Tess, Mrs. Yeobright, Mrs. Malbury, Susan Henchard, etc.

All the women characters are distinguished from one another. Hardy is always conscious of differences of personality, subtle distinctions and social status. Sometimes quite opposite traits are seen in his women. For example, Tess has ‘a touch of animalism in her flesh’. She on the other hand has a marked ‘sexlessness’, by her desire for marriage without physical union. It is strange that both these characters are Hardy’s masterpiece creations. Similarly, Elizabeth-Jane, Sue and Ethelberta are different from one another. Sue feels as well as thinks—a rare fusion of emotion and intellect; Ethelberta is nothing but cool, calculating reason, mathematical even in her love; Elizabeth-Jane is a special type, a little philosopher, the only woman of Hardy with a sense of
honour. Thus, there is a vast variety in Hardy’s delineation of women characters.

Another important feature of Hardy’s women characters is that his women are more vital than men. A close scrutiny of his novels reveals a marked contrast between his male and female characters. Hardy had an instinctive liking for his female characters. Hardy tended “to regard women as the more energetic and forceful of the sexes, around whom men revolve like obedient satellites.”

He, therefore, makes his women beautiful, interesting, fascinating and more vital in the human drama represented in his novels. But, like Shakespeare’s heroines, with Hardy is would be wrong to say that ‘he has no heroes, but only heroines’. His male characters such as Henchard, Clym, Jude, oak, etc. are quite energetic and alive.

Hardy’s major heroines are represented as patiently suffering creatures. “Out of his ten principal heroines, five are brought to tragic ends after great suffering, and the rest endure great suffering. In the case of two-Tess and Eustacia-we get the soul’s tragedy more harrowing and painful than in the case of men.” This is all due to Hardy’s realistic observation of life. Hardy’s treatment of his women is conditioned by his keen observation of the realities of life. In actual life, women, being the weaker sex, suffer more. Hardy represents these women as he saw them in actual life.
As Crompton-Rickett observes, “Admirable as many of his male characters and as many of his female characters are, they yield both in clarity and intensity of interest to his women; and since woman is more elemental than man, swayed far more by the instinctive life, their superiority is another illustration of Hardy’s peculiar skill in dealing with the primal type.” In fact, Hardy does not handle masculine psychology with the same penetration. His male characters are either sensual or effeminate or else victims of a kind of internal attention. He doubtless discovered in women a complexity, which remained more prominently before his eyes, a submission to instinct which involved her in more intimate relations with the whole order of things.

Hardy is a worshipper of Nature, and his reverent attitude towards her controls and colours all his writing. Towards religion in the conventional sense his temper is hostile; he is a pagan whose faiths and sentiments are rooted in the distant past. Such religious sentiments as he has, attached themselves to things immemorially sacred—the sun, the moon, the stars, the march of seasons, ‘the loom of silent powers weaving the web of life’, the worship of fecundity, the spirit of creativeness, the sense of the eternal in time. The worship of the sun appears to him the sunset religion under the sky. The rising sun is “a golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, going down in the vigour and intentness of youth, upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him.” The sun had a personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression.
The Egdon Heath is the type of the eternal in nature, a ‘brooding and shaping presence’ that touches the actors in the drama of life, generation after generation. In this art of producing entries sympathy between man and his surroundings scene, Hardy is supreme. Nature herself breathes and speaks through them, and they are the obedient servants of her will.

For Hardy “seasons have their moods; morning and evening, night and noon have their temperaments; winds, trees, waters, clouds, silences and constellations have their dispositions”; and all speak in voices audible to the spirit.

We are throughout kept in touch with the spirit of Nature and antiquity and pagan imagination. As Tess moves through the meadows in morning light, her head rising above the low-lying mists, she is to Angel Clare the Mare Magdalene, or Artemis or Demeter. A rough table and at evening is ‘Cybele the Many-breasted’ reclining without stretched limbs. Salisbury plain at the approach of morning is mighty being, waking from sleep.

With this power of translating large effects in scenery, of sea, sky and broad heath, Hardy combines the most observant eye for minute and humble details in ordinary landscape. There is no book of Hardy that does not a bound in Nature pictures, some delicately sketched, some composed of broad masses of colour, but all carefully observed by a consummate artist. But their chief quality lies in their relation to human destinies. Nature and man are constantly engaged in expressing the same thought.
Hardy shows in places a wonderful, even uncanny knowledge of the signs and symptoms of Nature. Secrets that are instinctively known by the brute creation, and not altogether hidden from people living in close touch with Nature. The coming on of winter with its accompanying frost and snow-storm in ‘stealth, measured glides, the moves of a chess-player’ step by step is wonderfully described in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. The description of the frost-bitten polar birds, ‘gaunt spectral creatures’ with tragic eyes-eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmic horror in inaccessible polar regions—which had beheld the crash of icebergs and the slide of snow hills by the ‘shooting light of the Aurora’ fills us with a terror almost elemental in its nature. The indications of a coming thunder-storm perceived by the Gabriel Oak in *Far From the Madding Crowd* similarly strikes the reader with a strange fear, so magical the warning of nature appears to the ordinary man. The richness of the world of wonder is opened before us and we come to comprehend, dimly and slowly, how the life of labouring men is acted upon by nature. They live in the society of trees, winds and waters; they find companionship in creatures of the woodland and the field; their hopes, fears, experiences, the faith and love, sorrows and hate, are nourished by the mighty mother.

Hardy’s chief aim is truth, and hence, whatever superficial graces he may lack, he never fails in the grace of severe sincerity. He has been compared with Crabbe as one of the sternest painters of man’s social life. He deliberately chooses a restricted field for the sake of the intensity of vision that
it gives. The knowledge of the rural life he describes is by his inheritance and training. Art express best what is normal to the artist, and Hardy’s art is completely expressive of his melancholy temperament.

A notable feature of his art is a certain continuity of design. He does not indeed introduce the characters of former novels into later stories, but he secures the effect of continuity by retaining the same scenery, familiarity, instead of becoming tire-some, becomes a new bond of attraction on account of the artist’s skill. Greatness of design must be reckoned as one of the features of hardy’s art. He attempts a broad synthesis of human life. He has certain definite convictions to express, and in order to express them he invents a wide framework and adopts a logical scheme. The slightest detail is thought out with exactness. Hardy obeys on chance impulses and never wanders from his path. This extraordinary definiteness of aim produces something like an epic force in his writings.

He builds his story as he would build a house, “the strain of every part is calculated and every stone has its place.” Hardy produces his effects by largeness of design as well as minute finish of details. Nothing is forgotten; slight incidents which we barely notice at the time reap later as controlling force of destiny. Unity of effect is an eminent quality of his art. In everything Hardy’s chief concern is truth. His purpose is not to popularize a new idea, nor even to prove a case, but to declare the truth as he sees it. Endowed with the fullest power of appreciation of all that is noble and beautiful in life- all that is true,
and honest, and just, and pure, and lovely, and of good report, helps yet a realist who never loses sight of the defects and limitations of man’s powers. He is not anxious to paint a moral, or content with an easy solution of complexities, but presses on as far as the logic of facts will lead him, and yet when he winds up his story, we recognize fitness in the final issue and somehow feel chastened.

Thus on the basis of foregoing discussion it is amply clear that Thomas Hardy is an existentialist and existentialism is at the bottom of his creative art. His view of life is tragic and his major characters are best examples.

Hardy is at once a true child of his age and a rebel against it. It is often forgotten by those to whom the Victorian era means Landseer rather than Alfred Stevens, the Origin of Species rather than the Grammar of Assent, that a healthy self-criticism did in fact flourish; and that it the nineteenth century threatened to become self-complacent, there was Butler to tickle it out of sleep, Whistler to irritate it to protest, and Swinburne to move it to action. Not the least of these castigators is Hardy, who has more than a creator’s sympathy with the reformers Clym and Jude.

Hardy no less than any other novelist presents a criticism of life, but he is no unconscious propagandist, and gives a clear exposition of his theories in the preface to *The Dynasts*, where he notes “the plethoric growth of knowledge simultaneously with the stunting of wisdom.” The problem which
Hardy faces is, in this respect, a modern one, and in dealing with it, more than any other English writer; he is the instigator of the modern novel.

The sudden increase in Man’s knowledge of the material universe in the nineteenth century brought with it a new atheism that with the thoroughness of English compromise was called Agnosticism. The Romantic discovery of the Renaissance also ushered in a paganism and “decadence” which became a feature of the last quarter of the century. The issue which was brought most clearly to light was the old one of whether Man was to be Materialist or Deist, sensualist or rationalist: whether he was cultivate flesh or spirit. Hardy himself accepts the challenge, but he enters the lists silently, with no shield-rapping or trumpet-blowing. That keen perception which led him later to feel the pulse of modern ills and diagnose “plethoric knowledge” and “stunted wisdom” is clearly at work in the series of novels to which the name “Wessex Novels” has been given.

In these novels the incompatibility of impulse and reason, duty and desire, is intensely expressed. Hardy shows that surrender to impulse inevitably produces unhappiness and, often, tragedy. His impulsive, passionate characters, Jude or Sue or Eustacia, do not temper their new knowledge with old wisdom and fall victims to a fate of which they are fundamentally the prime movers. Who can doubt that the real paragons, the true examples to be followed and those with whom Hardy has the most sympathy, are the characters who exercise the most self-control-Gabriel Oak or Giles Winterborne or Marty South? Yet
curiously enough this moral and Christian attitude has been denied to Hardy. Chesterton has called him “the village atheist” when he is, in fact, the village lay-preacher dramatically pointing out the primrose path as a route not to be followed but avoided.

It is not, however, difficult to see why this misconception should have arisen. While Hardy in his attitude to the “deadly war waged with old Apostolic desperation between flesh and spirit” is stolidly and rustically conservative, he is realist enough to see that human nature being what it is, the consequences of a surrender to impulse should not damn the individual irredeemably. Hardy categorically states in the preface to *The Woodlanders* that there should be no doubt of the depravity of the erratic heart who feels some second person to be better suited to his tastes than the one with whom he has contracted to live: yet no thinking person should suppose on the broader ground of how to afford the greatest happiness that there is no more to be said on the marriage covenant. Hardy certainly was not among those who said no more on the matter, and he devotes his last two novels to saying much; but he questions a social convention rather than a moral code. His last novel, *Judge the Obscure*, had an earlier title, *The Simpletons*, and this name, tinged as it may be with irony, expresses nevertheless what was probably Hardy’s true conception of Jude and Sue. Few critics would now maintain that their story is an incitement to an immoral way of life. The novel goes from grimness to grimness with nothing to relieve the tragedy which grinds down with relentless force in the last
stifled words of Jude. The total effect which this work makes upon the reader is
that Hardy was writing to clear his own mind by bringing the last variation on
an original theme to a logical conclusion. He produced no novels after *Jude the
Obscure*, an indifference which is usually accredited to the hostility which
greeted its publication, but from the evidence given in his biography it seems,
more plausibly, that he had exhausted ideas for the novel-form.

Thus Hardy is a rebel against an age of Christian precept and
Materialist example, but in his methods he is indebted to his contemporaries. It
is perhaps unfortunate that he regarded writing as no more than a means of
gaining a livelihood. In his situations he gave the public what is wanted and few
would deny that the serial publication of his novels had a damaging effect upon
their artistic structure. He was not unconscious of this defect, and complained
that in writing *The Mayor of Casterbridge* for publication in Harper’s Weekly
he was obliged to include “incidents” in almost every week’s contribution.
There is much to show that Hardy’s novel-form might have evolved on different
lines. His first novel, which he afterwards destroyed, seems to have been “new”
in technique, but on Meredith’s advice he directed his attention to producing
something with a “more complicated” plot. Contemporaries preoccupied with
these “complicated plots” were Willkie Collins, Mrs. Henry Wood, and Miss
Brandon. Hardy considered he could do no better than follow their example. His
next novel, *Desperate Remedies*, was written in this melodramatic vein, and in
reacting violently from it in *Under The Greenwood Tree*, we may suppose that
Hardy approached more nearly to his own idea of what a novel’s structure should be. He never departed, however, from a “complicated” framework to his other stories, although it seems obvious that he was not deeply interested in the technical aspect of his plots, an indifference which may explain why the machinery creaks at times.

There is also another reason why Hardy did not abandon this structure but even developed it. He attempted to revive the Greek ideal of tragedy. A rustic fatalism is a protagonist in his novels. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* coincidence is unobtrusive; it begins to appear in *The Return of the Native* and assumes impressive proportions in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and later in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and in *Jude the Obscure*. But while the Greek was a fatalist in the will of the gods who are hostile to Man, Hardy is a fatalist in the will of Nature which is hostile to Civilization and which he incarnates nowhere so well as in Egdon Heath, “untamable and Ishmaelitish” with “Civilization as its enemy.”

This tragedy runs as a dark thread through the web of the novels, and is best seen in his last two works where a fate inexorable and overwhelming is created by an almost melodramatic succession of coincidences, and finally leaves the impression of an inimical force behind the scenes, pulling the appropriate strings. Although to some extent with Hardy, “Character is Fate”, it is significant that *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* should conclude with the following ex cathedra comment: “Justice was done and the President of the Immortals had
ended his sport with Tess.” Hardy’s attitude is tragic not pessimistic; his characters have nobleness even in their ruin, they may stray yet they are not lost; but it is with the works of Sophocles rather than Shakespeare that his tragedies must be compared.

The parallel with Greek art does not stop here. Hardy in his work planned the same classical limitation of environment, but whereas the Greek was trammeled by necessity- he knew of little outside his own islands-with Hardy, the restriction is deliberate. He resuscitates the significant Saxon name of “Wessex” to embrace the region where his novels have their setting. This district is peopled by a race of peasants with a cultural inheritance going for back beyond the age of the Roman legionary who form a sort of chorus to the action as in a Greek tragedy. They are, too, a wise race who through the centuries have compromised with Nature in the struggle for existence and share her age-old secrets. Giles Winterborne had a marvelous power of making trees grow,-there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the trees he was planting; Diggory Venn knows every feature of Egdon Heath as the lines and wrinkles on a familiar face; and only Gabriel Oak can save the stricken sheep. With the Wessex peasants, religion is little more than superstition: they practise pagan rites as enthusiastically as they sing in the village choir. If they are conscious of any godhead it is a much the Earth, their Great Mother who increases their flocks and gushes from the cider presses, as the Jehovah of the
Old Testament. Their wisdom and happiness is age-long and inherited-Antaeus-like, they are strong with their parent Earth.

The forces of civilization debase this natural simplicity. Sophistication brings knowledge but not happiness to Clym and Jude, Grace and Tess alike. It is with these peasants that Hardy is primarily concerned. One feels that his interest in the more exotic and urbane types, the Charmonds, Fitzpiers, and Lucettas, is rather perfunctory. He is never at ease in the boudoir and drawing-room, but always longing to get back to the malt house and the barn.

If Hardy’s plots are at times melodramatic, his characters never are; and it is difficult to point to a villain even in his less ambitious works. He excels above all in the portrayal of passionate, emotional types, chiefly women, who predominate in the novels. Yet he usually manages to balance them with restrained, self-controlled characters: thus for a Henchard or Eustacia or Felice there is a Farfrae or Thomasin or Marty: even in his last work the contrast is marked between Jude’s questioning hesitancy and Sue’s impulsive certitude.

But perhaps the strongest and what will prove the most abiding feature of Hardy’s Wessex is not its characters but its landscape. The Romantic revival brought with it the poets of Nature: Wordsworth the mystic communicant, Keats and Tennyson the objective enjoyers. If Walton and Gilbert White be accepted, little had been done for Nature on the side of prose. With Hardy, however, begins that series of cultivators like W.H. Hudson, Edward Thomas, and Richard Jefferies; and Hardy is the greatest of them. His
prose is never grander, his style never more sure and convincing, than when he is dealing with Nature in its aspect of the beauty of things seen, and when he is describing the country side with the intimacy of the countryman and the intuition of the poet. Perhaps the most lasting impressions that the novels leave are the Wessex landscapes—of Casterbridge, “deposited in a block on a cornfield” or of the From Valley, “in which milk and butter grew to rankness”; or of White-hart Vale, “surrounded by orchards lustrous with the reds of apple crops, berries, and foliage, the whole intensified by the gilding of the declining sun..... In all this proud show some kernels were unsound as Grace’s own situation, and she wondered if there was one world in the universe where the fruit had no worm and marriage no sorrow.”

This last extract serves to show how different is Hardy’s very personal approach to Nature from Wordsworth’s: it is the poet’s approach not the mystic’s. Hardy does not lose himself in his vision: rather he loses his vision in himself.

Thus on the basis of foregoing discussion it is amply clear that Thomas Hardy is an existentialist and existentiation is at the bottom of his creative art. His view of life is tragic and his major characters are best examples.
References

1. Jude The obscure, p. 107
2. Ibid, p. 110
3. Ibid, p. 115
4. The Mayor of Casterbridge, 88
5. H.C. Duffin : A Study of the Wessex Novels, p. 189
6. Ibid, p. 190
8. Ibid., p. 207