PREFACE

Thomas Hardy, OM (2 June 1840-11 January 1928) was an English novelist and poet of the naturalist movement, although in several poems he displays elements of the previous romantic and enlightenment periods of literature, such as his fascination with the supernatural. He regarded himself primarily as a poet and composed novels mainly for financial gain. The bulk of his work, set mainly in the semi-fictional land of Wessex, delineates characters struggling against their passions and circumstances. Hardy’s poetry, first published in his 50s, has come to be as well regarded as his novels, especially after The Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The term “cliffhanger” is considered to have originated with Thomas Hardy’s serial novel A Pair of Blue Eyes in 1873. In this novel Hardy left one of his protagonists, Knight, literally hanging off a cliff staring into the stony eyes of a trilobite embedded in the rock that has been dead for millions of years. This became the archetypal-and literal-cliff-hanger of Victorian prose.

Hardy’s family were Anglican, but not especially devout. He was baptized at the age of 5 weeks and attended church, where his father and uncle contributed to music. However, he did not attend the local Church of England school, instead being sent to Mr. Last’s school, 3 miles away. As a young adult, he befriended Henry R. Bestow (A Plymouth Brethren man), who also worked as a pupil architect, and who was preparing for adult baptism in the Baptist Church, and Hardy flirted with conversion, but decided against it. Bestow went to Australia and maintained a long correspondence with Hardy, but eventually Hardy tired of these exchanges and the correspondence ceased. This concluded Hardy’s links with the Baptists.

Hardy’s idea of fate in life gave way to his philosophical struggle with God. Although Hardy’s faith remained intact, the irony and struggles of life led him to question God and His traditional meaning in the Christian sense.
The Christian god - the external personality - has been replaced by the intelligence of the First Cause...the replacement of the old concept of God as all-powerful by a new concept of universal consciousness. The ‘tribal god, man-shaped, fiery-faced and tyrannous’ is replaced by the ‘unconscious will of the Universe’ which progressively grows aware of itself and ‘ultimately, it is to be hoped, sympathetic.

Hardy’s religious life seems to have mixed agnosticism and spiritism. Once, when asked in correspondence by a clergyman about the question of reconciling the horrors of pain with the goodness of a loving God, Hardy replied,

Mr. Hardy regrets that he is unable to offer any hypothesis which would reconcile the existence of such evils as Dr. Grosart describes with the idea of omnipotent goodness. Perhaps Dr. Grosart might be helped to a provisional view of the universe by the recently published Life of Darwin, and the works of Herbert Spencer, and other agnostics.

Nevertheless, Hardy frequently conceived of and wrote about supernatural forces that control the universe, more through indifference or caprice than any firm will. Also, Hardy showed in his writing some degree of fascination with ghosts and spirits. Despite these sentiments, Hardy retained a strong emotional attachment to the Christian liturgy and church rituals, particularly as manifested in rural communities that had been such a formative influence in his early years. Some attributed the bleak outlook of many of his novels as reflecting his view of the absence of God. A sentence found in his Tess of the d’Urbervilles sums up Hardy’s philosophical stance even though he doubted God’s existence:

The inherent will to enjoy and the circumstantial will against enjoyment.

In Far From the Madding Crowd, Oak’s entire flock, and livelihood, dies. For Oak, being a simple farmer with nothing to his name, to
encounter such a loss is a tragedy wherein Hardy wants his readers to consider the role of God in this type of situation along with the universe’s cruelty. Biblical references can be found woven throughout many of Hardy’s novels as he became friends with a Dorchester minister, Horace Moule. Moule also influenced Hardy’s point of view by introducing him to scientific studies and ideas that questioned the literal meaning of the Bible. These new ideas, along with Darwinism, and a series of unsettling events in Hardy’s life may be the reason for his pessimistic attitude that is perceived by many critics and readers alike.

Hardy’s first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, finished by 1867, failed to find a publisher and Hardy destroyed the manuscript to only parts of the novel remain. He was encouraged to try again by his mentor and friend, Victorian poet and novelist George Meredith. *Desperate Remedies* (1871) and *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) were published anonymously. In 1873 *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, a story drawing on Hardy’s courtship of his first wife was published under his own name.

Hardy said that he first introduced Wessex in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), his next novel. It was successful enough for Hardy to give up architectural work and pursue a literary career. Over the next twenty-five years Hardy produced ten more novels.

The Hardy’s moved from London to Yeovil and then to Sturminster Newton, where he wrote *The Return of the Native* (1878). In 1885, they moved for a last time, to Max Gate, a house outside Dorchester designed by Hardy and built by his brother. There he wrote *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), the last of which attracted criticism for its sympathetic portrayal of a “fallen woman” and was initially refused publication. Its subtitle, *A Pure Woman: Faithfully Presented* was intended to raise the eyebrows of the Victorian middle-classes.
*Jude the Obscure*, published in 1895, met with even stronger negative outcries from the Victorian public for its frank treatment of sex, and was often referred to as “Jude the Obscene”. Heavily criticized for its apparent attack on the institution of marriage through the presentation of such concepts as erotolepsy, the book caused further strain on Hardy’s already difficult marriage because Emma Hardy was concerned that Jude the Obscure would be read as autobiographical. Some booksellers sold the novel in brown paper bags, and the Bishop of Wakefield is reputed to have burnt his copy. In his postscript of 1912, Hardy humorously referred to this incident as part of the career of the book: “After these [hostile] verdicts from the press its next misfortune was to be burnt by a bishop—probably in his despair at not being able to burn me.”

Hardy died on January 11, 1928. His ashes were placed in Westminster Abbey, but his heart was buried at Stanford Church in his native Wessex soil, which, indeed, it had never left.

The more fashionable a philosophy becomes, the more elusive is its definition. So the proponents of existentialism proclaim that, though many attack, few understand them. They insist on the essential optimism of their doctrine that “man makes himself,” for there is always, until death, another chance. Granted, they would say, that, in their wide humanity, they explore the far corners of human life, the horrors and perversions. They expose the can of a fraudulent, strictly bourgeois “human dignity.” But just because of this very humaneness, this very honesty, they are decried as perverts and iconoclasts, as philosophic nihilists and artistic freaks. So, finally, as the word goes around, every treatise that dooms man to destruction, every novel whose characters are mad or bad, every play that depresses without elevating, is labeled “so existential”; and hence existentialism, comes to mean the shocking, the sordid, or the obscene.¹

One may well agree with the existentialists that, so loosely used, the word is nearly meaningless—except perhaps for a vague sense that this
movement, like others, expresses the collapse in our time of certain formerly cherished conventions—and that existentialists, in fiction as well as in philosophy, say a number of things that would undoubtedly have brought a blush to the cheek of the young person. But in that sense, after all, anyone, from Freud to James Cain, might with more than justice be called an existentialist.

Despite this criticism, Hardy had become a celebrity in English literature by the 1900s, with several highly successful novels behind him, yet he felt disgust at the public reception of two of his greatest works and gave up writing fiction altogether.