

LESSON 11.

ROMANTICISM AND VICTORIANISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Regional Realism & Moral Philosophy in Thomas Hardy's Work

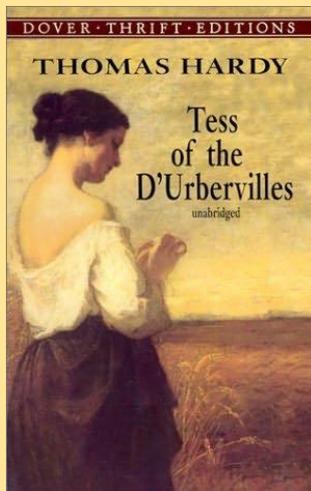
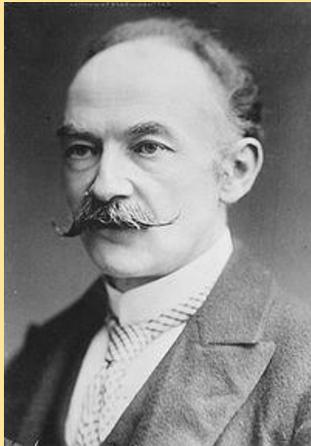
AIM OF THIS UNIT: The unit explains Thomas Hardy's significance in Victorian literature with a close reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

KEY FIGURES: Thomas Hardy

COMPULSORY READING: Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

KEY WORDS & TOPICS: agnosticism, regional novel, naturalism, moral philosophy, alternative morality/logic/religion, relativisation of social conventions, challenge of divine justice, problematisation of the question of purity, female revenge story, liberty in death, Tess as a pagan goddess, suspense, resistance to male gaze by forgetfulness

THE ART AND LIFE OF THOMAS HARDY (1840-1928)



'Though a good deal is too strange to be believed, nothing is too strange to have happened.'
Thomas Hardy

☼ Thomas Hardy was an English novelist and poet famous for setting most of his works in **Wessex**, the South-western part of England, today known as Dorset county.

☼ The eldest of the four children of a stonemason he grew up in humble circumstances, in an isolated cottage on the edge of the open heathland, where his early experience of **rural life's seasonal rhythms and oral culture** proved to be largely influential of his future writing.

☼ He learnt **architecture**, and the profession brought him social and economic advancement. Yet due to the lack of funds and **declining religious faith** he eventually abandoned his ambitions of university education and prospective ordination as an Anglican priest.

☼ In his late twenties, he decided to commit himself to literature. He tried his hands in **poetry**, then gained increasing success with his prose published in **serialised novelistic** form. He supplied *Tinsley's Magazine* with eleven monthly instalments of the moderately successful, autobiographically inspired, melodramatic love story *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873).

☼ Yet it was *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) he contributed as a series to the more prestigious *Cornhill Magazine* that earned him real fame as a **Wessex novelist**. He was the first to immortalise in English fiction the **atavistic lure of the agricultural region of his childhood** in a distinctive **blend of humorous, melodramatic, pastoral, and tragic tone**. The **sombre countryside** he came to know as a child remained the scenery to many of his novels.

☼ After a serious illness he moved with his wife to **Dorchester**, where he was appointed a local magistrate and designed and built Max Gate, the house in which he lived until his death.

☼ While *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) incorporates recognizable details of Dorchester's history and topography, *Wessex Tales* (1888) resuscitates the region's aura in short story form.

☀ Hardy's late novels are considered to be his finest: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude, the Obscure* (1895) conjoin features of the **regional novel**, the **social problem novel**, and **moral philosophical fiction** to offer sympathetic representations of working class people's – the erring milkmaid's and the studious stonemason's – high hopes, momentary joys, and troubled journeys towards their tragic destinies.

☀ Hardy rated poetry over prose fiction, and was preoccupied in the last three decades of his life with a **rich variety of lyrical forms** – war poems, philosophical poems, dramatic monologues, ballads, satirical vignettes, and even a huge poetic drama in blank verse *The Dynasts* subtitled “an epic drama of the war with Napoleon” (1902, 1905, 1907) – published in seven volumes of poetry. A stunning corpus of more than a thousand poems provides a mansion one could live in forever, as one of his critics put it.

☀ In his eighties he secretly wrote a **biography of himself** for posthumous publication under the name of his widowed second wife. Following his death, his cremated remains were interred with national pomp in **Westminster Abbey**, while heart was buried in the churchyard of his native parish.

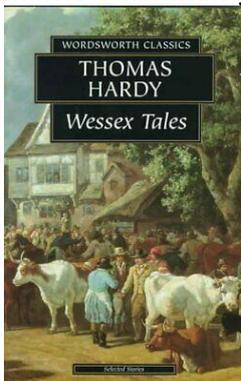
KEY TERMS IN THOMAS HARDY'S FICTION

🚦 REGIONAL NOVEL:

Hardy was an outstanding practitioner of the regional novel, a genre of fiction that is set in a recognisable geographical location and describes the everyday life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, mental attitudes, and other aspects specific of the given region's culture. Stories

1. may focus on **the relation of nature and its inhabitants**,
2. may use **landscape and climate for the characterisation of human agents**, or
3. employ the **local colours to reflect on larger existential philosophical dilemmas**.

Nature and nurture are interconnected in so far as the environment is assumed to influence the life of the people living in it. **The environment is just as much topographical, as it is geographical, social, economic, political, cultural, etc.** Hence, the notion “region” also holds social-political connotations, and, as a result, the genre of regional novel tends to mingle with the **social problem novel**. Even conflicts and their resolution or tragic consequences seem somehow determined by the setting. Regional novelistic writings often focus on **rural regions** depicted in a sentimental, nostalgic, melancholic tone that reflects the author's familiarity and intimacy with the location.



Hardy created a setting for his regional novels in the **Wessex area**. This Southern, largely agricultural region of England was slow to emerge from the old rhythm of rural life and labour into the modern industrial world. Practically Hardy writes of an England that is on the brink of virtually disappearing: a more pagan, more primitive, more intuitive and sincere life cut off from the mainstream of national progress, and closer to Nature that is regarded both as mothering and hostile environment. Hardy's representation of the landscape and Nature changed over the years: he **moved from the pastoral to a more realistic depiction of rural English society**.



EXPLORE VISUAL EXTRAS

[Click here to watch a documentary on Hardy's vision of Dorset and its influence in the creation of his partly dream, partly real Wessex](#)

✚ TEMPORALITY: TIMELESSNESS AND HISTORICAL TRANSITION

Hardy's characters are often peasants from the Wessex region who live in a **timeless** symbiosis with the land that has changed little over the centuries. They inhabit an **atemporal, atavistic zone** that is about to be ruined by the emerging modernism's fake values dictated by higher social classes, the machine monsters, and dehumanising technological progress. Unaffected by the impetus of historical progress and the **unpredictably fast pace of modernisation**, the Wessex country folk's life in Hardy's novels is determined by the **cyclicity of seasons**, the regular rhythm of agricultural activities, the monotonous, inevitable toil of physical labour. Hence, Hardy's characters are often marked by an unillusionistic, accepting, stoic attitude to existence.

Hardy's **life and work spanned over two contrasting eras: Victorianism and Modernism**, which represent radically different value systems and worldviews. A sensitive, contemplative personality by nature he disliked changes, yet the transitional period he lived in was rich in traumatic life experiences enough for three generations. He was born just after Queen Victoria's rise to throne, when children were entertained by stories of veterans of the Napoleonic wars. He witnessed the time of industrial evolution, the collapse of traditional rural life, the rise of imperialism, and the historical cataclysm of First World War, and died just a decade before the eruption of the Second. His **tragic, sombre, agnostic worldview** was **shaped just as much by the Zeitgeist as his personal attitude**.

✚ TRAGIC VISION OF LIFE

Hardy's novels are permeated by a fundamentally tragic, melancholic, stoic vision of life. Major recurring themes include:

- beauty destroyed,
- present shatters the past,
- blaming of the innocent,
- dignity of suffering,
- dark harshness of life, futile quest for happiness,
- brute sexual instincts, pure love doomed to fail,
- social prejudice (classism, sexism, racism),
- poverty, prostitution, rape, disease, filth,
- religious dogma, unjust laws, indifferent society, blind chance ruin lives

✚ NATURALISM

Naturalism is a **subgenre of realistic writing** that lacks the supernatural, idealistic, or symbolical aspects of Romanticism, Surrealism, or the Fantastic. The aim is the artistic reproduction of believable everyday life, the truthful mirroring of reality as it is. Literary writings of this mode were **inspired by scientific discoveries of Darwinism** and depicted human behaviour as largely "influenced by nerves and blood," as one of the greatest naturalist writer, Émile Zola put it. Naturalist writing was a **forerunner of the psychological novel** in so far as it aimed to explore how the hereditary and the social environment determines one's character (balancing between nature and nurture, biologism and social determinism, corporeal drives and cultured mind).

AGNOSTICISM

☀ Critics agree that Hardy gradually moved from the Christian teachings of his boyhood to a growing **scepticism** in dogmatic religious beliefs sparked by scientific discoveries of **Darwinism**, the epistemological view of **Rationalism** (that regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge), and his **quest for moral justice** that defined his enquiring mind.

☀ The religious motifs in his fiction reflect his personal **oscillation between faith versus doubt**, his divided feelings between an emotional attraction to the Church and a deepening tragic view of life, as well as an anxiety that conventional religious teachings are inadequate to cope with moral dilemmas of human existence or to justify the suffering of the innocent.

☀ His major novels display a growing bitterness: scepticism moves closer to **agnosticism**, the gradual questioning of a benevolent, anthropomorphic Deity, a growing **uncertainty about the knowability and the truth value of metaphysical claims such as the existence of God**, redemption and afterlife. As the idea of **humans' free will is challenged**, life becomes a futile quest for happiness; religion turns into a philosophical struggle with a transcendental entity.

☀ The Christian concept of the forgiving, loving (even vengeful but always man-faced) God the Father figure is replaced by pessimistic speculations about the **capricious unconscious will of the Universe** that remains largely indifferent towards the fate of mankind.

This sombre, absurd view of life is a forerunner of modern existentialism, and is akin with philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche agonised cry "God is dead." (Note: Hardy has a poem entitled "God's funeral")

 <p>READ & THINK</p>	<p>Read Hardy's poem below. Think about the humanist alternative he offers in place of the Christian vision of afterlife. If not in Heaven, how can humans reach eternity? How do these ideas relate to Pantheism?</p>	<p>Read the final paragraph of <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> below. Note how the narrator's tired, unimpassioned tone suggests his weariness with the unjust ways of the world. Tess' ancestors who implicitly caused her downfall (she left her family in search of her noble relatives) remain unaffected by her agony. Her tragedy lacks a cathartic quality, it seems just an ordinary part of human existence. She dies and life goes on as if nothing happened.</p>
<p>„Transformations”</p> <p>Portion of this yew Is a man my grandsire knew, Bosomed here at its foot: This branch may be his wife, A ruddy human life Now turned to a green shoot.</p> <p>These grasses must be made Of her who often prayed, Last century, for repose; And the fair girl long ago Whom I often tried to know May be entering this rose.</p> <p>So, they are not underground, But as nerves and veins abound In the growths of upper air, And they feel the sun and rain, And the energy again That made them what they were!</p>	<p>Tess, Chapter LIX</p> <p>Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals (in Aeschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained there a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on.</p> <p>Read Hardy's confession below.</p> <p>Click on the names (hyperlinks) to learn more about decisive figures in his art and life.</p> <p>“My pages show harmony of view with Charles Darwin, T H Huxley, Herbert Spencer, David Hume, John Stuart Mill and others ...”</p>	

MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Hardy was alternately described by biographers and critics as

- a reserved hermit and a vehement revolutionary,
- a realist with a sociographical zeal and a lyrical impressionist,
- a spiritual person and an agnostic unbeliever, challenged church doctrines, struggled with the idea of the divine, bordered on pessimist fatalism but used Biblical motifs in his art,
- an advocate of vanguardist artistic, philosophical ideas yet ready to make compromises.¹

These ambiguities also surfaced in the moral philosophical layers of his work. As a precursor of the modernist Existential(ist) Angst, he envisioned **humans as solitary beings victimised by the cold cruelty of society, blind chance, and the indifference of universe, finding only momentary consolation in Nature.**

Harold Bloom regards the philosopher **Schopenhauer's** notion of "the will to live" and Romantic poet **Shelley's** ideas of "visionary scepticism," "tragic sense of eros," and "shadow self" as Hardy's major inspirations. Modernist novelist DH Lawrence praised Hardy for "setting behind the small action of his protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by the human consciousness within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness."²

☀ Hardy's protagonists **transgress the conventionally established human moral codes and in consequence are punished by the social system.** But the justice served does not feel right to the reader, and their fall seems tragic because their wrong choices result from their very human, very relatable imperfections.

☀ According to Northrop Frye's typology, Hardy's main theme is the principal topos of Western *tragedy*: the demonic ritual of a public punishment, **the sacrifice of the hero** for the illusory cleansing of society. His characters are "hungry for love, desperate for some company in the void of existence,"³ but their desires gain no communal support and land them as **outsiders**. No matter how desperately they try to create a more just moral, political, religious code for themselves – as in the case of Tess – they are doomed to experience a **tragic fall**.



READ more about Hardy's life and art at the [Victorian Web](#) & [The British Library](#)

TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES. A PURE WOMAN FAITHFULLY PRESENTED (1891)

Tess of the D'Urbervilles. A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented initially appeared in a censored and serialised version in 1891 in the illustrated newspaper *The Graphic*. The novel received hostile reviews because it questioned Victorian sexual morals by its **compassionate portrayal of a fallen woman** and its disclosure of society's shortcomings: hypocrisy, unjust double standards, and a lack of empathy. (The negative criticism of the immorally portrayed themes of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and his following novel *Jude the Obscure* likely precipitated Hardy's long-contemplated move from prose to poetry.)

¹ Sz Kiss Csaba. *Hardy világa*. Budapest: Európa, 1976.

² DH Lawrence. *Selected Critical Writings*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

³ Harold Bloom, ed. *Thomas Hardy*. New York: Infobase, 2010.



PLOT Tess is a simple, kind-hearted, beautiful peasant girl who wants to help her impoverished family by undertaking a job as a poultry keeper at the household of rich relatives. She is seduced and likely raped by Alec, the son of her employer. She gives birth to an illegitimate child she names Sorrow whom the priest refuses to baptise and bury. Years later, working as a milkmaid, she meets Angel Clare, the son of a Reverend, they fall in love, and marry despite their class differences. But Angel abandons Tess when she confesses to him that she is no longer a virgin, blaming her for her corruption. While Angel is in Brazil, Tess accidentally meets Alec who has become a wandering preacher. Tempted by her charms again, he convinces her to become his mistress in return for the financial support of her family. When Angel returns to ask for his wife's forgiveness, it is too late. Troubled Tess thinks that the only way to settle accounts is to kill her seducer who ruined their life. She stabs him, and with Angel runs away to spend a few idyllic days in a county cottage on the run, before being arrested by the police while resting at Stonehenge. The novel ends with Angel and Tess's sister, Liza Lu watching the raising of the black flag that signals Tess's execution. They join hands, and walk on their way.

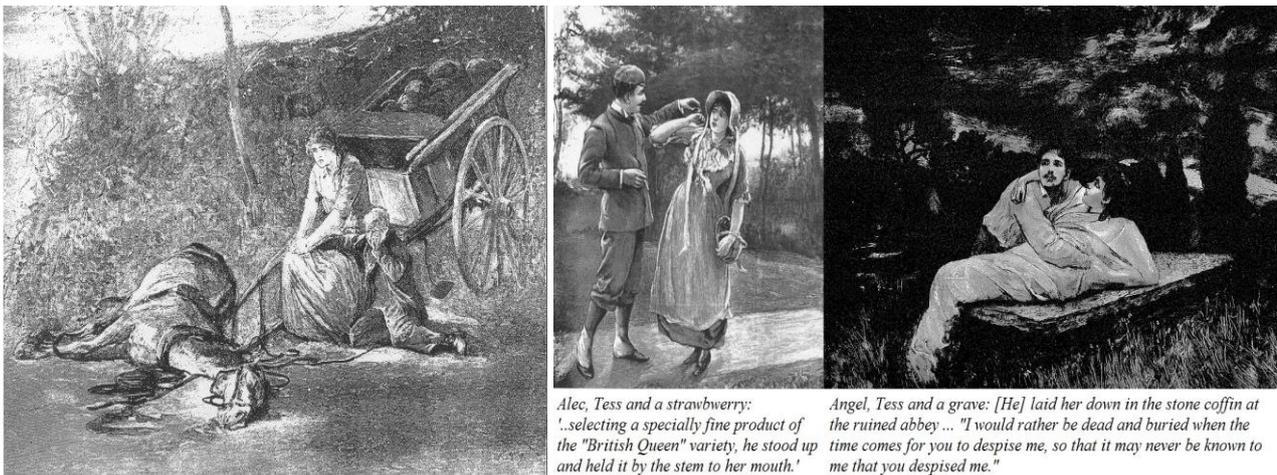
✚ AN UNCONVENTIONAL HEROINE

Tess is an ultimately **paradoxical character**:

- an **angelic fallen woman**,
- a pure heart abused by a corrupted society,
- a peasant girl of noble ancestry, a working class May Dance Queen,
- both sensual **and** innocent *femme enfant* figure,
- a pagan Earth Goddess **and** a Madonna → pagan sacrifice (Stonehenge) and St Theresa
- a sacrificial victim **and** a violent revengeful madwoman,
- a spectacular beauty **and** a desire to fade back invisibly into nature,
- a victim of cruel chance **and** of premeditated crime,
- a character marked by heartbreak, **and** physical labour, animal imagery, (tormented soul **and** body) → ultimately tragic figure
- a peasant destroyed by industrialisation **or** an educated rural workwoman destroyed by landed bourgeoisie (Alec), liberal idealism (Angel), Christian moralism (village),
- intimacy w. nature (milkmaid) and work w agricultural machinery (threshing machine)
- symbolizes chastity (Artemis), fertility (Ceres), abduction to hell (Persephone), fall (Eve)

Tess is a sacrificial victim but she also gains empowerment in a variety complex ways.

- A “Wessex Eve” she is invested w primordial powers seen as possibly sinful by others.
- She survives her rape, her child’s death, Angel’s abandonment, Alex’s reappearance.
- She lives through a period of autonomy before she dies.
- Murdering Alec is her only available expression of autonomy → she gains liberty by choosing death, serving justice even at the price of her execution.
- She acts according to an **alternative morality** (challenging the notion of purity)
- She follows an **alternative logic** (serving justice at price of her own death)
- She acts in line with an **alternative law** (kills her abuser)
- She invents an **alternative religion** (baptizes her own child)⁴



✚ MORAL PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN *TESS*

☼ Tess is a victim of: **social prejudice**, human vice, cruel fate, and indifferent cosmic powers. She is destroyed by her two love interests, intruders into her environment, who represent **different modes of masculinities** (Alec the immoral villain, Angel the gentle, liberal humanist who yearns to work for the honour and glory of mankind), but both fail to appreciate her for who she is, and entrap her in the status of **sacrificial femininity**.

☼ Alec abuses her innocence and takes advantage of her psychic and financial vulnerability. Angel reduces her to an idealised abstraction by calling her “Daughter of Nature,” “Demeter,” “Artemis.” Then he enacts the **double standards of Victorian morals**: after confessing his own premarital affair to Tess he condemns her when she admits in return her own past traumatic sexual experience. Sexual licentiousness is pardonable for men, but unforgiveable for women, and eventually culminating in victim blaming. (Tess is held responsible for men being attracted to her, because of her beauty she is seen as a temptress.)

☼ Hardy problematizes his era’s **dualistic understanding of femininity** that identifies a woman in terms of simplistic stereotypes either as “an angel in the house” (a virgin/mother) or a “fallen woman” (a whore).

☼ Hypocritical norms equate purity with innocence and ignorance, and are unable to make sense of Tess’s character, who is **no longer a virgin but preserves her moral cleanliness**.

☼ In the novel’s pessimistic universe, a **fatally corrupted world dooms the last remaining purity to be destroyed**, because it reminds us of our own impurity. It is the earthly peasant girl who teaches the learnt intellectual Angel a moral lesson, although at the cost of her death.

⁴ Ingham, Patricia. “Fallen Woman as Sign, and Narrative Syntax in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.” in Peter Widdowson, ed. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1993. 80-89.

✚ GENRES EVOKED IN *TESS*

- **Naturalist novel:** describes realistically the harshness of life; Tess is multiply marginalized: rural, poor, female
- **Regional novel:** set in rural England during the Long Depression of the 1870s
- **Sensation novel:** rape and revenge story, crime, death, sexuality, bigamy
- **Social problem novel:** explores how one's fate/ character are determined by social circumstances and hereditary conditions; problematizes classism (Tess's harmony w the natural world is contrasted with the hypocritical, exploitative, superficial world of fake nobility); discloses the double standards of sexism and injustice of demonization/idealization of women
- **Philosophical novel:** notion of free will questioned, deterministic fatalism, struggle with god, questioning of idea of divine benevolence ("Where was Tess's guardian angel?"), destabilization of traditional values (justice, love, faith, nobility, chastity), human being is just a puppet in the hands of fate/ blind chance?
- **Pre-cursor of psychological novel:** complicates conventional ideas on modesty and desire

✚ THE GAZE IN *TESS*

Kaja Silverman highlights how the **narrator oscillates between different spectatorial roles** in the novel, alternately taking on the positions and perspectives of

a tourist	a landscape painter	a passerby	a desiring man
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The so called male gaze – often problematized by feminist theoreticians – reduces Tess to the status of an erotic object meant to satisfy masculine desires. Tess's only way to **escape this objectification is a kind of passive resistance**. She is curiously absent from crucial events of the story: the horse's death, her seduction by Alec, the night in The Chase, Angel's return, her capture at Stonehenge. On these traumatic occasions she seems to be not only dozing off, falling asleep, but also submerging in a sleep-like trance, a death-like quiescence, followed by a dream-like oblivion. By pretending not to where she is, she stimulates forgetfulness, and somehow **fades back into Nature** to escape from the culture that corrupts her life. She alienates herself from her body responsible for her downfall. This **self-induced disembodiment at the peak of psychic crisis** makes her to drift like a corpse upon a current, dissociated from its living will. Instead of female spectacularity she opts for female interiority. Fading back into Nature coincides with disidentification, the sacrificial loss of the ego, but the assimilation of the human figure into the natural background also brings relief, escape via blurring into nothingness, the totality of being. Hers is the fate of the classical tragic hero.

CLICK here for trailers of film adaptations of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
[Tess](#), dir. Roman Polanski, 1979
[Tess of the d'Urbervilles](#), dir Ian Sharp, 1998
[Tess of the d'Urbervilles](#), BBC mini series, 2008



THINK

EXERCISE:

Think about how the speaking names carry a symbolical significance in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Eg. Tess (St Theresa), Alec (Alexander the Great), Angel Clare (bright angel), Sorrow

Think about how this final scene in the BBC film adaptation of *Tess* before the heroine's sacrifice at Stonehenge revisits the themes of paralysing stasis, waking dream and troubled desiring in [Andrew Wyath's 1948 painting *Christina's World*](#).

HARDY'S NOVELS

- ✚ Hardy's classification of his novels:
1. novels of characters and environment,
 2. romances and fantasies,
 3. novels of ingenuity.

1868	<i>The Poor Man and the Lady</i>	lost	unpublished first novel
1871	<i>Desperate Remedies</i>	sensation romance novel of ingenuity	bigamy, adultery, murder, suicide, quasi-gothic
1872	<i>Under the Greenwood Tree: A Rural Painting of the Dutch School</i>	1 st Wessex novel prose idyll, novel of character/ environment	life of group of west gallery musicians
1872	<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i>	melodrama w cliffhangers romance	love triangle, beautiful Emma's dilemma bw boyish architect and older literary man
1874	<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	Wessex novel, novel of character/environment	love, honour, betrayal, harsh reality of farming communities of rural England
1875	<i>The Hand of Ethelberta</i>	a comedy in chapters novel of ingenuity	humour, romance, happy ending, governess heroine
1878	<i>The Return of the Native</i>	sensation novel, novel of character/environment	tragic potential of romantic illusion, protagonists' failure to recognise opportunities to control their destinies
1880	<i>The Trumpet Major</i>	historical novel, romance	set in Weymouth during Napoleonic wars
1881	<i>A Laodicean: The Castle of the De Stancys. A Story of Today</i>	novel of ingenuity	people unable to make their mind up, torn bw possibilities, title: from Laodicean Church in Book of Revelations; who were neither hot nor cold
1882	<i>Two on a Tower</i>	romance	drama of oppositions and conflicts, male desire set against female constancy
1886	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	psychological fiction	tragic (personal, economic) struggle bw two men
1887	<i>The Woodlanders</i>	a woodland story psychological fiction, novel of character/environment	disastrous impact of outside life on a secluded community in Dorset
1891	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	Wessex novel, naturalist, psychological novel, social problem novel, novel of character/environment	moralizing, sympathetic portrayal of working class, empathy expressed for fallen woman
1892	<i>The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament</i>	Wessex novel romance	sculptor's search for ideal woman
1895	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	Wessex novel, novel of character/environment, tragic Bildungsroman, New Woman novel	stonemason wants to become a scholar, is caught bw contrasted kinds of love, deadly war bw flesh and spirit, passion and intellect, aspirations and reality, criticism of marriage, moralizing, sympathetic portrayal of working class



THINK

[TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A QUIZ BY CLICKING HERE](https://forms.gle/daPRgPmkEGJvkzaB6)

<https://forms.gle/daPRgPmkEGJvkzaB6>

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Készült az Európai Unió támogatásával, a Szegedi Tudományegyetem megbízásából.