

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) *Poems* (B, 2317-2315)

Thomas Hardy did not take the path of privileged education at Oxford and Cambridge, nor did he become a world traveler or adventurer. His early career decision to leave architecture for writing, led Hardy down the path of large fate-filled novels in which the English landscape played a major role. In that landscape the forces of nature proved *powerful* antagonists to humanity, as did the human prove to himself, when from within him fate time and time again turned against him. Hardy composed his dark Wessex novels—like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891)—throughout the later 19th century, then in his last three decades turned increasingly toward lyric poetry. We are reading a small but intense selections from those poems.

Question: What marks Hardy off, as 20th century lyricist, from Hopkins and the Romantics?

This is both a technical question, about Hardy's use of the English language for poetry, and a question about the change in cultural atmosphere that begins to set in with the turn into the 20th century. (We took up the same issue, also in regard to the work of Hopkins, in discussing Joyce's work.) Hopkins experiments in metrics, and manipulates syllables and stresses, so as to accumulate startling emphases and instants of revelation. Hardy, on the other hand, compels us with a tone which, though largely conventional in prosody, stops us with harsh chunks of thought, rough hewn words (*Powerfuller*, in "Hap") and a consistently bleak world view which sharply marks itself off from Hopkins and the earlier Romantics. Hardy also looks closely at the harsh realities of social existence, with a sense for the bitter in the daily. What poem could capture the paradoxical pain of lost virtue loss more spittingly than "The Ruined Maid"?

Comparative Literature:

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