

## **Book Review “Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception” by Tom Paulin**

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**Article Received:** 05/10/2022,

**Article Accepted:** 01/11/2022,

**Published Online:** 01/11/2022,

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.11.16

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### **Abstract**

This book review “Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception” is written to find out the multiple influences which shaped Hardy’s mind as a poet. It explores all chapters which are briefly reviewed. It highlights various facts about Hardy’s poems. His poetry is a fusion of songs, sounds and voices. Hardy read different writers, poets, thinkers and philosophers whose works moulded his mind as a pessimist and realist. Hence, his poetry is a reflection of different thoughts, ideas and emotions.

**Keywords:** Book Review, Perception, Poetry, Influence, Thought, Emotion, Impression

### **Introduction**

The book “**Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception**”, is authored by Tom Paulin. His approach behind writing this book is to stress many issues for which Hardy is known. The writer wants to give full and flexible account of his poetry. Tom Paulin acknowledges the influence of Donald Davie’s *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* for writing this book. Paulin explains nineteenth century theories of perception which he sees as central to the formation and expression of Hardy’s vision. The whole book contains a close reading of individual poems which are critically analyzed. Paulin’s point is to highlight the ideology of Hardy which reflects the perception of various thinkers, writers and scientists and which finds expression in his poetry.

Hardy’s poetry is, therefore, the reflection of various moods and attitudes. As an architect, Hardy trained his eyes to seize the most distinct feature in his field of vision and compose poetry.

### **Review of All Chapters**

#### **Chapter 1: Perception**

The writer Tom Paulin does not describe Hardy’s biographical phase. In the very first chapter “perception”, he writes about the various perceptions that formed Hardy’s mind and affected his writings including prose and poetry. Hardy read Newman’s *Apologia* when he

was twenty-five and was much influenced by it. This book challenged his faith regarding Christianity. But he still followed religion by reading hymns, bible, and by visiting the church. Hence, most of his poems bear religious themes. Hardy read Mill and Carlyle, during the crisis of faith and identity. The impact of their writings can be perceived into Hardy's work. Hardy was also influenced by Locke's theory of knowledge, indicating that: "We are the prisoners of our own minds and know nothing outside ourselves. Each of us ... must, so far as knowledge is concerned to be shut up in him, and cut off from all contact with outer world."

Hume, also inspired Hardy regarding "the universe of the imagination" and it began to take possession of him. Hardy read Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* and admitted the influence of this book on his work. Not only Hume but also a series of writers like Darwin, Huxley, and Comte Spencer form his perceptions as shown in his works. Shelly is yet another figure that fascinated Hardy. Shelly's idea that "*nothing exists but as it is perceived*" moves Hardy a lot and he stresses its relevance.

According to Paulin, Hardy was influenced by Shelly's poetry and personality. He calls him 'our most marvellous lyrist' and this attachment made him identify with the philosophical assumption in his poetry. He equates himself with Shelly when he states that the poetry of a scene varies with the minds of its perceivers.

Also a few of Hardy's perceptions are formed after reading Ruskin's '*Modern Painter*', whose note on pathetic fallacy influenced his writing to some extent. Ruskin believes in the external existence of hard objects and the ways in which cloudy, emotional language blurs and dissolves their reality. For him, this blurred language is not very perfect. Charles Darwin also affected Hardy when he read his famous work *The Origin of Species*. Hardy rejected the conventional scenic beauty in his works because like Darwin he believes that our appreciation of beauty is just a matter of fashion and cultural conditioning. According to him, the beauty he finds in nature is only an accidental quality that his mind notices. Human consciousness is not affected by nature. The feelings of isolation are described by Hardy in phrases like – 'A world of defeat' where emotions have no place. Hardy is not interested in the beauty of nature, but the experience he gets from it made nature attractive. Hence, he admires the objects that provide a beautiful experience. All this is recorded in the mind' eye. And also the impression that one gets from the objects is expressed in his poems very effectively. According to him "*the mission of poetry is to record impressions, not conviction*".

Hardy is a poet, not a rigid thinker and his poetry is diffident, sceptical, having passive qualities, like the recorded impressions which he receives from this world. Hardy, therefore, calls his poems, "*mere impressions of the moment*". Hardy also benefited from the various perceptions of philosophers, thinkers, poets, scientists like Newman, Mill, Leslie Stephen or Schopenhauer, Shelly, Wordsworth, or Coleridge and Darwin. From the very beginning to the end he was inspired by the various perceptions of persons.

## Chapter 2: Influences

The entire chapter reflects on multiple influences on Hardy's mind, life, career and his literary works. Shelly, a romantic poet and thinker, inspired Hardy's literary styles and his entire work. Shelly's romanticism was underestimated by most of the critics. But Hardy admired him a lot and his minor poem like '*O world, O life, O time*', was read by Hardy many times. From Shelly he learnt to read his poems many times. '*One shape of many names*', a phrase from Shelly's '*The revolt of Islam*', is the epigraph of Hardy's '*The Well-Beloved*' which is a study of Platonic love. Like Shelly, Hardy is a monist who adopts the philosophy of 'unity' that nothing exists but as it is perceived. Hardy was influenced by Tennyson's "*The Two Voices*" because he was attracted to the phrase which describes divine communication. The phrase has many memories, and seems to enquire: *What does thou here?* This reflects his worthlessness.

Although Hardy was an agnostic (atheist) but he describes himself as a Churchman. He wanted to retain church culture but was not attached to God. He advocates the scientific understanding of nature which discards old religious beliefs. His inclination towards reformation and reading of Tennyson's "*The Two Voices*" shows the process of development and improvement regarding his observation of nature. Hardy also read and copied W.K. Clifford's *Lectures and essays* in one of his commonplace books. Clifford's theory of the intellectual growth of mankind influenced Hardy a lot in his areas of interest.

Hardy also read '*Aeneid*' which was one of his favourite books. His mother gave him a copy of Dryden's translation of Aeneid when he was eight. The verses like –

**'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now'**

made a permanent impression on his mind. Aeneas's journey to the underworld in book six is one of the inspirations behind Hardy's '*poems of 1912-13*' and it embodies one of the deepest patterns of his imagination. The native always returns to the lost past like Aeneas, to continue the journey. There is an interesting echo of the Aeneid in Hardy's '*The Souls of the Slain*' one of his war poems, where the ghosts of soldiers killed in the Boer War return to their native land. The soldiers have come back to enjoy their fame, but their families do not think of their glory and heroism. Both Virgil and Hardy share a profoundly traditional wish to commemorate the soldiers who were killed in a foreign land and they both try to make eternal this memory. Besides the attraction for his theme of exile and return, another reason of Hardy's fondness for the *Aeneid* is Hardy's imaginative view of the underworld presented in a modern scenario. Robert Browning was another figure who also appealed to Hardy besides Shelley. Of all Browning's poems, '*The Statue and the Bust*' with its subdued allegory of the springs of artistic creation', haunted Hardy's imagination and it is evident in the relationship between Jude and Sue. There are instances of various literary figures that are the luminary sources behind Hardy's artistic literary works.

In this chapter, Paulin explores all the sources and links of influence which mould Hardy's mind as a pessimist and realist.

### **Chapter 3: Sound and Voices**

In this chapter the author explores Hardy's poetic contents based on the songs and the tunes that he knew so well because Hardy used to play fiddle at country dances and weddings when he was a boy. Those songs and tunes adorned his poetic creations. As the title of the chapter suggests, Hardy's poetry is a fusion of sounds and voices. Most of his poems like – '*Timing Her*' for example, are written 'to an old folk – tune'. There is a tune behind '*Dead "Wessex" the Dog to the Household*' which is sung by the ghost of his favorite dog. The lyrical quality of his poems is got from Shelley and Browning. The whole chapter contains many poems of Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning having a musical quality reflected in Hardy's verses. Hardy is capable of writing in a heightened style and his melodious verse like – '*In Death Divided*', '*A Broken Appointment*', '*To an Unborn Pauper Child*' and '*To Shakespeare*' is examples of his lyrical and musical poetry. A characteristic feature of Hardy's poetry is the frequency of direct speech, and this is partly due to Browning's influence whose poems are often a collocation of different voices.

In this chapter, Paulin gives a detailed account of Hardy's poetic style, the versification of his poems and impact of tune, sounds and music on his verses.

### **Chapter 4: Observations of Fact**

In this chapter Paulin describes some observed facts that are the foundation of Hardy's literary career. Hardy came under the influence of different thinkers like Leslie Stephen, Frederic Harrison, Comte, Ruskin, Darwin whose ideas shaped Hardy's perception regarding this world. So his poetry reflects all these impressions and observations. Hardy followed Comte in accepting that all real knowledge is based on observed facts and, therefore, religious faith became meaningless. According to Hardy the poet's task is 'to find beauty in ugliness'.

Hume's principal of 'custom', which he defines as "*the effect of repeated perceptions*" forms Hardy's outlook and in '*Afterwards*' Hardy, as a positivist, reflects the idea of immortality. In '*Afterwards*' he will survive after death and will be remembered by his neighbors. In '*The Occultation*', survival is presented as a metaphysical reality but in '*Afterwards*' it is rendered human. The idea and the setting in '*Afterwards*' are reminiscent of similar moments in Gray's *Elegy*, which is one of the favourite poems of Hardy.

Paulin thinks that there are more verbal echoes of the *Elegy* in Hardy's poem but what relevance is that like Gray, Hardy describes a series of scenes which are associated with the poet's personality. The landscape is humanized through the memories and associations related to the poets. Both Gray and Hardy, in the third person describe the sacredness of the occasion. According to the writer, Hardy reflects on immortality which he anticipates in '*Afterwards*' and tries to discover in '*Shelley's Skylark*'. Hardy's poetry is a reflection of visual

observation like – *'To my father's violin', 'The Two Houses'* and *'Haunting Fingers'* are the poems that are worth mentioning.

Paulin points out that the observation of the physical world removes all sorrow and despair: And yet like Eliot, Hardy does not reject biological materialism. It enables him both to create characters and refer to forces underlying it. Hardy's reviewers call him the *'Sentimental Materialist'*.

### **Chapter 5: Mnemonic Silhouettes**

Mnemonic means the study of memories in a scientific way and the word Silhouettes means structures. In this chapter Paulin has described Hardy's love for Gothic art and justify the impact of this art on his poetry. According to Ruskin irregularity and imperfection are present in Gothic art. He refers to the Gothic builders 'love of fact' reflected in Hardy's poetry blended with his imagination. Hardy's poems like *'Genoa and the Mediterranean'* and *'A Gentleman's Second-Hand Suit'* are based on observation and hence he calls it: *'the fresh originality of living fact'*.

Ruskin says that Gothic builders were a combination of fact and imagination which is the theme of Hardy's finest' poem, *'The Abbey Mason'* which is his tribute to the unknown artist who invented the perpendicular style of Gothic architecture.

According to the writer, Hardy the artist now works with brick and mortar, conceals his imagination behind a red brick reflected in his poem *'The Private Life'*. Paulin highlights Hardy's view that a reciprocity between prosaic ordinariness and imaginative vision can transform reality into art. Hence, certain specially observed facts are given distinctive shapes and are known as mnemonic image. The method was when he observed a particular scene, his eyes sought distinctive form and shape among the clutter of other impressions and retained it in his memory. Hardy's novels are full of his memories of paintings and the illustrations which he drew for the first edition of *Wessex Poems*. Hardy's fascination with shapes and patterns is clearly described in his essay *'Memories of Church Restoration'* where he writes that although limestone's or sandstones have passed into the 'form' of a Gothic church it is 'an idea independent of them – aesthetic phantom without solidarity, which might just as suitably have chosen millions of the other stones from the quarry whereon to display its beauty.' Hardy's acute sensibility to the memorably visible is clearly shown in a beautiful poem *'Lying Awake'*. The poem is simple and straightforward. The commas and semi-colons reflect his scrupulousness. By comparing the dew on the meadow to a counterpane he imagines he is actually lying outside as though already in the churchyard and under his sheet of white.

**You, Morningtide Star, now are steady-eyed, over the east,**

**I know it as if I saw you**

**You Beeches, engrave on the sky your thin twigs, even the least;**

**Had I paper and pencil I'd draw you**

**You, Meadow, are white with your counterpane cover of dew,**

**I see it as if I were there;**

**You, churchyard, are lightening faint from the shade of the yew,**

**The names creeping out everywhere**

Here, the 'steady-eyed' Morningstar, like the 'strange-eyed constellations' that watch over *Drummer Hodge*, is the observer whose dawning vision guarantees the existence of the beeches, meadow and the carved names Hardy is unable to see. The star's steady sight locks all the other objects into place. Hardy apostrophizes all of them and then transforms them into active beings – the beeches are engraving their twigs on the sky, a use of the pathetic fallacy which seems quite convincing. It is like his comparison of fresh leaves to silk, and twigs' sharp, black, exact outlines which are worth admiration.

Here is a combination of eye and objects, fact and imagination. In the entire chapter Paulin reflects on Hardy's structure of poems and the memories associated with the objects which brings to his mind certain impression while writing the poems. This explanation justifies the title of the chapter.

### **Chapter 6: Eidetic Images**

'Eidetic' means 'of or relating to voluntarily producible visual images that have almost photographic accuracy'. In this chapter Paulin highlights that besides dark outlines and silhouettes (structure), there is another way in which Hardy embodies memory in his work. Many of Hardy's poems contain images which the memory appears to project onto the bare, external world, like colour slides on a screen. These images assume a virtually autonomous existence outside the poet or his persona; these are half visionary or 'eidetic' images. Hardy was indebted to Shelley for subjective idealism – especially to Human elements in Shelley's poetry. In the poem '*After a Romantic Day*' he significantly made of these ideas. He uses projected visions '*In Front of the Landscape*' where the external, locality of coombs, upland and chalk-pit is reflected through a phantasmagorical of spectral visions which his memory imposed on it. These are the memories of people whom he disliked and they were alive.

According to Paulin, Hardy distinguishes between transcripts of fact and this active encounter between mind and object where the mind 'translates' qualities in the object. For Hardy, this combination of fact and imagination is reflected in poems like – '*In Front of the Landscape and Turner*.' Hardy calls these images 'eidetic' because there is a link between Hardy's use of visual memories and the term 'eidetic'.

### **Chapter 7: The Cogency of Direct Vision**

Paulin thinks that Hardy is a poet who wrote novels for some time. In this chapter the writer points out that sometimes he expresses himself directly and when he does so it is not

satisfactory. This is true of *'The Lacking Sense'* where time refers to suffering, disease, life's imperfections, in terms of a blind nature.

The word 'blind' describes chance, which is applicable to nature in this poem and it associates *'Nature's Questioning'*, *'Doom and She'*, *'To Outer Nature'*, *'A Philosophical Fantasy'*, *'God Forgotten'*, *'Agnosto Theo'*, all these poems are offshoots of *The Dynasts*.

According to the writer, Hardy is describing a state of acute mental suffering and he does so by referring indirectly to Milton's blindness. Therefore, Hardy's *'Far From the Madding Crowd'* – concludes as winning against the odd and unjust circumstances. Hardy's optimism regarding human possibilities for improvement in this world rather than a religious certainty that it will outshine, all in the next is appealing. According to the writer, Hardy has no confidence regarding metaphysical or divine existence and therefore, he wrote *"The Darkling Thrush"* as a humanist's hymn that expresses a very tentative belief in progress. Hardy has a great impact on Leslie Stephen's. He read almost all his works. According to Stephen's, 'an imaginative writer shows certain facts as they appear to him' and they contain the truth as is evident from, *'has all the cogency of direct vision'*. This bare fact will now be seen in the light of keener perceptions than our own.

The title of the chapter, *'the cogency of direct vision'* suggests a positive belief, that one look at bare facts with keen eyes is real knowledge. Hardy practiced, 'the art of observation' which produced his real poetry.

### **Chapter 8: Moments of Vision**

In the last chapter of this book the title bears a similarity to one of Hardy's poetic volumes: "Moments of Vision". In this chapter, the writer describes those images which are different from the temporal mechanism. The impressions recorded by those images are beyond sterile positivism. They have a visionary dimension. Paulin recites many poems from Hardy's volume "Moments of Vision" which have a spark of vision.

In the poem *"Magic Mirror"* he speaks of the magic of the mirror which is supposed to see the future. This is a poem describes a sudden vision of the future. *'Moments of vision'* is also a symbolic poem and magic mirror is a symbol also used in poems like *'The Furniture'*, *'The Pedigree'*, *'Honeymoon Time at an inn'*, *'Near Lanivet'* and *'The Last Signal'*.

The significance of this symbol is that it has multiple meanings. The thoughts and the emotions revealed in it have as a visible essence. Schopenhauer thinks that the artist, apart from his own desires, discovers a state of 'pure perception', a 'clear vision of the world' in his work of art. Eliot calls it a release from the 'practical desire' and MacNeice sees it as an understanding which is beyond 'any practical purpose.' For Hardy, there must be a synthesis of fact and imagination. Hardy favours a compromise between observed fact and imaginative vision. According to him, circumstantial fact encroaches and destroys imaginative freedom.

This idea is clearly brought out in *'The change'*, one of Hardy's poem included in *'Moments of Vision'*. According to the writer, images are based on facts which exist in a timeless reality.

### **Conclusion**

Tom Paulin starts the book with Hardy's statement that the *'poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers.'* Paulin first explains how Hardy's works firmly reflect positivism and sceptical empiricism. In the entire book, the writer explains this statement in the context of several thinkers, poets, scientists whose ideas influenced Hardy. All the chapters of this book revolve around Hardy's psychology and his poetic brilliance. The writer tends to describe all the sources of his artistic inspiration but Hardy was not only the prisoner of those impressions and always gives expression to his own thoughts as well. Paulin also attempts to show Hardy's pessimism who found life unjust and expressed it through his works. In saying so Hardy intended to give life rather less than its due. According to Paulin, Hardy's poetic achievement is so vast that it cannot be bound by either his pessimism or positivism .Finally, Paulin discovers Hardy's positivism hidden behind his poetry.

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