

Choose three of  
thomas hardy's short  
stories essay sample



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Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 in the tiny village of Higher Bockhampton near Dorchester which is the county town of Dorset. There were only about fifty people in total living in the village, which consisted merely of eight workers' cottages, on the side of an isolated stretch of heathland. Hardy's father was a stonemason and builder, carrying on the trade of his own father. However, his mother, who could read but could not write, was determined that her eldest son would have a better education than herself.

Compulsory education did not exist during this time and many children in the countryside grew up illiterate. Therefore, at the age of nine he was sent to a school funded by the church in Dorchester. His mother also pushed him into reading a wide range of "good" books at home. Leaving school at sixteen, Hardy began a career as an architect, training with a Dorchester firm for five years before moving to London in 1862, where he began to learn the art of church restoration.

He also continued to educate himself during this time by studying painting and teaching himself Greek and Latin. Hardy returned to Dorchester in 1867 to work on designing and restoring churches, but had also begun writing novels. His first novel was published in 1871 and he also met and married his first wife, Emma, around this time. They lived in Dorset and London for the next ten years and Hardy began to write full time. He became famous with a serialised story, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which was first printed in a London magazine and then published as a novel.

By 1885 he had earned enough from his writing to move back to Dorchester permanently and from 1887 began to write more short stories based on his

knowledge of Dorset life. Hardy's short stories and novels are all set in the county of Wessex, which was the fictional name he gave to the region of South-West England which he knew and loved from his childhood. Wessex actually included the counties of Dorset, Somerset, Cornwall, Hampshire and Wiltshire.

Many of his stories are. Iso set in or around the fictitious town of "Casterbridge" which is now known to be Dorchester. During the time that Hardy was alive, the region would have mainly consisted of very remote countryside, with cart tracks rather than main roads. Most people travelled around the countryside on foot, with many of them not ever going further than the nearest market during the whole of their lifetime. Almost everybody worked on the land, on the farms owned by middle-class farmers.

Wages were very low and men were often taken on as "casual" labour for harvesting and cropping. Women worked on the land as well and milked the cows in the dairies. In this essay I will be looking at three short stories by Thomas Hardy: Old Mrs Chundle; Tony Kytes the Arch Deceiver and The Thieves who Couldn't Stop Sneezing. I will be exploring the ways in which Hardy's writing can help us to learn more about the Wessex countryside and the people who lived there during the Nineteenth century.

Hardy's knowledge of, and love for, the region can be seen in his detailed descriptions of the rural lifestyle and the surrounding countryside. When we first meet Tony Kytes he is returning home from the Saturday market, carrying corn and driving home the waggon. Hardy describes the way that Tony and Milly "talked on pleasantly, and looked at the trees, and beasts,

and birds, and insects, and at the ploughmen at work in the fields," giving us a very clear picture of what the scenery surrounding them must have been like.

Similarly, we are given an idea of how isolated the lives of these simple people must have been in the story of Old Mrs Chundle, as she tells the curate that, " There's only two places I ever go to from year's end to year's end: that's once a fortnight to Anglebury, to do my bit o' marketing; and once a week to my parish church. " She dismisses the idea that she should even think of visiting Enckworth, about three miles away, calling it " a great mansion of a place, holding people that I've no more doings with than the people of the moon.

This shows how villagers could often live in the same place for the whole of their lifetime without even passing the day with the inhabitants of the next town. People were obviously used to getting about under their own steam as there was no railway or any reliable system of public transport: Tony Kytes therefore goes to market with his wagon and horse and stops to give his sweethearts a lift along the way; Hubert, the yeoman's son, goes on errands for his father on horseback and even old Mrs Chundle thinks nothing of walking the five miles to market every fortnight!

Hardy even uses rural knowledge and imagery to show the passing of time, for example, the opening sentence of *The Thieves who Couldn't Stop Sneezing* tells us that the story took place " when oak trees now past their prime were about as large as elderly gentlemen's walking sticks". Although

we might find this timespan difficult to imagine, it would seem perfectly logical to the village folk to have it explained to them in this way.

Hardy provides us with a very clear contrast between the different social classes that existed in the nineteenth century in the way that his characters talk. Old Mrs Chundle and Tony Kytes are lower class and therefore they speak using the dialect and "local slang" of the region: "Unity"... says he, "I shall catch it mightily if she sees 'ee riding with me." (Tony Kytes) "What's the good o' my lumpering all the way to church and back again when I'm as deaf as a plock?" (Old Mrs Chundle)

The Curate, in Old Mrs Chundle, and Sir Simon, in The Thieves Who Couldn't Stop Sneezing, are representative of the more educated, upper classes and therefore speak in a much more formal way, using Standard English: "I come on a more important matter, Mrs Chundle. I am the new curate of the parish." (the curate) "Come, since it is Christmas Eve, we'll treat him well." (Sir Simon) Class differences are also shown in the descriptions of the places where the characters live.

Mrs Chundle lives in a "stone-built old cottage" and cooks over a "wood fire", whilst Sir Simon lives in a "large mansion with flanking wings, gables and towers" with "battlements and chimneys" which rise into the sky. Mrs Chundle's cottage has curtains made of "calico", an unbleached, raw cotton and her furniture consists simply of a "bureau, case-clock, settle, four-post bedstead, and a framed sampler"; Sir Simon's home, on the other hand, has walls "covered with a great deal of dark wainscoting, formed into moulded panels, carvings, closet doors, and the usual fittings of a house of that kind.

Mrs Chundle naturally shows deference towards the higher status of the curate as she shares her lunch with him but refuses to either sit with him to eat or accept any payment for the food that she provides, saying, " I don't want to eat with my betters- not I. " Even the food that is eaten shows the difference between the two ways of life: Mrs Chundle dines simply on " taters and cabbage, boiled with a scantling o' bacon," whilst Sir Simon and his guests eat a " sumptuous supper" where the wine " flowed freely".

We are also given an insight into the complete lack of any welfare system or similar support for the poor, elderly or infirm. Even though Mrs Chundle is obviously old and very much alone, she still grows- and digs up! - her own vegetables and takes responsibility for looking after herself, doing her shopping at market five miles away and keeping her cottage clean. Religion was much more important in nineteenth century England than it is today.

It was considered vitally important that everybody should go to church on Sunday, and there were no such things as registry offices so weddings and all other important ceremonies took place in church. The livelihood of the majority of the local people would depend on the success of the harvest each year and so it was only natural that they should take their faith very seriously, in order not to risk God's displeasure. Hardy shows the importance of religion by emphasising Mrs Chundle's determination to walk to her church once she is able to hear the sermon through the curate's ear-trumpet.

He also describes how, as soon as Tony Kytes has sorted out his tangled love life, " their banns were put up the very next Sunday". Making a good

marriage was vitally important for women in the nineteenth century as they had few rights of their own and would find it extremely hard to support themselves without a husband to depend on. Even though married life could be hard, shown by the fact that, during Hardy's boyhood, it was not a crime for a wife to be whipped by her husband, most women would still prefer a loveless marriage to the hardship of life on their own.

Hardy helps us to understand this in the way that, although Tony Kytes is obviously a liar and a cheat, he still has three women who are almost throwing themselves at him! Even Hannah, who in front of her father declares that she " would sooner marry no-nobody at all," secretly knows that " she would not have refused Tony if he had asked her quietly, and her father had not been there. " In conclusion, the picture that Hardy paints for us of the Wessex countryside gives us an impression of a way of life that was much slower, simpler and somehow gentler than the way we live today.

There is evidence of crime being committed, such as the waylaying of Hubert and attempt at housebreaking by the thieves in *The Thieves Who Couldn't Stop Sneezing*, but overall, Hardy's gentle humour allows us to get the impression that it was a much safer and happier way of life, where Mrs Chundle would be able to leave her door unlocked without the worry of being burgled. The obvious advance of technology is shown, for example, with the curate's purchase of the " special machinery" of the ear trumpet, but its impact is made to seem hardly noticeable as the people of Wessex go about their daily lives.