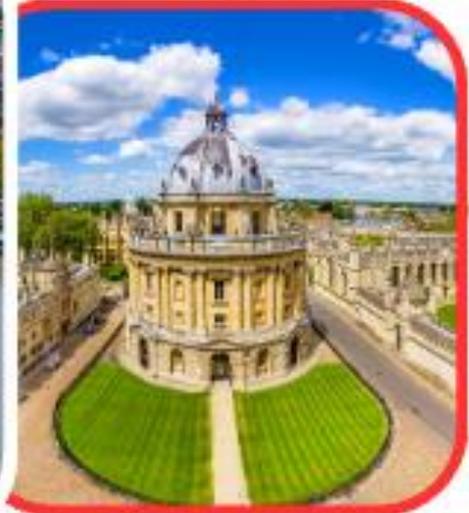




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## THE TRANSITION FROM VICTORIAN TO MODERN LITERATURE: THOMAS HARDY AND HENRY JAMES

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### ABSTRACT

This article illustrates the literary transition from the Victorian to the Modern period through the works of Thomas Hardy and Henry James, two writers whose works bridge the moral realism of the nineteenth century and the psychological experimentation of the twentieth. Both authors explored the tension between individual consciousness and the constraints of society, but in distinct ways: Hardy through tragic realism and natural determinism, and James through psychological depth and interior narrative technique. The article demonstrates how their works mark a shift from external moral order to internal consciousness a movement that laid the groundwork for literary modernism.

**Key Words:** Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Victorian Literature, Modernism, Realism, Psychological Fiction, Social Change

### INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a crucial transition in English literature. The stable moral vision of the Victorian era began to fragment under the pressures of industrialization, scientific discovery, and changing social values. Writers such as Thomas Hardy and Henry James played a central role in this transformation. Hardy, through his tragic depictions of rural life, exposed the indifference of nature and society to human suffering. James, in contrast, turned inward, exploring the complexity of consciousness and perception. Both writers bridged the gap between the social realism of the Victorian novel and the psychological and stylistic innovations of modernism, redefining the relationship between reality, morality, and art.

### LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

According to Raymond Williams in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970), Thomas Hardy represents “the last great tragic realist of the nineteenth century,” while Henry James inaugurates the modern psychological novel. Hardy’s novels such as *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) depict individuals crushed by social conventions and fate. His deterministic view of life reflects the scientific pessimism of





Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), emphasizing humanity's powerlessness against external forces. As Gittings (1978) notes, Hardy's tragic vision "is rooted in the tension between moral aspiration and social inevitability."

Henry James, on the other hand, redefined the art of fiction by shifting focus from external events to internal consciousness. In *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Ambassadors* (1903), James explores the moral and psychological complexities of perception, choice, and experience. Leon Edel (1985) argues that James's narrative technique especially his use of limited point of view and interior monologue "transformed the novel into an instrument of psychological exploration." This focus on the inner life anticipates the narrative innovations of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in the modernist period. Hardy and James, though stylistically distinct, share a critical attitude toward Victorian idealism. Both question the moral certainties of their age: Hardy through fatalism and irony, and James through moral ambiguity and self-reflective narration. As David Lodge (1992) points out, their works "mark the turning point at which fiction becomes an art of consciousness rather than conduct." This research adopts a comparative literary and historical approach, focusing on analysis of selected works Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, and James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors* — to examine themes of individual conflict, moral ambiguity, and psychological realism. The authors are studied within their social and intellectual contexts. Hardy's naturalism is examined in relation to Darwinian thought and late-Victorian moral decline, while James's artistic vision is related to emerging modernist aesthetics. The study engages with key critics including Raymond Williams, Leon Edel, and David Lodge whose research provides theoretical grounding for the transition from Victorian realism to modern psychological fiction. The methodology thus integrates textual, contextual, and theoretical dimensions to show how Hardy and James bridge two major literary epochs.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that both Thomas Hardy and Henry James represent transitional figures who redefine the boundaries of fiction. Hardy's novels reflect the disintegration of the traditional Victorian moral order. His characters often struggle against forces beyond their control social class, religion, and fate leading to tragic outcomes. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess's downfall illustrates Hardy's belief that human suffering is often a consequence of indifferent natural and social laws. Similarly, *Jude the Obscure* exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian institutions, portraying a society incapable of accommodating personal freedom and intellectual aspiration. Henry James, in contrast, internalizes these conflicts. His focus on perception and consciousness transforms narrative perspective. *The Portrait of a Lady*





centers on Isabel Archer's moral and psychological awakening, illustrating how freedom and experience are limited by one's own understanding. In *The Ambassadors*, James perfects his "center of consciousness" technique, showing that reality itself is subjective and filtered through perception.

The discussion also reveals that both writers anticipate modernism in different ways. Hardy's fatalistic realism paves the way for D. H. Lawrence's exploration of instinct and emotion, while James's psychological style influences the stream-of-consciousness techniques of Woolf and Joyce. As Lodge (1992) observes, "Hardy ends the Victorian novel; James begins the modern one." Thus, the results confirm that the transition from Victorian to modern literature was not abrupt but gradual embodied in writers like Hardy and James, who preserved the moral seriousness of their predecessors while experimenting with new forms of narrative consciousness.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Thomas Hardy and Henry James stand as pivotal figures in the transformation of English literature from the moral realism of the Victorian age to the introspective modernism of the twentieth century. Hardy's tragic naturalism exposes the limits of human freedom in an indifferent universe, while James's psychological realism opens fiction to the complexities of consciousness and perception. Together, they represent the bridge between two worlds the social determinism of the nineteenth century and the individual subjectivity of the modern era. Their works not only redefine the novel but also reflect the evolving understanding of human experience in modern culture.

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