



Characters conflict with the environment in Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native*

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Abstract: *The Return of the Native* is mainly deals with the conflict between the main characters in the novel and the environment; Egdon Heath, especially the conflict between Eustacia and the Heath. The Heath as a physical object is described as inviolate, untouchable and unalterable by man, as a symbol it is highly flexible, it becomes what the various characters want to make of it. Egdon Heath is the background of the action and often it plays more than the role of a mere observer to an active participant. Sometimes, it dominates the plot and determines the characters. In this research paper an attempt has been done to explore the characters conflict with the environment especially with the Egdon Heath in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*.

Keywords: Wessex, Egdon Heath, domesticity, anachronistic, antiquities, gratuitous.

Discussion: Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* is the most naturalistic of his works. The novel illustrates how the protagonists are somewhat fatalistically bound to the natural landscape. Because it is so determined over the lives of its inhabitants, the Egdon Heath begins to take on human characteristics. As D.H. Lawrence expressed in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, "Egdon, whose dark soil was strong and crude and organic as the body of a beast" (139). Indeed, the Heath becomes a symbol for the fickleness of nature over the human race. The story follows the evils of its protagonists, the idealistic schoolteacher Clym Yeobright and the Femme fatale Eustacia Vye, as they attempt to resist the ties that bind them to the Heath. These two thoroughly modern characters are confined by the traditional values of their rural community. Both contradict conventional societal ideals of respectability; Eustacia is an independent and sexually liberated young woman, while Clym is a progressive educational reformer. The great tension between these New World protagonists and their largely anachronistic environment illustrates a major theme present in all of Hardy's major works: the English struggle to adapt to the Modern World.

Nature is the background to almost all the novels of Thomas Hardy. In this novel *The Return of the Native*, nature receives more prominence than in any other novels of Hardy. Hardy has put so much life in Egdon that he spent less effort on the human figures, with the result that the characters in this novel are not

drawn according to the high scale of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Egdon is sentient, it feels, it speaks, it kills. Egdon presents a face upon which time makes but little impression. Egdon in this novel influences all the characters. It is not indifferent to the actions of human beings, but it plays an active role in the novel. It is ugly for Eustacia, beautiful for Clym, comforting for Thomasin and home for Venn. And it is described differently by the narrator at different times, depending on the perspective of the character being focused on. Eustacia hates the Heath and wants to escape from it, Clym wants to change it while Thomasin and Venn are faithful to it, but Mrs. Yeobright neither loves it nor hates it and she is like a denizen.

The characters in Hardy's novel can be clustered by their attitudes toward the heath. Clym, Mrs. Yeobright, Thomasin and Venn are products of Egdon and understand it: Clym is frequently shown, for instance, to have an intimate knowledge of its natural features; Thomasin, though well off after her husband dies, has no desire to leave it; Venn is shown to be so familiar with it that at night he can walk at full speed across it without losing his footing. On the other hand, both Eustacia and Wildeve look upon the heath as a place to leave with all deliberate speed, making it ironical and appropriate that both should die in a stream near Shad water Weir. Thomas Hardy's characters in *The Return of the Native* live in an environment governed by a harsh and indifferent ironic God. In this novel he attacks the grimness of the general human situation in which man is placed by the defects of natural laws. Hardy sees the reigning power of the universe as being essentially unjust and morally blind. Instead of rewarding the good and punishing the evil, throughout *The Return of the Native*, bad things happen to good people. Eustacia, the tragic heroine, is stifled by her environment in the heath and marries Clym Yeobright as an escape, despite his mother's disapproval. Her former lover, Damon Wildeve, spitefully marries Clym's cousin Thomasin in revenge for Eustacia's rejections of his charms. None of these characters is evil, but much misfortune befalls them before the book concludes. There seems to be no justice for the good or mercy for the mistaken, it is entity presides over a universe in which suffering abounds in the form of a perverse irony. In *The Return of the Native* the landscape is encapsulated in the descriptions of Egdon Heath and this sense of place is as ever central in a work by Hardy. Here, the heath symbolizes the rural past before human intervention and also adds to the sense of isolation suffered by those already isolated in human relationships, such as Eustacia and Wildieve. This thematic concern of rural life is also referred to as a fading past when Venn's occupation as a reddleman is described as being all but redundant with the later advent of the railway. The heath, though, is seen to be absolute and resistant to change and for some it may be regarded as an optimistic feature as it demonstrates the power of nature of humanity. The vastness of the heath also allows one to see that men and women are, by comparison, just absurdist insignificants.

Thomas Hardy's status as a distinctly regional writer is probably the most apparent in *The Return of the Native*. Egdon Heath is based on Black Heath, which bordered Hardy's childhood home in Higher Back Hampton, Dorset. Egdon Heath is truly a microcosm for a Pre-Industrial England; its inhabitants are socially conservative labourers who are attached to the natural landscape in an almost mystical fashion. The community's livelihood is completely dependent on the landscape itself; they are bound to the capricious

Egdon Heath in an eternal struggle for survival. In many respect, Hardy's work can be read as an anthropological treatise on the dying practices of English rural culture. A major figure in the novel is Diggory Venn, a travelling reedleman. Venn's nomadic lifestyle demonstrates a quiet defiance of the modern social custom of pastoral enclosure and domesticity. Diggory Venn represents the Old World concept of the rugged individual on the margins of society that lives off the land alone. Hardy further preserves this obsolete rural world through a nearly exhaustive exploration of rural trades. In a chapter entitled "The Custom of the Country," the author describes the rural practice of furze cutting. Through the illustration of these rural practices, Hardy acts as a sort of amateur anthropologist, depicting his dying Wessex culture at all costs.

The novelist demonstrates more regional mythology in *The Return of the Native* through an exploration of local superstitions. The novel opens and closes on Guy Gawkes Day, a holiday notorious for the collapse of social order and its nearly pagan obsession with fire. One of the most haunting parts of the novel is when Susan Nonesuch, an embittered neighbour, makes a wax fetish doll of Eustacia Vye and burns it in hopes of causing her death. This instance of "voodoo" violence illuminates what Hardy saw as an inherently superstitious and paganistic aspect of rural culture. Through the exploration of these pagan rituals the author illustrates how the Wessex people's profound connection with the natural landscape can potentially encourage them to forsake polite society and Christian values and pursue the dark arts. Indeed, there is an inherent danger in losing oneself completely to the landscape itself. D. H. Lawrence referred to the Heath in *The Return of the Native* as having the "body of a beast", he articulates just how vital a role the natural landscape has in Hardy's beloved novel. Indeed, the inhabitants of Egdon Heath are bound to its caprice; their Old World values and practices illustrate a nearly pagan reverence for nature.

Heath customs in this novel presents the local colour as the heath-folk gather furze and make them into bonfires. All across the heath, bonfires can be seen, the light from the fire shining brightly against the night sky. Once the heath-folk light the first bonfire on Rain barrow, the other heath inhabitants light their own fires. The villagers gather around the bonfires, sing and dance wildly. The tradition of lighting bonfires on November 5th is a holiday for the heath-folk. This holiday tradition is a celebrated custom of Egdon Heath, a custom which Eustacia Vye detests. Some children of the heath believe that reedleman have connections to the devil. Johnny Nunsuch is no exception; he is scared of Diggory Venn and gives as much information as he can about Eustacia Vye before he can finally leave and feel safely out of the reedleman's reach. Another heath custom is the 'Christmas mummers' play performed every year. Eustacia usually despises the Christmas mumming, as she does with every heath custom, but this year she is interested in it, once she hears that the first Christmas performance is at the Yeobrights'. That the mummers are masked completely means that Eustacia can scheme to find a way to perform as a mummer and spy on Clym. The bucket-fetching process is yet another important heath custom. When Captain Vye's bucket has fallen into the well, the heath-men gather rope from their homes and lower the men into the well with the rope tied around them. The raffle at the Quiet Woman Inn is a heath tradition the men participate in. They each put a shilling in the raffle and one man wins the money for his sweetheart.

Furze-cutting is an important tradition to the heath-folk. Many men cut and gather furze for bonfires, but Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright are horrified and ashamed that Clym becomes a cutter. The gipsying is a custom the villagers enjoy heartily. The heath-folk very much enjoy singing, dancing and socializing; this gipsying, which is a picnic and dance, allows them the chance to take advantage of the heath landscape. The villagers make a remedy for Mrs. Yeobright's adder wound. The remedy consists of boiling the oil of a freshly-killed adder and applying it to the wound. Clym is doubtful that the remedy will work, but applies it because he trusts the villagers. Susan Nunsuch makes a voodoo effigy of Eustacia and inflicts pain on the effigy by sticking needles in it and then melting it with satisfaction. Susan wants to counteract the evil curse she believes Eustacia set on her ailing son. The May-pole revel is a favourite tradition of the heath-folk. Thomasin especially takes delight in the beautiful flowers and the sight of the May-pole. Thomasin's delight and happiness at the May-pole revel coincides with her uplifted and cheerful spirits.

Eustacia hates everything connected to Egdon Heath, especially the turf and furze-gatherers and cutters. She feels that any job or object connected to the heath is degrading and miserable. Eustacia's rejection of the heath shows her rebellion against nature. Eustacia and Wildieve both share a deep disgust for the heath. They both yearn for exciting, cosmopolitan cities where excitement and mystery attract them, rather than the isolated, barren landscape of the heath. Eustacia's vision of the heath as repulsive and isolated now broadens to the whole world; she feels that the world, not just the heath, is against her. Eustacia feels that she never can belong to anyone or anything. She feels defeated and resigned to her fate; she knows she can never win as long as the heath rejects her. Eustacia feels that fate has been unjust. She asks the heavens what she has done to deserve such a terrible fate, to be bound to the heath forever without any chance of escape, in desperation and bitterness. The heavens and the heath are indifferent to Eustacia's tragic life. The heath is comfortable for those who live there. The inhabitants of the heath are accustomed to its forbidding, wild landscape.

Thomas Hardy's novels of character and environment convey a strong sense of fatalism, a view that in life human actions have been predetermined, either by the very nature of things or by God or by Fate. Like Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy attempted in his fiction to comment on the macrocosm of the human race through an intense study of a microcosm well known to him, the rural society of nineteenth-century Wessex. In his fiction, not only natural forces (such as the adverse weather that assists in ruining Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) but also human society seems bent on crushing the sensitive and imaginative individual. Society inflicts its gratuitous suffering through exercising outworn conventions and superficial values, as well as through the new age's emphasis on efficiency. The 'passionless permanence' of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* and the Roman antiquities of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* contrast with futile and pitifully brief human existence. In the novels of Thomas Hardy, time moves rhythmically, in seasons and ages, rather than mechanically. As a realist, Hardy felt that art should describe and comment upon actual situations, such as the heavy lot of the rural labourers and the bleak lives of oppressed women.

Thomas Hardy's philosophy of life is gloomy. This universe is to him an impersonal mechanism, directed by some automatic principle of life, pursuing its mysterious end. His conception of life was essentially tragic. He was one of those who takes life as a boon. The theme of all his novels is mankind's predicament in the universe. Hardy's vision is dark; life to him is a lost, inglorious battle. His characters struggle in vain against overwhelming odds. He bears a grudge against the universe which he could not throw off; he has a feeling of resentment at injustice and wanton cruelty heaped on human beings. Gloucester in *King Lear* says:

*As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods
They kill us for their sport* (Act IV, scene I).

These lines are quite true to Hardy's view of an indifferent and even cruel fate. He could not, therefore justify the ways of God to men. This gloomy view is expressed in his novels. Hardy speaks of 'the ingenuous machinery contrived by the gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum'. He writes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* that happiness is "an occasional episode in the general drama of pain" (243). He states about Tess "Justice was done and the President of Immortals..... had ended his sport with Tess" (213). Even a novel ends happily as in *Far From the Madding Crowd* the hero and the heroine pass through an ordeal of agony. A love scene in *Under the Greenwood Tree* is disturbed by the pitiful scream of a bird caught by an owl. Nature is cruel in Hardy's novel. Egdon Heath and Woods of Hintock provide the gloomy background to his works. Thus Hardy seems to be a pessimist. He had a tender heart responsive to the spectacle of suffering. As he had seen the grim cruelty of the law of the survival of the fittest, he rejected orthodox religious consolation. He found life offering only to deny. He believes that the Immanent Will weaves the fate of mankind with an absent mind.

Chance plays a large part in the novels of Hardy. He creates coincidences to snatch up the cup of happiness from the mouth of his characters. He overemphasizes the part played by chance. In *The Return of Native* Diggory Venn comes to propose to Thomasin a few minutes after Wildie has consented to marry and another character, Clym fails to wake up when his mother knocks at the door for reconciliation, his mother returns and bitten by an adder on the way home. The double calamity serves Hardy's purpose by giving the effect of a hostile fate, driving the characters to destruction. The characters seem puppet all right, not in the hands of fate, but in the hands of Thomas Hardy. There is a feeling that the enemy of Hardy's characters is not fate or chance but Hardy himself. Like a charitable institution appealing for funds, Hardy deliberately tortures his characters to win pity for them. He is responsible for their misery and suffering.

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