



## **Nature as a Character in Thomas Hardy's "Return of The Native"**

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### **Abstract**

Thomas Hardy is one of the best novelists of Victorian era. His novels are as popular today as they were in that time. He has written many novels but I would discuss here is *Return of the Native*.

Hardy is very much interested in the relationship of women to nature in particular way. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, women are more in touch with the earth than men are, and are able to melt into the landscape and become one with the kind in a way that men cannot. Being able to stay in touch with the natural rhythms of the earth is obviously something that Hardy values in this novel.





In the whole range of English fiction Hardy is unique for the sensitiveness with which he has treated nature in the novel. Throughout the Wessex novels the sights and sounds and smells, the birds and the beasts, the trees and flowers, are recorded with a light, deft touch, neither over scientific and technical, nor inaccurate and vague.

**Key Words:** Nature, Wessex, Landscape, Environment Man and Natural World etc.

Hardy's picture of Wessex is the most elaborate study of landscape in English Literature. No other novelist can render the sights and smells of the countryside with such evocative sensuousness. No one before Hardy has made the landscape part of the story. The landscape is always there in his novels, now grimly smiling, now frankly menacing.

Nature is an important element in Hardy's vision of life. Nature is to him a symbol of those impersonal forces of Fate with whom he shows mankind as being in conflict. In novels like *Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native* Nature is not just a background but almost a character in the story. Nature seems to Hardy to be the incarnation of a living force with a will and purpose of its own, now and again taking an actual hand in the story. Always we are aware of Nature moving on its appointed course-warming to spring, yellowing to autumn, with recurrent punctuality, careless whether Tess dies or finds her true love. When Tess is seduced by Alec in the midst of natural surroundings, Nature looks on indifferently. At this point Hardy writes, "Darkness and silence ruled everywhere. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares."(1) Hardy is a man whose strength lies in the understanding and portrayal of humanity, can almost match him with his skill in the painting of nature. 'If





Wordsworth's picture can be hung on walls, a great gallery could be filled with Hardy's nature-pieces, large deliberate oil painting, delicate water colours and etchings, whole portfolios of sketches and studies'. Nature is to Hardy far from being all beauty and goodness. It has its beautiful aspects, and no one appreciates too-cruelty, indifference, and caprice. Indeed, in Nature he sees a repetition of the same blind and selfish struggle which he finds in the life of man.

One of the most popular of Thomas Hardy's novels *The Return of the Native*, published in 1878. The story of *The Return of the Native* shows man as the helpless plaything of invisible powers, ruthless and indifferent. There is no such thing as free will. Those who are too passive to struggle against the invisible powers are less unhappy than those who assert themselves on their wills. The novel tells the history of two or three people who are conscious of the dilemma in which nature has placed them and who try new and again to play their own parts in the life to which they have been condemned; and a sorry drama it is. Every assertion of individual will ends in futility.

The nature serves as a background in the novels of Hardy but he does not depict all types of natural scenes. He confines himself to the somber aspect of nature. He gives the picture of a gloomy winter day, the God 'curstsum' and a pond edged with greyest leaves. Not only had this he found nature red in 'tooth and claw'. There is a perpetual struggle for existence going on her in. 'The ivy is eager to strangle the elm, the haw them to choke the hollies, the serpent hisses near the singing birds'. Nature has no "Holly plan" according to him. Nature is not kind or benevolent but indifferent to human lot. Nature's indifference to man's suffering is





emphasized again and again for example Nature remained indifferent to the violation of Tess' chastity. Everything went on as usual in nature in spite of that heinous crime.

Hardy's vision of Nature dominates his scene. Nature was to him a symbol of those impersonal forces of Fate with whom he shows mankind as being in conflict. *The Return of the Native*, the setting is made to stand for the universe; and in all his successful works it has a symbolic value. Not a background, but an actor in the play, Nature is always present, the incarnation of a living force with a will and a purpose of its own, now and again taking an actual hand in the story, but more often standing aloof, the silent and ironic spectator of the human creatures who struggle on its surface. Always we are aware of nature moving on its appointed course-warming to spring, yellowing to autumn, with recurrent punctuality, careless whether Tess dies or Anne finds her true love. Now and again the personality of Nature seems to step forward and with one tremendous gesture reduce the human beings in the story to insignificance.

“With these words Yeobright went forth from the little dwelling. The pupils of his eyes, fixed steadfastly on blankness, were vaguely lit with an icy shine; his mouth had passed into the phase more or less imaginatively rendered in studies of Oedipus. The strangest deeds were possible to his mood. But they were not possible to his situation. Instead of there being before him the pale face of Eustacia, and a masculine shape unknown, there was only the imperturbable





countenance of the heath, which, having defied the cataclysmic onsets of countries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the widest turmoil of a single man.”(2)

Such a passage as this illustrates how Hardy’s sense of a fundamental discord between man and his environment enrich his work with a special aesthetic effect. We witness, as it were, two movements: the movement of man’s life and the movement of the life of Nature counterpointed one against the other to produce a complex beauty.

Eternal aspect is established in the opening chapter of the novel. Its form is called Titanic, awaiting something for centuries and that it would end with the world. Egdon Heath is itself a character. The Egdon Heath is more than just a dramatic backdrop to the action; it is an integral part of the plot and character development, and a constant thematic symbol. Hardy devotes the novel's entire first chapter to describing the timeless landscape of Egdon Heath. What defines it most of all is its timelessness - it is much bigger than any human drama, and hence might its natural forces swallow those humans.

The Heath can also be viewed as an antagonist in the story, working against the key characters to bring about their tragic fates. Mrs. Yeobright, exhausted by her long toil to Clym’s house, collapses in the darkness on her return, and is bitten by a snake. Wildeve and Eustacia both drown as they plan to flee the heath forever. Clym becomes a preacher, extolling the virtues of a world beyond the heath. Only Thomasin and Diggory, who are truly at ease with their surroundings, endure. The heath is a place for lasting sentiment, not fiery passion or





intellectual ideals. Those who are able to tune to its rhythms and pace remain. Those who feel they can live beyond its power are destroyed by it. Eustacia views it as an explicit antagonist - "Tis my cross, my shame and will be my death" - and yet falls in attempting to defeat it" (3). Most of all, the heath is an expression of Hardy's tragic sense, which suggests that time and the world have little use for the squabbles of humans and will thereby negate their efforts time and again.

Egdon Heath is not affected even by the beauty of the moonlight:

"The moon had now waxed bright and silvery, but the swarthy heath was proof against such illumination, and there was to be observed the striking scene of a dark rayless tract of country under an atmosphere charged from its zenith to its extremities with whitest light. To an eye above them their two faces would have appeared amid the expanse like two pearls on a table of ebony." (4)

Moonlight serves as a romantic symbolic setting for Eustacia in regard to Clym.

"There was a slight hoar-frost that night, and the moon, though not more than half full, threw a spirited and enticing brightness upon the fantastic figure to the mumming band whose plumes





and ribbons rustled in their walk like autumnal leaves”(5).

In the contrast of Egdon Heath the human figure is insignificant and Hardy compares it with a moth, just a parasitic insect. It is indicated in the following lines:

“He appeared as a mere parasite of the heath, fretting its surface  
in his daily labour as a moth frets a garment, entirely engrossed  
with its products, having no knowledge of anything in the world  
but fern, furze, heath, lichens, and moss.”(6)

Hardy’s interpretation of nature gives us the clue to his outlook on men and women. To understand the self-sacrificing love of Marty South, we must realize the spell of the brooding woods, the magic of the quiet, enduring trees, whose life she knew so well. To understand the attraction of the reddleman, with his vagrant aloofness, we must first be made to feel the fascination of Egdon Heath in all its moods. Everywhere the life of the earth and of its inhabitants is subtly and inseparably interwoven. Winterborne’s work sums up and explains the man; yet there are subtleties in tree-planting that Marty South’s feminine nature seizes upon more readily. A mere sketch of dialogue while the two are at work reveals their natures and show how bound up it all is with the larger love of the earth.

Nature occupies a very special place in some of Hardy’s novels. It is not only a background to his novels but it is a living presence. It becomes a character as much as any human being. It determines the action of the novel and influences the lives of characters. The





*Return of the Native* is the story of Egdon Heath. It determines the characters and dominates the plot. Clym who was seen life in Paris loves Egdon Heath and wants to stay on. Thomasin loves her nature place. Eustacia hates Egdon Heath and wants to leave it and so suffers much. According to Duffin, "*The Return of the Native* is the book of Egdon Heath, without Egdon it would not hold together. With most of the other novels the scene could be transposed to some other part of Wessex without vitally affecting the story, this story could not run its course anywhere other than amid the solitudes at Egdon." (7)

Hardy describes the various aspects of nature in his works. He notes the changes that the weather and the seasons bring about in the life of nature. He can beautifully describe the various moods of nature. Nature is not only an element but work as a character like chance and fate in his novels. The setting and execution of Hardy's novels are based on nature. Sometimes nature is responsible for problems in the characters. Hardy uses a true picture of nature in all his novels.

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