

## Anti-Modernism through Symbolism in *The Return of the Native*

By

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### Abstract

*Thomas Hardy has shown his style in The Return of the Native distinctively in a way that most researchers have emphasized this work as Hardy's most instinctive mode as a figurative not analytic writer since his most habitual method as a writer is symbolism, not argument. Though Hardy is considered a modernist poet and writer related to his style, technique, kind of narration, and literary approach, he seems to be subtly anti-modernist in his sixth novel The Return of the Native due to his alignment with his characters that resemble symbolically anti-modernist point of view. Hardy's bias against modernism is obvious through his consciousness of the shortcomings of modernism which is described by his statement "the ache of modernism".*

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, Modernism

### 1. Introduction

Living in the critical events of two centuries Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and passed away in 1928. Modernism in this period has been begun, developed and led to its climax. Though Hardy is considered a modernist poet and writer based his style, technique and literary approach, he seems to be subtly anti-modernist in his sixth novel *The Return of the Native* due to his alignment with his characters that resemble symbolically anti-modernist point of view. "Hardy is primarily an artist and only incidentally a philosopher, so it is natural that he would present his philosophy artistically. He uses various artistic techniques to make his philosophy enriched" (Abdur 187). This novel is leaving a wide room for symbolic interpretation according to the writer's metaphorical language and his great intellectual background. His narration is pervaded with symbols derived from the historical, mythological, and religious allusions. The most important symbols include Egdon Heath, rainbarrow, bonfire, wind and storm, the moon, eye sight, gambling, and Paris. Hardy's characters tend to be symbolic rather than realistic especially for Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye, and Diggory Venn. The poetic language of Hardy enhances this symbolism in this novel by which the critics can derive much thoughts and attitudes related to the writer though the ambiguity of them results in a problematic issue.

#### The Heath

The setting of this novel plays a great role in the characterization of the figures. The place is the heath which was very close to the writer's birthplace in Dorset. The time is the second half of the nineteenth century during which the precursors of modernism have to be initiated. The first chapter of the novel describes this heath in a way which transforms it to a principal character and so identified as man-like figure. The heath symbolically might be referred to the main character of this novel.

The characters of the novel can be divided according to their love or hatred at the heath and their destinies are to be defined according to this relationship. Diggory Venn, Thomasin Yeobright, and Clement (Clym) Yeobright are deeply rooted in the heath, so that they are contented with their life in this place. The latter's return from the city of modernism to live in his native place bears the symbolic meaning of the title of the novel. Eustacia Vye, Damon Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright are, on the contrary, characterized by their hatred at the heath. The latter's disapproval of her son's decision to stay as well as her feeling of supremacy towards the locals reflects her hostility to the heath.

The description of the heath proves physically and psychologically to be important throughout the novel. The frightful appearance of the heath enhances those characters' point of view. The primitive nature of the heath seems to be at severe enmity to civilization and modernism. Moreover, the unchangeable features of the heath reinforce its ability to resist any attempt to change its nature. "The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained" (Hardy 33).

The heath may be considered as a symbol of fate, in a sense it controls the destinies of its inhabitants. The symbolic end of the first chapter refers to the beam of hope which may emerge from the gloomy nature of the heath by the reference to the white color of the road. "On the evening under consideration it would have been noticed that, though the gloom had increased sufficiently to confuse the minor features of the heath, the white surface of the road remained almost as clear as ever" (Hardy 34).

### **Bonfire and Rainbarrow**

Traditionally, bonfire is used for commemorations both religious and pagan. The word "bonfire" seems to mean the beautiful or nice fire assuming the first stem of the word related to French. It suggests that the evil side of the function of fire is eliminated. The writer puts the bonfire-makers in a high radiant position in contrast with the darkness of the heath.

The imagery of light and darkness serves symbolically the theme of knowledge and ignorance throughout the novel especially in the first eight chapters. Fire serves to yield light and warmth to the ignorant natives who are surrounding the bonfire with cheerful dancing. Eustacia and Wildeve are meeting by the bonfire as a contradictory image to the locals' meeting by the fire too, suggesting the knowledge-ignorance equation. Rainbarrow is the highest place in the heath, the centre of the locals' festivities, and the place of the lovers' meetings. Eustacia is the first person who emerges at its top when the novel starts. It reflects her consciousness of superiority over the heath and other characters.

By his poetic language, the writer depicts fire as the instinctive and resistant act of man with an allusion to the legend of (Prometheus) to denote the rebelliousness of some of his characters against nature embodied by the heath. The rebellious characters are Eustacia, Wildeve, and Clym though they are different in their directions. For Eustacia, the writer alludes to her rebelliousness in the chapter "Queen of Night" and describes it as "smouldering" to show her silent or suppressed rebelliousness.

The allusion to Tartarus here is to envisage Eustacia as an inhabitant of Tartarus (Wood 370). The recurrent allusions to Tartarus, where the Titans were cast, identify the heath with hell at least for Eustacia as the opinion of F.B. Pinion who states that "The fires, for example, that light up the heath are emblematic of the Promethean rebelliousness of Eustacia against her fate; for her, Egdon Heath is Hades" (Pinion 32). The writer uses "the decaying embers" standing for the decaying emotion between Eustacia and Wildeve which is in need to be stirred up. Eustacia blew up the red coal when she was waiting for Wildeve. This movement symbolizes that Eustacia intends to enhance her emotion towards Wildeve. She is used to call him by bonfires as a sign of her blazing emotions. On the other side, the writer uses the same symbol (embers) directly to indicate that "The revived embers of an old passion glowed clearly in Wildeve now" (Hardy 80). The writer maneuvers by these symbols (embers and fire) to keep pace with the fluctuated emotions between Eustacia and Wildeve.

On the fifth of November, all the bonfires are slowly extinguished except that of Eustacia's home because its vegetation is different from the heath's. It means that the nature of this family is incompatible with the nature of the heath and its inhabitants. Also, it indicates that the disturbing emotions of Eustacia are still burning. The writer describes her soul to be "flame-like" to refer to her romantic nature and anxious character. Her flame-like soul leads her to rebelliousness in a strange direction against all the traditional thoughts, that she prefers war men to the wise, to take the side of the Philistines not that of the Jews, and to admire Pilate the tyrant who handed Jesus over to the Jews to be crucified according to Christianity.

Moreover, symbolically the real Promethean figure is Clym who returns from the city of modernism to his native place with his project of knowledge as if he has stolen the fire of knowledge from the goddess of knowledge, Paris to give it to the inhabitants of the heath, even though he has been punished by his tragic destiny. Unlike his ambitions and knowledge, he is not a successful character in the heath as the death is waiting for him there as the end of his fate.

### **Clym's Semi-Blindness**

In general, it refers to the intellectual blindness, but as related to the theme of modernism it may be interpreted in three ways. Firstly, the writer is with modernism if this blindness is interpreted as Clym returns from the city of modernism "Paris" to the heath as a symbol of ignorance. Pinion interpreted Clym's partial blindness according to his "premature idealism which convinces him that he can bring light to a people still walking in darkness" (Pinion 34). Secondly, the writer is against modernism if this blindness is interpreted as intellectual blindness. The characters are depicted in moulds which are suitable to the writer's predetermined attitude. It can be concluded that "any character who comes from the "civilization" of cities or who longs for it proves to be someone of little worth - think of Eustacia and Wildeve" (Wood 11). Clym here couldn't understand other characters and reality, and this misunderstanding is proceeding to comprise other characters as well.

Hardy's philosophy of life is embodied in his character Clym who dislikes city life and describes it as "effeminate":

He conceives his great characters from the same height; in the case of Clym by making him a representative of what he considered modern man – and the man of future – in his most qualities; in the case of Eustacia by richly romantic view of her (Allen 248).

The criterion of modernity is different for Hardy. He considers Clym, who returns from Paris to the heath and rejects city values as a modern man, on the contrary of the case of Eustacia who hates the heath and longs for living in Paris, and considers her "not his modern woman. Clym's career as a furze-cutter, which is greatly attached to the land of the heath, and generally considered as uncivilized job especially for Eustacia, does not deter Hardy for his judgment. Pinion relates Clym's abandonment of his career as a diamond merchant to biographical reasons. He states that "Clym's sacrifice of a city career, and his mother's disappointment, owed something, no doubt, to Hardy's abandonment of architecture" (Pinion 31).

The symbolic meaning of Clym's career as a diamond merchant is traditionally related to the use of diamond for ornamental aims. It suggests the life of "going with appearances" that Clym disgusts. The comparison between the suggested and practiced careers of Clym as teacher, diamond merchant, and furze-cutter leads to conclude their symbolic meaning related to theme of modernism. Diamond trade is considered as a false demonstration of modernism; furze-cutting is deeply rooted to nature and the original or primitive world; education according to the real and genuine trend of modernism is the futuristic hope. Clym is seeking for a sort of knowledge which "brings wisdom rather than affluence" (Allen 249).

Finally, the third interpretation may be concluded as the reconciliation between the two previous contradicting points of view. It means that the writer is with certain kinds of knowledge that save the human being and he is against other kinds of knowledge which may destroy the human being and lead him to his tragic destiny.

### **Death**

The death of Eustacia and Wildeve can be considered a symbole which means that the heath hates these two characters and it kills everyone who resembles an enemy. Death by drowning is an imaginatively

appropriate end for Wildeve and Eustacia. It also suggests the hostile nature of the heath which revenges itself for the hatred shown it by these two. It seems that the characters cannot escape Egdon: you either come to terms with it or it destroys you (Wood 23).

Eustacia is so obsessed by the passage of time, she burrows her grandfather's telescope and her grandmother's hour-glass – the latter because of a peculiar pleasure she derived from watching a material representation of time's gradual glide away (Hardy, 86). She uses modern instruments within an ignorant background. The hour-glass is to show the significance of time for Eustacia who tends to live in a modern city but not for the heath folk or other characters for whom time is frozen or regardless except Wildeve. She directs the telescope to him in a sign which suggests their mutual perspective and destiny.

Many allusions in the novel which identify Eustacia with goddess, queen, and witch are mostly symbolic for her character. The chapter of "Queen of Night" is pregnant of these allusions chiefly directed to the idea of fate foreshadowing Eustacia's tragic end. The reference to the emblems of the three fates –the distaff, the spindle, and the shears– indicates the influence of women on the fate of men. "Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while, she had handled the distaff, the spindle, and the shears at her own free will, few in the world would have noticed the change of government" (Hardy 81).

Also, the allusions to Sphinx, Heloise, and Cleopatra reflect the controlling power of fate against the will of the suggested characters of these allusions. The conflict between will and fate is the pivotal problem for Eustacia. The major difference between Eustacia and Thomasin is shown in the text:

To have lost the godlike conceit that we may do what we will, and not to have acquired a homely zest for doing what we can, shows a grandeur of temper which cannot be objected to in the abstract, for it denotes a mind that, though disappointed, forswears compromise. (Hardy 85-86)

Eustacia with her deep arrogance wants to do what she wants, in contrast with Thomasin who wants to do what she can. Eustacia's tragedy emerges from the truth that she is not convinced by her lot as her partner in tragedy is Wildeve. Walter Allen goes so far when he accuses Hardy that "He has aligned himself with the nature of things against his characters, that he is manipulating fate against them". (Allen 251)

The symbolic meaning of their death is the death of their direction or attitude. Their attitude is against the writer's idea of anti-modernism; the real false appearances of modernism which are embodied by the behaviors and ambitions of Eustacia and Wildeve. Eustacia prophesized the death of Wildeve like the Witch of Endor who called up the figure of the dead Samuel to prophesy the death of the king Saul:

I merely lit that fire because I was dull, and thought I would get a little excitement by calling you up and triumphing over you as the Witch of Endor called up Samuel. I determined you should come; and you have come! I have shown my power. (Hardy 80)

It is not a kind of coincidence that Venn saves the life of Clym but not the lives of Eustacia and Wildeve. Venn is much associated to Clym according to his attitude of life. Venn, Thomasin, and Clym are still living in accordance with the heath life, in contrast with Eustacia, Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright who are not in reconciliation with the heath life, so they are facing their tragic death. By her part, Mrs. Yeobright contributes to the hatred of the heath, but her hatred is not announced publicly as for Eustacia and Wildeve. She endures life on the heath but she refuses this endurance to be suffered by her son. She dreams that Clym returns to the city of light, Paris. The heath symbolized by the adder takes revenge and kills her. Mrs. Yeobright resembles one of those who tend for modernism and the heath resembles ignorance in this point of view, so that the struggle between them ends with the victory of the heath.

## **Moon**

"No moon, no man" is a superstitious that the heath folk believe. It symbolizes the relationship between the moon and man's birth to define his personality. The perfect man might be born when the moon was full. Christian Cantle, the inept and the first gambler in the gambling scene, who proves unfortunately winner at first, was born at moonless night. The last state of Clym as an "itinerant preacher" suggests the similarity between Christian and Clym related to their state of mind. The scene of the eclipsed moon, in which Eustacia agrees to marry Clym, symbolizing the disapproval of fortune to this marriage. The failure of this marriage at last proves that this conclusion is correct for the differences of their characters. The writer's hints to Eustacia as a tragic heroine are related to the moon: "Eustacia once more lifted her deep stormy eyes to the moonlight, and, sighing that tragic sigh of hers which was so much like a shudder, entered the shadow of the roof" (Hardy 148).

The eclipsed moon may be interpreted that Eustacia "confides to her lover the deep (and perceptive) fear that their love will not last" (Salami, 422). She is always afraid of the "unknown":

No. Only I dread to think of anything beyond the present. What is, we know. We are together now, and it is unknown how long we shall be so; the unknown always fills my mind with terrible possibilities, even when I may reasonably expect it to be cheerful (Hardy 193)

She expects a better job for Clym when she interprets the shining of the eclipsed moon on his face as if it were cut out in gold: "...Clym, the eclipsed moonlight shines upon your face with a strange foreign colour, and shows its shape as if it were cut out in gold. That means that you should be doing better things than this" (Hardy 193).

At the night of the elopement, the absence of the moon is a sign for the occurrence of the catastrophe: "The moon and stars were closed up by cloud and rain to the degree of extinction" (Hardy 320). The writer uses the metaphor of the eclipsed moon to denote her tragic death; the eclipse of moon means the eclipse of Eustacia herself. "They stood silently looking upon Eustacia, who, as she lay there still in death, eclipsed all her living phases" (Hardy 339). The rise of the moon at the very end of the novel denotes the celebration of the regained love between Thomasin and Diggory Venn: "O no; it is not necessary, Mrs. Wildeve, thank you. The moon will rise in a few minutes (Hardy 349).

## **Wind, Storm, and Rain**

In the first chapter of the novel, the writer describes Egdon Heath's relationship with the wind and storm. "Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend" (Hardy 32).

At the end of the novel, the heath uses his lover "the storm" and his friend "the wind" appropriately to strike his enemies, Eustacia and Wildeve. Its beat is done with the aid of the whirlpool in which the two tragic heroes are drowned. The devilish tinge of the wind is portrayed clearly in the dancing scene of the locals around the bonfire. "The chief noises were women's shrill cries, men's laughter, Susan's stays and patters, Olly Dowden's "heu-heu-heu!" and the strumming of the wind upon the furze-bushes, which formed a kind of tune to the demoniac measure they trod" (Hardy 52).

When Christian heard of Clym's coming home at Christmas, he told Mrs. Yeobright "Mind you don't get lost. Egdon Heth is a bad place to get lost in, and the winds do huffle queerer tonight than ever I heard 'em afore. Them that know Egdon best have been pixy-led here at times" (Hardy, 54). The queer wind is accompanied by the fairy mood haunted the heath. Clym's coming is the cause of the death of Eustacia and his mother due to Clym's interpretation that "She is the second woman I have killed this year. I was a great cause of my mother's death, and I am the chief cause of hers" (Hardy 340).

Whenever Eustacia is proceeding towards Rainbarrow, the wind is blowing in severe gusts. Pinion thinks that "even more artistic is the acoustic introduction to Eustacia, as her lengthened sighing merges with the

sounds of the wind in the heath" (Pinion 33). As the writer himself said "The wind, indeed, seemed made for the scene, as the scene seemed made for the hour. Part of its tone was quite special; what was heard there could be heard nowhere else (Hardy 71). The wind expresses Eustacia's emotional disturbances and her internal conflicts. When she was waiting for Wildeve at Rainbarrow:

Her back was towards the wind, which blew from the northwest; but whether she had avoided that aspect because of the chilly gusts which played about her exceptional position, or because her interest lay in the southeast, did not at first appear (Hardy 70).

The role of the weather in the novel is directed in such a way that it and "the heath's seasonal changes accord with mood and situation in passages of poetic overtones, from the large scale to the small, from the most vividly colourful to the funereal" (Hardy 33). The parallelism between the setting and the inner feelings of the characters is designed in great harmony particularly for Eustacia that "Such harmony of the outer scene with the thought and feelings of the beholder are paralleled in 'the chaos of the world without' and the chaos of Eustacia's mind when she stood for the last time on Rainbarrow" (Hardy 33).

The last tragic scene at the end of the novel is the most powerful one in which this harmony is performed. When Eustacia is still thinking of her elopement with Wildeve though it is to be acted during midnight. "The scene without grew darker; mud-coloured clouds bellied downwards from the sky like vast hammocks slung across it, and with the increase of night a stormy wind arose; but as yet there was no rain" (Hardy 317).

The storm is at its beginning which reflects the beginning of the action because Eustacia's mind tends to the side of elopement. But the rain is still holding because Eustacia is still holding in the house. When her grandfather finds out that she has left and there is no response for his question, the wind is digging at the corners of the house and the rain is initiated with few drops. "But no response was made to this statement save an imaginary one from the wind, which seemed to gnaw at the corners of the house, and the stroke of a few drops of rain upon the window" (Hardy 319). The struggle is now started as soon as Eustacia leaves the door of the house and there is no chance for retreating:

When she got into the outer air she found that it had begun to rain, and as she stood pausing at the door it increased, threatening to come on heavily. But having committed herself to this line of action there was no retreating for bad weather. Even the receipt of Clym's letter would not have stopped her now. The gloom of the night was funereal; all nature seemed clothed in crape. The spiky points of the fir trees behind the house rose into the sky like the turrets and pinnacles of an abbey. Nothing below the horizon was visible save a light which was still burning in the cottage of Susan Nunsuch. (Hardy 320)

The cruel elements of nature are gathering to form the funereal scene; the rain was threatening to come on heavily; the gloom of the night was funereal; all nature seemed clothed in crape; even the light was still burning. The weather is rebellious against Eustacia as if it disagrees for her decision; meanwhile, she is rebellious against her lot of life:

How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me!... I do not deserve my lot!" she cried in a frenzy of bitter revolt. "O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O, how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all!" (Hardy 321)

On the other side, the wind is doing the same action at the corners of Clym's house symbolizing the evil will to undermine the bases of their mutual house. "To Clym's regret it began to rain and blow hard as the evening advanced. The wind rasped and scraped at the corners of the house, and filliped the eavesdroppings like peas against the panes" (Hardy 324). Also, the rain starts gradually to drop till it is falling heavily to awaken Clym and alarm him that the disaster is coming:

His sleep, however, was not very sound, by reason of the expectancy he had given way to, and he was easily awakened by a knocking which began at the door about an hour after. Clym arose and looked out of the window. Rain was still falling heavily, the whole expanse of heath before him emitting a subdued hiss under the downpour. It was too dark to see anything at all. (Hardy 324-325)

Darkness here is related to Clym's weak eyesight, as well as, the reference that is no hope or solution for the problem. Implicitly, the writer identifies the heath with monster and the drops of the rain with scorpions:

Yet in spite of all this Thomasin was not sorry that she had started. To her there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever, but impersonal open ground. (Hardy 329)

Actually, the malice nature of the rain and the monstrous structure of the heath are driven against Eustacia and wildeve, but not against Thomasin. "Here Wildeve waited, slightly sheltered from the driving rain by a high bank that had been cast up at this place". (Hardy 333)

Even Clym, when he and Wildeve were beside the weir and "a dull sound became audible above the storm and wind. Its origin was unmistakable--it was the fall of a body into the stream in the adjoining mead, apparently at a point near the weir" (Hardy 334). The wind did not treat him as an enemy and it might not blow him off.

## 2. Conclusion

In his novel *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy symbolizes his characters even the setting especially the heath to carry the central theme of modernism. He seems to be objective when he displays his characters according to their attitudes towards the heath and the modern cities especially Paris. Eustacia, Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright hate the heath and love Paris, in contrast with Clym, Diggory Venn, and Thomasin who love the heath and prefer it as a suitable place to live in. But Hardy is sympathizing with the idealist character, Clym and considers him as his ideal. Hardy's love to the countryside of Wessex and his longing for the rural rituals and festivities are embodied throughout the novel. The bonfire and Rainbarrow resemble the centre of these festivities and symbolize the Promethean fire which is strongly related to the rebelliousness of Eustacia and Wildeve. Also, it refers to the problematic issue of knowledge and modernism related to Clym, as a Promethean figure, and his scheme of education. Clym's semi-blindness symbolizes his misconception of the real world and the real identities of the characters around him. His suffering emerges from his consciousness of the wrong trend of modernism related to his experience in Paris and the disapproval of the heath folk and some characters to his scheme in a way proves that " the rural world was not ripe for him" as the writer states himself.

The setting is well designed to symbolize the internal conflicts and feelings of his characters. Moon and gambling are mostly regarded to fate symbolism. The weather (wind, storm, and rain) accompanies the tragedy of the main characters and reflects their suffering. The rich symbolism in the novel promotes it technically to the most eminent literary works ever written.

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