



Hardy as the Dark Knight: Pessimism in *The Return of the Native*

Naureen Rahnuma^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, Department of English, Independent University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Thomas Hardy's fiction are all set against the bleak and forbidding Wessex landscape, whose physical harshness echoes that of an indifferent, if not malevolent, universe, where men and women are merely the slaves of their fates and are at the mercy of some indifferent forces that shape their destiny. The aim of this study is to examine and determine how the narrative reflects the mood that Hardy creates in his novel. The study is centred around an extensive study of one of his most famous novels *The Return of the Native*. Hardy's extensive depiction of the setting allows readers to better understand and interpret the actions, emotions and moods of the characters. The distinctive portrayal of the characters, the use of mythological allusions, diction and the implications of various symbolism customary of Hardy, make readers delve deeper into the abyss of utter despair from where there is no return.

Key words: Pessimism; Mood; Setting; Fate; Symbolism

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While it is impossible to classify Thomas Hardy as an optimist novelist, it is clear that pessimism pervades in most of his novels. Despite Hardy's insistence that his work does not reflect a sense of pessimism, critics have accused Hardy of being a severe pessimist. Most of his poetry as well as his novels manifest a dark, brooding air about them. Interestingly, most of his famous novels like

Tess of the D'Urbervilles, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Return of the Native* are extremely pessimistic in their overtone.

Hardy strongly opposed to critics' accusation of being a pessimist with the claim that he was meliorist, a person who believes that the universe tends toward improvement and that human beings can enjoy this progress as long as they recognize their proper place in the natural order of things:

"People call me a pessimist; and if it is pessimism to think, . . . that 'not to be born is best,' then I do not reject the designation. . . . But my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs. . . . On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist" (Millgate, p.410).

Yet, the world Hardy portrays in his novels is severely somber and forbidding which allows critics to doubt his principle of meliorism. Even in *The Return of the Native*, the texture of the dreary narrative suggests the bitter ironies of which life is capable-an almost malevolent staging of coincidence to emphasize the disparity between human desire and ambition on one hand and what fate has in store for the characters on the other. The sense of the waste and frustration involved in human life is part of the mood he creates with his narrative in *The Return of the Native*.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy devotes the first chapter to a dramatic description of Egdon Heath, which slowly emerges as the greatest tragic power in the novel. The mood which seizes the readers at the very outset is one of absolute gloom and despondence, keeping in pace with Hardy's melancholic vision. The description "the untameable, Ishmaelish thing that Egdon now was it always had been" (p.56) characterizes Egdon Heath as timeless, wild and redundant, being "full of watchful intentness" and waiting for "a last crisis-the final overthrow" (p.54). The Heath thus emanates an inherent sense of inevitable tragedy which sets the overwhelming tone of the novel.

The real feeling of tragedy in *The Return of the Native* comes from the setting. As D. H. Lawrence appropriately points out in *Study of Thomas Hardy*;

“What is the real stuff of tragedy in the book? It is the Heath. It is the primitive, primal earth, where the instinctive life heaves up. There, in the deep, rude stirring of the instincts, there was the reality that worked the tragedy. Close to the body of things, there can be heard stir that makes us and destroys us” (Norton, p.418).

For Lawrence, obviously the Heath is the “somber”, “latent” power, to whom it does not matter who dies or lives a life of misery any more than “the withering heath, the reddening berries, the seedy furze, and the dead fern of one autumn of Egdon” (*Study of Thomas Hardy*).

Egdon is a place of darkness and repudiation which could “retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms... and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking dread” (p.53). Hardy relates the darkness of the heath to “a mortal sin” (p.104), associating the physical darkness with a spiritual darkness. The “sombreness” and mournful “sublimity” (p.54) of nature duly reflect Hardy’s mood of pessimism. Even on the night, the whole Egdon is lighted up with numerous bonfires, its darkness still cannot be subdued:

“[Hardy’s] descriptions of the scene of the story Egdon Heath, as night and mist are settling upon its barren ruggedness, and the surrounding gloom is made to seem blacker and more impenetrable by the huge fires of furze which its denizens have lighted on its central barrow...” (*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Norton, p.412).

Indeed, Hardy asserts that the Heath is “slighted” and “enduring” like man, “suggesting tragical possibilities.” (p.55) T.S. Eliot appropriately writes in his criticism of Thomas Hardy in *After Strange Gods*;

“... he [Hardy] makes a great deal of landscape; for landscape is a passive creature which lends itself to an author’s mood. Landscape is fitted, too, for the purposes of an author who is interested not at all in men’s minds, but only in their emotions, and perhaps only in men as vehicles for emotions” (Norton, p.440).

The somber, forbidding atmosphere represented by a bleak landscape, whose physical harshness echoes that of an indifferent, spiteful universe, is thus set for a turbulent human drama to unfold in its bosom. Since from the “black” source, as D. H. Lawrence fairly puts, all the “contents” of the “small” lives are “spilled” and “wasted”, with the purpose of man ending in a status of futility (*Study of Thomas Hardy*). It is in the Heath where people die of snakebite, drown in weirs and practise primitive witchcraft. Thus, throughout the novel, Hardy wants us to feel that the spirit of the heath is at a malicious and derisive work.

In the initial chapter, Hardy creates a strong sense of place as well as establishes the mood and atmosphere of Egdon Heath. The solitary Egdon Heath is situated among the most sequestered of parishes, where the inhabitants

live mostly in lonely dwellings, being tattered and torn by the tempestuous weather as well as the malevolent landscape. The public house stands by itself and bears the quaint sign of “The Quiet Woman”, who is a lady carrying her head under her arm. It is as if the lonely Heath embraces all that set their footstep on its grim milieu, sharing all that it possesses.

Hardy describes the Heath as “the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster” (p.55). This explicit identification of the heath with the unconscious at the beginning of the book establishes its significance in Hardy’s portrayal of the human mind. Through his use of the despondent setting, Hardy is able to suggest great depths in his characters since for him, the morbid qualities inherent in the Heath is equally relevant to man. Thus, against the somber atmosphere of an indifferent and chance-guided universe, the characters move in accordance with the natural law.

Hardy’s characters linger in our imagination and enlist our deep sympathy as grand typical figures silhouetted against the huge horizon of the universe. Love is the greatest factor that moulds their life; yet misunderstandings, misperceptions and accidents unfalteringly deny lovers their opportunities for perpetual consummation. It is malignity of fate, in the shape of catastrophes that overwhelmingly drags the characters down in the abyss of utter misfortune.

Eustacia’s affinity with the heath, which involves extreme antagonism, adds to the bleak mood that Hardy aims to create in *The Return of the Native*. Fate has hurled Eustacia on the dreary bosom of Egdon Heath from the gay society of Budmouth, making her “eternally unreconciled” (p.119) to Egdon Heath. The “fearful gloom and loneliness” (p.122) of Egdon deepened her desire and she longed to make her escapade from this stifling location. “’Tis my cross, my shame and will be my death,” (p.139) Eustacia would cry out in a prophetic manner. Hardy lends her these despairing moods to reinforce the feeling that she will remain trapped in this grim, desolate place until her death. Ultimately, this “ill-conceived” (p.421) world makes sport with her, until, tired with its play, it kills her. In creating, such a character as Eustacia, Hardy thus challenges us to broaden our sympathies and feel with someone who apparently is totally antipathetic.

The union of Eustacia and Clym was ill-fated from the start. As the author says, “Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye toward the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym” (p.232). Hardy states clearly that Clym is “permeated” with the “scenes”, “substance” and “odours” (p.231) of Egdon Heath and represents the intellectual type of the future, as Egdon Heath represents the scenery which best suits the “more thinking among mankind” (p.55). As “the first blinding halo kindled about him by love and beauty” is

rapidly extinguished, “sometimes he wished that he had never known Eustacia, immediately to retract the wish as brutal” (p.260). Yet again Clym seemed to be aware about the absence of affinity between himself and Eustacia and knows that “her tastes touched his own at rare and infrequent points” (p.258). Ironically, Eustacia marries Clym to escape the Heath only to find him devoted to it; while Clym to some extent marries her because he thinks she could help in his projected school.

The dissension between Clym and Mrs. Yeobright starts from the while Clym decides to settle in the Egdon Heath for good, leading to extreme antagonism on the account of Eustacia. Hardy depicts very powerfully the intensity of their relationship and the close affinity between their minds. Both the mother and son are equally inflexible and undeviating. As Mrs. Yeobright tells Eustacia, “He can be as hard as steel” (p.305). There is a deep silhouette of foreshadow to some traumatic episodes as Hardy reveals the emotional conflicts between the characteristically similar mother and son. Because of the quality of their relationship, Clym’s breakdown after his mother’s unfortunate death is almost inevitable. Hardy very effectively projects Clym’s state of mind in “the wildest turmoil” (p.388) as he is on his way to Alderworth after hearing Johnny Nunsuch’s account of his mother, before he encounters the final tragedy in his life.

As calamity succeeds calamity, we recognize Hardy’s train of characters, rather in their relations to death and fate, than in their relations with each other. We see them enlarged and magnified only to harbour the illimitable capacity for suffering. With the lingering mood of menacing despondence, we realize that we also belong to that darker world which for Lawrence is symbolised by Egdon Heath, a world which is fecund, amoral and incomprehensible.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy presents his rustic characters, whom he otherwise terms as “the philosophic party”, as a mode to heighten the tragic mood that envelops the whole novel. For him, these figures act as a benchmark by which the reader can measure the tremendous heights and depths to which the main characters rise and fall. As John Holloway appositely points out in *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, these minor characters are “genial”, “kindly” and “content with their station of life”, who “live in that continuity with their environment which for Hardy is the one root of a right life.” Their prosaicness thus gives the readers the ability to bear the immense burden of catastrophes, anchoring the story to reality.

Hardy is quaintly humorous in the conversation, which he put into the mouths of his rustic characters. Through their humorous activities, Hardy now and then puts a touch of the grave-diggers in “Hamlet” about it. We are made to laugh at the immemorial butts of the garrulous, reminiscent old Grandfer Cattle, the timid Christian Cattle or the superstitious Susan Nunsuch. The incongruity

between the facts of life and the countryman’s ignorant comment on them built up a picture of their down-to-earth attitude to living in its rural manifestation, in spite of their exaggerated characteristics. These rustics figures thus play the role of that of the “Greek chorus”, who go on living through their uneventful day, whatever catastrophes may overtake the finer spirits placed among them.

These rustic figures, however, not only take part in the series of festivals, but they also participate, as agents of destiny, in the critical action itself. Christian Cattle carries the guineas and gambles them away. Timothy carries the letter, which was fatally not delivered at last. Susan Nunsuch and her son intervene actively in the lives of both Eustacia and Clym. Thus, Hardy effectively uses them in the course of the action to suggest the fatal intervention of Destiny.

Hardy’s pessimistic view renders his fictional world bleak and desolate. His concept of a blind “Immanent Will”, controlling all human action to disastrous ends is obvious in *The Return of the Native* like in his other tragic novels. Although Clym possesses the necessary intelligence and noble vision to ameliorate life, he is condemned to failure because he is simply an insignificant part of the universe, which is governed by laws of Nature put in place by the “Immanent Will” or “the Prime Cause, against which human beings strive in vain. The Furies arrive punctually and neither act, nor will, nor intention will serve to deflect a man’s destiny from him, once he had taken the step which decides it.

Hardy conceives of humanity in relation to ultimate destiny: “Destiny is an inscrutable force; we do not understand its nature or its intentions . . . its acts always show themselves in the guise of inexplicable unexpected blows of chance”(Hardy’s *Autobiography*). Eustacia believes that Heaven has devised tortures for her and Hardy himself declares that human beings shy away from blaming “the First Cause” for the evil that befalls them and “invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears.” Hardy imparts that had their circumstances been different, Clym and Eustacia might have played a very different role in the grand stage of the world. But chance, in the silhouette of accident and coincidence, joins itself with the unsympathetic power to assure man’s unhappiness.

Clym prevails on Eustacia to marry him but fate intervenes and his dream of good fortune is gradually dissipated. The brooding shadows of despondency fall thickly on his domestic horizon as Eustacia is equally disenchanted of her expectations and dreams. She had admired the superiority of his manners, acquirements and intellect but she had anticipated, above all, of being introduced by him to the dazzling delights of Parisian society. But merciless Fate makes Eustacia live with Clym in a lonely cottage on that Egdon Heath of which she has grown so heartily sick and lead a life of penury as Clym takes to cutting furze and sods for a living.

To present the mechanism of fate, Hardy then resorts to a long chain of coincidences, which is the incarnation of the blind forces controlling human destiny. Hardy's world is not the world where devils, demons and fairies intervene in human affairs; it is a world where improbability and accident have replaced the miraculous. As in the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy writes; "But the ingenious machinery contrived by the Gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum... stood in the way of all that" (p.395).

What the dreary atmosphere of Egdon Heath makes the readers feel, the episodes of the catastrophe emphasize. Diggory Venn accidentally misunderstands the terms of Mrs. Yeobright's bequest to Clym and Thomasin. As a consequence Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright misunderstand each other and the breach between the mother and son is further widened. Mrs. Yeobright comes to see Clym in an attempt of reconciliation. By another incredible coincidence, Eustacia thinks Clym has opened the door, when he is actually asleep and Mrs. Yeobright goes away, having seen Eustacia looking at her. Mrs. Yeobright believes her son refuses her entrance and starts her weary journey home, when she is bitten by a poisonous snake. It is thus that Eustacia imagines a spiritual power upon whom to lay the blame for the fateful occurrence. "Instead of blaming herself for the issue she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot" (p.361).

With the tragic death of Mrs. Yeobright comes an irreparable estrangement between Clym and Eustacia. Hardy further reinforces his pessimistic notion as two chapters later, Clym's letter to Eustacia is not conveyed to her by an intervention of Destiny. This double calamity does justify Hardy's pessimistic notion by giving the effect of a hostile Fate, driving the characters to destruction, despite all their efforts to save themselves. Hardy uses almost a reverse approach to the *deus ex machina* technique as he invents ironical incidents in order to show a perverse world-order in operation. As Marlene Springer points out in *Hardy's Use of Allusion*, Hardy, in reality "saw all of life as a collage of ironies" (p.15).

Undoubtedly, Hardy believes that there is nothing malign in Egdon Heath, in the laws of nature, or in the play of Circumstance or accident. The characters hardly have any control over the factors that determine their fortunes. And bereft of their power to control their fates, the characters thus become puppets in the hand of a capricious and malignant contriver.

Hardy details a theme with a series of symbolic images to bring home his idea of world torn and tattered by malignant powers. The most significant symbolism used in the description of Egdon Heath suggests that it can be viewed as the microcosm of a cursed earth. The Heath is personified into a larger-than-life monstrosity that shares loneliness, sadness and the potential for tragedy with man. It is symbolic of the laws of nature which govern the fate of its inhabitants.

Hardy generates a pessimistic mood at the very beginning with the symbolic setting, in preparation for the action, suggesting a union of human and fatal darkness. The bright sky and the dark heath underneath seem to represent two sharply distinguished entities in a continuum. The glowing sky stands for the hope and the release while the dark heath below stands for the forces of character and fate that oppress and defeat them:

"...their meeting line at the horizon was clearly marked... the heath wore the appearance of an installment of night which had taken up its place in the sky.... The distant rims of the world and of the firmament [at the horizon] seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter. (p.53)

Hardy establishes a suggestion of a dark, invisible power in the heath which reach up in a harmony toward the darkening sky: "And so the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced half-way" (p.54).

The darkness of the heath is then disturbed by bonfires that symbolize the humanity's eternal rebellion against the dark. The heath-dwellers light bonfires which "are rather the lineal descendants from the jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot" (p.67).

In the mummers' play that is staged to celebrate Clym's homecoming, the death of the Turkish Knight, played by Eustacia, is highly symbolic. The mummers' play is somber with the message that the good and life triumph finally over evil and death. Hardy relates this death to an indication of Eustacia's role in the novel and her ultimate tragic end.

In the Fourth book, a menacing sequence of symbolism shrouds Mrs. Yeobright's death. Exhausted, when she takes a seat on the lonely heath, she sees a heron flying above her into the sunset, gleaming like silver as its body catches the light and seeming to symbolize the happy release from earth to heaven that she has started to long for. Hardy later extends the bird symbolism to suggest the cruelty of nature when Clym, full of a sense of Eustacia's inhumanity to his mother and infidelity to him, was returning home for a confrontation to see that the only life visible in the front of the house was "a solitary thrush cracking a small snail... for his breakfast." (p.389)

In 1885, reflecting on the artificial life of London, Hardy wrote:

"The people in this tragedy laugh, sing, smoke, toss off wines... and yet are playing their parts in the tragedy just the same. Some wear jewels and feathers, some wear rags. All are caged birds; the only difference lies in the size of the cage. This too is part of the tragedy" (*The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p.171).

By means of the persistent symbolism connected with birds, Hardy thus highlights the extent to which the plight of man in this imprisoned universe encompasses the spirit of life itself.

Furthermore, on the day when Mrs. Yeobright dies, Egdon is imagined as almost literally in flames and her

death is a symbolic death-by-fire; “The sun... stood directly in her face, like some merciless incendiary, brand in hand, waiting to consume her.” (p.351) Eustacia herself will perish in a similar fatal flame: burned in effigy by Susan Nunsuch, she will hurl herself into ‘the boiling caldron’ (p.437) of the weir to meet her death.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy intensifies the grim atmosphere that encircles Egdon Heath and its dwellers through the mechanism of allusions. The accretion of classical allusions heightens the novel’s tragic effect, giving Egdon the feel of Sophocles’ Thebes. Various described as Dante’s Limbo and the Tartarean underworld of the ancients, Hardy relates Egdon Heath with the lightless underworld. Hardy further emphasizes on the dreary façade of the Heath as he refers to the Heath as “Homer’s Cimmerian land” (p.105) for Eustacia, where people dwelt in perpetual darkness.

For Eustacia, Hardy further employs the Promethean allusion as emblematic of her rebelliousness against fate; for her Egdon Heath is Hades. By conjuring up visions of that grim region of the Underworld where spirits such as those of Prometheus and Ulysses suffer eternal agony for their opposition to the Gods, Hardy makes the reader respond imaginatively to Eustacia’s torment and thus deepen the idea of man’s insignificance against an overwhelming background with an invincible power.

“Nature” for Hardy is hardly picturesque, not at all static, and above all not just a sheer backdrop, displaying the colours of human lives. Nature is but a scheme which embraces human activity, overpoweringly modifying human lives and ultimately controlling it. As Virginia Woolf aptly observes; “... he[Hardy] is aware in a larger sense of Nature as a force: he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes”(The Novels of Thomas Hardy, p.257). Hardy’s astonishing power of natural description depends on his consciousness of the pervasiveness of watching nature’s relentless indifference to mankind. He integrates his notion of pessimism as he attributes human qualities to the dismal heath, emphasizing the idea that it possesses a malign power. For him, Egdon Heath exists as a personality, as “a monstrous livingness which is more often Satanic than benevolent” (Hardy). Similarly, on the bonfire night on Egdon Heath, the fires of twigs or timber are “steady unfaltering eyes like planets” (p.79) while elsewhere, bonfires are “like wounds in a black hide” (p.66).

Hardy delicately and sensitively compares the sights and sounds of man’s activity to those of extra-human nature, assimilating them to the concert of natural sights and sounds to amplify his notion of nature being an extension to the human mind. For instance, Hardy describes the strange whispering emitted by the myriad, mummied heath bells of the past summer played upon by mournful November winds. It is like the voice of a single person speaking through each in turn.

“... Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally with the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs... What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind” (p.106).

There is the same minute observation of the wind in the heather bells and the sigh of Eustacia. By observing so meticulously every outward manifestation of human beings as well as nature, Hardy is able to suggest the strange darkness in human personality that is complemented by nature itself. Such harmony of the outer scene with the thought and feeling of the characters are paralleled in “the chaos of the world without” (p.420) and the chaos of Eustacia’s mind when she stood for the last time on the Rainbarrow.

The Heath’s seasonal changes accord with mood and situation in passages of poetic overtones, from the most vividly colourful to the funereal. As spring, “the green or young fern period” (p.299) begins, so does a relationship between Clym and Eustacia. The summer brings the one entirely happy period in Clym and Eustacia’s relationship;

“The July sun shone over Egdon and fired its crimson heather to scarlet. It was the one season of the year, and the one weather of the season, in which the heath was gorgeous”. (p.299)

Clym and Eustacia indulge in the happiness of their togetherness until, after such a seasonal high, their relationship start to become bland under various circumstances. With the death of Mrs. Yeobright, the heath is full of dying ferns, until winter befalls again and the tragedy has completed its cycle as with the season. Thus the Heath becomes both the agent of decay and rebirth, affecting humanity but apparently remaining unaffected by it.

Hardy endeavours to create his mood by contriving the whole structure of *The Return of the Native* into a classic tragic play. The novel recalls the grandeur of traditional tragedy in the ceremonial chapters of Egdon Heath, in the novel’s conscientious observation of the unities of time and space and in its organization in terms of the five parts or “acts” of a traditional tragedy.

The first book entitled as “The Three Women” characterizes the situation involving Eustacia, Thomasin and Mrs. Yeobright. The second book “The Arrival” presents the new dramatic alignment caused by the appearance of the protagonist. “The Fascination” vividly describes the following attachment between Eustacia and Clym and the consequent misfortune of Mrs. Yeobright. “The Closed Door”, is the concise dramatic name for the combination of events which trailed behind the death of Mrs. Yeobright. And “The Discovery” refers to the climax between Clym and Eustacia, leading to the tragic denouement. Hardy makes these five books emerge as the five acts of a classic play. And in each book, the scenes are largely grouped around certain points in time so as to suggest the classic continuity with the several acts.

In the first book, for instance, all the scenes take place on the fifth and sixth of November, following upon the Guy Fawkes celebration. In the second book, the scenes lead up to and center about the Christmas mumming where first the hero and heroine “stand face to face” (p.193). The fourth book centers about, and half the scenes take place upon the thirty-first of August, the day of Mrs. Yeobright’s death.

For Hardy, the tragic stage for his human drama is none other than Nature itself and this natural stage ultimately consumes the very characters that are placed upon it. *The Return of the Native* is staged on the ominous Egdon Heath, which has affinities with the Shakespearean heaths of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and more proximately with the setting of *Wuthering Heights*. Hardy incorporates the unity of place to be the counterpart of a unity of action rooted and bedded in oneness. The steadiness with which the Heath makes the reader feel its dark and overshadowing presence over the characters that live on its bosom, takes its place as the dominating force of the tragedy.

The undeniable power of Hardy’s narration lies in his endeavor to decipher the deeper principles and forces that lie behind occurrences while being unconcerned with the everyday surface of things. As he writes in his *Autobiography*, “My Art is to intensify the expression of things so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible.” Throughout *The Return of the Native*, Hardy is very successful in creating mood and atmosphere. Some scenes are so descriptive that a very clear mental picture can be formed by the reader, causing a distinct sense of place. Through his words, Hardy seems to submerge his readers into his story letting them take part only as an onlooker. It is at the beginning that the strongest mood, the heaviest atmosphere and the most obvious sense of place occurs until the scene is set and the characters are introduced.

Hardy’s touch passes over those untold visions of his mind, dwelling intensely on emotional experiences which are fully emitted through his narrative and characterization. T. S. Eliot, who discussed Hardy’s art in *After Strange Gods*, entirely in terms of its emotional expression, justifiably accused Hardy of being concerned not with minds but with passions. Hardy is, after all, a novelist of violent feeling. In his Preface to the first edition of *Jude the Obscure*, his most tragic and controversial novel, Hardy speaks of showing “the strongest passion known to humanity”, and of telling “without a mincing of words, of a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit” (p.39). And as for Eustacia, Hardy did not create such a passionate and vivacious heroine until he created Tess several years later.

It is unquestionable that *The Return of the Native* is the most pessimistic of Hardy’s early novels. From the initial description of Egdon Heath until the close of the

story, this dreary and unfertile waste seems to symbolize the indifference with which Nature views the pathetic fate of human beings. It is the unsympathetic background for the fateful human drama; what happens to man is not its concern. Like the forces of Nature, it has participated passively in man’s slow and unhappy progress through disillusioning centuries, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of petty humankind.

The Heath exercises its overwhelming power on the readers as the human characters are made to appear as slight figures in a giant, indifferent landscape. The importance of Egdon Heath in the novel lies mainly in the way Hardy uses it to enlarge our concept of human nature and yet it is the same Heath which has given rise to the idea that all characters are puppets, totally insignificant against an overwhelming background.

Hardy’s language reflects his stoical pessimism and sense of tragedy in human life. His eloquence is muted but intense, pure and severe, startling us by quiet but forceful means. His imagination is filled to the brim by emotions, which is animated primarily in visual terms. He uses words like “Titanic” (p.54), “a near relation of night” (p.53), “home of strange phantoms” (p.55), “haggard” (p.54), “obsolete” (p.55) to impart the idea of the Heath’s grim, sinister vastness at the very outset. Amidst of an aura of mystery, the lucid outline of the sky has been endowed with a demonic intent. With such words as “prison”, “dignity” and “sublimity” (p.54), Hardy goes on to suggest that the nightmare of the heath is indeed the most fitting symbol of the condition of man, “...a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature-neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly...” (p.55).

The very title of the second chapter serves to signalize littleness and frailty of man upon the stage of the inhospitable nature: “Humanity appears upon the scene, hand in hand with trouble.” It is very quietly that humanity makes its appearance like a slow-moving silhouette.

“Along the road walked an old man. He was white-headed as a mountain, bowed in the shoulders, and faded in general aspect.... Before him stretched the long, laborious road, dry, empty, and white.” (p.58)

In his description of the Heath, Hardy induces a kind of half-belief in the brooding presence of the heath; it is like a village superstition which a pragmatic will dismiss, but which might revenge itself on an unbeliever. A terrifying, persistent barrenness and blankness prevails throughout as stark pessimism shadows Hardy’s canvas.

Nevertheless, amidst moods of the most unrelieved depression, Hardy leaves grounds for future hope, no matter how bleak it is. In *The Return of the Native*, he inserts two illustrations of a way of life that makes living endurable even when it is faced by the worst contingencies. Neither Diggory nor Thomasin expects much of life, though their only misfortunes are in love. They lack both the infinite aspirations and the discontent

of the other characters in the book. When Venn is disappointed second time in his love for Thomasin, he suffers only for a while because he does not expect much. Similarly, Thomasin, is able to attain a measure of contentment because of her willingness to accept the inevitable. It is this quality in her, Hardy conveys to the readers, that accounts for her becoming reasonably happy, while Clym, Eustacia and Wildeve find little but suffering during the course of their lives. Tortured by the laws of nature, unrealizable desires, Chance and Circumstance, against a backdrop hostile to man, man himself is an unhappy creature. Thus, the readers of Hardy's novels feel convinced and get a total impression in which the doctrine of "meliorism" is occasionally stated but in which it plays little part in terms of the characters and their plots.

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