



Portrayal of Thomas Hardy's Life element in his novel *The Return of the Native*

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Abstract

This paper intensively discuss the autobiographical element of Thomas Hardy persuaded him to write his novel *The Return of the Native*. Places, Characters are based on real time characters witnessed by him in his lifetime. It repeats the incidents that took place in 1840 and 1850. The tales of heath –croppers, reddleman, mummers, stories of witchcraft and superstitious beliefs and practices narrated to him by his grandmother in his childhood had long lasting impacts on his memories. The imprints of all those events are reflected in this novel. Some incidents personally witnessed by him continue to haunt his memories and they became the part of novel. The mother-son relationship is mainly based on Hardy's own relation. Egdon Heath, the place of action in the novel is similar to the Heathland adjacent to Higher Bockhampton. The cottage of Mrs. Yeobright is the replica of Hardy's mother cottage. It was the birth place of Hardy. The paper presents various events, places, character and incidents reflecting the autobiographical element of Thomas Hardy.

Keywords: autobiographical, places, egdon heath, character, environment, greek tragedy, places, gothic architecture, mummers, effigy, christmas carols

Introduction

The Return of the Native was sixth published novel of Thomas Hardy published in *Belgravia Magazine* from January 1878 to November 1878. Walter Besant praised it as "the most original and most virile and most humorous of all modern novels" (208) as stated by Michel Millgate in his book. The novel begins heroically and slips more and more into the diminishing ironic and pathetic mode of characterization of Hardy's later tragedies. Hardy pointed out that his aim in writing this novel was to render the peasant life between 1840 and 1850.

The plot of the novel is not borrowed or invented one, but is directly based on his personal life events embellished with his narrative technique. The story is autobiographical in as much as it has a fair share of the author's experiences and knowledge of local people and local traditions. Imagination only helps in arranging the events coherently and convincingly so as to afford an artistic and faultless pleasure. This novel presents the story of an idealistic and gifted young man who abandons the professional goals set for him by his ambitious and strong-minded mother. But his infatuation with a free spirited woman, unexpectedly encountered in a wild and lonely place distract his ambitions.

Hardy classifies *The Return of the Native* in the category of *Novels of Character and Environment*. Egdon Heath, where decisive events mostly occur, assumes almost human proportions. Egdon Heath is given utmost importance, more than any other character in the novel. Due to all persuasiveness of Egdon Heath in the novel, many critics call it a book on and of Egdon Heath. It is indeed the story of Egdon Heath. H C Duffin says, "Egdon is not only the scene of the tale, it dominates the plot and determines the character." (16)

The Return of the Native is the first of Hardy's tragedies which is worked out with singular relentlessness. The Persistent influence of Greek tragedies and the tragic episodes of his life

enabled him to come up with a successful tragic story as FE Halliday in his book maintains to remarks about the autobiographical element in his Novel as stated:

On reading *The Return of the Native*, one thinks instinctively in the terms of Greek tragedy and Aristotle's analysis of plot, with its reversal of fortune. Here Hardy was thinking in terms of Greek Tragedy seems to clear from his allusions to Aeschyls, Prometheus and Oedipus, but like Shakespeare he was essentially a romantic and he seasoned tragedy with a comic relief.... (44)

Like Hardy's other works, this novel also presents the intermingling of personal element with the fictional. We find abundant autobiographical element in the form of Egdon Heath, the rustics way of living – their dressing, customs, professions etc., Nature, lower animals and distinguished characters.. In this novel, Hardy has made use of the flashback technique to recapture the memories from the past life.

Egdon Heath is based on the string of Heaths in South Dorset between Dorchesteor and Bournemouth. Hardy presented this place from his personal background, and this is very well brought out by Michael Millgate in his book explaining the life of Thomas Hardy: A biography, he writes:

... the place whose unity Hardy had sought so earnestly to preserve was the tract of heath land immediately adjacent to Higher Bockhampton, with the position of fictional Bloom's End roughly approximating to the position of the house in which he was himself been born and his parents still lived....the personal connection was so direct and obvious, it seems almost conceivable that Hardy would consciously have allowed the narrative to fall into autobiographical patterns. (199-200)

Egdon Heath is presented as a central figure in the novel. This is because all the tragic and comic episodes of the novel take place on the heath. In the later preface to the novel, Hardy says '.....though the action of the narrative is supposed to proceed in the central and most secluded part of the heaths united into one whole as above described, certain topographical features resembling those delineated really lie on the margin of the waste....'(45). Some of the critics have opined that Egdon Heath is presented and discussed as a character by Hardy. The first chapter of the novel entitled "A face on which Time Makes but little impression" evinces Hardy's preoccupation with its raw beauty and human importance. The known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen intermix to make in full what Egdon Heath is to an onlooker is stated by Michael Millgate in his book:

Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity.... (12)

Hardy paints Heath as barren and having no vegetation except Furze. Every changing season leaves remarkable impression on the physical appearance of Heath. Sometimes the climatic conditions are so favourable to the Heath that it appears much more beautiful and coloured. Some critics are of the view that the central character of the story is Egdon Heath. H C Duffin supporting Egdon Heath writes:

The Return of the Native is the book of Egdon Heath; without Egdon it would not hold together. This story could not run its course anywhere other than amid the solitudes of Egdon. Egdon influences all the human characters moving them to hate, to despair or to the philosophic mind. (16)

Hardy sketches the nearby places of Heath, rustics and their behaviour in this novel. Hardy's picture of Egdon Heath is the most elaborate study of landscape in English Letters. He was often times inspired by the geographical views of the places. Lionel Johnson states that even a barren and rough place like Egdon Heath interestingly inspired the author to write a masterpiece like *The Return of the Native*. Lionel Johnson in his book writes about Hardy's love for Egdon Heath:

Egdon Heath never fails to rouse a kind of personal pride in Mr. Hardy. He dwells upon the beauty of its desolate wastes, with the glow of a lover. No Carew nor Crashaw, Crowley nor Donne, exercised more ingenious an art for passion's sake, than this restrained writer exercises on behalf of his great, inviolate place. (111-12)

Egdon Heath as painted by Hardy is a place having dual nature. The weirdness of the heath inspires Clym to bring about a salutary change in its appearance. He comes back to the Heath with the unfruitful resolution to usher in an era of Renaissance in Egdon. Eustacia hates obsolete Egdon Heath as a disastrous and ominous. Thus the vivid and magnificent sketching of Egdon Heath brings about Hardy's personally observed facts. This novel is the story of Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, Damm Wildevve, Diggory Venn, Mrs. Yeobright and various other several minor characters. The characters are superb in their behaviour and manners. Eustacia Vye is of prudish and

passionate nature and lives with her grandfather in Egdon Heath. Thomasin- Clym's cousin very much reflects the personality of Hardy's sister Mary Hardy. Hardy's art of characterization is superbly presented in the novel. The chief characters of the novel seem to have been painted by Hardy on the basis of Personal perception of life in Wessex. Michael Millgate in his book writes:

Hardy likes to think of Clement, as Clym Yeobright was christened, as a name traditional in his own family; he based Mrs. Yeobright, Clym's mother, on his own mother, he gave Clym's dead father's own father and grandfather's love of music and church choirs; and he probably has his sister Mary in mind when creating the patient, unprotesting Thomasin, whose name echoes Hardy's own and who are in the manuscript was once cast as Clym's sister rather than his cousin.(200)

Eustacia ratifies the belief that she was Hardy's 'dream girl', and that's why she is extraordinarily sketched as the heroine of the novel. Hardy seems to have imbued Eustacia's figure with the impressions of Emma's beauty and qualities. William R. Rutland has also perceived a striking similarity between Emma and Eustacia clearly.

Critics compare the powerful figure of Eustacia with that of Sue Bridehead. They say that if Sue Bridehead is the subtlest of Hardy's female characters, Eustacia has deepest force. The heroic quality of Eustacia has been aptly compared with the figures like Oedipus, Lear and Cleopatra as stated by R P Draper in his book on Thomas Hardy: A Biography,

Eustacia Vye, more than any other of Hardy's protagonists, seems intended to be grandly heroic, to exist on a higher level of significance than any other characters in the novel. She is alone, rebellious even powerful – and so little explicable that she can be taken or a witch by the superstitious. Eustacia's state of the heroic isolation is emphasised by a tragic chorus of country folks clearly set off from the actors in the dramas.(119)

Eustacia Vye as presented by Hardy is a young woman with romantic dreams of heroic love and social brilliance. The comparison of her physical charm is made with precious objects like 'rubies', 'Bourbon roses', 'Tropical midnight', as a lotus-eater'. Her personality has potentialities of higher female deities like Artemis, Athena or Hear' - the evergreen Goddess and queens. Ritcher's views about the beauty more than a narrow band drawn over the brow.' Hardy addresses Eustacia as a 'True Tartereaan'. Hardy has presented her as a highly ambitious girl. Eustacia's love is not directed towards Clym, but towards the pompous life of Paris. Her love for Clym is her dream fulfilment. She longs for a new prosperous life, and surmises that Clym could give her all that she longs for. Hardy very cleverly and brilliantly draws here a similarity between the character of Eustacia and of Emma was attracted by the pompous life of Paris. The views of Eustacia and Emma about their lovers are also identical; it is very clearly stated in the novel by Thomas Hardy:

To be loved to madness- such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the

abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover. (75)

One who loves to be loved 'to madness' is invariably the one who throws invitation to failure and frustration. Even so is the case with Eustacia. Many critics feel that Eustacia is a Shelleyan creation in her quarrel with the stern realities and her joy in 'what seems' she yearns for a palace of delight. She would quaff off the moment can give, lest the cup should be snatched from her lips. Hardy's personal observation and experiences with Emma are clearly manifests in the portrayal of Eustacia's character.

Another major and important character in the novel is Clym Yeobright. He seems to be the Portrayal of Hardy himself. Even the title of the novel *The Return of the Native* seems to have drawn after Clym Yeobright longing to return to Egdon Heath. Clym is fed up with the artificial life of Paris. He returns to Egdon Heath with an intention to change it. It is like a tiny man fighting a losing battle against the formidable forces of nature. Hardy addressed Clym as a thoughtful man.' 'a handsome man'. Hardy paints a definite class of youth through the character of Clym. He is an immature youth, who was really one of those faces which convey less the experience, is ostensibly a portrayal of Hardy himself. Clym Yeobright, after the death of his father, was sent to Paris to study and to fulfil the ambitions of his mother and bring honour to his family. There he is confronted with a sense of profound disharmony between his beliefs which leads him to abandon Paris and return to Egdon Heath.

Clym's character in the novel appears as that of a man of nature, the man of heath.' He has deep love for Egdon Heath, may be because he was born here like Hardy himself. It was impossible for Hardy to resist, and not to reciprocate to the voices, sights and phantoms of the Heath because his house was in such close proximity to the Heath. Having his birth place here Clym Yeobright seems to be more strongly and tenaciously drawn than to the prosperous cities like London and Paris. After his return from Paris to Egdon Heath, Clym is preoccupied with its scenes, its substance, and its odour.

Clym's change of profession is a very well marked autobiographical fact. Michael Millgate in his book states:

Of all the autobiographical elements in *The Return of the Native*, the one that in the end remains the most fascinating... Clym's decision to reject his profession and return to heath.....(201)

Clym changes his profession from a diamond merchant to a school master; similarly Hardy also gave up architecture and took up the work of writing. Clym's mother protests but he does not abandon his efforts to make Heath an ideal place.

Personal Experience of Hardy is revealed through Clym's married life. Class discriminations smash the hopes of happy conjugal life of each. Hardy had to live in a separate cottage with Emma. The idea of Clym's cottage has been borrowed from there. Mother-son relationship, a dominant theme is expressive of Hardy's sentiments about this delicate family relationship, as also of his preference. This relation was spurned by Hardy's mother. Contrarily Clym's mother does not like to live away from her son, and goes to the cottage where her son is living facing so many difficulties.

Hardy's poetic approach to fiction was due to extensive influence of Shakespeare on his mind. He wrote his novels in

the high pitch of emotions of 'The poet'. Sir Walter Allen feels that poetry is the constant attendant of Hardy's tragic characters. Hardy holds a poet's pen to describe the places and characters, as is evident from the extract of the novel as cited below:

... on a stump between afternoon and night, as now where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland... the fields changed the rivers, the villagers, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.' (69)

Such passages suggest that Hardy ornaments Heath and its people with poetic words that reveal his interest in poetry. Hardy spent his infancy on a Heathland and among rustic folk. He observed the community intently and failed to bypass them in his novels. Characters like Grandfer Cattle, Susan Nunsuch, Johnny Nunsuch and many others are drawn from the memories of comic figures engaged in merry-making, in getting their living from earth. The various traditions and customs of the rustics are engagingly displayed in the novel. Millgate draws attention to this fact:

...the countryside around Dorchester – that the place whose unity Hardy had sought so earnestly to preserve was the tract of the heathland immediately adjacent to Higher Bockhampton, with the position of the fictional Blooms End roughly approximating to the position of the house in which he himself had been born and his parents still lived.(199)

Descriptions of bonfire, mummers and Christmas party are the descriptive presentation of the rustic society. Hardy's creative imagination mingled with the true autobiographical facts provides the novel a distinguished genuineness. Eustacia Vye uses bonfire as a signal to invite her lover. Hardy had attended many Christmas parties and remembered the joyful family gatherings and carols. Along with the festive occasions Hardy's firm belief in Christianity is also amply displayed. All his main figures take active part in Christmas celebrations. A distinguished thing included in this novel is "Mummers". The description of their dresses, actions in the tale shows his interest in theatre. Allusions to Aschylean drama are found in many places in the novel. Harold Orel shows Hardy's affection for theatre. Hardy had seen several thrilling mummers' plays in Dorchester. The effect of those plays is illustrated in chapter four and five of this novel. Hardy considered mummers' performance as an art that was carried on as a traditional pastime. The play of "Saint George" and the people who assist are mentioned elaborately in the text of the novel

... they insisted on attaching loops and bows of silk and velvet in any situation pleasing to their taste... the view of feminine eyes were practicable spaces whereon to sew scraps of fluttering colour.(127)

Hardy's characters share his interests. For instance, Eustacia Vye in this novel participates in the choir activities and with mummers. She acts in their drama. Hardy was a regular church-goer and inherited interest in choir activities and musical instruments, Hardy deals with the occupations of the rustics pursuing business of interest. Some of them, like reddleman, are on the verge of extinction;

The traveller with a cart was a reddleman – a person whose vocation it was to supply farmers with redding for their sheep. He was one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in the Wessex... (16)

We read about professional tools and techniques in the novel. He had seen different segments of rustic society with different traditional work like furze cutting. His rustics do not take any tensions and live merrily in their present. Hardy's own life was full of tensions, so he found pleasure in portraying the merry life of rustics. Hardy was quite conversant with the simplicity and innocence perpetuated in these rustics. Hardy portrays his own mother as Mrs. Yeobright, Clym's mother, Mrs. Yeobright is a dignified and ambitious woman. Florence Emily Hardy writes in his book;

The basic drama is that of mother's love for her son, of a son's love for his mother, and of the estrangement that follows his infatuation with a beautiful voluptuous girl, which leads to the death of both women. If Mrs. Yeobright is not the chief character, she is the central one and probably a near portrait of Hardy's own mother. (102)

Hardy found his mother more caring and protective in nature; Mrs. Yeobright is no less worried about her son than Mrs. Hardy. In the Christmas party she is care laden on account of her son. She protests against Clym's idea of reforming solitary place. She is a woman of firm determination and strong will power. She does not attend the marriage party of Clym and Eustacia. She faced many difficulties in bringing him up single handedly after the death of Clym's father. Like Hardy's mother she marries a commoner. His mother and his character have similar superstitious beliefs. Hardy had watched his mother pursuing religious and superstitious beliefs. Hardy had watched his mother pursuing religious and superstitious belief. Millgate notes that Hardy illustrates this interest of his mother in the fictional characters as well. On the occasion of the marriage of Wildevve and Thomasin, Mrs. Yeobright practiced superstitious rituals. In Hardy's days the custom of touching the bride with a slipper was prevalent in the countryside. Elsewhere Mrs. Yeobright practices superstitious rites. In Hardy's days the custom of touching the bride with a slipper was prevalent in the countryside. Elsewhere Mrs. Yeobright demonstrates her dislike for Eustacia by comparing her with witches and ghosts. Hardy's own mother had been a daughter of a Yeoman Farmer and it was from her that she gained the great love for reading which she passed on to her son. Several entries in the biography suggest that she spent a lot of time with him, playing, encouraging his childish games introducing him early to the fantasy world of song, verse and story. Mrs. Yeobright and Jemima are astonishingly similar in their ambitious nature. They are to a great extent, alike.

Hardy completely borrows the episode of wax effigy from his personal experiences. He had observed his mother using Wax effigy for getting rid of bad spirits. Vague impressions of such superstitious indulgences must have lingered in his psyche and come out with a renewed vitality when he came to delineate similar situations. It is an open secret that Hardy had passion for Gothic art and architecture and for classical literature. The influence of Aeschylus and Sophocles can be seen in the tragic traits which out with a renewed vitality when he came to delineate similar situations. It is an open secret that Hardy had

passion for Gothic art and architecture and for classical Literature. The influence of Aeschylus and Sophocles can be seen in the tragic traits which Hardy imparts to his characters. Hardy's chorus characters are not meme puppets, but are living personages full of life and blood. H C Duffin uploads that the English Society of the novelist's age was greatly influenced by the Greek dramatists. Their effect can be seen on Hardy's work. Hardy could not lead his life happily with his wife because of unrelenting class discrimination existing between them. Similarly, Clym and Eustacia cannot enjoy their married life. Clym loves his native place fondly, whereas Eustacia wants to lead a rich and sophisticated life. Thomasin and Wildevve, another married couple, also fail to enjoy their married life because of the villainous acts of Wildevve. Hardy's disenchantment with peaceful love in marriage was so thorough and excruciating that he could not contain him and made the married couples of his novels wade through deep waters.

This novel is Hardy's first grim and sombre drama, played out against the vast background of Egdon Heath and cosmological forces. He had seemingly made these forces to have a say and sway over matters exclusively human. This is a typical autobiographical trait discerned in this novel. Hardy is a writer who had observed intensity of dramatic moments even in the lives of unenlightened rustics. Quite ignoring the traditional norms of fictional writing he has been successful in imbuing the significant lives of rustics with emotions and passions common to all human beings. The theme of the novel is Hardy's favourite experience of engaging love-tangle of wavered passion. Hardy's chief interest lay in the lives of the rustics he found to be larger than life because of their interests and driving emotions. The local atmosphere diffused all over the novel is a major achievement of Thomas Hardy. His treatment of nature, depiction of scenes and episodes, his fascination for barns, dialect and its deft use, though criticised by some critics, has made the novel more lively and fresh. Also, Hardy's appetite for poetry can be discovered in the treatment of lives of country folk. Hardy's love for classics and fondness for Gothic architecture play prominent role in the novel. In short, the novel is an impressionistic and symbolic piece of art clearly exhibiting the author's personality.

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