

Eustacia’s Struggle -----The Tragedy of Eustacia in the Return of the Native

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Abstract: *The Return of the Native* is the representative novel of Thomas Hardy’s works on the theme of ‘Character and Environment’. This paper is aimed to analyze the struggle of Eustacia Ivy, the heroine of this book, against the nature: Egdon Heath to uncover the roots of her tragedy and reflect the author’s implication: nature can not be conquered and human beings must harmonize himself with the environment.

Key Words: *Eustacia, Struggle, Nature, Tragedy*

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I. Introduction

A. An Introduction to the Author

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), the famous novelist and poet, is one of the representatives of Critical Realism in the history of English literature. He was born near Dorchester, which latter became the ‘Wessex’ in his novels. His major works are Wessex novels describing the characters and the environment of his native country, including *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native*, *the Major of the Caterbridge* and etc.

As a witness of the turn of the 19th century when the urban civilization intruded the peaceful rural region, Hardy was aware of the cruelty of the nature and the society in his early age. So his works usually paint a vivid social picture with a combination of critical realism, romanticism, his own philosophical ideas and religious beliefs, and the current society. Most of his novels focused on the destruction of the characters, through marriage, love and even life against a bleak and forbidding backdrop, whose physical harshness echoes that of an indifferent atmosphere.

B. An Introduction to the Novel

The Return of the Native is widely recognized as the most representative of Hardy’s Wessex novels for it indicates Hardy’s exploration of the ‘Wessex Theme’ go to a maturity. It evokes the dismal presence and menacing beauty of Egdon Heath, the background of the whole story—reaching out to touch the lives and fate of all who dwell on it.

The story mainly happened among Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye, Diggory Venn, Damon Wildeve and Thomasin Yeobright, demonstrating sophisticated affairs among them. Clym, ‘the native’, experienced a successful but, in his opinion, shallow career as a jeweler in Paris and returned to the area to become a schoolmaster. His cousin Thomasin and him represent the traditional way of life. Eustacia, the heroine of the novel, longed for the city, attaching her hope to Clym initially. Disappointed, Clym was content of his life on the heath, Eustacia rekindled her affairs with the reckless Damon, the husband of Thomasin. After a series of accidents and coincidences, finally, Eustacia and Damon were drowned, Thomasin married Diggory Venn and Clym became a traveling preacher in an attempt to assuage his guilt.

II. An Analysis of Eustacia’s Tragedy

The theme ‘character and environment’ is distinguished in Hardy’s novels. He depicts conflicts between characters and settings in his works to put the development of plots and reflect a meaningful philosophy through the fates of main characters.

There is no exception in *The Return of the Native*. When reading the novel, most readers were impressed greatly by Eustacia through Hardy’s allusions of her tragic beauty and heroic rebelliousness. Here is a brief analysis of Eustacia’s tragedy through her conflict with the ‘Environment’: the Egdon Heath.

A. A Brief Description of Eustacia.

Eustacia Vye, 'Queen of Night' is a composite of aesthetic, pictorial, mannerist and romantic images—a curious exotic collection of associations which combine to create a sense of incongruity that reflects her alienated position on the heath.

Her first appearance in the novel is from a distant perspective, a mysterious, powerful, grandiose figure, potentially demonic, 'very strange in her ways' (p. 25). She presents a combination of classical metaphoric allusion and stock 19th century romanticism: 'Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation..... Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights; her moods recalled lotus-eaters and the march in Athalie' (p. 55-56).

B. Eustacia's Struggle against the Nature

If one doesn't harmonize himself or herself with the environment, he or she usually has no other choice, which easily leads to tragedy: 'To dwell on a heath without studying its meaning was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue' (p. 59). And this just what Eustacia's tragedy lies in: she hates the heath and even damns the heath. Meanwhile the discrepancy between dream and reality, between hope and opportunity leads to Eustacia's frustration and disappointment which causes a further tragically self-destruction.

She is not born in Egdon heath. After her parents' death, she moved there to live with her grandfather. But she doesn't lead a happy life on Egdon heath. Owing to her education, beauty and personality, she is different from others. She is so special that she could bear the unchanged scene and boring life on heath, which leads to a self-isolation situation. And we can regard it as her first struggle – a silent protest against the Nature: the Egdon heath.

All of these make her wander between reality and dream. Dream for her is the 'problem-solving'. She dreams herself as the queen, dreams the seaside and sunshine, and most important, she dreams Clym as her knight to realize her dream. So she wants to depend on this man to change her life, to make her escape from the depressive heath to Paris, which can be considered as the second great struggle against her unpleasant life.

Unfortunately, Clym is tired of the life style in Paris and satisfies his life on heath, which destructs Eustacia's dream thoroughly. She plans her third struggle and also the final struggle to rekindle her affairs with the Damon, a man with the same aspiration of change, of city life. But finally, the two are drowned miserably.

She failed at last in the struggle with the control of fate. Eustacia chooses death at last most probably by committing suicide because she is not willing to yield to the heath and to her fate. Though the war between Eustacia and Nature end with the death of her, neither is the winner.

III. Conclusion

In the conflict, we can find Eustacia's worst enemy may not be the heath but herself. Through the description, we can find the imperfections of her personality, such as ambition, vanity, arrogance, etc., which partially contributes to her tragedy. Therefore, I think only by defeating herself can Eustacia defeat the fate.

Meanwhile this kind of ending indicates the theme that the one who rebels against the nature will suffer punishment while the one who obeys the nature will get what he or she wants. For sometimes, nature can not be conquered, which is the truth to some degree.

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