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## **(Un) Impaired Vision in Hardy's *The Return of the Native***

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**Abstract:** Thomas Hardy's fictional works offer a spectrum of conflicts fixed in specific time and space; and the characters he created become metaphors of the vision he possessed. The visually impaired protagonist of *The Return of the Native* contradicts the presumptions of a hero figure and through him, Hardy disseminates his ideas on human relationships, anxieties, authority and subjectivity. The text branches out as multilayered commentaries on the human performativity if not gender performativity in the Victorian milieu. The textual space is shared by the "fallen woman", "the angel of the house", "the deviant", "the manipulator" and "the not-so-significant characters/others"; however, a re-reading of the text disturbs this equilibrium and the nominal attains a significant position in the text. This destabilization generates an alternative way of examining the text, where the reader is compelled to see if blindness is a technique employed by Hardy to establish the presence of epistemic uncertainties in the text.

*The Return of the Native* is also a text on the issues of survival in a hostile environment. It provides an insight into how survival can be understood as a desire to adapt to the adversities. The desire to be a part of the society persuades the individuals to devise a mode of survival and the deviant is either penalized or ostracized by society. The death of the deviant is a notion that many writers have dealt with, for instance, Daisy Miller in Henry James' *The Daisy Miller* or Bertha Mason in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Caddy in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*. Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve represent façades of the deviants who fail to formulate their modes of survival in the wilderness. In a one-dimensional way of looking at the text, the characters with unimpaired vision appear oblivious of the functioning of the society. The question that emerges at this juncture is if Hardy deliberately employed the physical impairment in juxtaposition to the idea of vision that

humans hold irrespective to their conditions of existence. The paper aims to delve deeper into this proposition and examine the employment of escape and evasion techniques in the text as resistance to the counteracting forces in the society the characters belong to.

**Keywords:** Impaired/Unimpaired vision, Blindness, Escape and Evasion, Death of the Deviant, Mode of Survival-Resistance

Thomas Hardy revolutionized the ecocritical<sup>1</sup> writings, much before the term came into existence. Most of his works reveal the audacious side of the author to challenge the age-old literary traditions and re-define the code directives of the society he lived in. *The Return of the Native* is Hardy's sixth published work of fiction where he depicts his picaro heroine Eustacia Vye, whose characterization allows the reader to interrogate her integrity, as a victim of the times;

..but the attacks continued. Their nature can be briefly indicated in the words of Sir James M. Barrie: In an old library copy of *The Return of the Native*, I have been shown, in the handwriting of different ladies, "What a horrid book!" - "Eustacia is a libel on noble womankind," and (should this be mentioned?) "Oh, how I hate Thomas Hardy!" (Weber 213)

And for his unconventional methods of portrayal, Hardy faced difficulty to go through a great ordeal to find a publisher. *The Return of the Native* finally appeared in twelve episodes in the magazine *Belgravia* during the year 1878.

*The Return of the Native* provides insight into the ways individuals behave in an untamed setting. The book engages the reader in a discourse of the wilderness that functions primarily as a field of darkness, savage and rustic conditions. As the narrative develops, Hardy unsettles this assumption and reflects upon the various nuances of the wilderness, wherein we perceive it in terms of binaries -- constructive and destructive force simultaneously. The idea of (un) impaired vision is an extension of this fraying that allows the reader to infer the plurality of meaning that wilderness takes upon with respect to time and space. Hardy's musings on the wilderness are intricately bound with his understanding of civilization:

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither

commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lovely face, suggesting tragical possibilities. (7)

The setting, thus, implies a unified system that corresponds with the entities within it. The characters appear to be defined by the place that restricts their movement within and outside the village. This also corresponds to the title of the text where ClymYeobright returns to the wilderness leaving behind the sophisticated standards of living in the city of Paris. His relocation from urban space to a rustic space contributes to the re-defining of the equation among all the other characters. EustaciaVye's pursuit of entering the nuptial bliss with ClymYeobright is closely connected to this displacement which she considers to be temporary. She yearns to move out of the rustic space and adapt to the refined urban culture. However, Clym's disillusionment with the city and his desire to a part of the Heath marks his journey of assimilation with the dynamics of the wilderness. The conversation between Clym and his mother, Mrs. Yeobright act as a prologue to the impending tragedy:

'I am not going back to Paris again, mother,' he said. 'At least, in my old capacity. I Have given up the business.'

...

'After all the trouble that has been taken to give you a start, and when there is nothing to do but to keep straight on towards affluence, you say you will be a poor man's schoolmaster. Your fancies will be your ruin, Clym'. (147)

The element of irony emerges through the choices made by the sighted Clym that facilitate his downfall and eventually disrupts his familial relations. Mrs. Yeobright realizes the onset of his blindness and anticipates,

'You are blinded, Clym,' she said warmly. 'It was a bad day for you when you first set eyes on her. And your scheme is merely a castle in the air built on purpose to justify this folly which has seized you, and, to salve your conscience on the irrational situation you are in.' (162)

The 'blindness' here contrasts with the actual blindness awaiting Clym that eventually transforms him into an enlightened individual. Hardy

brings in these conflicting notions to point out the ineptitude of human choices and assert the role of the inescapable fate against human desires.

Mrs. Yeobright's efforts to illumine Clym of his ignorance, and Eustacia Vye's manipulations to convince him about leaving the Heath, and, Clym's inability to succumb to either of the plans create the complexity within the text. His blindness acts as a phase of discovery. Eustacia Vye's romantic engagement with both Damon Wildev and Clym Yeobright is the execution of her innate desire to escape from the pensiveness of the natural world. Her first disillusionment occurs when Wildev chooses Thomasin Yeobright over her. There is an untamed side to Eustacia's nature when she walks alone in the night disrupting the Victorians codes of conduct. Is it what Hardy wanted to articulate of his unconventional protagonist that she transforms into the wilderness? In such a case, that allows the reader to read her as part of the wilderness continuum.

### **Escape and Evasion**

The escape motif in the text functions at multiple levels, firstly when Thomasin Yeobright escapes from deceit, secondly, when Eustacia escapes from the cottage and lastly in the attempts made by Wildev and Eustacia to escape from the Heath. In the first case, the escape anticipates the course of the relation between Thomasin and Damon, and Thomasin and Diggory Venn. Eustacia's constant effort to leave the Heath results in her association with Wildev and Clym respectively. And lastly, the characters with predominantly negative shade unite to accomplish their plan. As readers displaced from the times during which the text was written, we would find the previous statement problematic. The companionship that develops towards the end of the text is undoubtedly anomalous to the Victorian design of life. Considering Thomasin's endeavor to evade the dubious marriage or Eustacia's willingness to evade a forlorn relationship, one can fathom the intensity of self-esteem these women nurtured in them. Hardy seems to have deliberately brought the contrast between the two women who represent the 'angel in the house' and 'the fallen woman' respectively with regard to the Victorian definitions. The plurality of identity is revealed when they defy their assumed image and manifest different shades of womanhood, perhaps unintelligible to the times during which Hardy wrote. However, Thomasin is restricted to remain within the four walls of the house, thereby dousing her occasional rebelliousness: "But having

once consented, I (Mrs. Yeobright) don't submit to these fancies without good reason. Marry him (Wildevve) you must after this" (34). Rosemarie Morgan considers this distinction of the portrayal of the female characters as,

It is part of Hardy's purpose in *The Return of the Native* to expose the anger and frustration suffered by the intelligent mind and energetic body restricted to an unwavering, unchallenging, isolated existence. Thomasin's domestic world, with all its conventional trappings, throws Eustacia into relief by contrast; the estranged solitary woman belongs to no circumscribed world, least of all Thomasin's, in the sense of settling in it, becoming habituated to it or wishing to remain in it. Where Thomasin enacts the exemplary, dutiful, submissive, forbearing wife, Eustacia burns with 'smouldering rebelliousness'. (42-43)

Eustacia evolves as a deviant. She rightly fits into the idea of the 'fallen woman'. However, Hardy's technique of juxtaposing the binaries, inside out where the good is not preeminently good and the bad may also contain the traces of the former, blurs all the existing demarcations,

EustaciaVye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus, she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman. Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while, had she handled the distaff, the spindle, and the shears at her own free will, few in the world would have noticed the change of government. (55)

Eustacia is Hardy's response to the assumptions that revolved around the 'fallen woman'. The reader is caught in a state of liminality, unable to make judgments about the character. The characters then appear as victims of circumstances and their unalterable fate. An alternative reading would liberate Eustacia from the stringent criticism levelled against her integrity for,

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. (58)

Hardy's protagonist defers from the stereotypical Victorian heroines as she was ardent romantic in revolt with the reticence the place offered. The Heath was a "jail" (76) to her. She failed to translate the nuances of the place, ironically when she was an extension of the wild and untamed nature;

To dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she only caught its vapours. An environment which would have made a contented woman a poet, a suffering woman a devotee, a pious woman a psalmist, even a giddy woman thoughtful, made a rebellious woman saturnine. (59)

The despair that pervaded the Heath appeared on Eustacia's countenance or the vice versa. She stands the test of time when another native Susan Nunsuch bleeds her to prove her as a legislator of witchcraft and evil affairs. The text explicates the tendencies to identify the wilderness, through the characterization of Eustacia, to the uncanny and the mysterious. The reader feels the astonishment to see "a man accustomed to the attractive women of Paris and elsewhere should be so easily worked upon by a girl in a heath" (158). She is elevated to the state of a demi-goddess when Clym preserves strands of her hair in her memory. The divinity is extended to other worshippers as well in a gesture where he gives a hair lock to the young Charley who treasures it. However, no mortal could possess her for she, like the wilderness, never belonged to anyone.

### **The Deviants and the Law**

The text is vocal about the modes of survival that need to be devised by every individual of the society. The rustic space is a space of myths, folk culture, oral narratives, and beliefs. Clym's decision to be a furze-cutter can be read as a method of domesticating the wilderness. Eustacia and Wildeve's efforts to defy the dictates of the land and the people make them the deviants of a higher order. Hardy maintains the tacit law that the deviants must succumb to the punishment which is no lesser than elimination from the society.

The homecoming for Clym scripts his penury; the actual journey begins on the Heath where he struggles with relationships with family,

society, nature and primarily his own self. Clym is a tragic hero whose inner vision is impaired despite his being educated and exposed to the outer world. It is his blindness that finally liberates from ignorance and provides a vision of life. The rebelliousness, though temporary, is appeased and Clym's mode of survival is attuned to the laws of the Heath. He conforms to the natural law of decay /deterioration which leads to regeneration; his occupation of that of a furze-cutter accentuates his downfall, closely connected to the idea of decay. His life is regenerated after Eustacia's death when he decides to follow the path he initially sought:

Yeobright had, in fact, found his vocation in the career of an itinerant open-air preacher and lecturer on morally unimpeachable subjects, and from this day he labored incessantly in that office, speaking not only on simple language on Rainbarrow and on the hamlets round, but in a more cultivated strain.... He left alone creeds and systems of philosophy, finding enough and more than enough to occupy his tongue in the opinions and actions common to all good men. (337)

Clym's journey is the realization of the metaphysics of presence of both Eustacia and his mother even after their deaths. The union of Eustacia and Clym is suggestive of the reunion of his with the landscape. Mrs. Yeobright who challenges this equation is excluded from the scene through her death. Thus, the landscape is revealed to possess a perilous side to her. This provides enough grounds to dwell upon the mythic nature of the text. The decay and regeneration phenomenon is integral to all fertility myths. The death of the deviants, one male and the other female and the regenerated lives of the survivors imply the possibilities of reading the text as a subversive narrative on fertility myths. Though the text predominantly echoes the downfall of a hero, it is, as in most of Hardy's novels, the saga of the heroine's/ the female hero's journey. In this light, Eustacia becomes the fertility queen whose death assures renewal. However, it poses certain amounts of tension when we read Damon Wildev's death as part of the mythic ritual. Hardy's dexterity lies here when eventually wins away with his technique of dualism. Eustacia's bereavement is incomplete without Damon's as he plays a pivotal role in persuading her to escape the confinement the Heath offers,



'So, I would!' said Wildeve. 'Such strange thoughts as I've had from time to time, Eustacia; and they come to me this moment. You hate the heath as much as ever; that I know.'

'I do,' she murmured deeply. 'Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!'

'I abhor it too,' said he. 'How mournfully the wind blows round us now!' (71)

The scene anticipates the fate of the lovers. The 'mournful' wind acts as an agent of the wilderness that would eventually assimilate them into an eerie silence. The vulnerable silence of the Heath stood against the idea of civilization, "civilization was its enemy" (7). The characters who desired to be part of civilization (as in the sophisticated world) were condemned vehemently thereby compelling us to look at the landscape as a living organism that is in a state of wielding power,

Hardy glimpsed "the primitive, primal earth"...As in Hardy's novels, this landscape<sup>2</sup> is no mere scenery, no flimsy stage set, but rather the energizing *medium* from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured. (Sanders 183)

This tendency observed in Hardy's novels allows us to overlook the scope for reading the text as a performance of renunciation. In Freudian definition,

Renunciation no longer has a completely absolving effect; virtuous restraint is no longer rewarded by the assurance of love; threatened external unhappiness—loss of love and punishment meted out by an external authority—has been exchanged for lasting inner unhappiness, the tension of a sense of guilt. (112)

In this light, no character eventually suffers from "inner unhappiness" as a result of the world they renounced.

The open-ended relationship between Thomasin and Venn simulates the peculiar trait of the landscape that projects it as an indefinable entity. Coincidentally, they survive. It becomes obvious that there is a method involved in surviving in an impulsive milieu.

The return, the text implies, is the return of the individuals to the fold of the Heath from which they cannot desire to escape but come back.

## **Resistance, Traces of Madness, Violence**

The characters, even amidst hostile conditions, attempt to resist the counteracting forces-social, economic and cultural. Clym's effort to 'enlighten' the people of the Heath is a form of resistance to the 'uncivilized' nature of the place. Hardy succinctly raises this concern of civilized/uncivilized conflict at the beginning of his narrative. The people referred to who are also Christians by their religious sentiments, experience indefinable dilemma in their relationship to the landscape. The rustic beliefs and practices stand against the Christian normative codes, and Clym's teachings appear impractical on the heath that functions according to the natural laws. It is this knowledge that provides power to an individual to formulate a method of survival on the heath. The aversion to novel ideas that emerge from the same power/knowledge can be read as a form of resistance to civilization. However, we cannot surmise that Hardy's interest in the rustic setting, beliefs, and customs ensue solely as a detestation of the urban culture; Raymond Williams takes up this point in his work, *The Country and the City*:

It is common to reduce Hardy's fiction on the impact of an urban alien on the 'timeless pattern' of English rural life. Yet though this is sometimes there the more common pattern is the relation between the changing nature of the country living, determined as much by its own pressures as by the pressures from 'outside,' and one or more characters who have become in some degree separated from it yet who remain by some tie of family inescapably involved. (200)

The text pits the landscape against the characters and vice versa, majorly as can be seen in the characterization of Eustacia Vye. Her presence at the Rain barrow during the late hours of night choreographs the traces of the Victorian ambiguity related to the state of the human mind. The defying nature of hers can be rightly contained in the phrase "rebellious feminine", a peculiar form of resistance found in the female characters of the Bronte sisters;

As far as social ethics were concerned Eustacia approached the savage state, though in emotions she was all the while an epicure. She had advanced to the secret recesses of sensuousness, yet had hardly crossed the threshold of conventionality. (79)

This is an amalgamation of the contradictory notions of revolt and submissiveness that the female characters eventually perform by being within the parameters set by the patriarchal society Jane Thomas opines that "in their concentration on the lives of women, Hardy's novels reveal the local and intimate operations of power" (4). Eustacia masquerades as the Turkish Knight who sings "Here come I, a Turkish Knight,/ Who learned in Turkish land to fight" (104) in "want of an object to live for" (105). Though she fails to 'fight' the heath, her defiance to be eliminated is sustained through the metaphysics of her presence that Clym experiences after her death. Her desire for the 'object' (Clym) is nothing new, but a continuation of what she loses to Thomasin, "twining and untwining about him (Wildeve) as the single object within her horizon on which dreams might crystallize" (78) and the yearning as she asserts, "I will never give him up—never!" (78). Hardy performs a controversial (for his times) task of illustrating the female gaze and desire in the Chapter IV titled "Eustacia is led on to an Adventure". What Hardy perceived as the adventure was defined as contemptibly denigrating act, by a majority of the Victorian readers;

... There was to be a party at the Yeobright's; she, naturally, had nothing to do with it. She was a stranger to all such local gatherings, and had always held them as scarcely appertaining to her sphere. But had she been going, what an opportunity would have been afforded her of seeing the man whose influence was penetrating her like summer sun! To increase that influence was coveted excitement; to cast it off might be to regain serenity; to leave it as it stood was tantalizing. (103)

The yearning de-structures the concept of an ideal woman/lover and dictates the need for ostracizing her. Yet, Hardy designed the text around 'such a woman' who becomes a pervasive presence as an eternal lover. Penny Boumelha illumines the challenges Hardy faced due to the publication of *The Return of the Native*;

Nevertheless, the novel was in its own time close to failure, both commercially and critically. The response of contemporary editors and reviewers to this long considered and authorially cherished work was not the first occasion on which Hardy had experienced a painful clash between his own artistic vision and the horizon of readerly expectation forming around him...he

encountered objections to the supposedly dangerous—or at least questionable—moral tone some saw in his works. (254)

The identifying of the performance of bodily instincts in terms of morality had been endemic to nineteenth century Britain. Hardy's design intentionally or unintentionally subverts the Victorian double standards related to sexuality and body performances. Eustacia engages in the romantic fashion of chasing Clym in order to entice him- an act that defeminizes her and in certain fractions, emasculates Clym. The process of emasculation as that we see in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* where Mr. Morel is unable to detach himself from his wife and remains unsuccessful in his endeavours to re-built his intimacy with her. Clym's blinded by the wild nature of Eustacia, who leaves him once her desire to be in conjugal bliss is surpassed by her eternal desire to dissociate herself from the wilderness. Thus, she becomes a counterfoil to Wildeve's character (in connection to his equation with Thomasin), explicating the satan-like qualities specific to the writings of the Romantic Age. She evolves as Hardy's response to the Byronic Hero or a Promethean figure of the early nineteenth century. The complexity is built when we realize the possible connections between reading both Clym and Eustacia as variants of the Promethean figure--Eustacia becomes the metaphysical rebel and Clym the chained Prometheus who desires to enlighten the 'so-called' ignorant heath dwellers. Critics maintain different opinion about Hardy's conception of the female characters,

We can see, then, that Hardy seems at once peculiarly intimate with and peculiarly dissociated with his female characters, creating an authorial distance from them that seems too close physically and too remote in other ways. His unwillingness or inability to explore the consciousness of his heroines has led to much critical bafflement as readers try to deal with the enigmatic personalities Hardy thus presents them with. (Mitchell 183)

Hardy has been indicted for the concealed/obvious patriarchal bias in his renditions. It would become unassuming of a reader to neglect this accusation and consider him as bandwagon of individualistic temper. The concern that remains is how to offer a critique of the text as "Hardy was displeased when any of his work was distilled to a major idea or refined

into a complete philosophy or essential stance" (Watt 156). His aim was to tell a good story, and in this process, he held a mirror against the normative society that had its established definitions of gender and gender performativity. The paper shall argue that Hardy needs to be read against the socio-political events of his times which alone would exonerate him of all his charges. Instead of approaching his female characters as entities caught in his subjectivity, the paper shall focus on the play of impaired/unimpaired vision that Hardy performs in his works. Clym is a visionary, but he is visually impaired; Eustacia's eyesight is unimpaired, however, she is metaphorically blinded; this inverse proportion is visible in all the major characters discussed. This countering states of existence formulate the power and tangent of resistance inside and outside the text.

The gamut of Eustacia's resistance against the rusticity or the landscape also exhibits the streak of wildness within her; a wildness that synonymizes with the notions of madness in the Victorian times.

Hardy subtly destabilizes this order of identifying the female with the irrational/insane by depicting Diggory Venn as "the red ghost" (63) of the heath. We might acknowledge that the author's dexterity to absolve the Mother Nature from the epistemic violence posed by the male discourses or an attempt on his part to extend the associated ideas to the male as well. Venn is "a self-deprecating and condescending figure, as well as being severe, earnest, moral, grim, and silent" (Jensen 53). Being a reddleman, his skin is always bathed in the red-hued dye. Though his appearance is likened to that of the ghost, a symbol of evil, he acts as a vigilant observer of the landscape and as an intermediary between the text and the characters. His appearance that reminds one of an evil figure contradicts his role in the story. Hardy reveals the deceptiveness that lies behind the physical appearances and advocates the requirement to re-dwell upon these reflections—a quite progressive or ahead-of-times method in the mid-nineteenth century. He sustains the poetic justice by allowing Venn to unite with Thomasin; the name of EustaciaVye is provided continuity by christening Thomasin's daughter, Eustacia. Hardy's engagement with differing meanings and notions lends his text a philosophical edge for it contains both the thesis and anti-thesis. We can attribute this tendency emerging from the influence of Darwinian Theory on him; the 'god'-figure is substituted by the faculty of human mind that possesses the power to manipulate its fate. Plenty of articles on Hardy, discuss the element of pessimism in his writings, the

paper shall read that a manifestation of consequences that entail when the modes of survival challenge the laws of the natural world. This is the (un)impaired vision underlying most of his works.

*The Return of the Native* celebrates the varied forms of human instincts that determine the fate of the respective characters. The title provides the cue regarding the enigmatic nature of characterization—it can either be physical/metaphysical 'return' or 'a re-turn' to the heath. The tragic death of Eustacia and Wildevcan be understood a metaphorical return to the wilderness and the Rainbarrow stands a symbol of Eustacia's metamorphosis into the wilderness; Wildeve also succumbs to the untamed nature. Mrs. Yeobright's death is caused due to adder bite, again Clym, Thomasin, Charlie, Venn and so on take a re-turn from their normal lives and adapt to the changes brought by the death of the deviants.

#### ENDNOTES

1. The term was launched by William Reuckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Cheryl Glotfelty revived the term at the Western Literature Association meeting by Cheryl Glotfelty and seconded by Glen A Love in his speech entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism." She defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xviii)
2. Landscape refers to wilderness here. *The Ecocriticism Reader*

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