

# The Deviation In Thomas Hardy's The Return Of The Native

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## Abstract

Any author, in any era, strives to make his or her work a reflection of the society in which he or she lives. This research looks at Thomas Hardy's effort to define deviation. Hardy exposes the late-Victorian world with inconsistencies, disappointments, discoveries, and the resulting deep-seated urge to categorize and classify individuals and situations. Decoding these social tendencies that assign an alternate interpretation in which tradition and convention deviate reveals a subtext. As a result, Hardy aims at the degeneracy of societal structures and customs that his characters must contend with rather than the degeneracy of actual themselves. He defies gender stereotypes by creating characters that represent a fresh and profoundly upsetting picture of masculinity and femininity in settings that go beyond the oppressive and depressing conventional sexual paradigm. Hardy expresses his dissatisfaction with this oppressive social system as a transitional writer. He was writing at a time when the presentation of women in the novels was mostly done to uphold the values of patriarchy. Hardy refused to compromise with these conventions and deplored the values of this inequitable society. Therefore, in his novels, he projected deviant women who try to break out of their stereotyped roles. He wanted to redefine the basis for family, sexual, marriage relationships, and women's role in society. This study deals with the theme of the deviation in Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native*. It shows that the female protagonist deviates from social norms and how the background, i.e., society and nature, supports such deviation.

**Keywords:** Deviation, Heath, social norms, nature, place

## I. Introduction

### I.1. Thomas Hardy: A Transitional Novelist

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 in Dorset, grew up in rural Wessex, and worked as an architect in London before settling down at Max Gate in 1885 and remaining there until 1928. He married Florence Dugdale after his marriage to Emma Gifford ended in 1912. Hardy authored fourteen books about women, the most famous of which are *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* (Widdowson, 1996, 8). His novel *The Return of the Native*

(1964) falls in the category of "Novels of Character and Environment" (Gilmour, 1986, 186). This clash between the individual and his/her society confirms that Hardy spanned the transition to modernism.

Barbara Hardy comments that Hardy is "a great artist who challenges our conception of the Victorian and the modern" (Hardy, 2000, 4). Hardy was a keen observer of the changes around him in the social setup. While standing on the threshold of the nineteenth century, He made the readers witness the scenario full of clashes and conflict between the old and the new order.

Hardy was quite conscious of the transformation in all the phases of life around him, which he observed gravely and critically. The modern mechanical advancements, class, gender, and social issues gripped his attention throughout. The nineteenth century was when England passed through the phase of modernization, which was quite swift in the urban areas, whereas, in the rural parts of the country, the people were still suffering from unemployment, malnourishment, and deprivation. Enhancement of social awareness amongst the indigenous people of his land was at the top of his agenda. He wanted to provoke the social orders to think sympathetically for the downtrodden. His stories revolve around the exploited and the exploiter, and they also project class and gender conflicts promoting female and class liberation (Miller, 1970, 60).

There is a conflict between class and individuals in his novels, and this element links his novels with modern fiction. According to George Lukacs, "the new relationship between individual and society, individual and class, creates a new situation for the modern novel" (Lukacs, 1969, 174). Hardy's art resides on the projection of the miserable condition of the countryside. He is an egalitarian and, in his novels, disapproves of social stratification that affects the individuals (Miller, 1970, 61).

Hardy is blamed for his pessimism and cynicism. According to Percy Wilson, "Most serious modern novels are marked by uncertainty and pessimism may be cynicism also." (Wilson, 1968, 11). His issues are modern developments, gender conflicts, and society's transformation from ancient to modern. Having a complex and vital attitude towards modernization, Hardy portrays modernity's positive and negative aspects regarding individuals and rural communities (Miller, 1970, 61). His themes rotate around industrial developments, migration to urban areas, and modern inventions.

Furthermore, for David Cecil, Hardy is a modern writer, and in his novels, he expressed his abhorrence against the conservative customs of Victorian society, which were harmful to individual aspiration. Cecil asserts that "Intellectually, Hardy was a man of the new age—a so-called advanced thinker, in open rebellion against traditional...views" of his society (Cecil, 1969, 39).

## 1.2 Victorian Norms

By the time Hardy writes *The Return of the Native*, he is sensitively aware of the economic and social aspects that restricted women's lives. He has emphasized the social restrictions on women's desires and aspirations in his writings. In contemporary novels, the image of the woman is presented as passive, docile, and evasive. They hardly questioned the male-dominated role of society. The social conventions of the Victorian period desired that a woman must be innocent in mind and action. Society imposed certain restrictions on women to ensure ignorance and silence. Victorian women had no independent identity. The real concern of women was their children and husbands. Society had an aversion to female sexuality, and the literature upheld the view that a woman having passion, independent character, aims, and enthusiasm was a 'deviant,' and society termed her a fallen woman. Apart from this suppression by the Victorian standard, a woman of that period was also denied economic power (Blailo, 2016, 95). As Catherine Hall, in her essay, "Private persons and Public Someones: class Gender and Politics, in England, 1780-1850," observes:

The late eighteenth and nearly nineteenth centuries marked a period of transition in English society when traditional values and beliefs were subjected to attack and criticism.

Established social hierarchies were breaking down, and common-sense notions were being turned upside down. It was in this context that middle-class men articulated their new demand for representation. ... middle-class men were busy challenging customs in other arenas. Customary patterns about gender divisions were reworked in this period of transition. It was in that re-working that men were firmly placed in the newly defined public world of business, commerce, and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family (Hall 152).

The rigid norms of Victorian society stifled women's lives that affected their achievements, and they were severely removed from the creative world by critical devaluations, social attacks, and severe moral judgments, which silenced their voices and blurred their visions. The Victorian "angel in the house" posed a fundamental problem for creative women because it stifled their desire for power and creativity and became hateful to talented women (Olsen, 1995, 213). This polarisation of women into angels (conformists) and devils (rebellious) was not only supported by conduct books, moral sermons, or schools that taught young ladies how to act artificially to please men's tastes but also by

medicine, psychoanalysis, and social doctrines which invented dispassionate ideological statements that tried to link women with their restrictive spheres: the home and the family. Hence, any deviation from the assigned roles demands immediate punishment (Blailo, 2016, 3).

However, with the advent of the industrial revolution, a new concept about the role of women in society gradually evolved. Industrial and economic development changed society's condition, giving rise to new socio-economic aspects of society. New ideas about women and their role in society were a natural manifestation of this change (De Vries, 1994, 250).

Hardy felt compelled to write about women with sexual frankness and psychological reality rather than feelings by confronting popular notions of femininity and maternity. He attempted to portray women as active participants in public spaces. He sought to write about women's ambitions for power and independence, resulting in a drastic departure from social and cultural norms. He practically had to re-invent women in the novel by bringing inner struggles and sexual impulses that had been denied to women for over a century in English fiction (Stubbs, 1979, 58).

### 1.3 Deviation from Norms

Deviation, in general, refers to a departure from what is usual or acceptable, i.e., a departure from what is anticipated or accepted. In this view, any variation from the ordinary, accepted, and, at times, rigorous rules of society is regarded as a deviation. Moreover, this deviation is a "behavior that departs radically from the norms of the individual's referent groups, overcoming personal or environmental constraints to create extraordinary change" (Thiel, 2015, 2). In the Victorian age, the deviation was labeled the rebellious women who deviated from their assigned roles as daughters, wives, and mothers.

When a woman deviated from the Victorian construction of the ideal woman, she was defamed and considered a fallen woman or a witch. She was viewed as a moral threat and an infection (Barnhill, 2003, iv).

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy presents unconventional women who refuse to conform to society's expectation of ideal womanhood. These women came in direct clash with the society to attain their independence, identity, and self-fulfillment. However, the conventional society denies them these by making them powerless against the social codes.

## **2 .1 The Return of the Native**

*The Return of the Native* can provide modern aspects that show Hardy as a transitional writer. Both Eustacia and Clym symbolize a divergent goal and a clash of interests, attraction, and repulsion against modernism. Eustacia Vye, having a passion for enjoying the town life in Paris, is wary of the dullness of Egdon Heath. Under the spirit of modernism, she earnestly wants to get rid of Egdon Heath. At the same time, Clym, a diamond dealer in Paris, is ironically tired of the artificial modern town life. He ultimately resolves to reside in Egdon Heath. Clym's return to Heath is of great benefit for the natives of his land as he, on his return, intends to educate the illiterate rustics.

## **2.2 Deviation in The Return of the Native**

*The Return of the Native*, by Thomas Hardy, was first published in 1878 and depicted a wild, passionate lady yearning for satisfaction amid the gloomy surroundings of Egdon Heath. The usual restless and unhappy girl seeking adventure and excitement beyond the conventional means for a lady Eustacia Vye is depicted. Hardy sympathetically shows Eustacia's unorthodox and desperate attempts to achieve happiness in life. On the other hand, Eustacia is foiled by Thomasin and Mrs. Yeobright, who demonstrate the proper

procedures and further illuminate Eustacia's carelessness.

The novel's protagonist, Eustacia Vye, is a restless, passionate dreamer who rejects society's ideas. She is enigmatic by nature and somehow appears to interact with nearly everyone else in the narrative. Described by a guy on the Heath as a "lonesome dark-eyed creature," the narrator subsequently describes it in lyrical detail: "She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy, without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow—it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow." While her hair is dark, she has "pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries" that seem to glow and radiate a light (Hardy, *Return* 72). Hardy later labels them as "deep stormy eyes" (*Return* 152). Her outward appearance represents a mixture of the pure and evil passions inside her. As Rosemarie Morgan illustrates, "Clym's perception of Eustacia is circumscribed by a host of assumptions that range around the polarized stereotypes of Goddess and Whore; but Hardy's perspective, even while invoking visions of Goddesses, emphasizes Eustacia's painfully isolated, nullified existence" (Morgan, 1966, 81). Inconsistencies in her descriptions add to her uncertainty of character. Her lips are large and gorgeous, but the corners of her mouth are spear-like, clearly expressing the strength of her words and kisses. One of the several species of Eustacia has been identified: "tiger-beetle, which when observed in dull situations, seems to be of the quietest neutral color, but under a full illumination blaze with dazzling splendor," again showing her mysterious and even volatile nature (Hardy, *Return* 96).

Eustacia is completely self-sufficient and only relies on males to satisfy her sexual wants. She "burns with 'smoldering

rebelliousness" (Morgan, 1966, 59). As Shanta Dutta explains:

Eustacia is always isolated and alienated from the heath-people, and, almost hating her fellow creatures, she is never shown as being of any use to anyone. But she constantly uses other people, exploiting their romantic weakness for her, in order to further her narrow personal ends. She uses Johnny to tend her bonfire, which is a lover's signal to Wildeve; she is not above trading on her physical charms and using Charley to gain a role in the mummers' play in order to catch a glimpse of Clym; she sees Clym not so much as a human being but as a key to unlock the glittering world of Paris; and although her pride is deeply mortified, she agrees to use Wildeve's services in fleeing from Egdon when her marriage finally breaks down (Dutta 44).

In sharp contrast to Thomasin's helplessness and Mrs. Yeobright's self-pity, Eustacia exhibits a self-assured and confident demeanor. Unlike Mrs. Yeobright, Eustacia can easily manage and ignore the opinions of others,

despite being as strong-willed and determined as her mother-in-law. In response to her grandfather's criticism that she was wasting fuel by hosting a bonfire, she explains her motivations "in a way which told at once that she was absolute queen here" (Hardy, Return 64). No apologies are made; instead, she advises her grandfather to get some shut-eye, as a mother would. As a "little slave... galvanized into moving and speaking by the wayward Eustacia's will," she orders Johnny Nunsuch to fuel her bonfire (Hardy, Return 65). Eustacia's signal fire alerts Wildeve, and when he arrives, she mocks him:

"I merely lit that fire because I was dull and thought I would get a little excitement by calling you up and triumphing over you as the Witch of Endor called up Samuel. I determined you should come, and you have come! I have shown my power. A mile and half hither, and a mile and half back again to your home—three miles in the dark for me. Have I not shown my power"? (Hardy, Return 70)

Her persuasive influence over Wildeve has only begun as she manipulates him to postpone his wedding until she decides whether or not she wants him as her lover. As Jennifer Gribble describes, "Eustacia's fire expresses the passionate self-assertiveness that will rekindle out of the ashes of her relationship with Wildeve" (Gribble, 1996, 240). Her boldness in breaching societal norms is evident when she disguises herself as an attractive man to catch a peek at another potential suitor. Caitlin Lowrey claims,

"She rebels, even scandalously cross-dressing" (Lowery). Self-regard is all Eustacia owns, and she does not give a damn about what other people think.

Eustacia's accusations divulge the pride and audacity within her: "How can you dare to speak to me like that?" and "If you had treated me honorably, you would have had [Clym] still . . . You have brought yourself to folly; you have caused a division which can never be healed!" (Hardy, *Return* 246-247). To her in chagrin, the law is that she is too critical and dismissive of any attempts to heal fences or gain favor with her mother-in-law. During her debate with Mrs. Yeobright, Eustacia also exhibits her arrogant self-assertion as she defends her reputation and tries to persuade her mother-in-law to see her point of view. She cannot see the woman's reason for inquiring because she is only focused on the presumptuous charges. Mrs. Yeobright, on the other hand, takes offense and the two never agree.

Eustacia's other defining characteristic is her blatant disrespect for the natural splendor of Egdon Heath and the people who inhabit it. To demonstrate Eustacia's dislike for the location, Hardy adds, "Egdon was her Hades" (*Return* 73). Rather than relishing in what she did not fully grasp about her current situation, she tried to run away to find something more exhilarating. According to Morgan, "Eustacia . . . is very much a prisoner in her world which she roams restlessly, night and day, yearning for freedom, action, passion – a yearning manifest in the burning fires she sets by night as beacons of her desire" (Morgan, 1966, 59). As Hardy explains: "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" (*Return* 76). To Diggory Venn, Eustacia confesses that "[t]here is a sort of beauty in the

scenery . . . but it is a jail to me" (Hardy, *Return* 98).

However, despite her continual desire to escape the Heath, Eustacia dies there and will never be able to do so again. As the hatred of society for a passionate and bold woman restricts her prospects, she is forced to die in a miserable environment. "It will be the eternal irony of this poetic figure that no reader will ever be able to dissociate her from the lonely and gloomy setting from which she made her desperate vain attempt to escape," Joseph Warren Beach writes in his essay (Beach, 1962, 103).

In Heath, Eustacia thinks that the worlds of Budmouth, Paris, and even America contain the promise of excitement and perfection. Eustacia, according to Beach, is "a woman of rich and stormy passions, pent up in a lonely place, and longing for the larger and livelier movement of the great world" (Beach, 1962, 80). Eustacia asks, "But do I desire unreasonably much in wanting what is called life—music, poetry, passion, war, and all the beating and pulsing that are going on in the great arteries of the world? That was the shape of my youthful dream" (Hardy, *Return* 283). Lionel Johnson says that Eustacia "was a dreamer of great dreams, and in love with the imageries of a heroic life" (Johnson, 1973, 194). He adds that "Eustacia is beautiful, fitful, imperious, discontented, and inexperienced; she hates the great lonely heath and makes an ideal of Budmouth" (Johnson, 1973, 43). Eustacia is immediately fascinated with Clym Yeobright and his return from Paris because she is so enamored with the possibilities of the outer world. As a way out of the "cruel taskmaster" of the Heath, she views him as her only option (Hardy, *Return* 190). Eustacia Vye's desire for Clym Yeobright's connection to Paris makes him attractive," J. Hillis Miller writes in his essay "Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye, and Paris." It is not him that Eustacia loves about Clym. It is what he seems to stand for or what he

promises her. (Miller, 1970, 129). Since Clym represents the romance of Paris in Eustacia's eyes, she is instantly attracted to his name. Miller illustrates that "Eustacia falls in love with Clym before she even sees him, falls in love because he promises access to that celestial place, Paris" (Miller, 1970, 129).

Eustacia's marriage with Clym occurs because she automatically assumes that he will rescue her from Heath. She believes that their ambitions and goals in life are the same. Clym asks Eustacia to marry him, but the focus is not on love or devotion but the conflict between their goals: Hardy insinuates the impending conflict as follows: "Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym" (Return 178).

"If you'll agree [to go back to Paris,] I'll give my promise without making you wait a minute longer . . ."

"I have vowed not to go back, Eustacia . . . Will you marry me?"

"I cannot tell."

"Now—never mind Paris; it is no better than other spots. Promise, sweet!"

"You will never adhere to your education plan, I am quite sure, and then it will be all right for me; and so I promise to be yours forever and ever."  
(Hardy, Return 202)

The reader can sense the tension between Eustacia and Clym and their respective misunderstandings throughout the discourse; sadly, they are oblivious to themselves. The

conflict, according to Laura Green, is between Eustacia's "social restlessness" and Clym's "reforming intellectual zeal" (Green, 1995, 524). The reader can see the conflict of interests, but the pair cannot. According to Shirley A. Stave,

Eustacia and Clym marry for reasons that guarantee failure. Clym assumes marriage will relieve him of the distress of passion and will provide him a helpmate in his mission to educate the Egdon folk. Eustacia marries because her boredom is great and her choices are limited . . . in the isolated world of the Heath, she has no other suitors (Stave 60).

When Clym's eyesight fades, and he has to rely on chopping furze for a job, she grows unsatisfied. "But it's so dreadful—a furze cutter!" she says. And you, a guy who has traveled the globe, knows French and German and is capable of far more than this" (Hardy, Return 258). He loses importance in her eyes when she no longer sees him as the noble guy who can whisk her away from Heath and fulfill her desire for adventure. Soon later, she finds Wildeve at a local village event and agrees to his invitation to dance, allowing old desires to resurface as new ones are stifled. She subsequently instructs him to prepare the carriage to whisk her away from Heath and her life with Clym in a final bid for passionate adventure. He appears to be her sole method of escaping dullness and gaining access to excitement. She does not feel bound to Clym by the bonds of marriage because she is such a passionate and independent lady. She can leave

him and his ties behind and pursue adventure elsewhere.

Eustacia's escape plot, however, falls apart. Whether she slips and falls from the slick bridge or jumps to escape her never-ending quest for fulfillment, her doom is certain. She feels compelled to flee since society's established methods cannot tolerate her passionate nature. "She is prevented from coming into being in a world that denies women's autonomy, identity, purpose, and power," Morgan asserts (Morgan, 1966, 82).

"Hardy recognized women's physical, mental, and emotional susceptibility to the convention and their subsequent capitulation in the face of seemingly overwhelming social pressures," says Jane Thomas (Thomas, 1999, 48). Hardy does not condemn Eustacia's acts; rather, she is shown as a victim of her culture, helplessly caught in an unloving and unsympathetic environment. Her death, in the end, elicits compassion from readers and pushes them to see the futile battle of those dedicated few to feel satisfied and accepted in the rigid society of their day.

## Conclusion

Throughout *The Return of the Native*, which was written over the course of 17 years, Hardy expresses his ever-growing scorn and dissatisfaction with the Victorian image of women. He begins by showing Eustacia Vye's deviance and empathizing with the problems of the lady who is not welcomed. This deviance shows his growing dissatisfaction with society and desire to better women's lives from the conventions.

Women's passionate, deviant stereotype is used by Hardy to demonstrate the conflict between emotional fulfillment and societal intervention. Such a lady, such as Eustacia, can find fulfillment, but only provided society does

not intervene and sabotage her goals. Because of the traditional perception of the angel as a controlled and delicately feminine figure, the function of the dreamer has been marginalized. Societal pressure or males interfering might cause such a woman to feel anxious or unsatisfied in her relationship. As a result, she feels a sense of restlessness and uneasiness due to her culture's whims and desires. To Hardy's credit, she always portrays Eustacia as a victim of the times. She is seen as a divergence from the norm since she does not correspond to the home ideal.

Hardy critiques the encroachment to highlight the anguish that follows from society's interference in women's lives. People who do not comprehend or empathize with Eustacia's plight ultimately lead to her death. Because of her discontentment and tragic end, Eustacia blames society. To emphasize the necessity for reform and unprejudiced thinking in his culture, Hardy demonstrated the suffering of women and personalized the nebulous and abstract stereotypes of Victorian society.

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