

## Nature vs Human Desire in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*

**\*Dr. Vijay Kumar Banshiwal**

### Abstract

Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* presents a profound conflict between the indifferent power of nature and the intense desires of human beings. Egdon Heath, the central setting of the novel, symbolizes an ancient, unchanging natural force that dominates the lives of the characters. In contrast, individuals such as Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, and Damon Wildeve are driven by strong personal ambitions, emotional needs, and dreams of escape or fulfillment. Their desires often clash with the limitations imposed by their environment, leading to frustration, misunderstanding, and tragedy. Hardy suggests that nature is not concerned with human hopes or suffering; instead, it remains constant and indifferent. This highlights his tragic vision of life, where human beings struggle against forces beyond their control. Ultimately, the novel reveals that human desire, though powerful and passionate, is often powerless in the face of the vast and unchanging presence of nature.

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy's, Personal Ambitions, Nature and Desire, Clym Yeobright, Environment.

### I. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) is widely regarded as one of the most significant Victorian novelists and a leading figure in English literary realism. His works often reflect a deep concern with rural life, human suffering, and the indifferent forces of nature and fate that shape human existence. Unlike many Victorian writers who emphasized moral progress and social optimism, Hardy presents a more tragic vision of life, where human beings struggle against forces beyond their control. His novels are deeply rooted in the region of Wessex, a semi-fictional representation of rural southwest England, which serves as both a physical and symbolic landscape in his fiction.

*The Return of the Native* (1878) is one of Hardy's most powerful novels and a central work in his Wessex series. The story is set primarily on Egdon Heath, a vast, dark, and ancient landscape that dominates the narrative both physically and symbolically. Egdon Heath is not merely a background setting but functions almost as a living presence in the novel. It reflects permanence, indifference, and timelessness in contrast to the emotional instability and desires of the human characters. Through this setting, Hardy creates a powerful atmosphere that shapes the lives and destinies of his characters.

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The central theme of the novel is the conflict between nature and human desire. The characters in the novel—especially Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, and Damon Wildeve—are driven by intense personal ambitions, passions, and dreams of escape or fulfillment. However, their desires often come into conflict with the unchanging and indifferent force of nature represented by Egdon Heath. This struggle highlights Hardy's belief that human will is often powerless against larger natural and existential forces.

The significance of *The Return of the Native* lies in its contribution to Hardy's broader literary vision. As part of his Wessex fiction, the novel explores the relationship between individuals and their environment, emphasizing how landscape and nature shape human identity and destiny. It also reflects Hardy's philosophical outlook, often described as deterministic or pessimistic, where human aspirations are frequently defeated by fate, environment, or chance.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how nature and human passion interact and conflict within the novel. It aims to explore the symbolic role of Egdon Heath and examine how human desires are shaped, restricted, or destroyed by natural and environmental forces. This research is guided by the following questions: How does Thomas Hardy represent nature in *The Return of the Native*? How do human desires conflict with natural forces throughout the narrative? And what broader message does Hardy convey about human limitations in the face of nature and fate? Through these questions, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of Hardy's tragic vision of life and the enduring relevance of his themes.

## II. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of nature in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, particularly the symbolic and structural importance of Egdon Heath. It also aims to analyze the desires, ambitions, and emotional struggles of key characters in the novel. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore the conflict between human will and the natural environment, highlighting how external forces shape human destiny. Another important objective is to understand Hardy's pessimistic philosophy of life, which presents human beings as limited and often powerless against the indifferent forces of nature and fate.

## III. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary research methodology to examine Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. The primary method used is textual analysis, focusing on a close reading of the novel to identify and interpret key themes, symbols, and narrative patterns related to the conflict between nature and human desire. Particular attention is given to the representation of Egdon Heath and its influence on the characters' lives and decisions.

In addition, the research uses a close reading approach to analyze significant passages involving major characters such as Eustacia Vye, Clym Yeobright, and Damon Wildeve. This helps in understanding how their emotions, ambitions, and failures are shaped by the natural environment and social conditions.

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A literary and thematic analysis framework is also applied to explore broader ideas such as determinism, pessimism, and the symbolic role of landscape in the novel. This approach allows for a structured interpretation of recurring motifs and conflicts within the text.

Furthermore, the study incorporates secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and academic books on Thomas Hardy and Victorian literature. These sources provide critical perspectives that support and enrich the analysis. By combining primary textual interpretation with established scholarly insights, the research offers a balanced and comprehensive understanding of Hardy's thematic concerns.

#### **IV. Literature Review**

Critical studies on Thomas Hardy's fiction have consistently emphasized his distinctive treatment of nature as an active and powerful force in shaping human destiny. Scholars generally agree that Hardy's novels move beyond simple pastoral descriptions to present nature as indifferent, sometimes even hostile, to human aspirations. In *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath has been widely analyzed as a central symbolic element, representing timelessness, permanence, and cosmic indifference. Many critics interpret the heath not merely as a setting but as a shaping force that influences both character development and narrative outcome.

Scholarly interpretations of Egdon Heath often highlight its role as a symbolic and almost supernatural presence in the novel. It is seen as a force that contrasts sharply with the emotional volatility of the characters, reinforcing Hardy's tragic vision. Research on Hardy's fiction also frequently explores themes of tragedy and determinism, suggesting that human beings are ultimately subject to forces such as fate, environment, and chance beyond their control.

However, while extensive research exists on symbolism and determinism in Hardy's work, there remains a noticeable gap in the psychological interpretation of the interaction between nature and human desire. Few studies deeply explore how natural forces influence the inner emotional and psychological states of characters. This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on the psychological dimension of this interaction alongside traditional literary analysis.

#### **V. Analysis and Discussion**

In *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy presents a powerful conflict between the indifferent forces of nature and intense human desire. Egdon Heath symbolizes a timeless and unchanging natural world, while characters like Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright embody ambition, passion, and the desire to escape their environment. Their struggles show that human aspirations often clash with natural limitations, leading to disappointment and tragedy. Hardy suggests that nature is far more powerful and enduring than individual human will.

In modern times, this theme remains highly relevant. Ecologically, it reflects the importance of respecting nature and recognizing human dependence on the environment. The novel also resonates psychologically, as people today still struggle between personal desires and external limitations such as society, circumstances, and mental pressures. Thus, Hardy's vision continues to offer valuable

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insight into the fragile balance between human ambition and the natural world.

### **Egdon Heath as a Force of Nature**

Egdon Heath stands at the centre of *The Return of the Native* not merely as a physical setting but as a powerful symbolic force. Hardy presents the heath as timeless, vast, and indifferent to human life. It exists long before the characters are born and continues unchanged after their struggles and deaths, emphasizing its permanence in contrast to human transience. The heath symbolizes stability and continuity, while human life is shown as fragile and constantly changing. Through detailed descriptions, Hardy elevates Egdon Heath almost to the status of a character in its own right, shaping the mood, events, and emotional tone of the novel. Its dark, ancient presence reflects the insignificance of human desires in the larger scheme of nature.

### **Human Desire and Ambition**

In contrast to the indifferent natural world, the characters are driven by intense personal desires and ambitions. Eustacia Vye represents passionate longing and escapism; she dreams of leaving Egdon Heath for a more exciting and urban life. Clym Yeobright, on the other hand, embodies moral ambition and intellectual idealism, seeking to return from Paris to serve as a teacher among his people. Damon Wildevve is guided by impulsive desire and emotional instability, particularly in his relationships. Each character, in different ways, reflects the complexity and intensity of human longing, which often clashes with reality.

### **Conflict Between Nature and Desire**

The central tension of the novel arises from the conflict between human desire and the restrictive power of nature. Egdon Heath imposes limitations on the characters, both physically and psychologically, restricting their dreams and movements. Eustacia's desire to escape, Clym's idealistic plans, and Wildevve's emotional choices all ultimately fail in the face of larger environmental and social forces. Hardy portrays nature as indifferent to human suffering, suggesting that human beings struggle in a world that does not respond to their hopes or ambitions.

### **Role of Fate and Determinism**

Hardy's philosophy in the novel is strongly linked to determinism, where human beings appear to be controlled by forces beyond their understanding or control. Events in the story often seem inevitable rather than accidental, reinforcing a sense of tragic destiny. The characters' choices are important, but they are constantly shaped by circumstances, environment, and chance. This creates a worldview in which suffering and failure are not exceptions but natural outcomes of existence.

### **Symbolism and Philosophical Meaning**

Symbolically, nature in the novel represents cosmic indifference, a vast system that does not prioritize human emotion or ambition. In contrast, human desire becomes a symbol of limitation and illusion, revealing the gap between what people want and what reality allows. Through this contrast,

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Hardy suggests a philosophical vision of life that is tragic but deeply insightful, emphasizing the fragility of human aspiration in an uncaring universe.

#### VI. Critical Evaluation

Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* is widely admired for its powerful symbolism and deep psychological insight. One of its greatest strengths lies in the portrayal of Egdon Heath, which functions not only as a physical setting but also as a symbolic force representing permanence, indifference, and natural power. Hardy's ability to merge landscape with human emotion creates a rich and immersive narrative. Additionally, the novel provides profound psychological depth in its characters, especially in their inner conflicts, desires, and emotional struggles. The tension between personal ambition and environmental limitation is depicted with remarkable sensitivity and realism.

However, the novel also has certain limitations, particularly its overly pessimistic worldview. Hardy often presents human beings as helpless victims of fate, nature, and circumstance, leaving little room for free will or positive transformation. This deterministic outlook can be seen as reducing human agency and emphasizing suffering over growth or redemption. Some critics argue that this makes the novel emotionally heavy and philosophically one-sided.

When compared with Victorian optimism and realism, Hardy's vision stands apart. While many Victorian writers emphasized progress, moral development, and social improvement, Hardy focuses on limitation, failure, and the indifferent power of nature. His realism is darker and more tragic, challenging the dominant belief in human progress during his time.

In modern interpretations, the novel has gained new relevance through ecological and existential readings. Ecocritical approaches highlight Hardy's awareness of nature as an autonomous force, not merely a backdrop for human activity. Existential interpretations, on the other hand, view the novel as a reflection on human isolation and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. Thus, despite its pessimism, *The Return of the Native* continues to offer valuable insights into the relationship between humans, nature, and existence itself.

#### VII. Conclusion

This study has explored the central conflict between nature and human desire in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. The analysis reveals that Egdon Heath functions as a powerful symbolic force that shapes and restricts human actions, while the characters are driven by intense ambitions, emotions, and dreams of escape. The interaction between these two forces results in repeated failure and tragedy, highlighting Hardy's belief in the limitations of human will.

The findings reinforce Hardy's tragic vision of life, where individuals are often powerless against the indifferent forces of nature, fate, and circumstance. Human desire, though strong and passionate, is frequently shown to be illusory when confronted with the permanence and stability of the natural world.

In modern contexts, the novel remains highly relevant. Ecologically, it reflects the relationship between humans and the environment, emphasizing nature's dominance over human control. Psychologically, it explores inner conflicts between desire and reality, making Hardy's vision meaningful for contemporary discussions of identity, environment, and existential struggle.

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