The Natives and Their Returns in Thomas Hardy’s The Return of the Native

Jason Burger
Western Connecticut State University Danbury, Connecticut

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol11/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
The Natives and Their Returns in Thomas Hardy's The Return of the Native

Keywords
Thomas Hardy, Victorian realist, The Return of the Native

This article is available in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol11/iss1/6
Although Thomas Hardy’s 1878 novel, *The Return of the Native*, appears to present a straightforward account of Clym Yeobright, the native, returning to the land of his home, Egdon Heath, such a simple rendering could prove an impediment to a complete understanding of the text. Many critics seem to take for granted Clym’s position as the title character despite exhaustive critical responses that often, inadvertently, suggest otherwise. Truly, other natives of the heath leave, both literally and figuratively, only to return to their natural homes and states of being. Diggory
Venn, for example, makes many trips on and off the heath and in and out of the story; also, each of his returns either coincides with or instigates some sort of crisis which serves to propel the plot, thereby making a strong case for Venn as the title character. Yet, it is ultimately Eustacia Vye, as the embodiment of the turbulent, passionate, and pagan aspects of the heath, who leaves her natural wanderings and ways of life and enters into a marriage with the hope of greater understanding and further travel, only to make a violent return to the heath culminating in her death.

Critics generally take one of two positions towards the native of this novel: they make passing reference to Clym as the native or stay entirely silent on the matter. Both approaches seem to be implicit acknowledgements of Clym’s nativity and prominence in the plot, and both signify a resulting disregard for the importance of this topic. On the one hand, Leonard Deen simply states that “Clym, the native returned, as furze-cutter” (209). Gillian Beer also calls Clym “the returning native” (523); Geoffrey Harvey notes that “Clym Yeobright . . . is brought back to his native heath” (66) while Perry Meisel goes so far as to say that “the real plot . . . does not really begin until Clym appears in the second book” (75-6). The other sources quoted in this essay do not take a position on the identity of the native.

At first glance, this unexamined “fact” makes good sense. Clym is certainly a native of the heath in a strict literal sense. He was born there, and his arrival in the novel is the most prominent homecoming of a native to the heath. However, it is important to note that the language used to
describe Clym’s appearance in the novel, used by Hardy as the title of the second book and echoed by Meisel, is not “return” but “arrival.” The mere fact that Hardy explicitly calls Clym’s appearance “The Arrival” instead of “The Return” would seem to be proof enough that Clym is not the title character nor is his homecoming truly a return. A return suggests a prerequisite “leaving,” also implying that the subject has been there before while an arrival suggests a sort of nascence. Although it is noted in the text that Clym “was coming home a’ Christmas” (Hardy 20) and had grown up on the heath, he has not been in the story except as an off-scene character. For Clym to return to the book, he must have already been in the story. While Clym’s homecoming may constitute a return in the fictional and extra-textual world of the characters, it is certainly not a return to the text itself. Therefore, the accepted critical position proves to be somewhat hasty. Meisel’s argument that the story does not even begin until Clym’s arrival is structurally patriarchal at best and essentially misogynistic at worst since the entire first book of The Return of the Native is called “The Three Women.” To discount entirely this first book as prologue seems narrow-minded and even naive. Furthermore, the first book is full of interesting characters, including other true natives that go on to make literal exits from and returns to the heath. It is certainly conceivable that one of these characters would be introduced to provide the early presence necessary for setting up a later leaving and return.

Diggory Venn is the first major character to make an appearance in the novel, and it comes after only twelve
pages. In fact, he is the second character introduced in the book—not counting the heath, which many critics note “as a central character in the novel” (Morgan 475). The first character, Captain Vye, is merely an instrument to reveal Venn’s purpose and his intriguing cargo. Like Clym, Venn is a literal native to the heath. He also admits early on that he had known Thomasin “as a lad before [he] went away in this trade” (Hardy 36). Venn possesses the same claims to nativity that Clym holds. By this account, Venn’s early appearance in the novel also constitutes a return of sorts—at least, the same sort of limited, superficial return that usually serves as justification for labeling Clym as a returning native. Venn has, prior to the beginning of the text, left the heath, left his normal life, and returned to this society as a reddleman. His “return” not only precedes Clym’s return but also opens the novel.

Venn leaves and returns to the text many other times throughout the narrative. After disappearing on business, Venn returns at the end of Chapter Seven in Book Two to take part in one of the most dramatic and cinematic scenes of the novel: the dice game with Wildeve. Not only is this scene artistically memorable but it is also incredibly significant to the development of the plot. Indeed, much of what follows in the novel can be seen to result directly from the outcome of this game and Venn’s subsequent mistake in unwittingly redistributing Mrs. Yeobright’s money. Certainly this return of Venn’s is much more dramatic and memorable than Clym’s somewhat droll arrival in the story and can be read as one of the major complications in the plot.
Yet this is not Venn’s only return, nor is it of the most consequence. A more significant return for Venn might be his final return: his reversion to his old self in Book Six, in which he is “no longer a reddleman, but exhibit[s] the strangely altered hues of an ordinary Christian countenance” (Hardy 316). This metamorphosis is a literal return to the heath that coincides with a return to his former countenance and character, pre-reddleman. Clym cannot compete with such a total return. Clym never really returns to the heath because he has changed too much to be a part of this society ever again. Clym comes back unable to relate to the rustics. His desire to open a school and “raise the class at the expense of individuals” (Hardy 147) is grossly condescending and demonstrates an affected and gentrified character. On the other hand, Venn returns and seamlessly integrates into the society by marrying Thomasin.

If Venn is Hardy’s title character and this final transformation/return is the climax or even denouement, then the book leads the reader to a very different conclusion than otherwise suggested. The novel seems to portray a taming of the pagan Otherness of the heath represented in the scarlet reddleman. Venn becomes a good Christian and marries Thomasin to provide what J.O. Bailey concisely terms a “happy ending” (1153). But such a conclusion seems to be far too religiously optimistic for Hardy. Indeed, Hardy would seem to suggest through such an ending that Christianity is the ideal way of life through which savage natives could be brought around to “become human being[s] again” (317). Knowing Hardy’s complex and conflicted attitude towards
religion, such a reading of this ending is problematic. Furthermore, there is a limited Christian presence in the novel other than the rustics’ seemingly ritualistic church attendance, which is quite dull in comparison to the vivid, pagan bonfires (17) and passionate maypole celebrations (318). Christian primacy is not supported in the text without perhaps an assumed purity of motives and undue significance attributed to Venn.

Another problem with this reading is that if Venn is the native, then the book should, perhaps, have been called *The Returns of the Native*. Indeed, each of Venn’s returns coincides with important plot developments and it is difficult, if not impossible, to judge which is the most important return. Bailey provides a tantalizing solution to this quandary with the suggestion that “Diggory, though native to Egdon, was also a visitant” (1151). Diggory Venn does not so much return to the heath as visit it on a few, very important occasions. Ultimately, this essay is not necessarily suggesting that Venn is the native of the title but merely that the same argument used to prove Clym to be the native can be used—and, when followed to its logical conclusion, used more effectively—to prove that Venn is the title character. Therefore, previous readings of the novel asserting Clym’s titular significance fail to reason this point adequately. A new understanding of the characters in this book is in order.

Up to this point of the essay, the focus has been primarily on the “return” aspect of the title. Since both Clym and Venn were born on the heath, they are natives, so there has been no need to address the requirement of nativity. Yet
there is another aspect of nativity that has been neglected and must now be addressed: it is that of affinity with the land and society. Such affinity is most clearly exemplified by one character who the critic Robert Evans calls “Hardy’s most memorable heroine” (251). Eustacia Vye was not biologically born on the heath but remains a native for other reasons which will be expatiated upon below. But first it will be interesting to point out that early editions of the text presented Eustacia (as Avice) as a literal native of the heath. Her father was Jonathon Vye and her mother was considered to be a witch (Gatrell 355-56). It is only in the later drafts that Avice is changed to Eustacia and is no longer a literal native of the heath. The reasons for this change and ramifications have provided fodder for much critical scrutiny and will not be fully addressed here. Perhaps Hardy did not consider a geographical requirement to nativity necessary for Eustacia’s character. For the purpose of this essay, it will suffice to note that Eustacia was considered, at least at one point, to be truly a native and Hardy most likely relocated her birthplace to Budmouth to emphasize her Otherness from the culture of the heath-inhabitants, not necessarily the heath itself.

Even though she appears at variance with the other inhabitants of the heath, Eustacia is more a part of that society than she would like to admit. Though some of the rustics say that Eustacia is a witch (most notably, Susan Nunsuch) and therefore some sort of outsider or Other, it is reasonable to argue that the witch is as much part of this society as the pastor or the furze-cutter. Even Susan
Nunsuch, who so vehemently accuses Eustacia of witchcraft, practices her own forms of voodoo and black magic towards the end of the novel. In this instance, a native by all reckonings shares the same traits with Eustacia that are often used to highlight Eustacia’s Otherness. Eustacia the “witch” is very much a part of the heath’s pagan and superstitious society.

Another example of Eustacia’s affinity with the rustic society is the incident of the mummer show. Regarding the show, the narrator debates whether it is merely a traditional pastime or a powerful revival (107). Yet, either way, it is a yearly occurrence in which all the natives of the county take part. Eustacia typically shuns such performances, but when the opportunity arrives to see Clym through the show, she reveals that she “had occasionally heard the part recited before” (109) and could actually deliver the part better than the annual participants. Eustacia claims to be separate from this society but possesses the knowledge and ability to partake in their traditions, their superstitions, and their culture. Even against her own will, she shares some of the culture of the rustics who were born there, making her at least a small part of the society.

Ultimately, regardless of any tenuous connection with its inhabitants, it is the heath itself with which Eustacia most closely identifies. The heath, as Hardy makes clear, is a powerful, eternal, pagan, living, and breathing entity. It is often personified, as when the heath is said to “slowly awake and listen” (9). Also, “Haggard Egdon,” is said to have “appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently
learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair” (9). This statement reveals two very interesting aspects. For one, the word “appealed” suggests that the true spirits of the heath are not necessarily of the heath but drawn to it. There is an essence of the heath that attracts a certain type of character and necessarily envelops these individuals as true spirits of the land. The second part of this quotation explains the nature of the true native: a subtle character who does not respond to traditional concepts of beauty.

Eustacia, more than any other character, illustrates this instinctive response to nontraditional beauty. D.H. Lawrence claims that the foremost spirit of the heath is Eustacia: “the natives have little or nothing in common with the place” (421). In this sense, even though she was not actually born in Egdon, Eustacia embodies its dark turbulence more than anyone else in the novel. Hardy himself states that Eustacia’s “articulation was but as another phase of the same discourse as [the bluffs and bushes of the heath]” (50-1). Hardy also contrasts Eustacia to true foreigners when he describes her traversing at night the paths that “a mere visitor would have passed unnoticed even by day” (52). She is no visitor to the land; she knows it as well as, if not better than, those people who were actually born within the boundaries of Egdon. Gillian Beer goes so far as to say that “the most intimate expression of physical familiarity between the heath and its denizens is the natives’ power of crossing and recrossing it in darkness” (519). Indeed, Hardy takes pains to identify Eustacia with the
heath, even extolling her as the “absolute queen here” (54). To be a native is more than a few words on a birth certificate; it is also affinity with the land. With a terrain as alive and powerful as Egdon Heath, which comes alive when “other things sank brooding” (9), the true native of the heath is one who awakens to the night in kinship with the earth. When she first appears in the novel, Eustacia rises from a hill as a “perfect, delicate, and necessary finish . . . so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure” (15). Eustacia seems to be born from the heath in this, her first appearance in the novel. And even more than a symbolic birth in this cinematic moment is the distinct possibility that hers is an eternally ancient and everlasting existence. She is as natural to the heath as the furze that lines its ridges, the wild horses that roam its pockets, or the darkness that seems to issue from its bosom.

Yet the heath is turbulent and “harassed by the irrepressible New” (Hardy 11). Eustacia shares this inner turmoil, and as Leonard Deen points out, “the heath mirrors the minds of its inhabitants, and for Eustacia it is hell” (210). Eustacia wants to escape the heath, indeed, to escape herself. For her, Clym becomes the way out. Eustacia’s naturally passionate desire precipitates her belief that Clym will make her happy despite her solitary nature. She falls in love with the idea of him before she even sees his face. All that he signifies—Paris, culture, high society—fulfills Eustacia’s desire to get even further away from the heath and her painfully tempestuous nature. The marriage between Clym and Eustacia is the “leaving” that precipitates Eustacia’s
“return” to the heath. Eustacia is “queen of the solitude” (Hardy 16); and therefore marriage, with its cohabitation and promise of some place in society, is antithetical to Eustacia’s nature. She is miserable through most of her time at Alderworth because she is limited by the home, civilization, and social constructs. She is unable to fulfill her evanescent yet passionate dreams and therefore becomes quite oppressed. Hardy’s language to describe Alderworth reflects this isolation: “The heath and changes of weather were quite blotted out . . . [Eustacia and Clym] were enclosed . . . hid from their surroundings . . . the absolute solitude in which they lived . . . had the disadvantage of consuming their mutual affections” (201). Alderworth appears to be cut off from the heath and Eustacia’s natural environment. Here she is in limbo between her passionate and unrealistic dreams of Paris and the primitive, indigenous pull of Egdon Heath, just beyond the fence of Alderworth’s domestic purgatory.

It is no surprise that Eustacia feels the pull to escape Alderworth as well as her oppressive marriage and make her inevitable return. Mrs. Yeobright’s death with its associated guilt and Wildeve’s inheritance with its contingent possibilities of escape are mere catalysts to Eustacia’s inherent desire to return to the heath from which she has come. First, she returns to her home at Mistover but still feels conflicted. Wildeve’s offer to remove her entirely, once and for good, seems like a viable option, but Eustacia remains at variance with herself. Her soliloquy in the storm shows her conflict: “‘Can I go, can I go?’ she moaned. ‘He’s not great enough for me to give myself to—he does not
suffice for my desire! . . . O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world!” (294). Eustacia exhibits what could almost be termed psychomachy, a battle for where her soul will reside. Can she bear to separate herself from the heath and go to Paris where, because of her inadequate companion, she might not be the queen that she is on the heath? Or does she remain a part of Egdon, succumbing to the agitated passion that is such a part of her nature? Ultimately, whether she makes a conscious decision to dive into the violent, Charybdian Shadwater Weir or she accidentally falls in, Eustacia’s plunge consummates her return to the heath in a physical way. Eustacia becomes one with Egdon Heath in her final moments. Gillian Beer argues that “the return of the native figures a return to nativity—to the place of birth, and, further, to the mother who gave birth in that place” (522). Although Beer goes on to say that re-entering the womb is impossible, certainly Eustacia’s fall into the Weir can be seen as a symbolic return to the womb of Egdon Heath, her true mother. Eustacia’s biological mother is mentioned only in passing, merely as the wife of Eustacia’s father or in the passing reference to “her mother’s death” (63); both remarks seem to be significant more for what they do not say than for what is said. Eustacia was born at Budmouth but is a child of Egdon Heath, her surrogate mother. Eustacia’s death is the return of the native to her home, her symbolic place of nativity, the womb of Shadwater Weir.

Gillian Beer focuses primarily on questions of migration and whether or not a native, once he or she has
left, can ever truly return to his or her homeland without a drastically changed perspective and therefore a loss of his or her claim to nativity. Both Clym and Diggory Venn seem to prove Beer’s argument that “in Hardy’s imagination ...return is not possible for the native without the idea of retrogression” (524). Clym reverts to a furze-cutter, Venn reverts to a pre-reddleman, Christian state. But Beer, as is characteristic of most of the critics, ignores Eustacia’s return. Eustacia’s return is not retrogression but an inability to reconcile conflicting aspects of her nature—the same aspects that play out in the dramatic turmoil of the heath. Eustacia is the embodiment of the heath’s struggle, and her death signifies an escape from the irreconcilable realm of human emotion into the eternal, natural afterworld of the heath, the earth—the land of her nativity.

Eustacia’s “return,” therefore, seems to be a much more powerful return than Clym’s. If Clym is the titular native that comes back—and whose somewhat dry return is also his first appearance in the novel after 100 pages—then the reader must see his return to be merely a necessary precursor to the real action of the book as opposed to the action itself. If Eustacia is the native, then her return corresponds to the powerful climax of the novel. Whether she constitutes a tragic heroine or even a heroine at all is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, she is certainly the focus of the novel and arguably its most captivating character.
Works Cited


Beer, Gillian. “Can the Native Return?” Mallet 504-524.


