



## An Ecological Interpretation of *The Return of the Native*

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### Abstract

This essay aims to study *The Return of the Native* from the perspective of ecocriticism. Hardy indicates nature possesses its intrinsic value and nature and humans are equal in the ecological system. Human's alienation from nature leads to the disharmonious man-nature relationship. It reveals the deep natural ecological thought contained in the novel: man should see nature's intrinsic value and build harmonious man-nature relationship.

**Key words:** Thomas Hardy; *The Return of the Native*; Harmony; Nature

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### INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is a famous novelist and poet of the British Victorian era in the 19th century. He has written a lot in his life. In addition to short stories, essays and poetry, he is most famous for "characters and environment novels". The series, *The Return of the Native*, which first published in 1878, it is one of Hardy's masterpieces. The novel portrays a large number of natural ecology and explores the relationship between characters and the representative of nature, the Egdon heath.

The world in *The Return of the Native* no longer focuses on people, but has become a world centering on the "heath." This "world" includes not only human

activities, but also various changes in the mountains and rivers, the sun and the moon, the sounds of birds and beasts. The world in *The Return of the Native* has been expanded to the entire ecological layer. These natural objects have their own sounds and have the independent existence of the soul. This subverts the human-centered world in traditional literature and reflects Hardy's ecological overall view.

### 1. THE EGDON HEATH: AN INDEPENDENT SUBJECT WITH LIFE FORM

The heath is a part of nature and is often referred to as a deserted area. In the concept of the ancient ancestors, the heath is a wild, barren and desolate place that threatens human existence. It is also mysterious, evil, and unpredictable. Thoreau sees the heath as a cultural carrier that is more advanced than civilization, the cultural value carried by the heath is immeasurable. In Hardy's view, nature is a biological community composed of all beings. In this biological community, each being has its own life value and intrinsic purpose. As an ecological whole with natural value, the heath is the root of human existence. Human beings depend on the wilderness and draw a steady stream of life from the wasteland. It can be said that the creation of the natural prototype of the wilderness reflects the advanced ecological concept of Hardy's emphasis on nature and the importance of life.

In *The Return of the Native*, the heath is a small universe, with its own independent meaning, a certain human irresistible deterrent force. "The vast tract of unenclosed wild" (1981, p. 2) Egdon heath, from the past to the present, has not changed at all, still retaining the most primitive state of nature. "Ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had won the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular

formation.” (1981, p. 5) This heath has been unruly since ancient times, with grandeur and majesty that cannot be destroyed. Civilization is its deadly enemy. It is integrated with the sky and shows the original realm of human and world, and the natural integration of heaven and earth. In the face of the Egdon heath, human beings are so negligible. The heath also has its own emotions and moods: “It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, not tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring.” (1981, p. 5) Because Hardy abounds with feelings for nature, his works are full of concern and compliment for nature. The beauty of nature stems from the sublimity of nature. The sublimity of nature stems from the vitality, vitality and power of nature. People often advocate the morality and philosophy through the discovery and praise of natural beauty.

The heath also determines the fate of the characters who live on it. For Eustacia and Wildeve who resist it, the heath made their destruction; even Mrs. Yeobright dies of being bitten by the poisonous snake on the heath because of her opposition to the return of her son to the heath; and Thomasin who loves heath found her own destiny and happiness on the heath. In view of it, Hardy shows readers a unique environment that is not subject to human training and use. Compared with the environmental depictions in Hardy’s other works, the environment in *The Return of the Native* is unique. As Lance (1978, p. 38) points out: “Almost nowhere in his works is there a ‘pure’ description of personified, generalized, anthropomorphized nature.”

## 2. THE PLANTS AND ANIMALS ON THE HEATH: MAN-NATURE HARMONY

*The Return of the Native* also conveys a deeper understanding of the man-nature relationship. For Hardy, nature is the source of life. Except for human beings, all creatures in nature are inartificial products. They have the same rights as human beings living in nature, and human beings are like brothers and sisters. Human beings are “bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun” (Lance, 1978, p. 188). People should care for other creatures in nature, protect them, live in harmony with them, and not abuse them indiscriminately. Hardy warmly praises the friendly and harmonious relationship between man and nature. The natural simplicity and beauty described by Hardy’s are endless. When the protagonist of the novel, Clym, works on the heath, the surrounding creatures regard Clym as one of their kind, treating him with enthusiasm and kind. “Bees hummed around his ears with an intimate air, and tugged at the heath and furze-flowers at his side in such numbers as to weigh them down to the sod. The strange amber-colored butterflies which Egdon produced, and which were never seen elsewhere, quivered in the breath

of his lips, alighted upon his bowed back, and sported with glittering point of his hook as he flourished it up and down. Huge flies, buzzed about him without knowing that he was a man.” (1981, p. 229) Clym and the natural creatures are completely integrated, reaching the highest level of harmony. With the rapid development of modern industrial civilization at the end of the 19th century, the capitalist mode of production invaded the British countryside, causing the patriarchal social foundation to collapse, the traditional economic structure to collapse, the natural appearance to be destroyed, and individual farmers to go bankrupt and poverty. Hardy witnessed the rapid development of social material wealth and people’s wanton destruction of nature. Faced with the harsh reality, Hardy deeply ponders the relationship between man and nature and expresses his thoughts in his works. The life of Hardy’s life is far away from the dust, close to nature, fully proving his deep love for nature. With the increasing global ecological crisis, human beings are pyramidally worried about their living environment, and they are calling for the ecological protection movement, calling on people to love nature, return to nature, obey the laws of nature, and live in harmony with nature. Nowadays, with the continuous destruction of the earth’s ecological environment, the killing of animals and even the emergence of some wild animals are on the verge of extinction. People begin to care about animals and call for the protection of animals. However, nearly a century ago, the outstanding British writer Thomas Hardy has already revealed in his novels his ecological consciousness of advocating nature, returning to nature, and living in harmony with nature. expressed his awareness of protecting animals. Therefore, from the perspective of the overall ecological balance system, Hardy’s keen foresight has already been fully reflected in his works.

The nature in Hardy’s novels is not only about natural landscapes, they have intrinsic life values, they have their own thoughts and feelings, and simultaneously they are intimate with the minds of the characters. All the beings in the biological community of nature are interrelated and interdependent. The image of these things is a natural feature of Hardy. Moreover, Hardy’s sympathy and concern for natural beings reflects his awareness of ecological equality: in the ecosystem, natural creatures have the same rights to human existence and development as human beings, and human moral care should be extended to the biosphere instead of destroying the biological species. Facing the harsh reality, Hardy thought deeply about the relationship between man and nature, and expressed his thoughts in his works. Hardy’s life is far away from the hustle and bustle and close to nature, which fully proves his deep love for nature. With today’s increasing global ecological crisis, human beings are more and more worried about their living environment, and they have begun to call for an ecological protection movement, calling on people to love nature and return to nature.

### 3. THE PRACTITIONERS OF THE HEATH SPIRIT: THE SONS OF NATURE

*The Return of the Native* shows Hardy's profound insight about the man-nature relationship. Ecocriticism shifts the focus of criticism from social relations to the relationship between man and nature, and regards people as both members of the ecosystem and members of society. It ponders and explores the relationship between man and nature, and attempts to improve this relationship, best reflecting the relationship between man and nature.

Hardy's work is not simply to write for the scene, but to try to convey his philosophical thinking about the man-nature relationship. *The Return of the Native* is a novel about nature, people and destiny. Hardy believes that nature is the source of life. Man is the product of nature, the Son of Nature. People should be close to nature, love nature, respect nature, and live in harmony with nature. Hardy's many characters with strong local flavors are affecting because those men and women are close to nature, and even parts of nature. The images of the Sons of Nature in *The Return of the Native* is undoubtedly the practitioners of the spirit of the heath. Their shape and temperament are not only similar to nature, but also closely dependent on the heath, gradually becoming a member of the heath. They are the faithful guardians of the heath, watching the overall harmony of the heath. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy succeeds in shaping the characters of three natural sons: Wenn, Clym, and Thomasin.

#### 3.1 The son of Nature - Wenn

A typical Son of Nature in the novel is Diggory Wenn, a reddleman who frequently travels through the heath. He is the regular customer of the heath and is used to living in it. As a red clay dealer, he stays in the heath all year round. Wenn's body is blood red, which is the color of the wasteland land. "He took two of these as he lay, and dragged them over him till one covered his head and shoulders, the other his back and legs. The reddleman would now have been quite invisible, even by daylight; the turves, standing upon him with the heather upwards, looked precisely as if they were growing." (1981, p.73) This depiction portrays that Wenn and the heath are very closely contacted. He is a part of the heath and integrated with the wilderness. For him, the heath is his old friend and good helper. His work depends on the heath and the vastness of the heath makes him close to help his beloved girl, Thomasin, without disturbing her. Later, even in the stormy night, relying on his familiarity with the heath, he can successfully lead the Thomasin through the heath. Wenn "limits and controls the action as much the same way as the heath itself does (1981, p. 50)." The vastness of the heath forged his open-minded character, even after being refused by Thomasin. He still selflessly helped her to get happiness. Even if her happiness means marrying another man, Wenn's sincerity made him finally win the

love of Thomasin. Wenn's life form is in harmony with the natural environment in which he lives, showing a primitive natural character.

#### 3.2 The son of Nature - Clym

Another striking Son of Nature in *The Return of the Native* is Clym. In many ecological literary works, nature has always been a spiritual habitat that pampers the human soul and brings comfort to humanity. Returning to nature should be the most reasonable choice for human beings to escape modern civilization. On the one hand, he felt the psychological trauma caused by modern civilization, and tried his best to encourage the protagonist to stay away from modern civilization and return to nature. On the other hand, the nature of his works is full of tragedy. Returning to nature is often not the most ideal choice for the characters in the novel. The relationship between nature and society has become a puzzled exploration of the protagonist of his works. Born and grown up on the heath, Clym is a faithful aboriginal of the heath and a person who is truly familiar with the heath. Although Clym has been doing jewelry business for many years in Paris, he is full of resentment against the principles of capitalism and plunder, so he resolutely stays away from the bustling city and returns to his hometown. On the heath, Clym is in the embrace of nature, working with the villagers and living a simple and frugal life. In Clym's view, the heath "is most exhilarating, and strengthening, and soothing (1981, pp.168-169)." He "would rather live on these hills than anywhere else in the world (1981, p.169)". Clym is closely intertwined with the heath from childhood, and anyone who stares at the heath would think of Clym.

As Hardy (1981, p. 157) points out: "If anyone knew the heath well it was Clym. He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odors. He might be said to be its product." When Hardy portrays this character, he highlights the returning life that Clym pursues and the essence of harmony with nature. Clym is actually a typical eco-man in the novel. Clym often walks alone on the heath and enjoys the surrounding natural scenery. His whole world is the stones, flowers, snakes, horses and insects on the heath "His familiars were creeping and winged things, and they seemed to enroll him in their band" (1981, pp. 228-229). Clym's life form is in accordance with the heath and shows a primitive natural character. Lance (1978, p. 47) considers Clym's life value "derives from or depends on a relationship with nature". The ecological ethics of equality between man and nature advocated by Hardy is completely embodied in Clym. The love for nature breeds Hardy's moral concern for the life value of natural beings, and is also a concentrated expression of his ecological ethical spirit.

#### 3.3 The son of Nature - Thomasin

Thomasin is also a native of the heath. Her innocent kindness is hailed as a beautiful bird on the heath. For

Thomasin, everything in the heath is beautiful. She loves the heath and never leaves it. The heath “were not as to Eustacia demons in the air, and malicious in every bush and bough” (1981, p. 330). for her. As she puts it: “I like what I was born near to; I admire its grim face.” (1981, p. 316) For Thomasin, the heath is also a great place to walk in the wild, where the green grass is still a paradise for her children. After the death of her husband, nature has healed the wounds of her heart: “Spring came and calmed her; the summer came and soothed her; the autumn arrived, and she began to be comforted.” (1981, p. 348) As “the most natural native of the heath” (1978, p. 40), Thomasin is close to nature, and nature brings her comfort, happiness and happiness. The harmonious man-nature relationship is better reflected on her. The disharmony between the heroine and the heath is far-reaching. Hardy gave the Egdon heath a strong will to control people’s betrayal of it to clarify that once the ecology is destroyed, the victim is not the wasteland but the man himself. He has such a vision that has a lot to do with his background in life. He lives in the transition period of the decline of the patriarchal system and the rise of modern civilization. The modern civilization characterized by telegraphs, telegraphs and machines has accelerated the expansion of people’s desires, which not only alienated themselves but also destroyed the natural ecological balance. Obviously, Hardy presented the results of people’s pursuit of market life to the reader in order to show that he eagerly hopes that people can live in harmony with the heath.

The Sons of Nature in *The Return of the Native* have established intimate and inseparable connections with the heath. They inherit the fine traditional virtues of the ancestors of the heath: diligence, loyalty, benevolence, simplicity, and endurance. Their life forms are in harmony with the living of the wilderness, showing a primitive natural character. By depicting the Sons of Nature, Hardy conveys his appreciation for the natural virtues that human beings should have, reflecting the ecological thoughts of advocating nature and returning to nature.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of ecocriticism, *The Return of the Native* has important enlightening significance for us to re-recognize nature and construct a new and interdependent relationship between man and nature. What Hardy wants to convey us is that natural forces are the nature of all things, and only social order established in accordance with the laws of nature is moral. The characters are no longer the center of the world, but a component of the ecosystem.

By deliberately rendering the mysterious magic of the Egdon heath, Hardy contrasts with the smallness and weakness of human beings. Simultaneously, he suggests people not easily violating the natural nature and neglecting the relationship between man and nature. Otherwise, human beings will eventually be punished and rejected by nature. In addition, Hardy’s comparison of the man-nature relationship shows that human beings can survive in the interaction with nature. When humans are close to nature, they can integrate into nature, and then experience nature, and get a happy life in harmony with nature.

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