

The Return of the Native by Thomas Hardy

1. In “Hardy and Folklore” James Gindin asserts that “Hardy organizes the novel around folk festivals with pagan origins,” notably the Guy Fawkes bonfire and the mummers’ play at Christmas time. “Hardy relates his mummers’ play to his other themes in *The Return of the Native*, for he has Eustacia usurp the role of the Turkish Knight, the villain, the character who kills the valiant Crusader but is finally slain by the righteous Saint George, as an indication of Eustacia’s role in the traditional community on Egdon Heath.” However, in “Hardy’s Mummers,” Robert Squillace asserts that Hardy was unaware of the pagan origins of *The Play of St. George*, and that his use of this mummers’ “play is not an example of unconscious paganism boiling beneath a veneer of conscious Christianity,” although Hardy took great care in the novel “to ensure that he included only material genuinely part of the folk tradition in it.” Hardy’s reason for using both the Guy Fawkes bonfire and the mummers’ play, insists Squillace, is that “they comprise an anti-reality, a mistaken science in which the truly educated or evolved can no longer maintain their belief.”

A. Evaluate the implications of Eustacia’s enacting the role of the Turkish Knight in “Through the Moonlight” (Book the Second, Chapter Five--pp. 102-108 in Norton edn.).

B. Summarize the traditions of the mummers’ play that Hardy mentions in *The Return of the Native*.

C. Continues Squillace, “the mummers’ play in *The Return of the Native* does not manifest the unconscious conflicts of the natives of Egdon Heath; rather, it reflects the evolutionary stage of heath society, the superstitious Christianity of the Middle Ages” (185). Assess the accuracy of this remark, then suggest how the play relates to the larger themes and issues of the novel, making it almost a play-within-a-play, as with “The Murder of Gonzago” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

D. Thomas Hardy in his reminiscences of local customs in William Archer’s *Real Conversations* (1904) stated that the village mummers of his childhood “would go to the farmhouses round, between Christmas and Twelfth Night doing some four or five performances each evening, and getting ale and money at every house” (as cited in Alan Brody, *The English Mummers and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery* [1970]: 15). How does even this brief account indicate that in the novel Hardy is manipulating the mumming tradition to serve his own ends?

2. Arthur Hopkins’s [seventh plate](#) for the *Belgravia* Serialisation of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (July 1878): “The stakes were won by Wildeve.”



Letters from Hardy to Hopkins indicate that the artist had not seen the entire text of the novel, but that, like the public, was seeing it a monthly installment at a time. Arthur Hopkins (1848-1930) was a pictorial illustrator for *Punch*, the *Illustrated London News*, and the *Graphic*, as well as *Belgravia*, for which magazine he also illustrated Wilkie Collins. Born and raised a Londoner, Hopkins was living in Kensington when he illustrated *The Return of the Native*, and so in all likelihood had little knowledge of the countryside and customs of rural Dorset.

A. The dicing scenes between Christian Cantle and Damon Wildeve, and then between Diggory Venn and Wildeve occur in Book Three, Chapters Seven and Eight. What visual clues does Hopkins provide to indicate the precise textual moment he is realizing in the above plate?

B. How does a relatively minor action (Christian's striking his boot on the ground after his initial losses) have serious consequences in the succeeding chapters? How is this chain-of-events related to one of the novel's major themes?

C. Richard G. Lillard in "Irony in Hardy and Conrad" suggests that "Hardy crystallizes his irony into firmly outlined scenes" such as this one. What is the source of the irony in these dicing scenes? For the complementary dice-games, see pp. 177-185 in the Norton edition of the novel (Book the Third: The Fascination).

D. According to Richard Corballis in "A Note on Mummery in *The Return of the Native*" in the fifth *Thomas Hardy Year Book* (1975), the dice games may be related to the custom whereby, upon entering a house, the mummers would silently engage the occupants in dicing, the dice being loaded in favour of the mummers: "their victory was apparently regarded as a kind of ritual offering to the supernatural powers, designed to ensure future good fortune." Similarly, when Wildeve and Venn play, Venn like the mummers is silent and Wildeve complains repeatedly that the dice are against him. The term "mummery," then thought to be related to the Danish "Momme," signifying "One who wears a mask," might have suggested to Hardy deception, duplicity, and victimization. How are these patterns important in the dice games and elsewhere in the book?

3. In his July 1895 preface to *The Return of the Native*, Hardy drew his reader's attention to the character, literary origins, and importance to the story of Egdon Heath (see Norton edition, p. 1), a sketch map of which appeared in the first volume edition of 1878.

A. In *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure* (1971; rpt. the Modern Critical Interpretations series, ed. Harold Bloom), Jean R. Brooks sees the heath as a catalyst to both the characters and the plot:

Egdon Heath, the resistant matter of the cosmos on which the action takes place, bears, shapes, nourishes, and kills conscious organisms possessed of its striving will without its unconsciousness of suffering. The six main characters take their key from Egdon. They all feel its pull through some affinity of temperament. [Bloom 21]

How does the heath function in the story to test the character of each of the six principals?

B. *Fiction and the Ways of Knowing: Essays on British Novels* (1978; rpt. in Bloom) regards Egdon Heath as a figure "in both narrative senses of 'figure,' as a person and as a trope" (Bloom 95). Throughout his poetic and fictional works Hardy exploits this history-laden landscape; here, he shapes the reader's responses to the heath by loading it with associations and connotations. Examine his opening description of it in "A Face on Which Time Makes But Little Impression" (2-5). Stipulate what these multiple associations are, and explain how these point towards the major issues and concerns of the novel.

C. John Patterson in "The 'Poetics' of *The Return of the Native*" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 6.3 (1960) notes that

Egdon Heath itself is altogether transfigured in being juxtaposed with the grisly underworld of the ancients and, though less frequently, with its Christian equivalent. (216)

Why does Hardy repeatedly use the heath to evoke hell, limbo, and Tartarus?

4. Aristotle says that the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and terror if he [or she] is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil but a mixture of both; and also that the tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is "better than we are," in the sense that he is of higher than ordinary moral worth. Such a man is exhibited

as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, to which he is led by his hamartia--his "error of judgment" or . . . tragic flaw. (One common form of hamartia in Greek tragedies was hubris, that "pride" or overweening self-confidence which leads a protagonist to disregard a divine warning or violate an important moral law.) M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*(1988): 190.

A. In his 31 January 1878 letter to illustrator Arthur Hopkins Hardy rated Clym Yeobright as the most important character in the book, but described Eustacia as "the wayward & erring heroine" (*Collected Letters*I: 53). In *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (1971), Michael Millgate accuses Eustacia of "impulsive actions . . . which drive the couple finally apart" but describes Clym as "Self-absorbed, isolated, humourless, . . . incapable of sympathetic communication with anyone outside himself" (139). Determine who is the book's tragic protagonist, Eustacia or Clym, using the points that Abrams and Millgate have raised.

B. Richard Benvenuto in "*The Return of the Native* as a Tragedy in Six Books" (*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 26, 1: 83-93), instead of criticizing Hardy's violating the five-part structure of Greek tragedy, feels that "the sixth book reshapes the drama of the first five in a way that changes, qualitatively, our total experience of the novel" (83). Given the origins of tragic drama in fertility rites celebrating the rebirth of life every spring, suggest what the sixth book contributes to the tragedy of *The Return of the Native*.

C. In the famous "Queen of Night" passage (Norton edition p. 53-54), Hardy presents this insignificant young woman living in a remote corner of England in such a way that, as John Peck remarks in *How to Study A Thomas Hardy Novel* (1987), he "associates her with an irrational side of existence" (29). What does this Pateresque effusion contribute to Eustacia's becoming a tragic heroine?