

THE QUEST FOR REALITY: AN INNER JOURNEY IN THOMAS HARDY'S THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

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Most of Thomas Hardy's novels describe in a vivid way an inner voyage of characters from illusion to reality. This is what is case with Hardy's novel *The return of the Native*. This novel depicts, as Penelope Vigar rightly puts it, "the tension between the real and the ideal, darkness and light, blindness, deceptions, dreams and illusions, which form an ever-changing pattern throughout the tale." Almost all the characters in the novel including Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye, Mrs. Yeobright Thomasin Yeobright, Damon Wildene, and Diggory Venn they are extremely prone to illusions. While Eustacia Vye's conception of reality is dim and romanticized, her attitude is constantly and erroneously based on a fantasy of freedom and a wistful longing for a glamorous and glittering life with "a Saul or Bonaparte" as her paramour. Mrs. Yeobright nourishes her own prejudices, fads and obsessions, and, thus, is quite grim and obstinate. Whatever that happens against her ideas cuts her down with mortification. Like Eustacia, she is also busy spinning dreams of glory and greatness around her son who is doing excellently well as a manager of a rich diamond business.

Clym Yeobright returns quite to Egdon Heath quite weary and disillusioned of the glamour and glitter of cosmopolitan life. After having five years experience of urban life, he is awakened to the fact that "the idlest, vainest and most effeminate diamond business (RN, p.195) of this artificial life of pomp and show is significant and hollow. He returns to Egdon Heath with the realisation that he can be a more useful part of the rustic life by following "some rational occupation among the people (he) knew best" (RN, p.195). Disenchanted with the glittering world as a diamond merchant Clym decides to do some worthy thing - - "to spread the light of knowledge among the darkness of ignorance and superstition" (RN, p.198) and to clear away cobwebs of superstition. Like Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright, Clym is also occupied with his own fancies and idealism. He is also myopic and lives in a state of nebulousness of mind. That is why when he reveals his plans to his mother, she replies in a prophetic tone that his "fancies will be (his) ruin" (RN, p.199) Clym is obsessed with his idealistic plans and in the pursuit of his idealistic aims, he seems to be as prejudiced against urban life as Eustacia is against heathery life. He is an impractical and naive idealist and not "a well-proportioned mind" (RN, p.197) and thinks erroneously. He appears to forget the reality that he himself has risen to this comprehensiveness after getting satiated of material pleasures of the world, which are denied to them.

No doubt, Clym has attained to that higher state of consciousness where he becomes acutely aware of the gripping quandary and the predicaments of those unfortunate people who are "going to ruin for want of somebody to buckle to and teach them how to breast the misery" (RN, p.199) they have inherited. Meanwhile, he falls desperately in love with Eustacia Vye who is his counter-part. He is so infatuated with her bewitching and maddening beauty that everything seems to move around her. Though Eustacia frankly expresses her hatred for the



rustics, he decides to make her life partner in order to fulfill his missionary task. This shows that he is still myopic. Even after seeing the shape of her “youthful dreams” (RN, p.303) Clym goes ahead passionately with his plan and marries her. His mother, Mrs. Yeobright aptly and pertinently calls him “a foolish man” (RN, p.226) who deludes himself about the nature of Eustacia and betrays ignorance that “her tastes touched his own only at rare and infrequent points” (RN, p.222). However, Clym assumes blindly that Eustacia will abandon her longing for luxurious life of glamour and grandeur after getting his love. Thus he moves about in a world of willing suspension of disbelief. On the contrary, his mother has a clear perception of Clym’s juxtaposition of his ideas and his marriage with Eustacia and wisely comments: “You are blinded Clym. It was a bad day for you when you first set eyes on her.” (RN, p.216)

Myopic Clym unwittingly thinks that Eustacia can be a good matron in a boarding school. What is more, he hopes to pursue his own educational pursuit “by the assistance of a wife like hers” (RN, p.215). The apparent difference in nature and incongruity of purposes - - she being a pagan and he was humanitarian - - should have been sufficient to induce Clym to think better of his decision. His mother’s judicious assessment and declaration that Eustacia will to be (s) his disaster appeared to him to be a biased opinion. Blinded by her hypnotizing beauty he lets his passions get the better of his reason, and thus buys “an hour of bliss and many hours of sadness” (RN, p.217). Even the furze-cutter Sam can better understand that Eustacia is “quite a different sort of body” (RN, p.225) and is a misfit for the pursuit of teaching. Knowing Eustacia a hedonist and a selfish woman, and knowing that Clym was obstinate, his mother comments: “Don’t you see that by the very fact of your choosing her you prove that you do not know what is best for you.” (RN, p.225). With the same judgement and in the same tone H.C.Duffin pertinently comments on Clym’s woeful life as a “tragedy of divergent aims” Clym joins hands with Eustacia among multiple misunderstandings and illusions and so does she. Obviously enough, such a union is wrought with tragic possibilities and tragedy is writ large on such a bond.

After a brief period of honeymoon revelries, Clym sets forth on his altruistic mission of “instilling high knowledge into empty minds”(RN, p.225) whereas, Eustacia, who has married him solely with the purpose of transporting herself to the world of luxury and splendor, cannot withstand the “sight of books”(RN, p.262). They become aware of their emotional and intellectual incompatibility and the process of disillusionment starts in the case of both. Clym feels irresistibly propelled by an ardent love for truth of the purely intellectual kind with a craving to put all his power and resources into a project for the enlightenment of the rustics. By and by, he finds that he only foolishly entrapped into a stultifying union with Eustacia and comes to realise that this union of an altruist with a hedonist will not flourish. He begins to regret his rash and hasty decision to marry her. In this regard, Hardy highlights that in a cooler moment he “would have preferred a less hasty marriage” (RN, p.230). Now, he recognizes clearly the absence of affinity between them. Quite contrary to Eustacia’s wishes to shift to some fashionable city such as Paris, he becomes more firm in his resolve to work as a philanthropist. Recognising Eustacia’s real motive of marrying him, he asks her in a disillusioned tone: “Has your love for me all died then because my appearance is no longer that of a fine gentleman?” (RN, p.275). When the blinding hypnotism of romantic love is dispelled, Clym realizes that the illusory harmony that seemed to prevail on their ill- - tutored minds at the time of their marriage has now disappeared completely. He honestly and sincerely confesses his folly and ignorance before Thomasin Yeobright: “I, who was going to teach people the higher secrets of happiness, did not know how to keep out of that gross



misery which the most untaught are wise enough to avoid.” (RN, p.332). Thus Clym gets separated from Eustacia by a deep breach in their hearts after the death of his mother.

Clym again plays the fool in the hands of emotions and sentiments. He is completely subdued by the crushing grief of his mother’s tragic death, indirectly brought about by Eustacia’s callous and indifferent attitude toward her. Clym feels determined to find out the mystery of his mother’s death, he launches a mad hunt but succeeds only in exchanging his ignorance for misinterpretations. Deceived by the apparent meaning of Damon Wildeve’s presence at that time and Eustacia’s refusal to open the door, he sees vile and immoral things in hallucination and goes to the extent of accusing Eustacia of infidelity and whorage. His callous treatment of Eustacia shows that he has not yet come out of the shackles of his ego.

Gradually Clym marches forward on the path of mental illusion. After his separation from Eustacia, he can see her with a less prejudiced eye and assesses her with a more sympathetic and kind heart. He admits that his accusations of Eustacia were needless. Exposed to a series of shattering experiences after the death of his mother he emerges from the labyrinth of sorrow and suffering as wiser, saner and more considerate to the feelings of others. He acquires an exceptionally clear awareness of human nature and the cosmos. He is evolved to a higher state of consciousness so much so that even in his affliction, he would neither pray nor curse the divinity which is more or less irrelevant to his plan of living. He gradually acquires the profound comprehensiveness that wisdom lies in adapting ourselves to the circumstances, limiting our wishes to the rigorous conditions of life. He adopts calm and complete resignation, as opposed to Promethean rebelliousness, as the means of converting the darkest dungeon like Egdon Heath into a serene hermitage. He finally succeeds in establishing a perfect harmony with Egdon Heath and its people, a harmony that comes out of the mature perception of life which bestows repose to the individual concerned. As a result of this evolution of consciousness, he turns his emotions to be perfectly in tune with what life and people have to offer him. Like a perfect sage, he sets out on his mission of spreading light among the people of the heath as a preacher.

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