



Thomas Hardy's Controversial and Uncommon Characters

There is nothing ordinary, at least by Victorian standards, about Thomas Hardy's characters. His novel titled, "The Return of the Native" would undoubtedly meet the criteria he himself sets, that 'a story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling.' His characters certainly are.

Characters in Hardy's novel are full of contradictions. Christian, in contrast to what his name implies, represents a distorted version of Christianity. He is extremely superstitious and constantly afraid of the unknown. Diggory Venn, who is portrayed initially as the devil in his red outfit is really a decent character. In time, Reddleman's red colors wash off, and he turns out to be an angel and savior to Thomasin with whom he ultimately joins hands.

The principled and honorable characters in the novel are downtrodden individuals like Venn and Mr. Yeobright in his latter days. Yeobright appears rather insignificant and very much against what is perceived to be exemplary in the Victorian era.

Eustacia seems to be a mysterious, out of this world character, but in reality, she is "a girl of some forwardness of mind, indeed, weighed in relation to her situation among the very rearward of thinkers, very original. Her instincts towards social non-conformity were at the root of this." (Page 68).

Hardy laments the fact that Eustacia does not appreciate the heath, “The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she only caught its vapours. An environment which would have made a contented woman a poet, a suffering woman a devotee, a pious woman a psalmist, even a giddy woman thoughtful, made a rebellious woman saturnine” (page 69).

The heath itself is another character in the novel, but this one never undergoes change. “The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to cause of shaking and dread” (page 1).

Hate and love are used as catalyst throughout the novel, changing the course of events. No other character experiences love and hate to the extreme like Eustacia. She despises what she calls “the miserable inhabitants of Egdon.” She hates the heath and proclaims, “Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!” (Page 84) Olly Dowden is quite the opposite. She is “a woman who lived by making heath brooms, or besoms. Her nature was to be civil to enemies as well as to friends, and grateful to all the world for letting her remain alive” (page 18).

Wildeve, who is a character not dissimilar to *Rhett* in *Gone with the Wind* and gives little damn about women, is the one who actually reaches out to Eustacia in her hour of need. Eustacia despises Wildeve for having chosen another woman to marry instead of her. But she is drawn to him again toward the end of the book. She initially acts nobly by asking Wildeve not to see her again in her house, yet, falls into the trap of Wildeve’s machinations eventually. As Clym sleeps the easy sleep of a hardworking

man with a clear conscience, Eustacia and Wildeve plan a different course of life together. Eustacia yearns to go to Paris and Wildeve offers her just that opportunity. Plus, he has conveniently inherited a vast fortune that also entices Eustacia.

Charlie, whose love for Eustacia had only grown since he held her hand in his, becomes an instrument to prevent her initial suicide attempt, but unwittingly he lights the fire to surprise her on November 5th, not knowing that the fire is a signal to Wildeve.

There is also an intense motherly love on the part of Mrs. Yeobright, however, despite her attachment to her son, she ends up abandoning him and even avoids attending his wedding. Mrs. Yeobright, like the other characters in this captivating novel, undergoes change. She decides to visit his son and her daughter-in-law.

In hastening to allow Wildeve to leave through a back door and thinking that Clym will open the door, Eustacia makes the terrible mistake of not letting Mrs. Yeobright in. Later Clym's mother dies of injuries received through this ordeal, and the plot takes a completely different turn from this point on.

Clym Yeobright is another uncommon personality in the novel. He has returned from Paris to transform his native society. His face is described as one that, "could be dimly seen the typical; countenance of the future. Should there be a classic period to art hereafter, its Pheidias may produce such faces...He had been a lad of whom something was expected" (page 165).

After Eustacia's tragic death, Clym like the biblical *Lazarus* is risen from the dead and begins a new life with a mission. He reaches out to the natives in an attempt to uplift them. He is no ordinary preacher. "He stated that his discourses to people were to be sometimes secular, and sometimes religious, but never dogmatic; and that his texts would

be taken from all kinds of books.” Although, “some believed him, and some believed him not; some said that his words were commonplace...but everywhere he was kindly received, for the story of his life had become generally known.” (Page 406).