

# The prevalence of coexistence in nature



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In Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, the main character Clym Yeobright seems to disappoint everyone he loves upon his arrival home to Egdon Heath from Paris. His refusal to continue to lead the life he had previously been living in Paris is most upsetting to both his mother and his wife, Eustacia, for they both aspired for him to be something more than a simple man of the heath. Clym, however, sees no shame in conforming to the heath and becoming one with nature. Hardy's detailing of the land and its creatures solidifies this idea; for example, he draws a parallel between Clym and the snakes of the heath when he writes "immediately following the shedding of their old skins... their colours are brightest" (Hardy 274). Though Clym's physical appearance becomes dull as a furze-cutter, his "brightest colours" also surface when he sheds himself of his old life.

This symbolic imagery alludes to the fact that Clym all along was meant to exist within nature, not beside it. He embraces his embodiment of nature, even though it ultimately costs him his relationships with the two people he loves most. Prior to Clym's endeavors as a furze-cutter, he is utterly infatuated with Ms. Eustacia Vye, who tactically distracts Clym for her own personal gains. Though her efforts are persistent, Clym is still inexplicably drawn to the heath. The land's familiar grooves and animal inhabitants soothe him where no human can, subtly assuring him that he is right where he belongs. For example, when Clym's eyesight begins to go, Eustacia feels frustration and hopelessness towards him, while Mrs. Yeobright is sympathetic. The heath, on the other hand, passes no judgement. Through his work cutting furze, he escapes his worldly troubles, and even the "huge flies... buzzed about him without knowing that he was a man" (Hardy 274).

The flies inability to differentiate between Clym and one of their own is telling that not only does Clym fit in with the nature around him, but he is accepted by it.

Man is perhaps expected to swat away flies or regard them with a certain degree of disgust, yet there is a sort of mutual respect between the two; they see each other as components of the same system, instead of one being more valuable than the other. This equality encapsulates Clym's relationship with the heath, further revealing the idea that Clym's true identity is continuously interconnected with the heath.

This aforementioned acceptance is coupled with the detailing of the snakes in the field to again stress the idea that Clym is his best version of himself when he is submerged in nature. Hardy notes that the snakes “glided in their most brilliant blue and yellow guise” (274), bringing light to their natural beauty and magnificence, yet Clym is earlier mentioned as looking like a “brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more” (273). These seemingly contradictory descriptors, however, are not a direct stab at Clym. Instead, this imagery draws a parallel between Clym and the snakes of the heath; while the snakes are physically transitioning into their brightest colors, Clym is mentally transitioning into his brightest, most adept self. He “sheds himself” of his old Parisian lifestyle, even though everyone throughout Egdon thought of his life in Paris as glamorous, intellectually stimulating, and ideal; in the short amount of time that he has been back in the heath, Clym seems to have already found more tranquillity and enlightenment than he ever did in Paris. This transformation signifies that there is no going back for Clym, thus destroying his relationship

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with Eustacia. Clym is a devoted husband to his beloved wife Eustacia, but, just as many regard nature as unforgiving, Clym too is unforgiving in his decision to be the best, most authentic man he knows how to be.

The *Return of the Native* was originally published in 1878, only 19 years after Charles Darwin's remarkable text *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, in which Darwin challenged the widely accepted idea of creationism. The idea that God was not singlehandedly responsible for the existence of humans was unheard of in the late nineteenth century, giving everyone something to talk about. According to science, nature, and travel writer David Quammen, *The Origin* is "undeniably one of the most significant books- if not the most- ever published in English... *The Origin* was one of those rare books in any language that triggered a genuine revolution in the way we humans see ourselves, our relationship to the world, and all other living creatures on the planet" (9). Hardy was clearly influenced by Darwin, considering the fact that he draws countless parallels between humans and animals. Clym, the snakes, and the flies, for example, are not clearly detailed as man vs. wild; Hardy makes it evidently clear that they all are linked in their mannerisms and demeanors. Clym is arguably the most genuine character in the novel, making it all the more heart wrenching to discover that even though he found himself through the heath, he lost the two women he held dearest to him. Hardy leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not a reader should blame Eustacia for Clym's final fractured state of mind, but one thing is not left open ended: the heath practically serves as a character throughout the entirety of the book, and it is accepting only to those who treat it with the respect it deserves.