

# The unreliable world in the return of the native



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In his novel *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy creates an unreliable world of misconceptions and coincidences by paralleling the setting of Egdon Heath to reality, as perceived through human nature, to convey his theme. Throughout the novel, the characters struggle with the obscurity of life on the heath, and ultimately, their own natural flaws, which govern events surrounding them. Hardy uses kinesthetic and visual imagery, connotative diction, and parallel syntax to support the theme that due to the inconsistency and fallibility nature of human perception, no conclusive conception of reality exists. The author stresses the ambiguity of reality through kinesthetic and visual imagery. The novel functions on the characters' individual perceptions, which cause several interpretations of reality to exist concurrently. Thus, the weather patterns and moods of the heath correspond with the ambiguous motives, blemished natures, and erratic perceptions of the characters. Hardy writes, "...the permanent moral expression of each face it was impossible to discover, for as the nimble flames towered, nodded, and swooped through the surrounding air, the blots of shade and flakes of light upon the countenances of the group changed shape and position endlessly. All was unstable; quivering as leaves, evanescent as lightning" (I. iii.). The kinesthetic imagery creates dashing movements, and thus, unpredictability through words such as "swooped," "flakes," "quivering," "evanescent," "towered," and "nimble." This reinforces the complexity of perception: ambiguity pervades reality on the heath and thus, the nature of its inhabitants, as Hardy states, impossibly obscuring the true character of each person. Therefore, due to the overall obscurity of human perception, as symbolized by the bonfire flames, one cannot decisively classify reality, demonstrated by the heath. The human

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experience, Hardy argues, remains one of inescapable subjectivity.

Moreover, he writes, “ The thorn bushes which arose in his path from time to time were less satisfactory, for they whistled gloomily, and had the ghastly habit after dark of putting on the shapes of jumping madmen, sprawling giants, and hideous cripples” (I. viii.). Hardy elaborates on the inconsistent reality of the heath. Bushes by day become horrid specters by night in this example of visual imagery. The author’s ghastly descriptions evoke images of wicked beings creeping in the night and imply a sense of peril provoked by the obscurity of individual perception. Perception allows humans to define their individual reality, but blinds them from agreeing on a consensual definition of reality like the night blinds a traveler. Lost in dark, his perception of the truth becomes blurred. Both examples of imagery evoke a sense of nonuniformity, in both cases ominous, proving that human perception remains complex, obscure, erratic, and unable to reliably conclude on one interpretation of reality. In another successful attempt to reinforce his theme, Hardy uses diction that promotes confusion and subjectivity. The author describes the heath as, “...a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature,” (I. i). To elaborate, Hardy states, “ The untameable, Ishmaelish thing that Egdon now was it always had been” (I. i). The word “ Ishmaelish” literally means “ of Arab origin,” but connotes a sense of isolation: Abraham cast Ishmael and mother Hagar away in favor of Isaac and Sarah, but Ishmael survived and later founded the Arab race. Moreover, during the late 1800s, when Hardy wrote *The Return of the Native*, the Arab culture remained, to many foreigners, one of mystique and fantasy. Often portrayed as shamans, nomads, and dervishes, Arabs hailed from the land of dazzling genies, magic carpets, and shrouded harems<sup>2E</sup> This

compares to Hardy's characterization of reality as essentially evasive and obscure. The "Ishmaelitic" heath, a symbol for reality, remains in a constant state of revision. Thus, the wandering quality of the heath, or reality arises from the mutable nature of perception. Next, the author addresses the chaos of life when he writes, "There was something in its oppressive horizontality which too much reminded him of the arena of life; it gave him a sense of bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun" (III. v.). Hardy refers to the flat environment of Egdon Heath as "oppressive," connoting that it stifles humans. This in turn implies that the different perceptions clashing within the novel create an ambiguous reality: the downfalls of many characters occur because misjudgments arise from varying perceptions. Everyone remains equal since humans misinterpret, and thus, hurt one another because of their incomplete conception of reality. Hence, "oppressive" describes human existence since every human can only conceive his own reality. This supports the theme that because perception differs from individual to individual, absolute reality cannot exist. To support his theme, the author also uses sentences created by parallel syntax. Parallelism demonstrates the complex elements that form an abstract idea of reality. The author writes, "A well proportioned mind is... one of which we may safely say that it will never cause its owner to be confined as a madman, tortured as a heretic, or crucified as a blasphemer. Also, on the other hand, that it will never cause him to be applauded as a prophet, revered as a priest, or exalted as a king" (III. ii.). Here, Hardy introduces two antithetical sentences partially from parallel dependent clauses. He notes that the qualities of a superhuman, revered or reviled, arise from the same imbalance of the mind. Thus, one cannot conclusively

classify such a person as good or evil, since his condition occurs from a mental imbalance shared by all others who reach his remarkable status. Based on his own perception, anyone can freely deem a given individual as good or evil. This creates a blurred obscurity between prophet and heretic, murderer and martyr, madman and genius, and ultimately within reality itself as the identically structured sentences show. Finally, Hardy writes, “Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still: in these spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, have some way or other survived mediaeval doctrine” (VI. i.). In this sentence, Hardy forms a portrait of paganism through parallel phrases. The author’s mention of pagan customs characterizes the inhabitants of Egdon Heath as free from the confines of Christianity, depicting them as whimsical people who live to serve their human nature. The syntax enhances this meaning because of frantic, fast-paced quality of the sentence created: it evokes the gleeful abandon of paganism as well as a mystical element of fantasy. More importantly, the pagan sense of multiple realities created by the sentence supports the theme that blemished individual perception makes it impossible for one definitive definition of reality to exist. Throughout the novel *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy creates an atmosphere of ambiguity and unreliability. This obscurity arises from his indispensable comparison between Egdon Heath and reality, as seen through individual perceptions, and creates his poignant, holistic theme. Furthermore, Hardy uses kinesthetic and visual imagery, connotative diction, and parallel syntax to support his theme that inconsistent and often fallible human perception ensures that no absolute conception of reality exists.