

Love and modernity:
analysis of
relationships in the
return of the native



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The Victorian novel often focuses on prominent, relevant issues of the time during which it is written. These issues can range from class, ambition, and gender to love, sexuality, and desire. Authors of the Victorian era delivered insight on these often controversial topics through the characters in their novels. Because of the prevalence of these issues in the Victorian novel, authors often have overlapping views and insights. However, in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*, Hardy delivers his views on desire and romantic love with a unique spin. Hardy explores the ideas of desire for social status and possession versus romantic desire through the various relationships in the novel; in doing so, he examines the implications of modernity within these relationships. There are a number of significant couplings within *The Return of the Native*. The most obvious of these are Eustacia and Clym, Eustacia and Wildeve, and Thomasin and Diggory Venn. The first, Eustacia and Clym, offers a clear depiction of a marriage that is motivated by desire for social achievement. When Eustacia hears of Clym's return from Paris, she immediately romanticizes her image of him, picturing him as a wealthy man of the world who has the ability to move her away from the heath, thus elevating her social standing. When Eustacia overhears two men talking about Clym's return to the heath, she immediately begins to fantasize, thinking, "A young and clever man was coming into that lonely heath from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from heaven"(110). Although Eustacia has never met or even seen Clym, she assumes that because of his time spent in Paris he is sophisticated and wealthy, two qualities she esteems above all others. She vows to form a relationship with Clym, and succeeds in marrying him. Eustacia's desire to marry Clym for social advancement is similar to a relationship within another <https://assignbuster.com/love-and-modernity-analysis-of-relationships-in-the-return-of-the-native/>

well-known Victorian novel: that of Catherine and Edgar Linton in Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Much as Eustacia sees Clym as a way to raise her social standing, Catherine views Edgar as useful in the same capacity. When Nelly questions Catherine's motives for marrying Edgar, she responds by saying, " And he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband" (66). Each of these women marry out of their desire for social advancement. Yet in *Return of the Native*, Hardy explores the ways in which modernity complicates this sort of marriage. The Clym that Eustacia marries does not live up to the Clym of her fantasies. Modern and forward-thinking, Clym has little concern for material luxury and wealth, instead focusing on his desire to educate the people of the heath. This disrupts the marriage, as Clym truly does love Eustacia yet refuses to compromise his modern ideals. Eustacia's realization that Clym has no intention of returning to Paris with her shatters her image of Clym as a worldly, sophisticated gentleman. She admits her disappointment first to Mrs. Yeobright, saying, " And if I had known then what I know now, that I should be living in this wild heath a month after my marriage, I - I should have thought twice about agreeing" (239). Shortly thereafter, she reveals to Clym that she is appalled by his choice of occupation, telling him, " But it is so dreadful - a furze-cutter! and you a man who have lived about the world, and speak French, and know the classics, and who are fit for what is so much better than this" (251). Here, Eustacia's desire for social advancement and wealth is prevented by Clym's modernity. The relationship between Eustacia and Damon Wildeve is drastically different from that of Eustacia and Clym. These two characters act as though they are passionately in love, yet it appears as though " act" is the key word in this <https://assignbuster.com/love-and-modernity-analysis-of-relationships-in-the-return-of-the-native/>

relationship. Both Damon and Eustacia are volatile and emotional characters, and seem to spend much of the novel acting on whims and attempting to make each other jealous. It is as though possession and competition are the driving forces behind this relationship. When Damon and Eustacia meet on the heath after his near-marriage to Thomasin, Eustacia tells Damon that she has heard that he did not marry the other woman, “ And I knew it was because you loved me best, and couldn’t do it”(64). Eustacia’s pleasure at Damon’s return lies in her “ victory” over Thomasin, and not out of genuine love for Damon. She practically admits that her affection for Damon is superficial, telling Diggory Venn that, “ I should have cared nothing for him had there been a better person near”(93). Eustacia’s behavior in this relationship is similar to Estella Havisham’s in Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*. Both women feel that they have an almost magnetic appeal to their male companions, and view the relationship as a game. When Estella and Pip meet after their long separation since childhood, Pip still recognizes the ways in which Estella plays with him, saying, “ She treated me as a boy still, but she lured me on” (235). Like Eustacia, Estella’s relationship with Pip is primarily a source of amusement to her, a way for her to exert power over him. Yet unlike the relationship between Pip and Estella, in Hardy’s novel the dynamics of Eustacia and Wildeve’s relationship are double-sided; Eustacia is not the only player in the game. Damon as well views their relationship as a show of power, or more specifically, possession. Throughout the novel, he wavers back and forth between Thomasin and Eustacia, using each as a tool to make the other jealous. Hardy’s initial description of Wildeve is the most accurate and self-explanatory illustration of his character; Hardy writes, “ He was quite a young man, and of the two properties, form and motion, the <https://assignbuster.com/love-and-modernity-analysis-of-relationships-in-the-return-of-the-native/>

latter first attracted the eye in him. The grace of his movement was singular: it was the pantomimic expression of a lady-killing career”(45). In this relationship, both Eustacia and Damon are motivated not by love, but by a desire to possess one another, to exert their control over each other. As a modern novelist, Hardy disallows this type of relationship, showing through the ultimate demise of not simply Damon and Eustacia’s relationship, but also the characters themselves, that modernity denies a relationship of possession. As such, of each of the Victorian novels discussed in this essay, Hardy’s *Return of the Native* is the only one that features a couple who has married for love, not social advancement or control, and who is happy within this union based on romantic love. That couple is, of course, Thomasin and Diggory Venn. Unlike Bronte and Dickens, Hardy’s novel illustrates the modern couple as one whose marriage is based on love and respect, as well as showing the progression of such a relationship. At the start of the novel, Diggory Venn is transporting Thomasin back to her aunt after her failed attempt at marriage to Wildeve. When he meets Captain Vye along the way and the elderly gentleman asks if the woman in the wagon is Diggory’s wife, he responds by saying, “ My wife!...She’s above mating with such as I” (15). At this point in the novel, it appears that social status will stand in the way of this relationship, especially when the reader learns of Diggory’s proposal to Thomasin two years prior. However, even though Thomasin declines Diggory’s proposal, she does so with a great deal of respect and courtesy to him, saying, “ You must not becall me for laughing when you spoke; you mistook when you thought I laughed at you as a foolish man. I laughed because the idea was so odd, and not at you at all” (81). Here, Thomasin seems to be referring to the fact that society has instilled in her the idea that

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marrying “beneath” oneself is unheard of, and that she still admires and respects Diggory Venn’s character. And at the end of the novel, Thomasin does indeed come to love Diggory Venn, despite Clym’s objections that she should marry a “professional man” from the town. Thomasin responds by telling Clym that she, like him, could not be happy living away from the heath, and asking, “...how could you say that I should marry some town man? I am sure, say what you will, that I must marry Diggory, if I marry at all. He has been kinder to me than anybody else, and he helped me in many ways that I don’t know of” (385). Here, Hardy exhibits a typically modern relationship that is based on simply romantic love and respect. While it could be argued that the relationship is only permitted because Diggory is now no longer a lowly reddleman and has obtained ownership of the dairy, Thomasin’s respect and fondness for Diggory from the start of the novel reveal that the only thing that has changed in her opinion of Diggory is the growth of a platonic affection into a solid love relationship. As a Victorian novelist, Hardy examines many of the same issues that other novelists of the era explore. Like Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, which showed the relationship of Catherine and Edgar Linton as one motivated by a desire for social advancement, Hardy’s *Return of the Native* offers a similar relationship in Eustacia and Clym. Additionally, much like Dickens’ portrayal of the manipulative control held by Estella over Pip in *Great Expectations*, Hardy shows not only how Eustacia exerts a similar control over Damon but, in contrast to Estella and Pip’s relationship, illustrates how this manipulation works both ways. As a modern novelist, however, Hardy does much more than simply depict the commonality of these types of relationships; he also explores the effects of modernity on each coupling, as well as offering a

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portrayal of a modern couple whose union is based on love and respect. In doing so, Hardy delivers a refreshingly different insight into issues that other Victorian novels deal with rather uniformly, securing his place in the literary canon as a groundbreaking author.