

Love triangles and  
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In Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, the heath is essentially treated as a character, albeit an extremely powerful one. Like the other characters, it loves possessively and without regard to the feelings of others. It competes with Ms. Yeobright and Eustacia for Clym's affections, ultimately destroying all three of their lives. Thomas Hardy presents the heath as a character, which lives, loves, and feels in the same ways as the other characters. He opens the novel by introducing and describing the heath, giving the reader an initial glimpse of its rugged grandeur and raw, sometimes cruel, power: It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature – neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities. (pg 7) The heath is an illusory character, full of dark strength and mystery. While inhabitable, it is at its core an untamable, wild place, and " Civilization [is] its enemy." (pg 7) Though a character and susceptible to human emotions, the heath has supernatural strength, and an unbridled capacity for violence. It wields its physical power over the humans that live on it, molding their lives as it desires. With the exception of Diggory Venn and Thomasin, " love" for the characters is more synonymous with possession than with romance. Wildeve exploits Thomasin, marrying her primarily to punish Eustacia. When Eustacia " loves" Wildeve, she thinks about him only in monetary terms, and her love fades when she perceives his social inferiority: . . . What was the man worth whom a woman inferior to herself did not value? . . . Her social superiority over him, which hitherto had scarcely ever impressed her, became

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unpleasantly insistent, and for the first time she felt that she had stooped in loving him. (pg 83)The heath is a jealous lover, and, like the other characters in the novel, it wishes not just to romance its objects of affection, but to possess them, both in body and in mind. No one in the novel manages to leave the heath alive: Either they remain out of free will like Thomasin, as victims of circumstance like Clym, or, like Eustacia and Wildeve, die in an attempt to escape it. The heath holds a special love for Clym. As evidenced by the title of the novel, Clym is a native of the area – in many ways a child of the heath, and an object of fascination for it and its commoner inhabitants. “. . . I'll own that we was talking about ' ee. We were wondering what could keep you home here mollyhorning about when you have made such a world-wide name for yourself. . . .” (pg 143-4) Clym decided that the life he was perusing was empty, and so he returns to his native land, proudly announcing, “ I have come home.” (pg 144) He takes pleasure in the heath's immutable glory: To many persons this Egdon was a place which had slipped out of its century generations ago, to intrude as an uncouth object into this. It was an obsolete thing, and few cared to study it... But as for Yeobright, when he looked from the heights on his way he could not help indulging in a barbarous satisfaction at observing that, in some of the attempts at reclamation from the waste, tillage, after holding on for a year or two, had receded again in despair, the ferns and furze-tufts stubbornly reasserting themselves. (pg 146-7)Clym's lengthy excursions and decision to become a part-time furze-cutter indicate an urge to be in and with the heath. His compulsion is requited – the heath, overjoyed at his return, welcomes Clym warmly, a reunion akin to that of long-lost lovers: Bees hummed around his ears with an intimate air, and tugged at the heath and furze-flowers at his

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side in such numbers as to weight them down to the sod. The strange amber-colored butterflies which Egdon produced, and which were never seen elsewhere, quivered in the breath of his lips, alighted upon his bowed back, and sported with the glittering point of his hook as he flourished it up and down. (pg 209) The heath's relationship with Eustacia Vye is not so intimate. Eustacia is no native to the heath: She was born outside of it, in the local town of Budmouth, but when her father died, she was moved to Egdon to be cared for by her grandfather. She feels trapped in the heath, an exile from ". . . what is called life – music, poetry, passion, war, and all the beating and pulsing that is going on in the world" (pg 233) and resents Destiny for imprisoning her there, "'...You hate the heath as much as ever; that I know.' 'I do,' she murmured deeply. ' 'Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!'" (pg 71) Eustacia sees Clym as a way to get to Paris, and it is primarily this illusion that draws her to him. Even as he attempts to propose to Eustacia, her mind is off in Paris: 'There is only one cure for this anxiety, dearest – you must be my wife.' She started: then endeavored to say calmly, 'Cynics say that cures the anxiety by curing the love.' But you must answer me. Shall I claim you some day – I don't mean at once?' 'I must think,' Eustacia murmured. 'At present speak of Paris to me. Is there any place like it on earth?' (pg 165) Ms. Yeobright is a proud woman, and while she accepts a life on the heath for herself, is no friend of it. Her conversations with Clym suggest that she sees life on the heath as inferior to life elsewhere. Even before Eustacia, she wants Clym to have a better life than the one he has set his sights on. When Ms. Yeobright becomes aware of her connection with Clym, she primarily blames Eustacia for his desire to stay: "It troubles me, Clym. You are wasting your life here; and it is solely on account of her. If it <https://assignbuster.com/love-triangles-and-the-complicating-factor-of-the-heath-in-the-return-of-the-native/>

had not been for that woman you never would have entertained this teaching scheme at all.” (pg 161) From the very beginning of their interactions, Ms. Yeobright and Eustacia are at odds with one another. Ms. Yeobright, not entirely above listening to town gossip, not only warns Clym that Eustacia is not only inferior in her social standing, but questions her moral substance, “ I have never heard that she is of any use to herself or to other people. Good girls don’t get treated as witches even on Egdon.” (pg 150) Ms. Yeobright is also worried that Eustacia is the reason that Clym wants to stay on the heath. She thinks that Eustacia ties him down, and resents her for it. For Eustacia, it is primarily arrogance and an inflated sense of dignity that causes her to fight with Ms. Yeobright: I am indignant; and so would any woman be. It was a condescension in me to be Clym’s wife, and not a maneuver, let me remind you; and therefore I will not be treated as a schemer whom it becomes necessary to bear with because she has crept into the family. (pg 203) The competition and fight that ensues between the two women creates what seems to be an irreconcilable division between them. The heath, which desires to possess Clym for itself, competes with Ms. Yeobright and Eustacia for Clym’s affections. The heath tries to satisfy all of Clym’s desires, even those of human companionship. It not only provides Clym with a living by cutting furze, but seeks to fulfill his need for intimacy. While Eustacia seeks to turn Clym’s head with her physical appeal, the heath arrays Clym in an aura of organic finery, courting him with “ litters of young rabbits,” (pg 209) and “ tribes of emerald-green grasshoppers.” (pg 209). It is, in a sense, putting on a show for Clym, trying to draw him in to ensure his fidelity. It is also presented as a mother figure to Clym: [Clym] might be said to be its product. His eyes had first opened thereon; with its appearance all

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the first images of his memory were mingled; his estimate of life had been colored by it; his toys had been the flint knives and arrow-heads which he found there, wondering why stones should 'grow' to such odd shapes; his flowers, the purple bells and yellow furze; his animal kingdom, the snakes and croppers; his society, its human haunters. (pg 146) The heath is an extraordinarily narcissistic character. It seeks to replace his mother and wife, not to benefit Clym, but because it wants him to be completely dependent on it. Because it cannot emote as a human would, the heath often expresses its feelings in the weather, which is a prime indicator of the mood of a scene in the novel. When it becomes agitated or angry, the heath turns wild and tumultuous. The storm following Clym and Eustacia's decision to marry expresses the heath's anger at their union and what it implicates for Clym's future: The weather was far different from that of the evening before. . . The wet young beeches were undergoing amputations, bruises, crippling, and harsh lacerations, from which would leave scars visible till the day of their burning. Each stem was wrenched at the root, where it moved like a bone in its socket, and at every onset of the gale convulsive sounds came from the branches, as if pain were felt. (pg 175) The heath demonstrates its destructive power in the storm, a dark omen of things to come. Though Eustacia and Ms. Yeobright compete with each other for Clym's attention, they share a common hope for his future. Both women want Clym to return to Paris – Ms. Yeobright because it is what will be best for him, and Eustacia because she hopes that Clym will take her away from her stifled existence on the heath. Ms. Yeobright says to Clym, "I fully expected that in the course of a month or two you would have seen the folly of such self-sacrifice, and would have been by this time back again to Paris in some business or other."

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(pg 144) She expects much of Clym, and is worried by his decision to “ go back in the world.” Eustacia, by far the more egocentric of the two, is mainly concerned with what she hopes to gain from marriage to Clym – a life in Paris. Despite their different motivations, the women are in agreement with one another on this subject. For most of the novel, Eustacia and Ms. Yeobright live very separate lives, each trying to keep as much distance as possible from the other. However, Ms. Yeobright, wracked with despair and loneliness, eventually decides to swallow her pride and visit Clym and Eustacia. She hopes to reconcile herself with Eustacia, but primarily to reunite with Clym, whom she misses greatly. When Ms. Yeobright sets out for Clym’s house, the heath, trying to keep the two apart, whips up an oppressive heat wave: The sun had branded the whole heath with his mark, even the purple heath-flowers having put on a brownness under the dry blazes of the few preceding days... In cool, fresh weather Mrs. Yeobright would have found no inconvenience in walking to Alderworth, but the present torrid attack made the journey a heavy undertaking for a woman past middle age... (pg 228) Single-minded in her determination to make things right, Ms. Yeobright foolishly decides to brave the weather, physically exhausting herself in the process. “...She sat for twenty minutes or more ere she could summon resolution to go down to the door, her courage being lowered to zero by her physical lassitude.” (pg 230) When she arrives at Clym’s house, she is shut out and unable to regain her strength. Though physically spent and weary with grief, Ms. Yeobright lets theatrics get the best of her and, abandoning her common sense, immediately heads back towards her home: Clym’s mother was at this time following a path which lay hidden from Eustacia by a shoulder of the hill. Her walk thither from the garden gate had <https://assignbuster.com/love-triangles-and-the-complicating-factor-of-the-heath-in-the-return-of-the-native/>

been hasty and determined, as of a woman who was now no less anxious to escape from the scene than she had previously been to enter it. (pg 236)Ms. Yeobright's heat-of-the-moment decision proves to be a mistake – she is unable to make it home and lays down in the heath to rest. As she sleeps, the heath sees its opportunity to strike, and an adder bites her leg, inflicting a fatal wound. Ms. Yeobright didn't die of "natural causes;" she was murdered by the heath. The heath, that covetous, cruel entity, saw her as an obstacle to its relationship with Clym, and slew her so that it might have Clym for itself. Ms. Yeobright, already a rival to the heath simply by virtue of being his mother, also wanted him to move to Paris. Though Clym seemed resolute in his decision to stay in the heath, "'How extraordinary that you and my mother should be of one mind about this!' said Yeobright. 'I have vowed not to go back, Eustacia.'" (pg 166), an alliance between Ms. Yeobright and Eustacia could have jeopardized his relationship with the heath. By killing her, the heath eliminates competition for Clym's attention and ensures that a union between Ms. Yeobright and Clym or Eustacia is impossible. The murder also serves to widen the split between Clym and his wife – Once he discovers the truth, Clym lays the blame for his mother's death on Eustacia: You shut the door – you looked out of the window upon her – you had a man in the house with you- you sent her away to die. The inhumanity – the treachery – I will not touch you – stand away from me- and confess every word! . . . Forgive you I never can. (Pgs 271-2)Here the heath first demonstrates the full extent of its possessiveness and capacity for calculated brutality. It refuses to be deserted and would rather take a life than risk having anyone, especially Clym, leave it. The heath again lashes out when Eustacia and Wildeve attempt to run off together to Budmouth.

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Though the cause is left ambiguous, Eustacia ends up drowned in the midst of a storm, unable to break free from her Israelite-esque captivity on the heath: . . . The light from Yeobright's lamp shed a flecked and agitated radiance across the wir-pool, revealing to the ex-engineer the tumbling courses of the currents from the hatches above. Across this gashed and puckered mirror a dark body was slowly borne by one of the backward currents. (pg 306) She was Clym's last intimate human connection, and with her death goes his capacity for emotional attachment: Every pulse of loverlike feeling which had not been stilled during Eustacia's lifetime had gone into the grave with her. His passion for her had occurred too far on in his manhood to leave fuel enough on hand for another fire of that sort, as may happen with more boyish loves. (pg 320) With both Eustacia and Ms. Yeobright dead, Clym is left destitute of human companionship, suspended in a state of spiritual limbo. He has no reason or motivation to leave the heath, and so there he stays, making a living as a local itinerant preacher. He is reduced to lengthy speeches and long, lonesome walks to visit the graves of Eustacia and his mother. At last, the heath has achieved its goal of singularly possessing Clym's mind and body, but at the expense of his, Eustacia's, and Ms. Yeobright's lives. The heath's narcissism and possessive love for Clym brings it into a vicious rivalry for his attention. It alters the course of Clym, Eustacia, and Ms. Yeobright's lives, ultimately bringing them to tragic ends.