

Hardy's fatalistic view  
of life as shown  
through the return of  
the native



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The Return of the Native, by Thomas Hardy, begins with personification of a majestic heath, the setting for this novel: "The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could... retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms... and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread." Yet these emotionally intense descriptions are extremely misleading, for in reality the heath is an inanimate object which possesses no feelings, opinions, or biases. It is an immortal place, and continues to exist as its inhabitants live their lives and die. In contrast with the heath is man himself: mortal and vulnerable, selfish, and always looking to advance his place in the world. This novel shows the dominance of nature over man, stressing man's impermanence against the infinity of nature. This belief, also known as fatalism, is emphasized throughout the novel. This view is shared by the character of Clym Yeobright, who survives at the end of the story, but is contrasted by Eustacia Vye, who rebels against these ideas, leading to her own downfall. The views of these characters are emphasized through their own actions, their interactions with other characters in the book, allusions to biblical references, and the use of motifs. Fatalistic views can best be illustrated through Clym Yeobright's character and relationships with the other characters of the novel. On his own, Clym believes that everyone's lives are predetermined, and that fate will direct what will happen to a person. Because of this, Clym is able to constantly revise his lifestyle to adapt to what his life brings to him. He takes all of his successes and failures in stride, because he knows within his life there is an underlying reason and plan for what is happening. His first big life change occurs when he decided that life in Paris was not for him, and that he must return to his native land, and live his life on the heath. This is almost

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like a birthright, for although he is an extraordinary person, shown through his description, at heart he is a man of the heath. Clym is again forced to make a modification in his lifestyle when he is blinded. This is a major setback to Clym's plans of setting up a school to educate the people of the heath. But, instead of being devastated by it, as Eustacia is, Clym decides to continue on with his life as best he can in spite of this new obstacle.

Although he is an exceptional person, Clym finds no shame in becoming a furze-cutter, the typical job of a heathsman. He even enjoys the job, as, "the monotony of his occupation soothed him, and was in itself a pleasure... [his] effort offered homely courses." Clym's enjoyment of his new work shows that he is at peace with physis, and he sings songs of delight while working. This flexibility that Clym shows in his lifestyle exemplifies his notion of fatalism, and shows how he survives life on the heath. During the novel, there is an allusion to Oedipus, "[Clym's] mouth had passed into the phase more or less imaginatively rendered in the studies of Oedipus." This allusion is really the mention of Clym's partial parallel, as he is very much like Oedipus in numerous ways. In the tale of Oedipus, he gouges his eyes out when he finds out that he married his mother; Clym's equivalent is that he is blind. When Oedipus first came back to the town of his birth, the people lauded him as a hero and gave him the gift of the queen; later, however, when the truth was discovered that the queen was really Oedipus' mother, it caused much harm and bad happenings. Likewise, everyone on the heath is very happy to have Clym return from Paris, but after a while, his return causes disturbances on the heath, and leads indirectly to the deaths of Mrs. Yeobright, Eustacia, and Wildeve. In addition, it is suspected that Clym has an Oedipus complex, and that name is derived from Oedipus' marriage to his mother. This shows <https://assignbuster.com/hardy-fatalistic-view-of-life-as-shown-through-the-return-of-the-native/>

fatalism because the entire story of Oedipus is based on a series of omens (which told of his fate), and miscommunications. Because Oedipus is a partial parallel to Clym, Clym's return to the heath can be seen as being predetermined, as Oedipus' life was based on fate as well. Fatalism is also shown through the people of the heath. The people who live there are innocent and simple, trying to cope with their day-to-day struggles as best they can. Their dialect, which is simple and softly accented, illustrates their naturalness, "'Twas to be if ät was, I suppose.'" These people lead menial lives; still they accept, and are content with, whatever comes their way. This is a part of what makes them so innocent. It is this fatalistic approach that allows them to survive live on a place like the heath, and to be happy and at-one with nature. One way they try to cope with this harsh, rustic lifestyle is through rituals. Their annual November 5 bonfire introduces the heathfolk into the story. This bonfire is their way of trying to lighten the darkness of the coming winter, which could be symbolic of the dismal lives they lead. They enjoy dancing around the bonfire in a circle, and, even after the fire goes out, they continue with their dance, showing of their untold peace with nature. Dancing seems to be a common practice at most other special events: "' You be bound to dance at Christmas because ätis the time o' year; you must dance at weddings because ätis the time o' life. At christenings folk will even smuggle in a reel or two...'" These dances help to put hope and good times into the heathfolks' lives and to be together as a community. Thomasin could also be considered as a person of the heath, for she is simple and natural, and abides by the laws of nature. Thomasin is first described as possessing, " A fair, sweet, and honest country face... reposing in a nest of wavy chestnut hair... The grief had... abstracted nothing of the

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bloom... The scarlet of her lips had not had time to abate..." These numerous references, (country, nest, chestnut, bloom, scarlet (as in berries)), illustrates how Thomasin was very much in accordance with nature.

Thomasin reveals her fatalistic views when dealing with her relationship with Wildeve. Although she knows that it is not truly in her best interest after their non-marriage, Thomasin agrees to marry Wildeve again. She realizes that if she does not marry Wildeve that the heathfolk will gossip about her and Clym will be ashamed. This self-consciousness helps her stay on-track with her fate. She accepts Wildeve's second marriage proposal with the following view: "' I agreed to it... [because] I am a practical woman now. I do not believe in hearts at all. I would marry him under any circumstances...'"

Throughout the novel, Thomasin goes along with her fate, and is rewarded with happiness at the end of the story through her second marriage.

However, not all heathpeople are as in sync with nature as Thomasin.

Christian Cantle's character shows views opposing fatalism. This is a very superstitious man who is afraid of most everything. Basically, his fears take him out-of-line with fate, yet it is also his fears that put him back on-track.

This is illustrated during the November 5 bonfire. When darkness comes, Christian is the only person who suggests that all the heathfolk head home right away and that, " Fifth-of Novembers ought [not] to be kept up by night except in towns. It should be by day in outstep, ill-accounted places like this!" This suggestion is spurned by the universal human fear of the dark and unknown. However, what he is suggesting would break rituals, which are the way for the heathfolk to cope in their fatalistic society. However, the other heathfolk tell him that is a foolish idea. Christian's low self-esteem gives him fear of speaking out against them, and he returns to his fated course.

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Another time, Christian's extreme superstitious nature leads to rebellion as well. When he wins a raffle on the way to delivering guineas to Clym and Thomasin, Christian thinks that this is a sign that he is lucky. Although he has no wife or girlfriend, his prize of a gown-piece elates him. This leads to his game with Wildeve in which he lost all of the guineas that were supposed to be delivered directly to Thomasin and Clym. His superstitious nature allowed him to get involved in something so risky, but, despite his flaws and mistakes, Christian is basically at-peace with nature, and feels very much at home on the heath. In contrast with Clym's ability to accommodate his life to survive the heath, his mother, Mrs. Yeobright, cannot fulfill her ananke, as she goes against her fate, and, consequently, dies. This occurs when Mrs. Yeobright's fatal flaw is revealed; she has a bad habit of meddling into her children's affairs. When this is combined with her ananke, which is to bare the burden of Thomasin and Clym, it leads to disaster. She, like most other heath people, disapprove of Eustacia Vye, and when she finds out that Clym is interested in her, is unhappy. One day, when she and Clym are walking on the heath, they separate; Clym heads to Mistover Knap to see Eustacia, while Mrs. Yeobright's destination is for the Quiet Woman Inn. Mistover Knap is representative as a place for outsiders, and Mrs. Yeobright is burdened because she knows that Clym is on the wrong path. This separation to different places on the heath is also symbolic of the start of a spiritual separation between Mrs. Yeobright and Clym that will never fully be resolved. After this, Mrs. Yeobright's meddling becomes an issue when she interferes between Thomasin and Wildeve's marriage by plotting to give Thomasin money unbeknownst to Wildeve. This use of money, which is an unnatural substance, goes against physis, and causes sinister happenings to

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occur. The money causes a slew of misunderstandings and coincidences which lead to Mrs. Yeobright's journey to Clym's house. The "closed door incident" is too much of a burden for Mrs. Yeobright, and she is at the point of being unable to continue to fulfill her ananke. Her dying words are, "I have a burden which is more than I can bare." This leads to the establishment of Clym's ananke, which is to bare the burden of his mother's death. This is quite ironic because his mother's ananke was to bare the burden of him; in a way, they have reversed roles. Although Mrs. Yeobright could not fulfill her ananke because of her fatal flaw of meddling, because Clym holds fatalistic views and can easily adapt to new obstacles in life, he is able to continue to flourish on the heath. Contrary to Clym, Eustacia Vye held rebelled against fatalistic views. Her dream is leave the heath, which she feels she doesn't belong in. Ironically, her ananke is to stay on the heath. This discrepancy between fate and Eustacia's rebellion of, or misconceived notions about, her fate, are shown immediately with her introduction. When she is first incorporated into the story, she is standing on top of a high hill. Hardy decides to introduce Eustacia as being higher than nature, almost superhuman, a goddess. She is observed to be so high in the air that, "nothing that could be mapped anywhere else on the celestial globe." It being twilight, the way the sun reflects onto the hill, Eustacia's observer cannot distinguish where the hill ends and Eustacia begins. Hardy says that Eustacia gave the hills a "perfect, delicate, and necessary finish." Eustacia is truly meant to be a part of nature. But, as incredible as she looks as a part of nature, she moves, and the effect on the hill is palpable: "...the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion... The figure perceptibly... shifted a step or two... [resulting in] displacement..." Eustacia's <https://assignbuster.com/hardy-fatalistic-view-of-life-as-shown-through-the-return-of-the-native/>

movements were awkward, and disturbed the beauty of nature that she should have beautified. Her awkwardness in this scene is symbolic of her rebellion against nature and her fate. It also shows the irony of how this superhuman character who should be the goddess of nature, decides to rebel against her subjects. This introductory scene sums up Eustacia's fatal flaw and foreshadows her conflict with the heath. Besides being a goddess of nature, there is an allusion to the "Queen of Love", symbolic of Eustacia. There is something about Eustacia that makes men fall in love with her. As she rebels against being the goddess of nature, she also abuses her privileges of being the Queen of Love. The combination of her rebellion and abuse leads Eustacia to whatever she wants, illustrated through Wildeve, Clym, and Charley. It was destined that Wildeve would marry Thomasin. However, Eustacia could not accept this, because she wanted to prove she could be with Wildeve if she so wanted. On the night of his wedding, Eustacia sets a bonfire as a signal to him to meet her. Being the Queen of Love, naturally Wildeve cannot turn down this summoning. Besides interfering with fate, (Thomasin and Wildeve's), she uses the bonfire, a symbol of the innocence of the heathpeople, and turns it into a sign of corruption. Even after Wildeve and Thomasin's marriage, she stays in contact with Wildeve, and, when she gets depressed over the fact that Clym will not, or cannot, leave the heath, Eustacia falls back on Wildeve to get her out. Eustacia should never have been in contact with Wildeve after his proposal to Thomasin, because he and Thomasin are destined to be together. This refusal to accept fate leads to sneaking around, Mrs. Yeobright's death, Thomasin's suspicions, Clym's anger, and, ultimately, Eustacia's death. Just as Wildeve cannot resist helping Eustacia when she needs a favor, Charley, a

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young heathman, has the same problem. He is infatuated by Eustacia and will do anything for her. While Charley only holds a small part in the book, his entire role consists of helping Eustacia. When Eustacia wants to dress as a mummer to get into the Yeobright Christmas party to see Clym, Charley is more than willing to help her for the price of fifteen minutes of holding Eustacia's hand. When his fifteen minutes are up, Charley is regretful that he used all fifteen minutes and can barely let go of Eustacia's hand. Although Eustacia could care less about Charley, this admiration adds to her conceit that she can have any man she wants, including Clym. Later in the book, Charley sees Eustacia gazing at the guns in her grandfather's house, contemplating suicide. At this point Eustacia has hit rock bottom, and, protectively, Charley locks up the guns in the stable. It is Charley's love of Eustacia, and his heathfolk innocence, which keeps her alive; he doesn't just physically prevent her potential suicide, but shows her that people still care about her. Although still depressed, Eustacia's small rejuvenation allows her go on, but leads her to plot with Wildeve to go to Budmouth. Once again Eustacia is trying to leave the heath. When this materializes, and she is about to leave for Budmouth, she dies, because the heath cannot allow even a goddess to go against fate and break her ananke. In regards to Clym, Eustacia's flaws included over-confidence and an abuse of her position as the Queen of Love. When Eustacia finds out that Clym is returning to the heath, she immediately knows that she will be with him. It is at this point that she hastily tells Wildeve that she will not marry him. This frees her for Clym, who she thinks will bring her to Paris, a life that she dreams of constantly. Eustacia does not have any doubts that Clym will not think twice before fulfilling her wishes, even before they have met. When they finally

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encounter each other, Eustacia and Clym's fascinations are mutual.

However, they are so infatuated with each other that neither of them listens to each other's wishes, and there is unspoken hostility; Clym plans to stay on the heath and set up a school for the heathpeople, whereas Eustacia thinks that Clym is going to be her knight, and sweep her away to Paris. Eustacia is so conceited and used to everyone doing whatever she wants she believes that Clym will eventually abide by her wishes, even if they conflict with his own. But this is not what happens, as Clym is no ordinary person. Clym's ananke becomes clear when Mrs. Yeobright dies, and he knows he must stay on the heath to bare the burden of his mother's death. He is not as quick to yield to another's wishes without considering his ananke, which cannot be fulfilled if he journeys abroad. Even so, Eustacia still has hopes of Paris until Clym goes blind. At this time, she realizes that they will never leave the heath, and that their marriage isn't working out. When Eustacia hears Clym singing while working as a furze-cutter, she cannot take it anymore. Eustacia becomes crazed, and leaves Clym. Once again her conceit overwhelms her, as she feels she is better than having a furze-cutter for a husband, and feels that Clym should feel the same way. Eustacia could have lived as the goddess of nature and the Queen of Love and accepted the life that was given to her on the heath if she would have abided by her fate. But, her narcissism and pride, hybris, made Eustacia think that she was better than the people of the heath, and she viewed her surroundings with condescension. Eustacia was an extraordinary person; she was supposed to help the heath, not belittle it. When she tried to escape with Wildeve, her ananke was clearly being broken, and the result was death. Eustacia fought against the inevitable, which was one argument that even she was not

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above. However, Eustacia lead a life of torment as an outsider, because she held different beliefs and dreams than the average heathperson. Yet, in her death, Eustacia was happy and peaceful. The description of Eustacia's dead body carries a reference to light, "...her complexion... seemed more than whiteness; it was almost light." Her expression is described as "pleasant", and following descriptions carry references to nature, with the words "country" and "forest". These all hold positive connotations, and I believe that with her death, she was ironically happy, peaceful, and finally in-sync with nature. She was at last free of the dejectedness of the heath. In a story based on the greatness of nature and preaching the goodness of a simple life, Thomas Hardy's fatalistic views can be summed up with the appropriately primitive theory of survival of the fittest. Those on the heath that followed fate and could adapt to their surroundings, (Clym, Thomasin, Christian, and the heathfolk), survived. On the reverse side, those on the heath who could not deal with traditional life, (Mrs. Yeobright, Wildeve, and Eustacia), perished, leaving room for new and potentially better citizens to occupy their places. Through Clym and Eustacia's actions and interactions with other characters in the book, Hardy shows that he favors this view and tries to emphasize that individuals should not rebel against fate, because, as the word implies, it is inevitable. The heath will be forever; mankind is only transitory. Instead of unhappy rebellion, man should aim for the most of what life offers in one's lifetime, and a happy, fulfilling existence will follow.