



# Egdon Heath As An Embodiment Of Fate In *The Return Of The Native* By Thomas Hardy

Kakali Ghosh

State Aided College Teacher (Category-I)

Department of English

Mankar College, Mankar, West Bengal, India

**Abstract:** Egdon heath in *The Return of the Native* is Thomas Hardy's immortal creation. It is a fictitious area which was included in his famous Wessex. Beyond its literal role as the novel's setting, it has a profound symbolic significance. It may be called the central character in the novel, and all other characters evolve out of it. It is an embodiment of what may be called Fate. It dominates all through the novel and ordains the course of the lives of the characters. Like Fate, it is changeless, watchful, sinister, commanding, vengeful, retaliative, inscrutable, mysterious, and so on. Egdon stands for the blind force. Here Fate in the form of Egdon always wants to engulf all the men into its holes and caves. That is why the good (including Clym) as well as bad characters are victims of its caprice and wrath. And due to the merciless operation of Fate, the novel becomes a grim tragedy in spite of the Happy ending by means of the marriage of Thomasin and Venn.

**Index Terms** - Heath, fate, inscrutable, victims, grim.

## I. Introduction

Thomas Hardy was a writer who stood at the threshold of the Victorian and Modern era and the ideals associated with both these eras did find their replicas all through his literary career. This was an age which was torn between two conflicting ideals, namely religion and science. At the one hand, there was the age-old tradition and dogmatic religion and on the other, the modern scientific thought that had found its base in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* that directly challenged religion by scientifically explaining the origin and evolution of man. Some writers and poets (not to mention Hardy) like Matthew Arnold, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning were caught in the mire of these conflictual ideals. The result was the emergence of some of the deeply pessimistic writers and poets such as Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, James Thomson, A. E. Housman and John Davidson. Hardy's works are generally regarded as deeply pessimistic as he held the view that human aspirations and expectations do not match the actual outcomes.

Egdon heath in *The Return of the Native* has acquired a unique place not only in the writing career of Thomas Hardy, but also in the history of world literature. This imaginary (or partly imaginary) region, included in Hardy's fictional Wessex, also features in his novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and the short story "The Withered Arm" and has a reference in his poem "The Moth Signal" also. Critics and readers do not share the same opinion as to the exact area and location of Egdon heath. According to the Hardy specialist Michael Millgate, as is revealed in his *Thomas Hardy: A Biography*, the adjoining heath of the birthplace of Hardy at Upper Bockhampton was the origin of Egdon. But its fictional counterpart was larger than it and Hardy added to it places like Puddletown, Bovington, and Winfrith. However, the heath is not only the setting or background of the novel *The Return of the Native*, but it is endowed with a graver meaning. H. C. Duffin is not untrue when he says, "It is indeed the story of Egdon Heath" (Duffin 128). Apart from being the scenic

background of the novel, it has a symbolic function to play which is of much more importance. Truly and accurately, Walter Allen says, "Egdon is a protagonist of *Return of the Native*" and this protagonist dominates all through the novel as it stands for Fate or Destiny which is a dominant force or theme in nearly all of Hardy's writings. In other words, it is an embodiment of Fate. And as anywhere in Hardy, Egdon heath in the form of Fate is inscrutable, mysterious, vengeful, commanding, uncaring and impervious. It is of so much importance in the novel that it controls the lives and motives of the characters. The heath is the absolute monarch who will ordain what they speak and think or what they do and also, which turn their lives would take.

## II. Introducing Egdon

The novel *The Return of the Native* begins with the description of the Egdon heath at the time of twilight on a day of November. The details are fine. But the description is not without a kind of vagueness and this vagueness is in accord with the dark, gloomy and evil nature of the heath. The heath is changeless: "A Face on which Time makes but Little Impression" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 33). It is a barren open land. Here upon the heath night came "before its astronomical hour was come" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 33). Such was the appearance of the heath that it "added half an hour to evening" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 33). It can easily be seen that in the description of this kind there is the repeated reference to darkness and night which suggests the evil disposition of the heath itself. The very fact that "it could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 33) suggests its mystery, vagueness and inscrutability. The heath is watchful, "for when other things sank brooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 34). Every night like a watchful vigil, Egdon takes notice of the doings of the inhabitants of it with a sinister purpose and evil thought. Each night the "Titanic form" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 34) of the heath is awake with an evil and predatory machinations to cause the ruin, destruction and death of the people and then throw them into its underworld. D. H. Lawrence is true when he says, Egdon's "dark soil was strong and crude and organic as the body of a beast". The light brown colour of the heath adds to its gloominess and vagueness. The heath reaches the highest state of solemnity and gloominess during the time of winter, for it is a season which abounds in darkness, tempests and mists which match the temperament of the heath. Storm and wind are its lover and friend respectively. These things like storm, wind, tempests and mists which are the favourites of the heath, work as the agents of the merciless Fate, embodied in the heath and hint at the tragic aspects of life and man's helpless state, as these are associated with life's difficulties and misfortunes and sufferings. While all things change and alter with the passage of time, Egdon remains unaltered without any sign of change in it. Like an absolute ruler or colonizer, it remains there in the same place with the same sullen and gloomy mood. And due to this averse attitude to change, "Civilization was its enemy" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 35). It is untameable and does not permit any change.

## III. The Setting and Its Impact upon Characters

Nature occupies an important place in Hardy's novels, and in *The Return of the Native* in particular, it is of much more importance. In it, Fate or Destiny incarnates itself in the form of nature, that is, the Egdon heath. Its presence is felt all through the novel and no character is free from its all-pervasive influence. It intrudes upon the lives of its inhabitants. Not only that the heath is indifferent to the plight and misfortune of the people, but it seems to have an evil motive to do harm to their lives, apparently peaceful and silent though it may be. And this is what David Cecil says, "The Laws of nature, cruel and indifferent, forms the background of everyone of Hardy's books, incarnating itself now as savage Egdon Heath, now as the woods of Hintock, whose apparent peace masks an unending struggle for survival" (Cecil, *Hardy The Novelist* 26). Another critic Simon Gatrell in his *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind* says – "...the heath is the element in which the story moves, the element which has conditioned the formation of the characters (to a greater or lesser extent), and which is an agent in their ends" (Gatrell 46). Indeed, the heath actively influences all the characters and ordains their lot.

In *The Return of the Native*, Fate, that is, the Egdon heath is capricious and is guided by its own will. Conformity to social expectations in association with the heath brings relative happiness to characters like Clym Yeobright, Thomasin Yeobright, and Diggory Venn. On the other hand, the characters like Mrs. Yeobright, Eustacia and Wildeve do not conform to the norms of Egdon and so, they fall prey to its vindictive machination. However, such is the power and influence of Egdon that all the characters (conformists or non-conformists) draw some of the qualities of the heath one way or another. Jean R. Brooks is right when he says in his *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure* – "The six main characters take their key from Egdon. They all feel its pull through some affinity of temperament". Clym, the son of Mrs. Yeobright, is the child of Egdon. Though apparently cheerful, yet in keeping with the heath, his mind has developed a thoughtful and gloomy

disposition and his age can be judged from his intensity of experience. That he is totally identified with the heath and also insignificant while compared to the heath is clarified from Hardy's statement – "He was a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 273) [The colour of the heath is also brown]. His characteristic resemblance with the heath can be seen also in his cruelty towards his mother and then, towards Eustacia. Clym knows the heath intimately and has a deep affection for it. He has been bored with the gorgeous fashionable life in Paris and has no intention to go there again in any circumstances. Instead, he wants to stay on Egdon with a motive for the elevation of the lives of the uncivilized inhabitants. But though Clym is the product and lover of Egdon, his aim to civilize the uncivilized is punished by Egdon [as "Civilization was its enemy" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 35)], and at the end of the novel, he becomes a lonely figure, an itinerant preacher after his marriage proposal is refused by Thomasin who marries Venn. Eustacia, the "Queen of Night" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 93), hates Egdon intensely and her life on it becomes unbearable to her, though unknowingly she possesses the same gloomy and thoughtful disposition of the heath. Her situation on the heath is clearly revealed through Hardy's description: "Egdon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 94). The facts that "She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 93) and that she roams about on the heath at night or even the very term "Queen of Night" suggest her close contact with the heath. Her intense dislike for the heath becomes evident through her remarks to Wildeve – "Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 111). She attempts to escape from it. But Egdon does not allow to flee from it anybody who comes within its confines. She is punished for her disobedience and Egdon leads her to destruction by causing her death by drowning her into Shadwater Weir. Wildeve also hates the heath and perishes when he jumps into the pool to rescue Eustacia. Mrs. Yeobright also is a non-conformist who dislikes the heath and does not approve of her son's (Clym's) decision to stay on Egdon. And Egdon retaliates by causing her death by an adder as she is on her way back from Clym's house. Venn, the reddleman, can be regarded as the spirit of Egdon. Desmond Hawkins in *Hardy: Novelist and Poet* writes – "It is he most of all who embodies the very spirit of Egdon in his outlandish nomad life". Like Egdon, he seems mysterious. He appears and disappears mysteriously. He knows all its moods and the changes it undergoes in different seasons. At the end, he is happy, as he marries Thomasin. Thomasin has an affection for the heath, but her feelings are not very strong, as she expresses to Wildeve – "I like what I was born near to; I admire its grim old face" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 365). And she is also happy at last. Compared with the main characters, the rustic characters are happier, as they are quite content with the simple life without any ambition on Egdon.

#### IV. The Heath and Its Agents

"A struggle between one man on the one hand and, on the other, an omnipotent and indifferent Fate – that is Hardy's interpretation of the human situation" (Cecil, *Hardy The Novelist* 26), says David Cecil. And in this struggle, man is a helpless puppet in the hand of Fate. Fate, in the form of Egdon, is merciless, cruel, always inclined to place people in the mists of misfortunes and sufferings. In the deterministic universe of Egdon, there is no scope for individual to be guided by his own free will. Fate, in the guise of Egdon, makes use of various tricks or instruments (which can be called its agents) such as chance, coincidence, irony, misunderstanding among men, conflict of wills, incongruity of situations etc. to thwart human wishes. The chance-meeting of Venn with Johnny Nunsuch leads to a number of events which are very important to the development of the novel. Wildeve's winning the guineas, meant to be sent to Thomasin and Clym, from Christian Cantle and then Venn's winning back the guineas also are the cases of pure chance. Because Venn was unaware that the money was intended for both Thomasin and Clym, he gave the entire amount to Thomasin. Having received no reply from Clym, Mrs. Yeobright wants to know from her daughter-in-law Eustacia if she has received any money from Wildeve. Eustacia misunderstands Mrs. Yeobright as she thinks, the question is an insult upon her character and this embitters their relationship. Then, by chance, Clym becomes semi-blind, thus failing in his ambition to be a schoolmaster. Eustacia's meeting with Wildeve in the village festival also is a matter of sheer chance which not only causes a renewal of bond between them, but also arouses suspicion in Venn's mind, who, as a sincere well-wisher of Thomasin, remains deeply concerned for her. Venn makes use of coercion by firing a gun in the air to threaten Wildeve away from the door of Eustacia. As a result, Wildeve meets Eustacia at Clym's house during day-time. Now as Mrs. Yeobright sets upon a journey with a mind of reconciliation, coincidence and misunderstanding begin to play their game as the instruments of Fate (that is, Egdon). When Mrs. Yeobright reaches the door of Clym's house, he is fast asleep, while Eustacia is engaged in a private conversation with Wildeve. Eustacia sends Wildeve away through the back door, leaving the task of opening the door for Clym, who, she thinks, is awake, as he murmurs something in his dream. When she discovers the truth and opens the door to meet Mrs. Yeobright, she (Mrs. Yeobright) has gone. This causes misunderstanding in Mrs. Yeobright who thinks that she has not been



admitted into Clym's house deliberately by both her son and daughter-in-law. Through a chance encounter with Johnny Nunsuch, Clym discovers that his mother has informed Johnny that she was "a broken-hearted woman cast off by her son" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 308). Irony and misunderstanding lie in the fact that she is not "cast off by her son", or not even by anyone, but the fact is that she is ill-fated, that is, the heath plays its trick upon her with an aim to thwart her wishes. However, these words of his mother infuriate Clym more and Eustacia goes out of Clym's house. Egdon's favourites rain and stormy wind at night prompt her suicidal desire and she perishes in the pool. It can be seen that the rustic characters contribute much to the development of the plot and also to some extent to the tragic ends of the main characters. Thus, sometimes they work as if in conjunction with Fate. Also, there is conflict of wills and incongruity among various characters – between Clym and Mrs. Yeobright, between Clym and Eustacia, and between Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright. Then, there is the irony of Fate. H. C. Duffin's comment on Hardy's use of irony of Fate is such: "...in life it is the unexpected that happens, in the world of Hardy's novel it is the undesirable-unexpected" (Duffin 184). His whole novel is built primarily, upon the doctrine of the irony of Fate, as commonly understood". The words, innocently spoken by Humphrey, the furze-cutter, on the occasion of the arrival of Clym from Paris, are clothed in a veil of irony – "...she and Clym Yeobright would make a very pretty pigeon-pair" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 133). It is ironical that Eustacia marries Clym in the expectation of leading a fashionable life in Paris. Ironically, also, Clym hopes before his marriage that Eustacia would be helpful in his mission as a schoolmaster. All these complexities are created by the conspiring Egdon who always tries to bring about the downfall of man. Like the tyrant Greek gods and goddesses in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Egdon makes sport of the helpless men and manipulates and ignores them at its own will.

### V. Egdon and Hardy

The creation of the Egdon heath is a manifestation of Hardy's own mind and philosophy. He was a lover of Hellenism and pagan culture. Throughout *The Return of the Native*, the heath is associated with the pasts, the ancient days, the pagan culture, and particularly with the ancient Romans and the Celts. Hardy's bleak outlook on life is also evident in the novel. Though he knew Latin and had interest in the classics, he could not join the university as his family was not in a position to provide the means for university education. As observed by David Cecil, Hardy himself was brought up in a place where sufferings including poverty and passion were part and parcel of human life. The challenging aspects of rural life and the severity of the nearby heath left a significant impression on Hardy. The troubles and difficulties which beset the lives of the common people, especially the working-class people, deeply hurt the sensitive mind of Hardy. He in his later phase of life did not nourish any dogmatic view of God as was revealed in his viewpoint – "I have been looking for God for fifty years...and think that if he had existed I should have discovered him" (Duffin 196). In his Godless world, there is only one incomprehensible force, that is, Fate. And influenced by Darwinian theory of evolution, he thought that nature is indifferent to human ambitions and aspirations. The gloomy atmosphere manifested in Egdon is a revelation of Hardy's own gloomy and thoughtful mind.

### VI. Conclusion

Hardy has presented the Egdon heath in *The Return of the Native* in such a way as if it is the only active living character against which all the human beings seem insignificant and passive. Egdon is the omnipotent force which is blind to any sense of morality or justice. This is the reason of the suffering of the good as well as the bad. In fact, in the novels of Hardy, there is no evil character or villain. In the world of Hardy, the only evil, that exists, is the non-human entity; the incomprehensible, blind, omnipotent force, that is, Fate which shatters human hopes and wishes. Human beings are the victims of this indifferent Fate or Destiny. This Fate, embodied in Egdon, either leads them towards destruction and death, or makes them gloomy. Eustacia's protesting words against Destiny as she stands on the desolate heath amidst fearful wind and rain after her departure from her grandfather's house are poignant: "How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! I do not deserve my lot! O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world!" (Hardy, *Return of the Native* 372). The overall impression of the evil and sombre atmosphere is not relieved despite the happy ending by means of the marriage of Thomasin and Venn who become gloomier and more serious than before because of the sufferings they have undergone. The way the Egdon heath is portrayed and also the human beings are drawn in relation to it, confirm Hardy's philosophy and vision of life: "Man lives his life in a universe that is at least indifferent to him and may be hostile".

## REFERENCES

- [1] Albert, Edward. *A History of English Literature*. 1923. Third edition, George G. Harrap & CO. LTD, 1955.
- [2] Cecil, David. *Hardy the Novelist*. 1967. Second Indian Edition, Gayatri Offset Press, 1975.
- [3] Duffin, H. C. *Thomas Hardy a Study of the Wessex Novels, the Poems and the Dynasts*. 1916. Third edition, Manchester University Press, 1937.
- [4] Gatrell, Simon. *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*. 1993. 1<sup>st</sup> edition, The Macmillan Press LTD.
- [5] Khan Chandia, Shahzad. *Egdon Heath and Its Significance*. 22 May 2014, [share.google/KVdksy2G9hQL6wQxV](https://share.google/KVdksy2G9hQL6wQxV).
- [6] V. Allingham, Philip. "Discussion Questions for Thomas Hardy's the Return of the Native." *The Victorian Web*, 30 Mar. 2024, [share.google/qp0EA1gsnVlyNFJs4](https://share.google/qp0EA1gsnVlyNFJs4).
- [7] Wikipedia. *Egdon Heath*. 9 June 2025, [share.google/KVdksy2G9hQL6wQxV](https://share.google/KVdksy2G9hQL6wQxV).

