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STUDY GUIDE
TO
THOMAS HARDY'S *THE RETURN OF*
THE NATIVE

BY
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This work is totally based on:
BRIGHT NOTES: The Return of the Native
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LECTURE 15

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

SETTING & CHARACTER ANALYSES

EGDON HEATH

It is quite generally agreed that the heath is as strong a character as any in the novel—probably the strongest. It is the unique force that touches and molds all lives. The whole novel is played on Egdon Heath as on a stage, and the heath, in its turn, plays upon all the characters, molding their lives by its pervasive influence. H. M. Tomlinson in his essay in *The Saturday Review Gallery* voices this sentiment: “. . . It may still be true that the earth and the sky and the force we call life transcend in their mystery any character, however heroic or pitiable. The earth itself is the oldest, of characters; it was here when the earliest of us arrived. . . if you read again the first chapter of *The Return of the Native* . . . then the shadow of Something which is greater than mortal life begins to fall upon your reading.”

Hardy, the naturalist, enjoys writing of the heath. He writes of its sights: the purple bells of heather, the yellow gorse, the looming barrows, the heath croppers, the snakes, the flint knives and arrowheads of antiquity, the winding paths. He writes of its sounds:

“the baritone buzz of a holly tree”; “the intermittent husky notes of the male grasshoppers”; the “worn whisper” of the wind through “the mummied heath-bells of the past Summer”; the sound of the fir-clump in the stirring air; the breeze through the furze-bushes; the roaring of the weir in the storm. Hardy writes of “the intonation of a pollard thorn a little way to windward, the breezes filtering through its unyielding twigs as through a strainer. It was as if the night sang dirges with clenched teeth.” He writes of the insects of the heath: “among fallen apples on the ground beneath were wasps rolling drunk with the juice, or creeping about the little caves in each fruit which they had eaten out before stupefied by its sweetness.” There were “little brown butterflies” and “a colony of ants [which] had established a thoroughfare . . . where they toiled a never-ending and heavy-laden throng.” He writes of the birds of the heath: “a heron . . . had come dripping wet from some pool in the valleys and as he flew the edges and lining of his wings, his thighs, and his breast were so caught by the bright sunbeams that he appeared as if formed of burnished silver.” Only a keen observer and an ardent lover of nature could think these thoughts, and only a Thomas Hardy could find the words to write them in so vivid a style.

EUSTACIA VYE

A black-haired, white-faced beauty, Eustacia has been described by Hardy as “Queen of the Night.” Actually, she is a lonely, city-loving girl doomed to life on the heath. Self-pitying, she is always over-dramatizing her lot. She has the quick temper which goes with a too proud spirit. She has illusions of grandeur. At nineteen, she is driven by her passionate nature to take up with whatever man she can find. No man can resist her “flame-like” spirit. Too proud, she cannot lower herself to marry or run away with Wildeve, the man who could have given her the glitter of Parisian life. She chooses to marry Clym, who has turned his back on the artificial glamor of Paris. She expects to bend his will to hers, but finds herself at the last the wife of a furze-cutter. The heath people keep their distance from her. One mother believes her to be a witch and practices ancient superstitious rites against her. But one heath boy, hopelessly in love with her, treats her with deference and great kindness. The heath is to Eustacia a place to have secret meetings and moody walks. Her prayer is, “O deliver my heart from this

fearful gloom and loneliness.” She calls the heath “my cross, my misery . . . (it) will be my death.” It is her death. She drowns in the pool at the weir.

CLYM YEOBRIGHT

Clym’s face is one that conveys “less the idea of so many years as its age as that of so much experience as its store.” His habit of meditation makes people think his look odd rather than handsome. It is a look of natural cheerfulness overlaid with depression. He is a crusader who wants to help his kind. He values wisdom above affluence; ennoblement above repentance. His mother, disappointed at his decision to give up a flourishing diamond business to become a teacher, says, “I suppose you will be like your father; like him, you are getting weary of doing well.” And Clym asks, “Mother, what is doing well?” She is too thoughtful a woman herself to have a ready answer.

The heath to Clym holds friendliness and geniality. Being no farmer, he is glad to see attempts at reclamation of the heathland retreat before ferns and furze-tufts. “If anyone knew the heath well, it was Clym. He was permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odors. . . . Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye toward the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym.”

DAMON WILDEVE

Wildevé is a young man with “a profuse crop of hair impending over the top of his face . . . and a neck . . . smooth and round as a cylinder. The lower half of his figure” is light in build. He has a grace of movement that marks him for “a lady-killing career.” He is a nervous, excitable man, capable of quick decisions made in anger or pique. Thomasin says, “he has an unfortunate manner and doesn’t try to make people like him if they don’t wish to do it of their own accord.” He is a man of sentiment. Yearning for the difficult, weary of the easy; eager for the remote, losing interest when it is available; he will always find himself dissatisfied and restless. “The peculiarity of Wildevé was that, while at one time passionate, upbraiding, and resentful towards a woman, at another he would treat her with such unparalleled grace as to make previous neglect appear as no

discourtesy, injury as no insult...and the ruin of her honor as excess of chivalry.” He is “a man of fair professional education, and one who has served his articles with a civil engineer.” Some undisclosed misfortune has relegated him to the business of innkeeper. Of the heath he says to Eustacia, “I abhor it too ... How mournfully the wind blows round us....God, how lonely it is! What are picturesque ravines and mists to us who see nothing else? Thomasin tells him he looks “at the heath as if it were somebody’s goal.”

THOMASIN YEOBRIGHT

Thomasin is a young girl with “a fair, sweet, and honest country face...reposing in a nest of wavy chestnut hair.” She has a hopeful spirit. She reminds “the beholder of the feathered creatures who lived around her home.... There was as much variety in her motions as in their flight. When she was musing she was a kestrel [small hawk], which hangs in the air by an invisible motion of its wings. When she was in a high wind her light body was blown against trees and banks like a heron’s When she was frightened she darted noiselessly like a kingfisher. When she was serene she skimmed like a swallow.” Thomasin’s nature is one that takes life as it comes, philosophically and happily. Her aunt calls her “a practical little woman.” She has pluck, too, and self-respect: “Do I look like a lost woman? ... I wish all good women were as good as I!” is her reaction to the gossip about her having been jilted. She has her own kind of pride: “I belong to one man; nothing can alter that. And that man I must marry, for my pride’s sake,” She is not one to contrive. Others contrive for her so that she gets her desire. Diggory Venn contrives out of the desire to see her happy. Mrs. Yeobright contrives because she feels the dignity of the family must be upheld. Eustacia Vye contrives in order to eliminate her as a rival.

The heath to Thomasin is “a ridiculous old place” she has gotten accustomed to and couldn’t be happy without. She thinks of it as “a nice wild place to walk in.” She likes to take baby Eustacia to romp and roll on the soft green turf. “To her there were not, as to Eustacia Vye, demons in the air and malice in every bush and bough....” In a storm, “the drops which lashed her face were not scorpions but prosy rain. At this time it was

in her view a windy, wet place, in which a person might experience much discomfort, lose the path without care, and possibly catch cold.”

DIGGORY VENN

Venn is a handsome young man with keen blue eyes and a good figure. His clothes are of good cut and excellent quality. He is a well-to-do air. When we first meet him, he is “completely red. One dye of that tincture covered his clothes, the cap upon his head, his boots, his face, and his hands.” The color permeated him. “He was more decently born and brought up than the cattle-drovers ... but they merely nodded to him. His stock was more valuable than that of pedlars; but they ... passed his cart with eyes straight ahead. He was such an unnatural color to look at that the men of the roundabouts and waxwork shows seemed gentlemen beside him; but he considered them low company, and remained aloof. His occupation tended to isolate him.”

Diggory is traveling over the heath as a reddleman, a humble occupation for so personable a young man. We wonder why. He is in love with Thomasin Yeobright, and that young lady has refused his proposal of marriage. In his disappointment, he has turned from his prosperous dairy farm and roams the heath, living in his van. He contrives to be in the vicinity of Thomasin without bothering her. He is her self-appointed guardian angel. His single-minded purpose in life is to see that she is happy. Diggory Venn is a thread woven through the novel to trip up the transgressors at strategic moments. His shrewd maneuvers harass Eustacia and Damon Wildeve, and turn the tide against them. To Diggory, the heath is a familiar; a friendly place to live in; a congenial spirit, helpful to his purpose and plots.

MRS. YEOBRIGHT

Mrs. Yeobright is the proud, middle-aged mother of a successful son. Her husband, now dead, had been a farmer; “she herself was a curate’s daughter, who had once dreamed of doing better things.” She is a respected widow “of a standing which can only be expressed by the word genteel.” It is a great blow to her to have her son, Clym, come

home to live as a teacher, after he has been a successful money-maker in Paris. She is further crushed to have Clym marry “the hussy,” Eustacia Vye. Mrs. Yeobright is a quick-tempered, self-pitying woman, who will, however, relent when appealed to in the right way. She possesses “two distinct moods...a gentle mood and an angry,” and she can fly from one to the other “without the least warning.” She is undemonstrative, yet she has a kind heart for those she cares for. Those she dislikes she treats with “grim friendliness.” She expresses Hardy’s philosophy in her words: “Cry about one thing in life, cry about all; one thread runs through the whole piece.” The heath deals her a death-blow as she walks nearly ten miles over its parched, searingly hot paths on a scorching August day.

CAPTAIN VYE

Eustacia’s grandfather is an absent-minded old gentleman. He has been a naval officer. He chose his spot on the heath at Mistover, because, with a telescope, he could see the English Channel on fine days. He lets his granddaughter run wild on the heath. He chuckles at her schemes and admonishes her good-naturedly; he means well but does not know how to cope with her powerful character.

THE RUSTICS

Albert Guerard says that Hardy’s rustic characters are compact personalities revealed by their motions, their words, their jokes, and their deficiencies. They take great pleasure in telling tales of their past escapades, but they have no present conflicts connected with the plot. Such a character is Grandfer Cattle. He uses a stick as a third leg, and dances and sings with zest, though they say of him, “There’s a hole in thy poor bellows nowadays seemingly.” He brags shamelessly about his adventures when he “went a soldier in the Bang-up Locals in the year four.” He belittles his poor slowwitted son, saying, “Really all the soldiering and smartness in the world in the father seems to count for nothing in forming the nater of the son. As far as that Chile Christian is concerned I might as well have stayed at home and seed nothing, like all the rest of ye here.” He provides a comic relief with his jigs and boasting. Christi Cattle,

his son, is all fears and timidity. He is depressed by his unmarriageable state. He is easily deceived and victimized. Charley is a rather pitiful fellow, with his unrequited love for Eustacia. He is also a likable fellow. In his small way, he is as solicitous for Eustacia's happiness as Diggory Venn is for Thomasin's. Timothy Fairway seems to be the leader among the heath folk. It is he who supervises the grappling for the well-bucket; he who does the village hair-cutting; he who takes charge at the gatherings. Susan Nunsuch, whose boy Johnny does chores for Eustacia, is a superstitious woman who uses magic to protect him from Eustacia's fancied witchery. She comes nearer to connection with the plot than most others. Sam, the turf-cutter, Humphrey, the furze cutter, and Olly Dowden, the besom-maker, round out the number of heath rustics. Guerard calls the country characters alive and vivid but not developed and buffeted by circumstances as are the main characters of the novel. They give a comic relief and serve to express earthy wisdom in their tales. Their reminiscences provide a strong connection with the past. They are not nineteenth century Dorset, but are drawn from Wessex's still living history. In other words, they are quaint people whose habits and talk have been untouched by modern progress.

GLOSSARY

Adam: The first man. (Biblical.)

Aegean: Sea between Greece and Asia Minor.

Aeneas: A Trojan, hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Aeschylus: Greek writer of tragedies.

Ahasuerus: A Jew condemned to wander about the world till Christ's Second Coming.

Albertus Magnus: Bavarian philosopher and theologian of the Dominican order, called the Universal Doctor.

Alcinous: Prosperous king of Phaeacia.

Alexander: King of Macedonia.

Alps: Mountain system in Europe.

Amerigo Vespucci: Italian navigator after whom America is named.

Antediluvian: Of the time before the Flood. (Biblical.)

Arab: A Bedouin, or wanderer.

Archipelago: A sea with many islands.

Artemis: Goddess of the moon. (Greek mythology.)

Athalie: A play by the French dramatist, Racine.

Athena: Goddess of wisdom. (Greek mythology.)

Atlantean: Of Atlas, the huge man who carried the world on his shoulders. (Greek legend.)

Babylon: Ancient city on the Euphrates River. (Biblical.)

Baden: State in Germany.

Balaam: Prophet hired to curse Israelites; when he beat his donkey, the animal rebuked him. (Biblical.)

Begum: Sheridan's Begum Speech made in Parliament (lasted six hours).

Belshazzar: The last king of Babylon. (Biblical.)

Bois: Park on the outskirts of Paris.

Buonaparte: Napoleon Bonaparte, the French general.

Bustard: A heavy, long-legged game bird.

Caesar: Roman statesman and general.

Cain: Oldest son of Adam and Eve; killed his brother Abel. (Biblical.)

Candaules: Legendary king of Lydia, a part of Asia Minor.

Carpe diem: Make the most of today (literally, seize the day).

Carthaginian: Of Carthage, a state in northern Africa.

Castle of Indolence: A long poem by Thomson.

Celts: An ancient people in central and western Europe.

Christendom: Parts of the world where the Christian faith is professed.

Cima-recta: An S-shaped curve.

Cimmerian Land: A region of perpetual mist and darkness.

Cleopatra: A queen of Egypt; Anthony (Roman general) and Cleopatra were two famous lovers of history.

Clive: Robert Clive, a great military leader and governor of Bengal.

Corfiote: From the Greek island of Corfu.

Coup-de-Jarnac: An unforeseen and decisive stroke.

Courser: A hawk.

Cretan Labyrinth: A maze constructed for the king of Crete.

David: Second king of Israel. (Biblical.)

Delphian: Oracular, prophetic (from Delphic oracle).

De Vere: Arthur De Vere, son of the Earl of Leicester.

Doomsday Book: Record of William I's great survey of lands of England made in 1086.

Druidical: Prophetic. Druids were Celtic priests or soothsayers.

Dureresque: Durer was a German painter and wood engraver.

Endor: Witch of Endor was a woman with a familiar spirit, asked by Saul to call up Samuel to prophesy. (Biblical.)

Etna: Mountain in Sicily, volcanic.

Exmoor: A moorland region in Somersetshire and Devonshire, England.

Florentine: Dante, the Italian poet.

Fontainebleau: Site of a palace of former kings of France.

Galloway: Horse of small, strong breed from southwest Scotland.

Gay: John Gay, composer of operas and plays.

Gethsemane: Garden where Jesus was arrested. (Biblical.)

Greaves of brass: Warrior's shin armor.

Heidelberg: University town in Baden, Germany.

Hades: Home of the dead. (Greek mythology.)

Heloise: Heloise and Abelard, French philosopher, are famous lovers of history.

Hera: Queen of the gods. (Greek mythology.)

Homer: Great Greek poet.

Hussars: European military horsemen.

Hypochondriasis: Abnormal anxiety over one's health.
Ikenild Street: The Roman highway.
Ishmaelitic: Outcast, one at war with society.
Ithuriel: An angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
Jacob: Father of the founders of twelve tribes of Israel. (Biblical.)
Jarnac: Famous duelist (French).
John the Baptist: Forerunner and baptizer of Jesus. (Biblical.)
Judas Iscariot: Betrayer of Jesus. (Biblical.)
Keats: English poet.
Lammas-tide: August first, harvest festival.
Laura: Petrarch's beloved.
Leland: Earliest of modern English students of antiquity.
Limbo: A region bordering upon Hell, in some Christian theologies.
Louvre: Art museum in Paris.
Lydia Languish: Heroine of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, a play.
Maenades: Frenzied women. (Greek mythology.)

Marsh-harriers: Swift running, African birds.
Mary Stuart: Queen of Scotland.
Mephistophelian: Devilish, fiendish. (Mephistopheles was the name of the devil in Goethe's *Faust*.)
Moslem: A follower of Mohammed.
Napoleon: French general.
Nebo: Mountain from which Moses saw the Promised Land. (Biblical.)
Nebuchadnezzar: King of Babylon. (Biblical.)
North: Frederick North, prime minister of England.
Oedipus: King of Thebes. (Greek legend.)
Ogee: An S-shaped curve.
Olympus: High mountain in Greece called the home of the gods. (Greek mythology.)
Paul: St. Paul, a Jew of Tarsus, apostle of Christianity. (Biblical.)
Petrarch: Italian poet, lover of Laura.
Perugino: Italian painter.
Phaeacia: A land in Homer's *Odyssey*.
Pheidias: A famous Athenian maker of statues.

Philistines: Non-semitic peoples warring against the Israelites.
Pis aller: Last resort.
Plato: Greek philosopher.
Polaris: The North Star.
Polly Peachum: Heroine of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*.
Pontius Pilate: Roman governor of Judea. (Biblical.)
Promethean: Courageous, Prometheus was a Titan who stole fire from heaven for use of mankind. (Greek mythology.)
Pyracanth: Evergreen thorny shrub.
Queen of Love: Venus or Aphrodite. (Roman or Greek mythology.)
Raffaello: Raphael, the Italian painter.
Rasselas: Romance by Samuel Johnson.
Rembrandt: Dutch painter.
Rogers: Samuel Rogers, English poet.
Rousseau: French philosopher.
Sappho: A woman poet of ancient Greece.
Saracen: A Moslem opposed to the Crusaders.

Saul: First king of Israel. (Biblical.)
Saxons: An ancient Germanic people who invaded England.
Scheherazade: Teller of tales who saved her life by keeping the Sultan interested.
Scheveningen: Coastal town in the Netherlands.
Scyllaeo-Charybdean: Between two evils. Scylla was a dangerous rock; Charybdis was a dangerous whirlpool.

Sennacherib: King of Assyria. (Biblical.)

Sheridan: Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the playwright, who made a famous six-hour speech in Parliament.

Siddons: Mrs. Sarah Siddons, and English actress.

Sisera: A military leader. (Biblical.)

Skimmity-riding: Skimmington, a ludicrous procession with figures carried on a pole, exposing and ridiculing marital quarrels.

Socrates: The Athenian philosopher.

Schleswig: A former duchy of Denmark.

Sphinx: An Egyptian statue having the body of a lion and the head of a man.

Strafford: Sir Thomas Strafford, nicknamed Black Tom Tyrant.

Sumner: Charles Sumner, American statesman and abolitionist.

Tantalus: Son of Zeus, doomed to stand in water which always receded when he tried to drink. (Greek mythology.)

Tartarean: Infernal, hellish. Tartarus was name for Hell. (Greek mythology.)

Teutonic: German.

Thor: God of thunder. (Norse or Scandinavian mythology.)

Thule: A far away, unknown region.

Titanic: Gigantic. Titan was a gigantic man of superhuman strength. (Greek mythology.)

Tuileries: Royal palace in Paris.

Tussaud: Madame Tussaud's waxworks in London.

Ulysses: Greek chief ant king of Ithaca. (Greek legend.)

Vale of Tempe: A beautiful valley between Mounts Olympus and Ossa, in Thessaly, Greece.

Versailles: Site of palace built by Louis XIV.

Via Iceniana: The Roman highway.

Vicinal way: Local road, not a highway.

West: Benjamin West, American painter in England.

William the Conqueror: Norman Duke who invaded England, 1066.

Zenobia: An ambitious woman who invaded Asia Minor and Egypt.

Woden: The chief Germanic god. (Teutonic mythology).

