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## Traits of Modernist Feminism in Eustacia Vye's Quest for Self

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### Abstract

Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* is one of Thomas Hardy's most memorable female characters. Though majority of Hardy's critics place her at par with Bathsheba Everdene and Elfride Swancourte, some do not hesitate to compare her with the monumental Tess and the unparalleled Sue Bridehead. Notwithstanding any controversy about her generic status among Hardy's characters, Eustacia's queer nature offers a fascinating case for aesthetic cum psychoanalytical exposition. As an impulsive being with unparalleled emotional sensibilities, she derives a great part of her personality from her setting and environment — the romantically gothic Egdon Heath. Though set in a Victorian frame, she anticipates the emotionally assertive woman of modern era. This paper aims at exploring her unique psychological constituents, as the seeds and roots of her spiritual convictions and emotional adventures, projecting her as anticipating the modernistic woman both in life and literature.

**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy, Eustacia Vye, Quest for self; Modernist Feminism;

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### Introduction

*The Return of the Native* is a tale of frustrations and disappointments of Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye and Mrs Yeobright. The story revolves particularly around two individuals — Clym and Eustacia — whose roles are focal in themselves as well as instrumental in moulding the destiny of all other characters. Eustacia is portrayed in such an unusual way that almost every reader becomes curious to trace the roots of her thoughts and actions. Wayward in her demeanour, she is

associated with darkness — hardly distinguishable from Egdon Heath itself. The glory of Egdon Heath lies in its ‘nightly roll into darkness’ and ‘nobody could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at such a time’<sup>1</sup>; similarly, everything about Eustacia is shrouded in mystery and nightly darkness. It is not just a place or a canvas for action; it is rather an inherent part of Eustacia’s very self — the deepest layer of her emotional existence.

Egdon Heath and Eustacia share a common spirit, and there exists a strong affinity between her nature and Heath’s fluctuating moods. Eustacia’s nocturnal wanderings and her strange, unusual, revolting habits signify extremity and darkness in her soul — the same darkness that Heath’s face bears as its distinguishing feature. The inherent darkness apparent in each and every aspect of Egdon Heath is equally applicable to Eustacia. ‘Thus far, she is an imperial recluse, of a grandeur equal to that of Egdon itself’ (Johnson 195). She awaits her overthrow due to something inherently fatal in the same way in which the Heath awaits its final catastrophe. She is aligned with elemental forces in nature — forces emblematic of death and destruction. She is associated with ‘the literary lineage of destructive and self-destructive *femme fatale*’ and supposed to be the ‘feminized version of Prometheus’ (Boumelha 55). Deen substantiates this view: ‘Eustacia is not only less spiritually pure than Clym; she has many of the masculine qualities — energy, aggressiveness, ambition, and Promethean rebellion — which he lacks’ (Deen 126).

### **Eustacia Vye’s Quest for Self**

In the portrayal of Eustacia, Hardy projects the image of an exceptional woman preoccupied with the question of self. She is described as ‘the rare woman, with her affinity for heights’ (Morgan 80) who is destroyed by the forces beyond her control:

Hardy will not have her [Eustacia] sink, like Clym, into a wasting decline. As befits her Olympian status she will be consumed by the elements; her death will call up a fury in the natural world; like her Wessex predecessor, King Lear, she will be stricken with wild and fretful delirium under impetuous blasts: ‘nocturnal scenes of disaster (Morgan 80).

In Eustacia, Hardy presents the image of a woman whose wilder emotions are difficult to be fettered within the defined boundaries of the culture. Her passion for life sweeps her off her feet: “She is a woman, after all, with a liking for warriors and a strong yearning for ‘life-music, poetry, passion, war and all the beating and pulsing that are going on in the great arteries of the world’” (Morgan 77). She refuses to be judged by people for what she appears to be to the folk of Egdon Heath. Her apprehension that she would not be judged fairly turns out to be true and compounds her wretchedness in marital relationship. She marries Clym,

despite Mrs Yeobright's strong opposition, due to her fleeting fancy which she mistakes to be her love for him, though her wild and fiery soul cannot wed with a man like Clym, the essence of whose being is placidity — to have a calm existence among furze-cutters.

Hardy describes Eustacia's zest for life in her extreme mood swings — from wild excitement to utter desolation: 'Thus it happened that in Eustacia's brain were juxtaposed the strangest assortment of ideas, from old time and from new. There was no middle distance in her perspective...' (RN 79). Eustacia is a lonely figure whose passion sweeps her off her feet to the man who suffices for her desire which, later, turns out to be her false assumption. She seeks recognition of her worth to which Clym is blind. 'To be loved to madness — such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover' (Gregor 87). It is Wildeve who submits to her fatal attraction by acknowledging her power and control over him. 'Eustacia's sense of her own identity seeks reaffirmation, not through action, but through that confirmation of value which is the desire of another' (Boumelha 55). Wildeve gives response not only to Eustacia's bon fire signals and calls, but also promises to pull her out of her state in which she feels deprived of every joy the glamorous life of Paris has to offer. She manifests traits of the 'literary lineage of the destructive and self-destructive *femme fatale*' (ibid 55) whose sense of self can only be realized and confirmed by Wildeve:

If Sue Bridehead is the subtlest of Hardy's feminine characters, Eustacia Vye has the deepest force. She is one of those figures who are not only themselves, but their own incarnate destiny. They are in a world which is a tragic poetry of their own creation; for it is a world made by 'submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind,' and these are dangerous desires for self-importance, which find a heady satisfaction in standing upright and unconquerable against a world of enmity. And so the tragic poetry of their own notional world at last overwhelms them; since they are unconsciously bent towards those actions whose result is likely to make their actual world conform to the world of their imaginative pride. Such is Eustacia (Abercrombie 77-78).

Hardy presents the dilemma of an eccentric woman and the chaotic state of her mind by portraying Eustacia as a misfit or deviant in her behaviour. She revolts against a repertoire of cultural images. She is portrayed 'as the sum total of male circumscriptive attitudes' (Morgan 81). Patriarchy defines the indefinable Eustacia in terms which conflict with her own estimation of self. The inner discord and

frustration stems from the diversity of culturally approved images pasted upon her. It disrupts her natural harmony with the place around, and manifests itself in her strange rising and sleeping habits; her staying at home on Sundays and going to Church when there is no service. Clym, Eustacia's husband, is isolated and withdrawn after losing his eye sight. His physical handicap metaphorically extends itself to his becoming insensitive to Eustacia's longings, passions and desires. As a consequence, she gropes in the darkness to get hold of something which could enable her to stand upright to assert her independence. Nothing could break her amidst crises; 'but it is the invisibility (to him) of her pain, frustration and desire that drives her out of her mind'(Morgan 74). Her marriage with Clym is more like putting ice and fire together, signifying the ultimate improbability of their co-existence. "To her grandfather, who inconsistently chides and neglects her, she is alternately childish and romantical, non-sensical or sportive-'one of the bucks'. To Venn she is the fabled femme fatale; to the heath-folk she is a witch; and to Clym, predictably, given his reversion to type, she is first goddess then whore" (Morgan 81).

The witch is traditionally supposed to have supernatural powers which allow her to alter the material circumstances of her world to fit her own desires, and this indeed corresponds to Eustacia's image of herself and of fulfilment; she sees herself, for instance, as having somehow materialised Wildeve into existence...Eustacia, furthermore, poses a particular threat to the women of the community, being disruptive by virtue of her unfocused sexuality (Boumelha 53).

Public opinion alone does not kill Eustacia; rather it is actually the frustration of not getting what she desires as 'there is no place which offers the kind of freedom and happiness that she desires' (Hyman 85). What an unjustified classification of the woman for whom the epithet 'rare' has been used frequently by Rosemarie Morgan in her book *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy!* Eustacia has been described as 'the rare splendid woman'(74); 'the rare woman'(80), 'the rare creature'(80); 'the rare bird'(74) whose wings are clipped to ensure her fall. She is split between her desire to be herself and what others want her to be. "For Eustacia, however, the problem takes only the form of choosing — or rather finding, in an environment where 'coldest and meanest kisses were at famine prices' — a lover adequate to her longing" (Boumelha 51). From the outset, Eustacia is aware of the fact that her dilemma is 'want of an object to live for — that's all is the matter with me!(RN 151). On Clym's arrival from Paris, she goes to mummies' party because she needs some purpose in her life to keep her going: 'She had come out to see a man who might possibly have the power to deliver her soul from a most deadly oppression. What was Wildeve? Interesting, but inadequate. Perhaps she would see a sufficient hero tonight' (RN 157).

Hardy affirms his philosophy of life in the destined doom of wavering, passionate and exceptional Eustacia Vye. She has her own way of living life, or in other words she asserts her will which evokes heavenly wrath. Lawrence in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* maintains that Eustacia is a woman who loves novelty in her life. She is passionate enough in her love with Wildeve, then she dotes over newly returned Clym Yeobright for some time. She herself does not know what are her expectations from life, but one thing is certain that she wants 'some form of self-realization; she wants to be herself, to attain herself' (Lawrence 13). She could escape her death and destruction by being moderate in her inclinations towards one or the other man. Clym does not seem to notice at party that the 'fantastic guise' camouflages the sensitive Eustacia whose scope extends to 'feeling and in making others feel' (RN 171). All the people 'with strong feelings and unusual characters' (Lawrence 14) who are exceptional in every way are crushed and only those survive who are steady, humble, ordinary and commonplace. In short, 'Let a man will for himself, and he is destroyed. He must will according to the established system' (Lawrence 14).

It is a duality of view which is to persist to her death itself, so that we do not know, when she drowns in the weir, whether she accidentally mistook her path on her way to elope with Wildeve, or whether, overcome by weariness and despair, she gave up her life for lost. At one point she exclaims passionately to Wildeve: 'But do I desire unreasonably much in wanting what is called life-music, poetry, passion, war, and all the beating and pulsing that is going on in the great arteries of the world?' A question to which there can be no simple answer for Eustacia. Her desire is eminently reasonable in that it reveals her appetite for life; eminently mistaken, in that such an appetite can never be satisfied in terms of the images of romance provided in *The Lady's History* she read at school (Gregor 87- 88).

Lack of interest in everything drifts Eustacia towards resignation which may be the cause of ultimate destruction. After being disappointed in marital relationship, Eustacia returns to her house and prefers to remain indoors in a horrifying state of mind. Her indifference towards the existence of everything held sacred by man or gods makes her situation worse. She becomes a silent onlooker without any sense of belonging to her surroundings. 'To have lost is less disturbing than to wonder if we may possibly have won: and Eustacia could now, like other people at such a stage, take a standing-point outside herself, observe herself as a disinterested spectator, and think what a sport for Heaven this woman Eustacia was' (RN 407).

Despair, misery, wretchedness and resignation are the suitable words to convey Eustacia's sense of fractured self. The repetition of 'I' in the last few chapters of the

book shows her exhaustion with social propriety, obligations and the prescriptive roles imposed upon her. Charley, stable-lad, tries to distract her by building up bon fire. Eustacia comes out of self-imposed confinement when Wildevve appears on the spot mistaking Charley's bonfire signal to be Eustacia's call. Wildevve perceives her wretchedness in the flame-light illuminating her face and is perturbed to see nothing but an epitome of misery standing in front of him. He is astonished at a picture of complete sorrow which she is presenting. He conveys his agony: "'You do not deserve what you have got, Eustacia; you are in great misery; I see it in your eyes, your mouth, and all over you. My poor, poor girl! He stepped over the bank. 'You are beyond everything unhappy!'" (RN 408). Wildevve feels miserable when she tells him that she has been blamed for not letting Clym's mother in the house. Her weariness finds expression in her hysteric articulations: "Her quiet breathing had grown quicker with his words. 'I- I-' she began, and then burst into quivering sobs, shaken to the very heart by the unexpected voice of pity — a sentiment whose existence in relation to herself she had almost forgotten"(RN 408).

At this point, Eustacia seems to be really weary of 'I' and the obligations it imposes on her in the way of her self-realization. Clym makes a case against her. He blames Eustacia for not letting his mother in the house when she visits them. Unable to defend her negligence, she quits the house in exasperation. She hates herself for ever revealing to Wildevve that despite all her efforts to fulfil her duty as a faithful wife, her marriage with Clym has been a disastrous failure. She tries to conceal her misery egoistically: 'I did not send for you — don't forget it, Damon; I am in pain, but I did not send for you! As a wife, at least, I've been straight' (RN 409). Wildevve feels himself responsible for her wretchedness which she denies 'Not you. This place I live in' (RN 409).

The inhabitants of Egdon Heath condemn Eustacia for what she is not. Consequently, she is nullified and marginalized by them. Held responsible for a crime she did not commit, she is neglected and forsaken by her husband:

Clym's perception of Eustacia is circumscribed by a host of assumptions that range around the polarised stereotypes of Goddess and Whore; but Hardy's own perspective, even while invoking visions of Goddesses, emphasises Eustacia's painfully isolated, nullified existence. If (recalling George Sand's words), Eustacia's urge to better herself is obstructed by a society that denies her individual existence, then Hardy will not only deny that society its ultimate appropriation of her-neither man nor institution will hold her- but her will ensure that she remains unclassifiable, a-typical, bearing no resemblance to male circumscriptions (Morgan 81).

Misrecognition of Eustacia's worth dooms her and precipitates her destruction. There is only one person who is desperate to do something to secure her from her doom — that is, Wildeve. His desperation is explicit when he asks 'Is there anything on the face of the earth that a man can do to make you happier than you are at present? If there is, I will do it. You may command me, Eustacia, to the limit of my influence; Surely, something can be done to save you from this! Such a rare plant in such a wild place it grieves me to see' (RN 409). At this point she has already realized that Wildeve's assistance would not be taken as a noble gesture; rather it would be considered as something immoral as each of them is married.

From one point of view this reads as a judicial description of adolescent fervour, a diagnosis of the source of Eustacia's weakness and one that can only move the author to reproof if not to irony. But from another point of view, it is the 'eating loneliness' of Eustacia's days which commands attention, and the absence of 'love', whose language alone can help her to an understanding of herself. In one way it is right to think that her 'love' is not bound up with a particular person, it is invoked to overcome some deep-seated malaise within her about her own identity. Her appearance accorded well with [her] rebelliousness, and the shady splendour of her beauty was the real surface of the sad and shifted warmth within her.' In that remark, untouched by irony, we feel what it is in Eustacia which prompts Hardy's sympathy — a consciousness of the way in which her intensities of feeling, her capacity for response, are never to find satisfactory expression (Gregor 87).

Eustacia's 'malaise' or chaotic state of mind finds its best expression in the stormy aspect Egdon Heath wears on the night of her death. She is devastated by the inadequacies surrounding her. A terrible conflict ensues in her soul after which she is resolved to elope with Wildeve: 'It was a night which led the traveller's thoughts instinctively to dwell on nocturnal scenes of disaster in the chronicles of the world...' (RN 425). She reaches Rainbarrow and halts, once again, to think over but perceives perfect harmony 'between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without' (RN 425). She presents a pathetic picture not only by standing exposed to the cruelty of tumultuous weather, but also cut off as a solitary figure in perfect 'isolation from all humanity' (RN 425). The 'slightly rocking movement that her feelings imparted to her person' (ibid 425) denotes intensified aspect of her suffering. This extreme unhappiness of Eustacia is unbearable to look at before her ultimate destruction. The tumult of her inner being is reinforced by the 'tearfulness of the outer scene' (RN 426), and there is something unusual about sobbing and soliloquizing aloud for a woman who is 'neither old, deaf, crazed, nor whimsical' (RN 426) or altogether insane. Her desperation for freedom from cultural images and dissatisfaction over her lot are expressed in these words:

Can I go, can I go?? She moaned. 'He's not great enough for me to give myself to — he does not suffice for my desire!...If he had been a Saul or a Bonaparte — ah! But to break my marriage vow for him — it is too poor a luxury!...How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! I do not deserve my lot! she cried in a frenzy of bitter revolt. O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O, how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all! (RN 426).

By embracing death, Eustacia defeats a repertoire of cultural images, and triumphs over signification in her extinction. Bound to time and space, 'her boundless desire is to be boundlessly desired' (Boumelha 55). Eustacia's sobbing before she drowns herself reminds us of her sighs in the beginning of the novel as if she is trying very hard to keep alive the smouldering or dying embers of her stormy existence. After thorough deliberation over the poor bargain she had made by eloping with Wildevé as his mistress and by forsaking her duty as a wife, she drowns herself into Shadwaterweir to put an end to her agitated existence. In order to achieve her ends, she needs to transcend the limits imposed upon her. Her self-aggrandisement does not let her stoop low; rather she chooses an appropriate way out of her predicament. In an article "The Woman Shall Bear her Inequity", Malton reads Eustacia's death as a social discipline and holds the society responsible for her ultimate doom that stigmatizes a woman if she possesses the zeal for life:

How could there be any good in a woman everybody spoke ill-off? In the most emotionally charged scene between husband and wife in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, Clym Yeobright thus finally succumbs to the view of Eustacia Vye's identity that has been constructed by public surveillance and conjecture. Deemed a witch, a temptress, and even a murderess by the voice of the social 'everybody', Eustacia is liable to the terms of such judgment, the consequences of which are most obviously literalized in her suicide by drowning. Yet punishment itself also definitively shapes identity on Egdon Heath. The numerous forms of punishment applied to Eustacia — stabbing, torture of her effigy, expulsion from her marriage — serve to confirm social interpretation, unequivocally defining her as witch, rebel, and, in short, fallen (Malton 147).

Frustrated by her typical image among the inhabitants of Egdon Heath, she wants to live among those who are utterly unaware of that stereotypical, vicious identity of her. That is why she feels uncomfortable in her native environment of Egdon Heath and feels it easier to adjust in the glamorous, but alien environment of Paris. 'Her death must become a victory over life — a mortal life that had, to her, been empty of significance and purpose. For who and what had she been? She does

nothing, goes nowhere, and apart from her status as Clym's wife, she is totally without identity' (Morgan 81). Clym wants her submission to his will which implies total disintegration of her 'self' by merging it into his identity as furze cutter's wife.

Eustacia's basic identity to Hardy's readers remains consistent: that of a rebellious grand-daughter of Captain Vye, incompetent and unfaithful wife of Clym, ruthless and murderess daughter-in-law of Mrs Yeobright, mistress of Wildeve and usurper of Thomasin's happiness in marital tie with Wildeve — a woman whose effigy is melted so that it may ward off her evil influence over the ones who are suffering. Eustacia, "the rare bird from hotter climes' (RN 100) ...was remorselessly tracked by a 'barbarian' who 'rested neither night nor day' until he had hunted her down and finally shot her"(Morgan 74). She is hunted down by representatives of patriarchy like Captain Vye, Clym, Venn and Wildeve. The unknown remains the unknown for Clym who, in his blindness, could not discover 'a radical, potential woman-on-the-barricades' (Morgan 78). Eustacia finds her release from her imprisonment in death alone, as John Bayley points out: "In death she lies with a tranquillity unknown to her stormy existence. 'The expression of her finely carved mouth was pleasant, as if a sense of dignity had just compelled her to leave off speaking.' Hardy was never to write a more expressive epitaph."<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

Hardy's heroines, placed in a social context which inherently clashes with their mental and psychological composition, consistently attempt to get an unlikely fulfilment. Ahead of their time in their independent thinking, they choose death as an alternative to have their own space to live. Hardy stresses the point that when they are not given social integration and society does not give them their breathing space, they destroy themselves rather than compromise on their independence and freedom. To embrace physical or psychological death is not an easy task which may be accomplished by cowards. The society that denies them their right to be and becomes a threat to their self-realization has to face a reciprocal resistance and resentment from these rare individuals, though ultimately the system wins and the defiant individuals have to face destruction. It is in this context that we can see the true worth of Eustacia, who like Tess, is moulded more to speak for the frail fair sex at large rather than represent her own individual self.

(This paper is based on my unpublished PhD research submitted to the Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.)

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy. *The Return of the Native*. P.3-4. All subsequent references are to the text of the edition listed in the works cited and are denoted by characters 'RN' and the page numbers.
- <sup>2</sup> From John Bayley's introduction to Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. p. xxviii (listed)

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