Culture and Nature: Thomas Hardy’s The Return of the Native

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Abstract
Victorian industrialization and its effects on the environment have been criticized by both contemporary and modern critics, writers and many other social commentators. However, little research has been done from an eco-critical perspective to make any claims about the Victorian approach to ecology. Very few people, such as John Parham, have analyzed the representation of the early-and-mid-Victorian novelists’ ecological representation. This study investigates the Victorian representation of the relationship between man and his environment or writing and land in Thomas Hardy’s The Return of the Native (1884). Analyzing Hardy’s work helps learning about the Victorian social and ecological criticism on the man-environment linkage that could be biologically and psychologically intriguing and strange when it comes to the question of placing man in the world. The research will show how someone like Hardy portrayed his ecological consciousness through a mere portrayal of any harmony or disharmony of man with his environment. Through the scholarships relating to the fictional region of Wessex in Hardy’s fiction, one also understands the place and importance of Egdon Heath as the central setting and also a living character in the novel in relation to the characters. The Return of the Native encourages the notion that setting is an essential and central element in human life which consciously or unconsciously has direct impact on their life. Discussing different characters and their different qualities and the roles the characters are given in relation to the natural world surrounding them is immensely important to understand the man-environment linkage. This essay shows the ways and reasons that Hardy portrays the representation of man’s true place in nature focusing on Egdon Heath and the significant of such representation in human life.

Keywords: Land, Eco-criticism, Culture, Nature, Environment, Eco-system & Writing.

Introduction

England in the mid to late eighteenth century and nineteenth century experienced a demographic transition, an agricultural and industrial transformation because of industry and machinery. Herbert Sussman maintains that industrial factories and machines were being developed from mid-and-late nineteenth century and have changed the way of production and manufacturing (336). The industrial and radical changes in Victorian age were reflected through the Victorian literary works. Although questions arise about the task of the novel as a provider of aesthetic quality for domestic sphere or a realistic representation of social life didactically, early-and mid-Victorian novels energetically participated in a realistic portrayal of Victorian life having a major role in the construction of individual and national identity (Childers, Fiction of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels 2). Among many industrial themes and works of art, Thomas Hardy’s poetry and fiction reflect the environment and the nature surrounding human beings; signifying his concern about human place and the relationship between man and land.
human-nature conflicts, coexistence, and the fate of man are of major themes in Hardy’s works. From his early ages and in his mental development, religion seemed to have taken the form of a meaningless fable for Thomas Hardy. William Lyon Phelps in his article “The Novels of Thomas Hardy” portrays that Hardy seemed to have stopped to have faith in a “grain of mustard seed” (502). Instead, Hardy tended to contemplate about the function of the physical world, its elements, and its relationships with human beings. Such reflections are important in understanding Hardy’s significant concern about the role and place of man in the ecosystem. Hardy has observed the physical world along with humans’ actions to recognize the relationship between nature and culture. Unlike most of his contemporaries who were concerned with dominant themes such as industrialization, gender, or domestic life, his works through his regional writings have been acclaimed as among the most influential works and insightful perception on ecosystem and the natural world. Art is a timeless and unique medium for Hardy to transcend his thoughts as his numerous fictions and poems seem to be the production of his contemplation and experience of his life time in rural areas.

This research examines Thomas Hardy’s The Return of the Native (1884) (Henceforth RN) and his perspective about environment and its relationship with individuals. This essay will provide an overview of scholarships relating to the fictional region of Wessex in Hardy’s fiction to better place his portrayal of Egdon Heath as the central setting and also a living character in RN. To better analyze the argument, I will discuss the idea of eco-criticism in relation to Hardy’s portrayal of the man-environment relationship. Thus, the question is about how has Hardy discussed nature and its relationship with man? Why? The essay also considers the argument that Hardy through his RN encourages the notion that setting is an essential and central element in human life which consciously or unconsciously has direct impact on their life. Later, to punctuate my argument, I will focus on analyzing some of the major characters and evaluate their various qualities as well as the relationship between such qualities and the roles they are given in relation to the natural world surrounding them. Analyzing the functions of the characters and trying to show a reflective representation of man and land, the research also tries to explore how Hardy emphasizes and echoes certain human qualities with the elements of nature. Thus, the essay specifically explores how and why Hardy’s RN can be a portrayal of the representation of man’s true place in nature focusing on Egdon Heath and the significant of such representation in human life.

Hardy is considered as a precious source to the south-western life of nineteenth century in the medium of a fictionalized commentary. In terms of his fiction, the setting and the natural world of his fiction is set in Dorset, which he calls Wessex; a historical term defining the southwest regions after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom (Williams “a preface to Hardy” 64). Wessex regions concentrate his representation of a rural environment that he knew well and “depicted with sympathy, appreciation and humor as well as his characteristic sense of tragic potentiality” that “portrayed culture and predominately rural and prehistoric times” (Gatrell 205, 19). By localizing his setting, Hardy familiarized also re-familiarized natural settings and elements as trees or water that have a universal value and truth for everyone everywhere. Targeting the places known to Hardy and examining them depicts his observation of a constant communications between the natural world surrounding and the individuals. Additionally, regionalism of Hardy’s setting shows that reading Hardy’s works might be difficult without rural context and picturesque of Wessex and surrounding countries as many of his novels including RN employ mythic Wessex as their field of action. Yet, they have universality in their treatment as place which arguably is the key to Hardy’s portrayal of eco-system. Hardy’s Wessex essentially comes to mean “the whole culture-predominately rural and preindustrial” to which Egdon Heath is an example because the Heath wombs a number of characters (Pite 54). The realistic and romanticized rural settings are possibly the result of Hardy’s perception of environment and his observation of “characteristics of rustics and vast knowledge of country legend” along with the place of man in nature (Rogers 221). Although Alison Byerly’s observation of nature is a wilderness that exists in the absence of human beings and outside the context of humanity it has no meaning, for Hardy nature and culture are in constant contact, mingling and connected. This perception shows that Hardy’s setting “Wessex” is more than an escapist world because it was based on realities faced in rural life; a partially real and partially fictionalized setting.
Along these lines, Hardy was more concerned with a localized physical environment because for him place is as crucial. Since Wessex regions writings has become part of his achievement, Hardy for many is known as “the historian of Wessex, the Wordsworth of Dorset” (Pite 2). His choice of Wessex “reflects his primary interest in examining … the nature of the relationship between man, the community and the environment” (Birch 352). Place is an essential theme to Hardy’s imagination. It is a notion that triggers his mind most that his portrayal of the natural setting of RN is not only the representation of a place known to Hardy but also reinforcing contacts between characters and their surroundings which indicate Hardy’s “socioecological approach to fiction” (353). Hardy’s fictions are predominantly about physical and mental presences of nature and land thus “intellectual engagement is apparent” especially towards an ecological notion (David 4). His description of the rustic life provides “a living continuity” that is not only a background to the setting but rather attached and integrated to it (Butler 32).

Although ecology is a term of the late mid-Victorian, the words “nature”, “environment”, and “ecology” have often been used interchangeably throughout the history of modern environmentalist discourse because they share the common connotation of a common good (Dixon 6). Along this line, the works of these novelists are literary texts that can also function as “acts of environmental imagination” that can “affect one’s caring for the physical world” (Buell 46). John Parham in his essay “Was There a Victorian Ecology?” maintains that the “Victorian writers were incorporating precisely … scientific ideas that formed ecology” and displayed at least an “intuition of both ecosystems’ theory and sustainability” (158). What one can perceive here is an understanding of the ecological concerns of these authors that is the outcome of their reflection to the study of society and man. These writers also have a “shared critical problem” having the prominence of Victorian ecology towards Romanticism (158). Hardy’s choice of “Novels of Character and Environment” to which RN is included, reflects his portrayal of interactions between characters and setting “making them equivalent to one another” (Pite 1). For instance, in his description of the Heath, Hardy says, “It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature … like man, slighted and enduring” (Hardy 4). This preoccupation with the human-environment relationship in Egdon Heath identifies Hardy’s intellectual endeavors about existence and his eco-critical insightfulness. Furthermore, in Hardy’s fiction nature and culture are powerfully linked that even extricating one from the other, the relation still remains with the power of nature where human activities take place (Erchinger 794). Additionally, Wessex helped Hardy to portray his characters in environment as “part of the ecology of the chosen area”, and this provided sufficient topographic information that could help his reader to recognize part of his fictional world in the real world (Birch 353). To this end, human place is a living experience in everyone’s life and Hardy as the seer portrays fictional but realistic world that is familiar to the reader but comprehensive and also universal to human life. Moreover, Hardy’s literature and its remoteness from the modern and industrialized world of Victorian times better signifies the importance of place. Wessex regions seem to portray “Hardy’s conscious skepticism about progress and his hostility to Victorian ideas” that hardly depicted or valued nature (Pite 113). This should not hide the point that reading Hardy’s fiction as conventional or antagonistic to social progress is misrepresenting him because of his depiction of individual relationships with place.

Hardy does not bind his representation of physical world –Egdon Heath- through one medium such as wilderness, nature, or mere agricultural and rural setting, but rather portrays it through all these different mediums. Essentially, the entirety of Egdon Heath is the setting and the environment of his novel and the entire action takes place on Egdon Heath. Significantly, for Hardy environment is as important as characters that he opens his novel RN with the description of Egdon Heath without mentioning any persons’ name. This shows the power and the presence of Egdon Heath and appreciated as a crucial existence in the novel as place and nature. Part of RN’s first chapter is to “elevate the Heath from setting to situation in a tragic sense, mapping the field of human activity, it indicates an area superseding and externally beyond such activity” (Schweik 116). Furthermore, the first chapter title “A Face on Which time Makes But Little Impression” indicates the very essence of wilderness and originality of the setting as the Heath has a “wild face” and is “the vast tract of unenclosed wild … embrowned itself moment by moment” (Hardy 3). Such description of Egdon Heath as wilderness signifies “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization” which
is another example of Hardy’s landscape reflecting the permanent human condition (Garrand 59). This shows that wilderness is the space we live in; a place apathetic to human beings. Hardy’s concern of the Heath is “Civilization was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation” (Hardy 6). This also indicates that Hardy’s perspective of the universe is “sublime and absolute as the inevitable, cosmic, amoral universe” (Berger 57). Such representation here signifies Hardy’s awareness of nature as an environment not alternative in the way farmland or woods are and his awareness of a universe as an indifferent character in human life. William Rueckert supports such perspective that environment as a living and an animated being should be considered crucial because the human being is part of it and defined by the place (103). Humans’ consumption in the environment is another crucial aspect apart from its presence that “acknowledges the intricate, inextricable network linking culture and environment” (Bate 559). The novel begins with a sense of separation between man and environment, but, then shows how a sense of connectedness can be achieved through human being challenging and maybe accepting their environment. The Heath is: “the untameable, Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was it always had been ... distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained” (Hardy 7). This essentially indicates not only Hardy’s perception of nature and wilderness inevitably unchangeable to human world and civilization but as a “symbol of permanence” (Williams “A Preface to Hardy” 64). The Heath is world of “all the antinomies and idiosyncrasies of the real, larger world” (Vigar 126). It surrounds and incorporates “all the living being of the world of dream and fantasy, of superstition and witchcraft …” (Hardy 126). This suggests Hardy’s interpretation of man and nature that each acts on the other, yet Egdon Heath is a world with no secret “no human actions can go unnoticed” (Boumelha 259). The condition of the Heath is “recorded therein as that of Heathy, furzy, briary, wilderness- Bruaria” portraying an untamed place and a symbol of an all-encapsulating world (Hardy 6). The people on it seem very small in comparison to “vast tract” of Egdon Heath because it is the only thing the characters can see (6). Indeed, Egdon Heath seems to have an omniscient of presence that the characters are constantly aware of its present reality in comparison to their very small being.

Along with the Victorian industrial ecology as a contemporary mid-Victorian theory, eco-criticism theory as a modern concept can be applied to the works of Thomas Hardy and the ways people and nature are represented by these authors. Hardy can be called proto-eco-critical author because of his concern and analysis of the land-man relationship or culture and nature. The term eco-criticism was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology An Experiment in Eco-criticism” by which term he meant “the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature” (Glotfelty xx). Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s in their The Ecocriticism Reader (1996), define ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). According to Glotfelty and Fromm, the ecological criticism of nineteenth century portrays fundamental views of the relationship between human culture and the physical world surrounded by that is “affecting it and affected by” (xix). Moreover, eco-critical scholars, through works of literature, have researched such relationship between man and place that are crucially in continual contact with one another.

Hardy’s Egdon Heath depicts the underlying reality of human fate in relation to land. Eco-critically, RN and its representation of Egdon Heath is a wilderness where humans work and make their living as well as a fictitious area of Hardy’s Wessex regions inhabited sparsely by the people who cut furze that grows there. Hardy’s only industry among many and unlike his contemporaries is agriculture; “a way of life, unique and irreplaceable in its human and spiritual values” which is his representation in the Heath when people are the digging land and by it (Brown 39). The Heath cannot be only mere scenery but a dominant element and “the energizing medium from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bound and measured” (Sanpers 183). This can reveal the fact that for Hardy, Egdon Heath celebrates “the naturalness of men and women engaged in the skills and necessities of agriculture” on the wild land he portrayed in the first chapter (Brown 44). Thus, the RN eco-critically reinforces the link between man and environment through the presentation of characters on the Heath cutting furze which could be unproductive but they use
the land. This shows Hardy’s eco-critical contemplation about human place in universe whether consciously or unconsciously. Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Cheryll Glotfelty xviii). Hardy portrayal of human culture and their interactions with Egdon Heath suggests his ability “to integrate the elements of his work into a natural, agricultural, biological, seasonal background” where people can get their living away from the industrialized world of nineteenth century (Bulter 51). This is essentially important because he portrays Egdon Heath not only as a mere romantic stage setting for emotions, but rather “a living soil which nourishes” (Hardy 136). Hardy combines a portrayal of the primitive life of individuals in tribes and community as well as of modern man and his individualistic sphere to a stage of “the realization of the unity of individual with universal life” (Williams H. 123). This can reveal insightful endeavors of Hardy’s politics and morals of a strong connectedness between man and the physical environment.

Having discussed the representation of the Heath in general sense, Historical landmarks also signify a crucial way in RN to internalize and reserve man’s history of contact with land. Egdon Heath is promoted as a preserver of historical spots that can carry traces of man’s previous historical interactions with his environment. Archaeologically, Hardy creates a union between the ancient and modern world. The barrow is the largest place on the Heath that villagers refer to as the “Rainbarrow” (Ingham 155). Hardy puts forward his notion of man and nature relationship through this spot that draws back the readers to the essential layers of history. The narrator presents the world of the Heath in a panoramic view “that grand inviolate place” (Ingham 155). This essentially points out how Hardy emphasizes on past as a context to the present circumstances and links the layers of history to appreciate and control the emotional balance of his setting. The Barrow links both literally and materially the layers of past and present which is a physical representation of both national and universal identity. The narrator mentions “the great Western road of the Romans … an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow …” that were not only “remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change” but also representative of an environment mingled with people (Hardy 8). Eustacia is first seen standing on top of its peak in the beginning of the novel, and later Clym preaches from this same place, using the summit as his platform. Hardy signifies the importance of material to the cultural activities of the Egdon Heath and how human’s activity can provide past with enough importance. The narrator asserts that the Barrow will “enliven the Heath … attracts the notice of its present motives” (Hardy 352). The combination of both ancient and modern is created through an archeological spirit. The barrow is concrete evidence on man’s history and “Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible by weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods and deposits” (7). Hardy emphasizes the importance of the historical layers when the narrator says that the Barrow forms “pole and axis” of both the opening page and the Heath (Hardy 7).

Hardy associates the historical representation of Egdon Heath to the “primitive rebellious instinct” of the community which reinforces his depiction of a connectedness between man and universe through layers of history (Ferguson 90). The Rain barrow more than a landmark, rather it becomes a live symbol and is in the life and memory of those within it and combines both past and present. For Hardy, past plays a crucial role for an ongoing archeological relationship with present and even future because the Barrow “excavate[s] the layers of the Heath’s past, noting geological evidence of Egdon’s age” (343). Furthermore, through this mingling Hardy can maintain the longer cultural significance of the local places he has experienced in his life time. What Hardy seems to provide is archeological of the indifferent passage of time because “on Egdon there was no absolute hour of the day”, thus fundamentally portraying the rooted link between individuals and their environment. (Hardy 152). The historical layers and spots are not only physical evidence of the history of men but also their very presence supports the idea of the relationship between man and nature. The narrator better portrays this when he says:

The scene before the reddleman’s eyes was a gradual series of ascents from the level of the road backward into the heart of the Heath … The traveller’s eye hovered about these things for a time, and finally settled upon one noteworthy object up there. The Rainbarrow is represented as a very crucial spot that combines
“continuous human gathering and ritual from the time of ancient British to that of the Heath men (Hardy 12).

Hardy’s emphasis on the historical layers shows his portrayal of Egdon Heath as a world in which “the invisible, the bodiless, the dead seem to have as much effectively as the living” because the Barrow is the spot where most of the communities rituals take place which highlights man’s rooted connection with environment (Boumelha 256). For instance, when darkness falls, the country folk lights bonfires which also emphasis the pagan spirit of the Heath: “The first tall flame from Rainbarrow sprang into the sky, attracting all eyes that had been fixed on the distant conflagrations back to their own attempt in the same kind” (Hardy 16). Through such rituals, Hardy shows how mankind throughout history has turned to organize rules as “instinctive response to the world” (Schweik 22). Through his half fictional and half historical regions of Wesssex Hardy essentially portrays “a dynamic relationship between England’s material past and Britain’s present” (337). The effects of the layers of history are “immediate and cumulative” and they seem to be portrayed to claim that it is significance to the history of man (Hornback 23).

Egdon Heath is characterized as Hardy’s major and central character because of its presence in the entire plot and having the most profound role of having effects on different individuals. Egden Heath was a chance to present human beings against a vast impersonal force of nature and presented as “a touchstone for humanity to live by and make judgments by” and also away through which the characters’ fates are discovered (Butler 51). The Heath is a symbol for the cosmic world of mankind and like a man “slighted and enduring” which emphasis man-environment linkage (Hardy 4). The characterization of the Heath as a living being further reinforces Hardy’s presentation that how it can reflect the inhabitants’ minds and different characters’ different interactions with it. Those characters who fail to adjust themselves to the Heath, the Heath as a representation of the natural world or the place of man seems “through every conceivable thick of manipulation and coincidence, wreak its vengeance upon them” (Wyatt 56). The Heath’s indifference, thus, shows that the destiny of every character seems to be dictated by their adjustment to Egdon Heath. Along similar lines, Hardy was influenced by science and particularly Charle Darwin’s theory of evolution and his On the Origin of Species (1859). Thus, Hardy’s work effectively explores “deeper understanding of nature, of our place in it, and ourselves” (Richardson “Hardy and Science” 156). Hardy’s Depiction of man and natural world resonates with Darwin’s idea of human being as a product of a repeated process and how species survive based on how they adapt to their environment (Darwin 33, 41). Egdon Heath, thus, presents the continuity of nature and culture and constant human activity, and to Hardy environment is essential to individuals’ progress and harmony. Among many characters, Eustacia Vye is one of the major figures and a young beautiful lady who rebels against her life on the Heath and yearn for escape from it so as to lead the more adventure-filled life of the world.

One of eco-criticism’s basic premises is that “literature both reflects and helps to shape human responses to the natural environment” and by studying the representation of the physical world in literary texts and in the social contexts of their production, ecocriticism also accounts for their attitudes and practices that have been attributed in the texts (Hutchings 172). Hardy’s concerns about the nature-human relationship tend to be a corollary of his more pressing thoughts about the situation of man. Hardy’s RN can be eco-critical text on nature through his representation of the environment and individuals. Jonathon Bate and Christopher Manes consider the primary task of eco-criticism as “consciousness raising”, which relates to individuals’ contact with their surroundings and raises their awareness of the environment around them (16, 552). Hardy has deeply shown the very fate man faces in contact with nature whether in harmony or in row with it. Manes and William Ruecker further discuss nature as a silenced subject that practises its forces and shifts from “an animistic to a symbolic presence” (17, 113). The existence of all life and the natural elements and their evaluation are as crucial as our understanding of human existence, culture, and the individuals’ lives because of a crucial relationship between human beings and their environment as human being is part of it and defined by the place.
For Eustacia, the Heath is a dark and empty place that frustrates her; she rebels against it and finds it intolerable: “There is a sort of beauty in the scenery, I know but it is a jail to me” (Hardy 106). The Heath encompasses all the realities that are associated with various stages of the characters and although she imagines herself a heroic figure, her failure is her inability to accept the realities on the Heath (Deen 215). She is not separated from the environment and Hardy describes her as "the raw material of a divinity" whose "celestial imperiousness, love, wrath, and fervour had proved to be somewhat thrown away on netherward Egdon" (Hardy 75). Eustacia has struggle to adapt her inner feeling with the physical world and has struggle between “her hope and dreams and the immovable and incalculable circumstances” (Deen 215). Hardy portrays her in an indifferent universe that she strives to exclude herself from the Heath and her becoming consumed by the community and its cyclical returns of paganism in terms of their primitive rituals. The Heath provides not only a social and realistic background to the “confused, dreamlike, evanescent human lives which exist on it” but also “a sense of doom” that Eustacia want to escape in both time and space (Vigar 145, Lothe 119). Hardy shows human beings in “an unconscious and indifferent but seemingly malignant universe” (Deen 215). She says, ‘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!’(Hardy 420). Furthermore, Hardy seems to suggest that man’s source of being is universe though he might decline as in the character of Eustacia, and her revulsion and her inability to face an existing situation and her being “out of tune with a time that demands the maximum awareness of man’s responsibility and his potential” (Southerington 92). Furthermore, Eustacia’s state of feeling depicts her unbearable emotions about Egdon Heath, “Extreme unhappiness weighed visibly upon her. Between the drippings of the rain from her umbrella to her mantle, from her mantle to the Heather, from the Heather to the earth, very similar sounds could be heard coming from her lips; and the tearfulness of the outer scene was repeated upon her face” (Hardy 419). The Heath is the unchangeable place of man as a representative and fictional symbol of nature. Hardy seems to suggest not only the indifference of natural world to man, but also demonstrates the responsibility of man to understand nature.

The Heath and the characters promote continuity of their relationships and through such tragic events, Hardy seems to promote “an image of a perversely ordered universe” (Jeannette 106). On Egdon Heath, Eustacia has revulsion almost towards everything connected to the Heath which suggests her rebellion against nature, “I hate her already” she tells Clym (Hardy 235). Eustacia feels herself being trapped between “the intolerable alternative of staying on Egdon Heath or living with a lover, she thinks vastly inferior to herself” (Deen 208). Such feelings unavoidably depict her inseparability from nature and being part of it. Eustacia’s contemplation about the Heath is that it will be “my cross, my shame, and will be my death” and this ironically come true (Hardy 123). Eustacia through her elopement attempts to substitute reality with what she imagines to achieve, yet her attempt with Wildeve leads them to experience “the futility and insignificance of grand gestures in an indifferent universe” (Jeanette 104). Damon Wildeve a local innkeeper and Eustacia’s lover seems to share her dream of escape and her fate and they manipulate hopes of leaving Egdon Heath in order to achieve a larger existence in Paris, but they become eternal residents when they drown at the end of the novel in Shadwater Weir just before making an escape. Her death symbolically seems her return to it “as if she were drawn back to the Barrow by a hand from beneath” (Hardy 220). So this indicates that Hardy has perceived “a monistic universe governed by one mysterious causality” (Brown 36). Eustacia and Wildeve become examples of “failed aspirations, unfulfilled desires or thwarted intentions” (Boumelha xxxiv). Furthermore, Hardy not only achieves the unity of place by binding all the events in one place, but also reveals his target about man’s destiny to be in nature because Egdon Heath becomes a place “where any man could imagine himself to be Adam without the least difficulty” (Hardy 123). This also indicates that characters who suffer seem to be those who aspire towards a culture that separates them from nature.

Most importantly, the behavior of the characters helps us to explore how Hardy echoes their qualities with elements of nature. Hardy seems to show human position by testing his characters through “intensify[ing] the world in which they live in” (Hornback 20). Eustacia’s thoughts of the Heath is a dim and an
The Heath becomes “an overwhelming barrier to their married happiness in reality” (Vigar 140). She is representative of feeling and never-ending desire rebelling against “the inevitable limitation and thus is the supremely tragic figure of the novel” (Deen 210). Mrs. Yeobright, Clym Yeobright’s mother, is proper proud woman. She seems to be a woman of inflexible standards. By the end, she becomes another victim of environment and dies because she is exhausted by the heat on the way back to her house and is bitten by an Adder. Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright are “ceaselessly entangled and thwarted by the external forces” (Chew 55). This indicates that the Heath is not a world to be acted against but rather acted in because, for instance, Eustacia seems to “wed Egdon Heath without learning its language”; she is peculiar with her place without having a moral alternative to it (Hasan 43). Generally, characters cannot escape the consciousness and the very present reality of Egdon Heath and they are “inextricably involved” (Lothe 119, William H.125). Some of the characters like Eustacia, Wildeve, and Mrs. Yeobright become victims of the Heath despite their desires to abandon it. This emphasizes Hardy’s depiction of a strong bond between human beings and nature because death is portrayed as the only escape possible. Thus, human will is “ceaselessly entangled and thwarted by the external forces”, which reinforces the fact that it is difficult to dissociate characters from the environment (Chew 55). Hardy’s expectation of the environment, then, echoes the qualities each individual offer to his/her surroundings.

Some characters are portrayed to have positive approaches to the Heath and have adapted and survived in its cycle. Hardy describes the Heath as “a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature- neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring” (Hardy 4). Hardy depicts the Heath as a microcosmic world through which he signifies a rooted interconnectedness between characters, their setting and environment. Along similar lines, Hardy shows victims and those characters that adopt themselves with the natural world of Egdon Heath and survive. Clym Yeobright, for instance, is one of Hardy’s major characters that has a harmonious relationship with the Heath and becomes absorbed in it. He is the son of Mrs. Yeobright and believed to be the “Native” of the novel’s title RN. Like other characters, Clym has a different attitude towards the Heath; he is shown to have an intimate knowledge of the natural features of the Heath. Clym is one of Hardy’s major characters that has a harmonious relationship and becomes absorbed with it. Clym is described to be “permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its adours. He might be said to be its product” and becomes part of it because he “had been… interwoven with the Heath in his boyhood” (Hardy 204). Moreover, Hardy seems to suggest that Clym is bound to the Heath and nature; therefore, he comes back from Paris to live there that surprises Eustacia that cannot understand why Clym has to come back from Paris, the centre of all that is desirable for her. Clym’s return can also reveal that the Heath becomes “an index, a symbol of men’s unchangeable place in nature” (Deen 207). Thus, the Heath seems to become an antagonistic prison for Eustacia, but liberation for Clym and it reflects various approaches of characters to it and its unconcern to the characters. Clym’s return further reinforces his perception and representation of nature or man’s surrounding environment as man’s true place.

Clym can be the strongest representation of the novel’s impulse of a rejection of urban life portraying his absorbed feeling with the Heath and the notion of man-environment relationship. Such relationship is shown through his feeling of Heath as the “most exhilarating, and strengthening, and soothing” that she also says, “I would rather live on these rather than anywhere else in the world” can better show man’s natural connectedness to nature (Hardy 220). However, Clym return from France seems to mean “culture has turned to nature” (Richardson 68). Clym is “fully alive” to the beauty of Egdon Heath, but he is also aware of “its oppressive horizontality” which seems to give him “a sense of bare equality with no superiority to a single living thing under the sun” (Hardy 245). The narrator describes him as “a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive …” (201). Following the deterioration of his eyesight, Clym’s blindness, a tragic symbol, seems another approach Hardy stress on concerning the place of man in nature because he loses relationship with Eustacia and unable to educate people. Clym Yeobright seems to be blind to both “Eustacia’s primitiveness” and Egdon Heath as “intractably primitive world” (215). Furthermore, his blindness is a dramatization of his body’s rejection to reading and researching and a further signifying of man’s relationship with nature because he seem substitute from “a life of mind to one
in nature, unable to belong fully in either” (Richardson “Hardy and the Place of Culture” 67). The Heath’s function seems to be “the intensifier of time and space, and thus of character and action” that can depict Hardy’s profound and least biased study of human nature (Hornback 17). Furthermore, Clym’s return shows his love and ties with the Heath, dramatizing the idea that “culture has turned to nature” and depicts the integration of the two (Richardson “Hardy and the Place of Culture” 68). Closeness to natural environment and such connection is shown in the assimilation of Clym, who has a good understanding and relationship with nature, to “an insect … a mere parasite of the Heath, fretting its surface in his daily labor” (Hardy 327). What Hardy suggests is the ways human beings can find harmony and understanding with their external environment. Such representation fundamentally portrays the acceptance of human being in an immobile and motionless environment surrounded by and in continuous communication with it.

RN portrays two other characters who harmoniously live by the Heath and survive in this indifferent setting Hardy has characterized. Both Diggory Venn and Thomasin Yeobright do not seem to resist the Heath and adapt themselves to it as their natural and appropriate place thus they are “neither heroic nor tragic” (Deen 209). If Clym said to be the product of the Heath, Diggory is literally saturated with it for his skin is impregnated with the materials dug out of earth. Furthermore, Thomason brings a baby happily and Venn gets on thoroughly well and achieves his reward of marriage by the end of the novel. On the other hand, Oak has a good relationship with the Heath and can read signals and signs of nature. He is portrayed as a competent interpreter of the Heath and “reads between the lines of nature’s message” (Benvenuto 85). For instance, seeing the large toad, Oak “knows what this direct message from the Great Mother meant” because nature seems to be illegible and its signs do not change (Benvenuto 85). Furthermore, a brown-slug to Oak was another hint from nature that “he was to prepare for foul weather” (Benvenuto 85). If Hardy Depicts Clym’s blindness to reinforce his separation from culture and teaching and his return to environment, Venn is portrayed as changing from being physically undesirable (dyed red by his job as a reddleman) to be strong, fit, gentlemanly, and most importantly able to adapt to his environment. The very existence of Egdon Heath is a means through which the existence of human being is stressed. Generally characters cannot escape the consciousness and the very present reality of Egdon Heath and they are “inextricably involved” (Lothe 119, William H. 125). This emphasizes Hardy’s depiction of a strong bond between human beings and nature because death is portrayed as the only escape possible especially for those characters who strive to escape. Egdon Heath, thus, is a microcosm representation of the physical world of the novel, and a microcosm, both in space and in time of the total history of the world, compressed to the present existence. Thus, human will is “ceaselessly entangled and thwarted by the external forces”, which reinforces the fact that it is difficult to dissociate characters from the environment (Chew 55). Such representation of the Heath perceptively portrays Hardy’s concern of man’s place in environment rather than social rules or manners.

In RN, then, Egdon Heath, part of the Wessex region, becomes the field and the setting of the novel. Egdon Heath profoundly portrays the study of human nature in an environment indifferent to human actions. Essentially, Hardy does not separate man with the natural world signifying the link and the interaction of man and nature portrayed on the Heath. The Heath is an organic yet motionless place that largely controls the characters in the novel. It is the unchangeable and unsympathetic place of man and characters have different interactions with the Heath. Some accept its reality and achieve a harmonious life with it while others are antagonistic towards it and struggle to live on it. Thus, the emotional and contemplative responses of different characters and their communication with the physical world of Egdon Heath dictate their place and destiny in the world. Hardy points towards man’s inherent attachment to the natural world through Clym. Indeed Clym’s return represents the combination of primitive life and modern life that strengthens a bond between man and his environment. However, attempting to escape from nature and abandoning it inevitably brings danger or undesirable consequences as evidenced, especially in the figures of Clym, Eustacia, and Yeobright, who become ultimately victims of the Heath. The Heath represents the indifferent natural world, suggestion that man has responsibility to comprehend it and live by it. Most importantly, there is no escape possible from the Heath but death, which further reinforces its
nourishing qualities and its symbolic role in the life-cycle and emphasizes on man’s inter-connectedness with nature.

References


