A STUDY OF THE CHARACTER EUSTACIA VYE IN THOMAS HARDY'S THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

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Abstract

Eustacia Vye is the heroine of The Return of the Native. She is the most impressive figure of the book. If Sue Bridehead of Jude the Obscure is the subtlest of Hardy's female characters, Eustacia has the deepest force. There is no doubt about the supreme success of the character of Eustacia. In her dark beauty Hardy has pointed one of his most memorable portraits. The present paper is aimed to study the character of Eustacia Vye.

Keywords: heroine, fate, chance, family, suffering

Introduction

Eustacia Vye was the raw material of divinity. On olympus she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman."[2] It has been suggested that Eustacia belongs essentially to the class of which Madame Bovary is the type. "The similarities between Emma and Eustacia are, indeed, clear enough; the tragedy of each of them consist in the disillusionment which reality brings for their romantic dreams of happiness unconnected with reality. But this, after all, is no uncommon theme; it is frequently met within literature as in life; and there is no need to seek in Flaubert for an explanation of Hardy's choice of it. The aim of the two novelists is, in fact, quiet different."[3]

Eustacia Vye's Family Background

In chapter VII of book First Hardy has given an account of Eustacia's parents. She was the daughter of the bandmaster of a regiment. Her father was a fine musician — who met his future wife during her trip thither with her father the Captain, a man of good family. The marriage was scarcely in accord with the old man's wishes, for the bandmaster's pockets were as light as his occupation. But the musician did his best; adopted his wife's name, made England permanently his home, too great trouble with his child's education, the expenses of which were defrayed by the grandfather, and throve as the chief local musician till her mother's death when he left off thriving, drank, and died also. The girl was left to the care of her grandfather, who, since three of his ribs became broken in a

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[2] Tomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1953), p. 75.
[3] William R. Rutland, Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Writings and their Background (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 185-186.

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shipwreck, had lived in this airy perch on Egdon, a spot which had taken his fancy because the house was to be had for next to nothing, and because a remote blue tinge on the horizon between the hills, visible from the cottage door, was traditionally believed to be the English channel.

The Most Charming Personality

Eustacia's great personal beauty is responsible for the tragedy of the Clym, Wildene, and also the death of Mr. Yeobright. The superstitious women of Egdon Heath look upon her as witch. Certainly she is an evil influence in the life of everyone in the novel. Her beauty is described with great poetic power by Hardy. The chapter dealing with her personal charms is one of the most glorious in all Hardy.

She was in person full limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch a cloud. To see her hair was too fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow. "She had Pagan eyes of nocturnal mysteries, and their light, as it came and went and came again was hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; and these the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English women."[4] This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so; she might have been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could fancy the colour of Eustacia's soul to be flame-like. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression.

The mouth seemed formed less to speak than to quiver, less to quiver than to kiss. Some might have added, less to kiss than to curl. Viewed sideways, the closing line of her lips formed with almost geometric precision, the curve so well known in the arts of design as the cima-recta or ogee. The sight of such a flexible bend as that on grim Egdon was quite an apparition. It was felt at once that mouth did not come over from Sleswig with a band of Saxon pirates whose lips met like the two halves of a muffin. One had fancied that such lip-curves were mostly lurking underground in the south as fragments of forgotten marbles. So fine were the lines of her lips that, though full, each corner of her mouth was as clearly cut as the point of a spear. The keenness of corner was only blunted when she was given over to sudden fits of gloom, one of the phases of the night side of sentiment which she knew too well for her years. She reminds one of the lotus-eaters and Cleopatra, of roses, rubies and tropical midnights.

The Most Dignified Heroine

Eustacia is perhaps the most dignified among the heroines of Wessex novels she is an imperial recluse, of grandeur equal to that of Egdon itself. The

[4] Tomas Hardy, p. 76.

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only way to look queenly without realms or hearts to queen it over is to look as if you had lost them; and Eustacia did that to a triumph. In the Captain's cottage she could suggest mansions she had never seen. Perhaps that was because she frequented a vaster mansion than any of them, the open hills. Like the summer condition of the place around her, she was an embodiment of the phrase 'a popular solitude' — apparently so listless, void and quiet, she was really busy and full.

Eustacia is a mildly neurotic hedonist. As Duffin puts it: "As far as social ethics were concerned Eustacia approached the savage state though in emotion she was all the while an epicure. She had advanced to the secret recesses of sensuousness, yet had hardly crossed the threshold of conventionality." An epicure in emotion, like Sue! Well, perhaps. But how different are Eustacia's emotional feasts from Sue's cool experimental savourings. If epicures both, it was as gourmand and gourmet! However, a rich sensuousness is undoubtedly her dominant characteristic, making her conspicuous among Hardy's Heroines. She had "predetermined to nourish a passion for Yeobright." She declares she once saw an officer of Hussars ride down the street and though he was a total stranger and never spoke to her she loved him till she thought she should really die of love. It is not a pleasant thing, this nature in a woman; it is only tolerable in Eustacia because her personality as a whole is heroic enough to glorify all its constituents. Her sensuous nature is incapable of thought, she is built entirely of highly — potentialised feeling. Her indolence covers, as Mrs. Yeobright perceives, very strong passions. Her cry that she has tried to be a splendid woman is bitterest ignorance of self: conscious and deliberate effort to be anything at all — to effect any change in her nature, to resist any impulse — is mere impossibility to her purely instinctive character. Such a woman must inevitably sin, according to all human notions of virtue: her soul dissolved in her hot blood, the restraint of reason absent, she has no guide but emotion and animal wants."[5]

A Passionate Lover

Eustacia is essentially a votaress of love. Love making is the primary concern of her life. In her case loving is generated by something beyond or beside the loved one to which he seems to be related. The love which drives Eustacia in ceaseless movements of longing is never simple desire for possession of another, but is always desire for something else which seem to be accessible by way of beloved. Eustacia 's love for Clym is directed not toward him, but toward what he seem to stand for or to promise her. Hardy is explicit her about the religious dimension of love.

It is interesting to examine Eustacia 's relations with Wildene.

[5] H.C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy, 3rd ed. (1961; rpt. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 226.

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Eustacia's fluctuations of love for Wildeve and indifference toward him provide the occasion for statements which are of capital importance as formulations of the pattern of loving in all his fiction. Just as Festus, in The Trumpet Major, is turned away from his love for. Anne Garland by the way John Loveday's supposed desire for Matilda makes Matilda desirable to Festus too, and just as Lady Caroline in, 'The Marchoiners of Stonehenge' perversely and passionately center(s) her affection on quite a plain looking young man of humble birth and no position at all because she is stimulated in this passion by the discovery that a young girl of the village already loved the young man fondly, so Eustacia ceases to love the man who is not lived by others and loves him again when he becomes desirable to another person. Her relation to Wildeve is mediated by way of his relation to Thomasin. When Eustacia has Wildene to herself she soon tries of him, but as soon as he turns from her to Thomasin he becomes desirable again: The man who had begun by being merely her amusement, and would never have been more than her hoppy but for his skill in deserting her at the right moments, was now again her desire. Cessation in his love making had revivified her love. Such feeling as Eustacia had idly given to Wildeve was damned into a flood by Thomasin. As soon as she learns that she can have him wholly to herself again, he is magically drained of his attractions for her.[65]

The Most Romantic Lady

Eustacia had French blood in her and this is responsible for her passionate character, love of beauty and pleasure, her sensuousness and desire for love. At Budmouth, Eustacia was surrounded by gaiety and pleasure. She saw gallant soldiers and musk, and dance and love making and such other things and all his deepened her love of pleasure. Her education was very moderate and did not develop her intellectual, moral or spiritual nature. It only supplied her with heroes like Napoleon whom she admired. She wanted to conquer hearts and reign like a queen in society.

Eustacia is a born romantic. "She is Shelleyan Creation, in her quarrel with the stern realities and her joy in 'what seems'; she yearns for a palace of delight, she would quaff all the moment can give, lest the cup should be sanctioned from her lips."[76] Hardy has heaped upon her beauty a series of historical and classical allusions, identifying her with the glories of past civilizations, the beauty of exotic landscapes, and the nature of rebellious and romantic heroines. "She is compared to Artemis, Athena, and Hera. She might have been, a fitting divinity for Olympus, one had fancied that such lip-curves were mostly lurking underground

[6] J. Hills Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970) pp. 159-160.
[7] Earnest A Baker, The History of English Novel IX (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 38.

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in the south as fragments of forgotten marbles, her skin is like Parian marble, her presence reminds one of Bourbon roses and rubies, and Hardy even endows her with a nobility of birth, linking her with an ancient English, as well as a classical Mediterranean ancestry. There can be compared to the façade of a prison."[8]

Highly Cultured and Refined One

Eustacia possesses beauty such as gives her a long start in playing the romantic heroine. Eventually the role commands her, so that she can proclaim its faith with entire sincerity. She was hoping for the time when, as the mistress of some pretty establishment, however small, near a Parisian Bouleyard, she would be passing her days on the skirts at least of the gay world, and catching stray wafts from those town pleasures she was so well fitted to enjoy.

In the way of sheer greatness Eustacia stands out with Sue and Tess. As Duffin puts it: "She is built entirely of highly-potentialised feeling. Her indolence covers, as Mrs. Yeobright perceives, very strong passions. Her every act is the instant product of impetuous desire."[9] But her personality as a whole is heroic enough to glorify all its constituents.

This queen of the night, this bundle of neuroses tingling in a body of great physical beauty, was too Shelleyan a thing for the didactic but earth bound Clym. Wildeve was paltry beside her. Her ancestry—a bandmaster's daughter—did not detract from regality. "To be loved to madness—such was her great desire, but there was nobody mend or great enough to do so. She was ever in a spring of discontent, and one can never conjecture of phase or situation of anything like a permanent nature in which she would ever be contented. There was insatiability about Eustacia, restlessness, an unceasing demanding. She had to live at a hotter pace: she had to burn up quicker than anybody else.[10]

She is more cultured and refined than the people of Egdon, except Clym and she, therefore, excites our admiration and that of Wildeve, Clym and everyone else. Only ignorant people like Susan Nunsuch regard her as a witch.

There is complete opposition her character and her environment. She hates Egdon Heath and it proves to be her doom. It was her fate which brought her there. The death of her parents and her grandfather's preference and taste brought her to Egdon. All her life she struggled against Egdon but she did not succeed and ultimately found her grave in one of its pool.

Role of Fate and Chance in Her Life

Fate made her fall in love with Clym a man whose character was just the opposite of hers. She was worldly, he was unworldly, she was sensual, he was

[8] [7]F.R. Southerington, Hardy's Vision of Man (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd., 1971), p. 93.
[9] H.C. Duffin, p. 227.
[10] George Wind, Hardy (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), p. 56

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intellectual. She did not care for the beauty of nature, he adored it. She hated man and had no desire for social service; he loved mankind and dedicated his life to the service of society. She was selfish and self-centred, he was thoughtful. This opposition of character was her misfortune and while it satisfied one of her two great desires, is left the second unfulfilled and this led to the tragedy.

She has hatred for Mrs. Yeobright. This was due partly to the contrast of character between the two women and partly to her own pride and passion. Her instinctive action in not opening the door was the result of a perversity of mind and a blind impulse. The action was fatal to her happiness. It is true there was a misunderstanding for she thought that Clym was awake. But she felt a deep impulse not to open the door, only because she hated Mrs. Yeobright.

Eustacia never told Clym all about her desires and passions. Hence Clym never quite understood the intensity of her desire for pleasure and even after marriage he thought that she might be a good teacher in his ideal school. Similarly, she did not understand the intensity of his idealism. Hence even after marriage she led a lonely life and sought pleasure stealthily, almost with a sense of quilt. If Eustacia had frankly told Clym immediately that she had not opened the door under the impression that he was awake, the whole of the subsequent tragedy might have been averted.

Why did Eustacia not go with Wildeve to Paris as was arranged between them? The logic is that she loved Clym and could not suffer the idea of leaving him as the mistress of such a worthless man as Wildeve. Since there was no other way of realizing her desires, Eustacia had no alternative to suicide.

Concluding Remarks

Of Eustacia a superficial judge is likely to make a very rough and hostile summing-up that she was an idle, conceited and discontented heroine, who, with no real troubles, created factitious ones for herself and other people. But a close analysis of her character shows that Eustacia is the most impressive heroine among Hardy's heroines. Indeed, she is very far removed from the average. The weaknesses of her character and her opposition to her environment were due to forces beyond her control. It is a soul's tragedy; the anguish of her soul makes us feel that she had her faults, no doubt, but she suffered more than she deserved. Lionel Johnson rightly observes that "The Return of The Native, among Hardy's works, is as that of King Lear among Shakespeare."[11]

The death of Eustacia creates a feeling of pity and a sense of waste. Fate was really cruel to her. She was like a rat in a cage. Her tragedy is to some extent universal. We are all like her, the victims of cruel destiny. Her only fault was that she wanted to be happy, at any cost. She is a typical heroine neither of tragedy nor of the Wessex novels.

[11] Lionel Johnson, The Art of Thomas Hardy (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1928), p. 43.

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