



Research Paper

Nature symbols in Hardy's Novels with reference to 'The Return of the Native'

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Thomas Hardy makes use of places and seasons as symbols to arrange the pattern of his novels. In the beginning, the descriptions of places may look insipid and awkward, but later, the reader feels that it contains certain details, which are very essential to understand his novels. Hardy endows inanimate objects with human sense and the human and the non-human world share for a moment, a common consciousness. He presents all with the help of imagery, subtle and extensive literary, religious and philosophical allusions and uses a language which is highly rhythmic and dexterous.

Hardy presents lifelike pictures in his novels, but he also uses them as spokesmen and symbols. Symbols, thus, present an important dimension of his skill of fiction writing and one can easily find throughout his novels symbolic under pattern, moving swiftly from one aspect to another. The symbolic overtones present the layers of meaning which offer clues to interpret the novel.

The use of symbols in poetry was very common by the 19th century, it emerged as an important feature of the technique of novel-writing too. Dickens, an early Victorian novelist, had started the use of symbols in his novels before other Victorians. He left his mark on the symbolic pattern which Hardy along with other Victorian novelists imitated in their novels. Milligan asserts, after Dickens's death, Hardy "extended still further the use of poetic technique in the structure of his novels."¹ Though their settings differ yet it "provides him with a no less powerful metaphor for the conditions of England than did city life of Dickens."² Both of them use symbols for similar purposes, although they opt symbols from different areas. If Dickens turns to the city life, Hardy draws his symbols from the countryside. But we find the description of the Great Salt Marsh in Dickens' 'The Great Expectations' and Egdon Heath in Hardy's 'The Return of the Native' has much similarity. One might notice that both Marsh and Egdon Heath are rural symbols. But this similarity is an exception. They generally use symbols from different fields.

In Hardy's major works, especially 'The Return of the Native', symbols lead us to derive certain conclusions. We find certain salient features of Hardy's use of symbols. Hardy is mainly concerned with the presentation of basic human emotions. Apart from the emotional aspect of human beings, Hardy works hard on bringing forth his philosophy of life. The rendering of these aspects demanded special attention and Hardy devised a special technique for this purpose. It could not be assumed that the use of symbolist technique in fiction was totally Hardy's creation. We get an impression that he borrowed some of its features from his predecessor, Dickens, and modified upon them. Later this teaching gained more popularity with his successors.

Hardy was very much inspired by the Romantics. So, nature has been repeated in his novels. But he repeats nature with the symbolic purpose. His uses symbols time and again as the most important feature in Hardy's work to bring forth his vision of life and thus landscape plays an important role. In 'The Return of Native', the physical world blends with the subjective presentation of nature as a symbol of the inner life. Not only have we been made to see the wild expanse of Egdon Heath, the rich meadowlands of Talbothays, where Tess milked her cows and Angel Clare made love to her, but also we have become aware of these places as influences entering into the lives of the men on human leaving there. Natural world, both in its wildness and cultivation, are meant to represent the principle of the permanence of the universe. Egdon Heath in The Return is an embodiment of Hardy's concept of the universe. As various critics have pointed out, it remains a masterpiece of superbly detailed landscape. The Heath broods over all, plays a part in the turn of events and universalizes tragic concept of life. It is linked more suitably to the action through the pattern of imagery. We can say that it is the character of Heath which gives imaginative expression to the larger dimension of Hardy's tragic vision, and thus, it has a poetic function. It is not just Hardy's concept of life that has been suggested through the Heath but the variety of moods and the season of Heath, provide an objective correlative for the emotions, feelings and thoughts on his characters. Manas Mukul Das has rightly suggest that natural objects "as

vehicles for emotion and thoughts”,³ should “convincingly symbolize”.⁴ This quality is, evidently, present in Hardy’s technique. He uses the ‘natural objects’ that are convincingly enough to convey the inner feelings and emotions. The emotions, whether it is of love or of hate, are embodied in different objects of nature. Among his nature symbols, the symbol of birds has been used several times. Its significance varies from work to work, depending on the context. Its main themes are either human happiness or suffering. Hardy’s female characters are generally, identified with the bird imagery. For example, Tess after seduction, she is compared to “a bird caught in a spring”. But even the male characters are associated with the birds as in *The Return*, Clym comes across the birds at various occasions that denotes the emotional upheaval and his mental taste. Seasons, a conventional symbol in Hardy denotes a various kind of moods and temperaments of his men, women and also the passing of time. *The Return* begins in the month of November with its cold and gloomy atmosphere associated with the life of the Heath and its central characters. It sets the mood of the whole book. Clym-Eustacia affair begins in summer. It is inter-related with all the joyous aspects of life. In contrast Mrs. Yeobright meets death when “sunny houses were stifling; and when cold draughts were treats.”⁵ The story progresses gradually with the various seasons passing on and each of them signifying some of the other change in the events of the story. Nature and human characters mirror their mutual temperament. Nature is not always the background often it is the leader. Eustacia and Wildeve meet their fatal end during an hour that was threatening and violent. The chaos of the nature present an exact correlative for the chaos going on inside Eustacia’s mind and it also foreshadows the end that they are not meet. After it, the calm is reposed and the happy notes are heard everywhere. The storm and the following calm represent the cycles of adversity and prosperity in men’s life. Hardy’s seasons present the contrasting ideas of both comfort and pain. The symbol of fire dominates the novel. It could be interpreted at several levels, depending on the context. Fire can be either beneficial or destructive for mankind. The innocent rustic lights a fire to get light and warmth and momentary pleasure. On the other hand, Eustacia’s fire becomes a cause of her and Wildeve’s tragic end. Venn, the reddleman, is introduced with the fiery colour of the Heath. In the earlier chapters, Heath is present with the fiery colours. It is all fire and could destroy anyone who is willing to cross it. Eustacia becomes the impersonification of Heath in the sense as she is all fire. But she wants to rebel against Heath that stands for her destiny. Mrs. Yeobright’s journey across the Heath takes place when the whole atmosphere is burning like fire. Thus, the fire-imagery in the book suggests that if fire can give light and warmth, it can also destroy. It is all powerful and is also emblematic of the Promethean rebelliousness against darkness. Other prominent symbols from nature are the ones related to the moonlight and the sun. Apart from these chief symbols, what strikes the eye and ear, first and last is the colour of these depicted scenes. It is through the colours that the intention is absorbed into action. In the description of the Heath, in the opening chapter, Hardy presents those dark and dull colours that reflect so vividly the moods of desolation that follows in due course. Other colours applied as symbols are the ones associated with fire i.e., crimson and scarlet. Most of the time, they have been employed to suggest the fiery atmosphere of the Heathland, the heart of some character. Hardy uses the colour symbols to denote various moods of his characters. The passing of brown foliage to green signifies the rejuvenation, as is felt by Clym and Eustacia.

References:

- [1]. Ian Milligan, *The Novel in English : An Introduction* (London, Macmillan Press Ltd. 1983), 105
- [2]. Ibid.
- [3]. ManasMukul Das, *Thomas Hardy : Poet of Tragic Vision* (Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd. 1983), 101
- [4]. Das, 101.
- [5]. Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (New York, pocket Books, INC., 1956), 312