

B.A. Second Year

The Role of Chance in "The Return of the Native"

Chance plays an important role, even an exaggerated role, in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Many things which are mysterious and sudden, which cannot be accounted for in any natural way, take place. The unexpected often happens and always it is the undesirable unexpected. Such chance events are heavy blows aimed at the head of Hardy's protagonists and they send them to their doom.

Hardy's plots are dominated by chance events. This is also true of the Return of the Native. In this novel also there are many things which happen at the wrong moment, when they are least expected to happen, and the result is sorrow, suffering, and tragedy for all concerned. For example,

(1) Clym's coming across Eustacia by chance as he returns home with his mother and Thomasin, leads to their sad and tragic love.

(2) It is just a matter of chance that Diggory is a few minutes late in coming to propose for Thomasin's hand. Wildeve reaches before him and is accepted. Had Diggory reached earlier, he would have married Thomasin and Wildeve would have married Eustacia. Much sorrow and suffering would have been avoided in this way.

(3) It is by chance that Christian meets some friends and goes with them to the Quiet Woman. It is by chance that he wins at the game of dice. The result is that Wildeve comes to know that he has Thomasin's guineas on him, and he wins all of them from him.

(4) It is just a chance that Wildeve comes to Eustacia's house exactly at the moment that Mrs. Yeobright also reaches there.

(5) It is just a chance that Clym moves, and mutters "mother", in his sleep, just at the moment Mrs. Yeobright knocks at the door. The result is that Eustacia supposes that her husband is awake, and so she does not herself open the door. This leads to the death of Mrs. Yeobright, and the separation of Clym and Eustacia after a violent quarrel.

(6) It is just a chance that Johnny Nunsuch repeats the dying words of Mrs. Yeobright, exactly at the moment that Clym reaches the cottage of Susan Nunsuch.

(7) The chance meeting of Wildeve and Eustacia in the fair leads to their dancing together, and the renewal of their love.

(8) It is just a chance that Clym's letter of reconciliation does not reach Eustacia in time.

Thus it becomes clear that the plot of the novel is heavily overloaded with chance events. Too much depends on chance. This introduces an element of artificiality into the novel. Indeed, this is one of the pieces of criticism levelled against the novel as a work of art.

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