



## Exploring Deviation and Conformity in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*

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### Article History

Received: 5 April, 2024

Revised: 26 May, 2024

Accepted: 4 June, 2024

Published: 7 June, 2024

### How to Cite

Muhammad Ishtiaq and Afsana Ferdous (2024). Exploring Deviation and Conformity in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. *Sumerianz Journal of Education, Linguistics and Literature*, 7(2): 22-26.

### Abstract

The study examines the concept of deviation and conformity in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* where the novel accounts about the lives of many characters as they struggle with their aspirations and society's expectations against the stunning backdrop of Egdon Heath. The study also explores how the characters namely Clim Yeobright and the enigmatic Eustacia Vie negotiate reciprocal conflict between personal desires and social norms through careful textual analysis and contextual inquiry. Additionally, supporting figures like Digory Vane and Thomasine Yeobright offer opposing viewpoints on the effects of conformity and deviation. This study shows the timeless conflict between individual aspiration and communal conformity as it portrays in Hardy's masterwork by examining the impact of Egdon Heath on the protagonists' decisions.

**Keywords:** Society's expectations; Individual aspiration; Reciprocal conflict; Conformity; and Deviation.

## 1. Introduction

The issues of deviation and conformity are powerfully explored by Thomas Hardy in *The Return of the Native*. The story investigates the conflicts that develop when people depart from or adhere to the conventions of their community, showing the contrasts between society's expectations and personal wants. In the end, Hardy creates an engaging story that explores the intricacies of human nature and the decisions we make as we attempt to balance deviation and conformity. Any author, in any age, aspires to have his or her writing reflect the culture in which they live. The study examines Thomas Hardy's attempt to define deviance. Through inconsistencies, disappointments, revelations, and the ensuing strong need to label and classify people and things, Hardy exposes the late Victorian world. Deciphering these social tendencies reveals a subtext that offers a different interpretation from tradition and practice. Consequently, rather than emphasizing his characters' own degeneracy, Hardy concentrates on the degeneracy of the institutions and societal conventions that they have to contend with. By creating characters that present a fresh and scary perspective on masculinity and femininity in settings outside of the stifling and depressing standard sexual paradigm, he challenges gender stereotypes. As a transitional writer, Hardy shows his displeasure with this repressive social framework. When he was writing, the majority of how women were portrayed in literature served to uphold patriarchal standards. Hardy rejected these customs and lamented the moral standards of this unfair world. As a result, he portrayed deviant women who attempted to break free from their predetermined positions in his novels. He aimed to change the foundations of marriage, family, and sexual interactions, as well as the status of women in society.

On the other hand, in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*, he criticizes conformity as a limiting force that hinders personal freedom and creativity, leading to misery and tragedy. Hardy praises individuals who defy conventional norms and forge their own path, highlighting the negative impact of conformity on human

independence and originality. The novel explores the contradictions between conformity and originality, highlighting the importance of individual freedom and creativity.

In 1878, when strict social customs and expectations ruled Victorian society, "*The Return of the Native*" was published. The novel takes place in the fictitious Egdon Heath, a desolate and lonely setting that reflects the protagonists' psychological and emotional issues. Thomas Hardy, a well-known author of Victorian literature, is renowned for his accurate depictions of country life and his acute awareness of human behavior. It was initially published in the sensationalist journal *Belgravia* from January to December 1878 and was distributed in twelve monthly sections. An English author and poet, Thomas Hardy, He was a Victorian pragmatist in the vein of George Eliot who, in both his works and his poems, displayed Romantic bias. *The Return of the Native* a literary masterwork by Thomas Hardy, enthralles readers with its in-depth investigation of the concepts of departure and conformity. The novel explores the human need for originality and the societal pressures to conform as well as explores the nature of deviance from social standards and the effects of trying to fit into a strict mold. Readers are presented with conflicting desires, aspirations, and social expectations throughout the novel. This study aims to benefit society by examining psychoanalysis, a vital field in science and literature. The purpose of this research is to examine the issue of deviation and conformity in Thomas Hardy's book *The Return of the Native* examining how the characters' conflicts with society's norms and the pursuit of their own wishes lead to their tragic personal outcomes. This research intends to shed insight on Hardy's representation of the damaging nature of rigorous conformity and the value of embracing uniqueness for true fulfillment by looking at the causes and effects of conformity and deviation in the novel.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Return of the Native* is as renowned as Hardy's most disputed piece that it has been studied away. In addition, there are several studies and researches on this literature in the nation. All of these data demonstrate that the native return is systematically worth focusing on. Scholars typically researched sad fates and features. Hardy's writings highlight his concern for class division and his perseverance in exposing the paradoxes and setbacks of the late Victorian era. He reveals the compulsion to categorize people and situations, revealing a subtext where tradition and convention diverge. Hardy's focus is on the degeneration of society's institutions and practices that his characters must fight against, rather than the degeneration of the characters themselves. His perseverance awakens people to their social ethics and distinguishes good from evil in the world of sin.

Struzziero (2016), remarks that *the book's subtext does not support the idea that the characters are 'degenerate' beings.* Lawlor (2003), argues that *Hardy's philosophy of a developing universe and people undergoing perpetual change is embodied through creative development.* According to Struzziero (2016), *identities are caught between unconscious impulses and social, semiotic, and symbolic modes in a state of creative instability.* However, the narrator ignores how the female protagonists diverge from societal standards and how their environment supports this departure in the beginning of her endeavor to fix the identities of characters inside traditional gender roles. Hardy bemoans the moral standards of an unjust society and opposed patriarchal norms. On the contrary, another critic named Goswami addresses *gender stereotypes by inventing characters who reflect a new and very disturbing depiction of masculinity and femininity in circumstances that go beyond the restrictive and dismal traditional sexual paradigm* Goshwami (2017). In a time when the way women were represented in literature served to uphold patriarchal standards, Hardy challenged these traditions by portraying rebellious women who seeks to overcome their assigned roles. His books, including *The Return of the Native*, center on deviance behavior that drastically deviates from social standards and overcomes obstacles in one's surroundings or self to bring about remarkable change. Although Hardy's ideas on variation are included in this work, the term "conformity," which is also covered in the research, is not made clear. Devi (2021), examines and her opinion of *Egdon Heath and human interaction with it.* Hardy investigates nature's empathy. *It asserts that everyone's life is impacted by nature, both directly and indirectly* (Devi, 2021). Hardy is adamant that for people to live peacefully there must be an exquisite connection between man and the environment. Importantly, *The Return of the Native* depicts the enigmatic power of nature. It also emphasizes how the novel's characters interact with one another in response to nature. Through this book, Hardy examines his personal viewpoint on the environment and how it connects to people. Hardy uses deviation and conformity as tools to attack the severe societal norms of his time. Templeton argues that Eustacia Vye embodies resistance and criticizes Victorian society in her description of the nonconformist. In his analysis of the racial tensions shown in the novel, Melani demonstrates how deviations from racial norms reflect enduring biases and prejudices.

## 3. Methodology

The main purpose of this paper is to examine Thomas Hardy's views on exploring deviation and conformity in *The Return of the Natives*. The research adopts a qualitative technique to collect and analyze non-numerical data in order to get insights that will assist in our understanding of the subject matter. This paper mostly uses primary and secondary sources and is based on descriptive and analytical methods. Basically, the novel is used as the primary source, while different related reviews, research paper, various journal articles, criticism, books and other relevant periodicals are used as secondary sources.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Social Anticipation and Conformity

In *The Return of the Native* Thomas Hardy skillfully captures the effect of society expectations and the struggle for conformity on the lives of the characters. Several people in the story battle with societal expectations and the pressure to fit in, which causes tensions on the inside and consequences on the outside. Hardy emphasizes how people's behavior and decisions are greatly influenced by society norms and compliance. Social expectations have a big impact on the lives of the individuals and influence their decisions. The book is set in the harsh, rural environment of Egdon Heath and explores the complexities of cultural customs and their consequences on individual lives.

Beautiful and inspirational Eustacia Vye yearns to escape the quiet community of Egdon Heath and enter the glamorous world of high society. Throughout the whole novel, she is motivated in part by her ambition to belong to a different social class.

"Eustacia, in spite of her passionate aversion for the heath in the sight of day, did not absolutely hate it at this hour. It was so still that the trees which stood against the sky appeared like grand unimpassioned thoughts." (Hardy, 2013). On the other hand, her ambitions of grandeur and social achievement are fueled by her disappointment at the restrictions her health imposes. Eustacia makes choices that are against social mores because she wants to have a more glamorous and exciting life outside of the house. Throughout the whole novel, she is motivated in part by her ambition to belong to a different social class. In this regard (Hardy, 2013) says regarding *Eustacia*, Lively as a passion in the supersubtle, epicurean heart of Eustacia.

Eustacia, dissatisfied with her surroundings, makes choices against societal norms to fit in with higher socioeconomic groups. Clym Yeobright, an educated man, moves back to the country to pursue a better-paying career, but his mother opposes his path, causing tension in his home.

"Your mother says you are to be a schoolmaster. But that's nonsense! You are not going to do anything so foolish as that?" (Hardy, 2013). Damon Wildeve struggles to balance his heart with societal expectations, choosing between marrying Eustacia due to her social position or Thomasin due to responsibility and regret. "If I were to marry you now after all, it would look as if I had done it entirely because of what happened yesterday. I cannot bear the thought of being considered a scoundrel for lagging so long in my duty." (Hardy, 2013)

The strain on Wildeve and his loved ones is evident in his decisions. Thomasin's situation demonstrates how adhering to cultural expectations can affect a woman's reputation and career, as society views her as vulnerable due to her unmarried pregnancy. Her dedication to social mores adds depth to her character and highlights the challenges Victorian society presented to women. Nevertheless, some characters strive to remain autonomous and distinctive despite their desire to blend in. Diggory Venn, sometimes referred to as the "reddleman," strives to forge his own identity by defying societal conventions and succeeding as a dairy farmer. His journey stands for a gallant attempt to resist class boundaries and assert his uniqueness. Characters that defy convention suffer social embarrassment, loneliness, and sometimes terrible outcomes. This demonstrates the consequences of nonconformity quite clearly. The characters' emotional well-being suffers greatly as a result of closely adhering to traditional norms, as seen in the novel.

#### 3.2. Deviation as a Quest for Individual Identity

In Thomas Hardy's book *The Return of the Native* deviation serves as a quest for personal identity, showing the characters' struggle to assert their individuality in the face of social expectations and cultural norms. A key example of this is the mysterious and alluring protagonist character, Eustacia Vye. Due to her desires and objectives, Eustacia differs from the typical rural existence of Egdon Heath. Because of her thirst for excitement, adventure, and independence from the restrictions of her environment, she deviated from the typical path for a woman of her era. Through inconsistencies, disappointments, revelations, and the ensuing strong need to categorize and classify people and things, Hardy exposes the late Victorian world. A subtext is revealed by decoding these social tendencies, which provide an alternative meaning in which custom and practice diverge. Consequently, rather than emphasizing his characters' own degeneracy, Hardy concentrates on the degeneracy of the institutions and societal conventions that they have to contend with. By creating characters that present an original and horrific perspective on masculinity and femininity in settings outside of the stifling and depressing standard sexual paradigm, he subverts gender stereotypes. As a transitional writer, Hardy shows his displeasure with this repressive social framework. The novel frequently expresses Eustacia's desire to leave the remote rural village of Egdon Heath in favour of a more metropolitan way of life. The rustic, uneventful existence Eustacia leads in Egdon Heath contrasts with her longing for a more fascinating, cosmopolitan life. "To be loved to madness- such was her great desire" (Hardy, 2013).

Because of how her desires set her apart from the neighborhood, she feels like an outsider. While reflecting on her yearning for a life outside of the heath. The focus on authenticity and personal fulfillment in this statement shows that she was willing to go against social standards in order to develop her own distinctive identity. Eustacia remarks, "I could not have lived there long, for life is intolerable without one's own approval" (Hardy 108). The rustic, uneventful existence Eustacia leads in Egdon Heath contrasts with her longing for a more fascinating, cosmopolitan life. Because of how her desires set her apart from the neighborhood, she feels like an outsider.

Eustacia wants her own independence and feeling of self-worth when she states, "I have made up my mind to shut myself up and work and live as if I were not in the world at all" (Hardy 142). She chooses to pursue a personal relationship with Damon Wildeve rather than being married to Clym Yeobright, the more devout and proper suitor, since she is not happy with the monotonous life she is leading. Clym Yeobright and Damon Wildeve negotiate the difficulties of pursuing their unique identities and personal objectives in the face of social constraints in *The Return*

of the Native Hardy. After his time in Paris, Clym returns to Egdon Heath with the intention of becoming a teacher and having a meaningful life. One of the main themes is Damon's fight between independence and desire as he juggles his love for Eustacia and his obligation to his wife. He admitted that-

"I ought to have my head examined for marrying at all, if I did not mean to do the regular thing" (Hardy, 2013)  
The story deftly examines the challenges of striking a balance between one's own objectives and social expectations.

### 4.3. Natural Deviation and the Influence of the Heath

Conflicts between human nature and other forces in the universe, as well as man's fate, are major ideas throughout Hardy's books. Thomas Hardy appears to have treated religion as a worthless myth from a young age and throughout his mental growth. According to William Lyon Phelps, Hardy seems to have given up having confidence in a "grain of mustard seed" in his essay "The Novels of Thomas Hardy". Instead, Hardy prefers reflecting on the purpose of the natural world, its constituent parts, and how humans fit within it. Such considerations are crucial to comprehending Hardy's grave worry over the location and function of man in the ecosystem. Hardy has investigated the physical environment and human behavior to understand how nature and culture are related. Contrary to most of his contemporaries, who focused on prominent topics like industrialization, gender, or family life, his works, via his regional writings, have received praise for being among the most important publications and providing insightful perspectives on the ecosystem and the natural world. Hardy defines it as a spot –"Where the scenery was savage, and, to a degree, desolate" (Hardy, 2013). After that, Eustacia conveys her sentiments when she says, "To dwell on a heath with you and no other, and with those glorious eyes always upon me, I have thought of it till I could hardly bear my good fortune" (Hardy, 2013).

In Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* the Egdon Heath is a desolate, wild environment that influences the lives and decisions of the characters. The heath reflects the idea of "natural deviation," where characters' desires and decisions are influenced by their surroundings. Eustacia Vye, a young woman, seeks freedom and escape in the heath, while Clym Yeobright, a schoolmaster, finds himself drawn back to the heath despite his desire for a simpler life. The heath's apathy and resolve contrast with human joys and sorrows. Nature's indifference is described when Hardy remarks, "The scene seemed all the more lonely because of this. The difference between the neglect of men and the neglect of nature toward a forsaken thing is that the former sinks, and the latter decays" (Hardy, 2013).

Finally, *The Return of the Native* exemplifies "natural deviation" through Egdon Heath's major influence on the characters' objectives, decisions, and outcomes. However, this examination of natural deviation imparts depth and complexity to the novel's themes because of the heath's ageless and cruel character, which emphasizes the futility of human endeavors in the face of nature's unwavering vitality.

### 4.4. Heath as an Expression of Individuality

Egdon Heath, in *The Return of the Native* is a tremendous manifestation of individualism and a major symbol in the story. Egdon Heath, being an untamed and old area, has a particular personality that distinguishes it from the other locales in the novel. Through its majestic and solemn presence, it distinguishes itself. Its size and untamed beauty evoke a sense of seclusion and emptiness that reflect the seclusion and individuality of the people who live there. The untamed beauty of Egdon Heath reflects the novel's theme of individualism. In the same way that the environment is unyielding and unaffected by human effects, the characters work to maintain their individuality and overcome cultural expectations. On the other hand, Egdon Heath is presented as a landscape with an unusual beauty, apart from typical ideas of lovely landscapes. Through the characters' perspectives, especially Eustacia Vye's, Hardy clearly evokes the appeal of the heath:

"the untamable, Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was, it always had been." (Hardy, 56)

*The Return of the Native* explores themes of isolation and uniqueness, with the desolate and wild landscape of Egdon Heath representing the characters' sense of alienation from contemporary society. The novel highlights the desires and goals of the characters, as well as the relationship between the environment and human nature. The heath's allure entwines with people's innermost desires, and the protagonists' psychological struggles to resist the allure of their surroundings are symbolized by their health. The heath also serves as a plot against their will, as Eustacia and Wildeva are unable to flee due to unforeseen circumstances. The perspective of Eustacia is employed to highlight the historical and enduring nature of the heath: "Egdon was her Egypt, and she was the sphinx-like element therein." (Hardy, 2013). Clym Yeobright's attempts to improve the health system are met with resistance and isolation, underscoring the characters' unwavering need for health. "Eustacia knew every well, pond, or watercourse in her wild neighborhood...But here, in this place, outwardly so strange to her, she knew the gates, styles, and general physiognomy of all the enclosures almost as well as her own" (Hardy, 2013). Eustacia's knowledge about the heath highlights the conflict between the characters' ties to nature and their efforts to fit in with society. Hardy does an excellent job of illustrating this connection between Eustacia's goals and the appeal of the heath: "A place perfectly accordant with man's nature... It was an aspect of the man's existence." (Hardy, 2013). The heath serves as a crucial part of the novel's symbolism and evocative descriptions, illustrating the characters' wants, loneliness, and inevitable fate.

### 4.5. Impacts on Non-Conformist Heath Ideals

In *The Return of the Native* Diggory Venn, an adolescent reddleman living in the barren heath land of Egdon Heath represents the nonconformist beliefs of the heath community. His unique job as a trader of red dye for sheep signifies his commitment to self-reliance and independence, making him a symbol of independence. This self-reliance makes Venn a symbol of independence, as he navigates life independently, free from traditional societal

expectations. Eustacia Vye, a young and alluring woman, represents yearning and longing amid the bleak Egdon Heath. Her desires for a more glamorous and thrilling existence clash with the stuffy ideas held by the medical establishment. Eustacia refuses to live up to her community's expectations, defying pressure and gossip. She participates in a hidden connection with Damon Wildeve, a prior suitor of another lady, and makes public displays of her desire for a life outside of the heath. Due to her brashness and disregard for social conventions, she is an outcast in society. The novel explores the characters' relationships with their surroundings, particularly Egdon Heath, a lonely and untamed place. The heath represents a powerful force shaping the lives of its inhabitants. The characters' complex relationships reveal concepts of loyalty and commitment, as well as their perseverance and adaptability amidst hardship. Eustacia Vye, despite facing rejection and failure, remains determined to fulfill her ambition.

#### 4.6. Conformity and Victorian Society

The conformity and social expectations problems that afflicted Victorian England, as depicted in Thomas Hardy's "*The Return of the Native*." The novel examines how conformity impacts the characters and their interactions as well as how the novel questions and critiques the rigidity of Victorian social norms. The effect of social standards loomed immense, like a majestic structure that influenced the very fabric of society, in the all-encompassing world of Victorian England. From 1837 to 1901, the Victorian era was marked by a broad spectrum of cultural standards and values that influenced how people behaved and interacted with one another.

Victorian society was characterized by family, duty, loyalty, and a meticulously woven tapestry of genealogy and legacy. Gender roles were delineated, with men holding the mantle of breadwinners and masters of their households, while women took on the role of domestic guardians. Respectability was a prized possession, and the dominant religion of the time, Christianity, served as the moral compass. The tight social order was evident in the elaborate tapestry of Victorian society, which resembled a maze of class distinctions. Invisible threads of decorum and etiquette guided social interactions and established the bounds of proper conduct. Every social class followed its own set of traditions, and even the slightest deviation would be frowned upon by the high echelons above. In the rural setting of Egdon Heath, Thomas Hardy deftly spins a gripping tale that addresses the conflict between originality and conformity encountered by the protagonists. The conflict between distinctiveness and conformity is personified in the story's mysterious and energetic heroine, Eustacia Vye, who represents disobedience to the oppressive standards of her traditional culture. The novel navigates the complexities of individuality versus conformity through other characters, such as Eustacia's cousin Clym Yeobright, who seeks to challenge societal norms by aspiring to bring education and social reform to the heart. His idealism and desire to assert his individuality clash with the resistance from the traditionalist community.

### 5. Conclusion

Considering above statement, it can be remarked that Thomas Hardy competently balances a nuanced examination of deviation and conformity in a traditional society with the weaving of a gripping narrative about the complexities of humans. The narrative explores the nuanced dance between conformity and deviation via a variety of characters, each of whom battles with society's expectations and their desire for individuality. Eustacia Vye's desire for a life away from the heath and Clym Yeobright's conflict between urban aspirations and a desire to return to rural life serve as the best examples of the characters' struggles with cultural norms. Victorian woman Thomasin Yeobright illustrates the effects Victorian society placed on women. She first adopts patriarchal gender norms before embracing her independence and autonomy. When she is financially independent, she is free to pursue her happiness. The heath represents the wild aspirations of its people and the limitations of rural living. Readers are prompted to consider their own battles with society's standards and the quest for authenticity in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. The classic work provokes thoughtful reading by serving as a reminder of the harmony between self-expression and belonging.

#### Acknowledgement

The authors applauded immensely to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for providing precious feedback which significantly contributed to improving the quality of this paper.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose concerning this study.

#### Declarations

The manuscript has not been submitted/presented for consideration to any other journal or conference.

#### Data Availability

The author holds all the data employed in this study and is open to sharing it upon reasonable request

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