

Short Communication

The Return of the Native by Thomas Hardy: A critical analysis of Mrs. Yeobright

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This paper offers a critical analysis of Thomas Hardy's novel, The Return of the Native and focuses on one of his characters, namely Mrs. Yeobright. Hardy sets the novel in Victorian England, a time when the country was very prosperous. Moreover, the society was dominated by a rigid social hierarchy. Victorian women were treated as second-class citizens and were given identities that corresponded to their roles in the family, such as wife, mother, daughter, and widow. Hardy's character is examined in regard to how she functions according to these roles. Mrs. Yeobright is utilized in order to critique social class and explore how social class functions in everyday life.

Key words: Identity, Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native, Victorian, social class.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* focuses on the relations between his characters. Mrs. Yeobright is a conventional, class-conscious, proud woman of inflexible standards. Her father was a prominent figure in Egdon Heath, leading his daughter to feel superior to the rest of the community. She is the mother of Clym Yeobright and aunt to Thomasin Yeobright. Clym Yeobright is a man who inspired high hopes from others. He is a forward-thinking man, who does not think through his actions. Eustacia is the daughter of a non-white father, who longs for a life of glamor away from Egdon Heath. She is a beautiful woman who desires "to be loved to madness..." (Hardy, 2006: 64). She is in love with

emotion, not people. Damon Wildeve, a womanizer, and owner of a local inn is an impulsive man. He is selfish in his pursuit of both Thomasin and Eustacia. He is somewhat flippant in his feelings for the women. Thomasin Yeobright is characterized as "a fair, sweet, and honest country face..." (Hardy, 2006: 37). Her feelings for Damon are genuine, and she wants to please one and all. Diggory Venn is a loyal man to Thomasin and looks out for her well-being.

Hardy employs a tragic ambience to the impulsive marriages. Mrs. Yeobright disapproves of the relationships between these characters, as these relationships do not coincide with societal expectations.

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze Mrs. Yeobright's role in the narrative, as it pertains to Victorian-era society. The concealment of her first name has taken her own identity while causing her to be defined by the society in which she lives. Furthermore, she is allotted an identity that functions for the benefit of those around her. Her sole identity is that of a widow, a mother and, an aunt rather than as an individual. Her autonomy is distorted by society. Mrs. Yeobright is indeed an integral character to Hardy's novel, although her forename is never specified.

THE GENTEEL TOOL

The novel begins with two men discussing the expected marriage of Thomasin Yeobright and Damon Wildeve. Thomasin Yeobright is brought back to her aunt, by Diggory Venn, after failing to marry Damon Wildeve. Mrs. Yeobright is shocked by the news and insists that Thomasin must marry Wildeve so there will not be a scandal. Wildeve also has a romantic relationship with Eustacia Vye. When Diggory Venn learns about their relationship, he tries to persuade Eustacia to let Wildeve marry Thomasin, as the marriage will save Thomasin's dignity. He also tries to persuade Mrs. Yeobright to let Thomasin marry him instead, to save her dignity. Mrs. Yeobright tells Wildeve that Diggory Venn wants to marry Thomasin, in hopes that Wildeve will marry her. Upon learning the marriage is not taking place, Eustacia is no longer interested in Wildeve because she thinks he has been discredited and instead becomes enamored with Clym, who had returned from Paris. In order to get back at Eustacia, Wildeve marries Thomasin. Mrs. Yeobright has a fight with Eustacia about money she had sent to Thomasin and Clym as a gift on their wedding ceremonies. As a result of reading too much, Clym loses his sight and becomes a furze-cutter to pass the time. Eustacia becomes interested in Wildeve again because he inherited a fortune from his father. Eustacia is visited by Wildeve one afternoon, while Clym is sleeping, and Mrs. Yeobright arrives at the door to reconcile with her son and Eustacia. Eustacia is reluctant to see Mrs. Yeobright because she is still shaken from their previous argument, and thinks Clym will see his mother. However, Mrs. Yeobright is distraught over this because she believes Clym to be the one who will not speak with her, and thinks her son is angry with her. Mrs. Yeobright dies of a snake bite on her way back to her own house, and Eustacia and Damon Wildeve drown in an attempt to leave the town. Diggory Venn marries Thomasin, and Clym becomes a preacher.

Although the concept of marriage was institutionalized as a sacred and highly respected union between a man and a woman, it was utilized as an attribute for success that remained acutely ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, especially for women. A woman's marital

prospects were tied to her family. According to Pamela Horn, historian of the Victorian era and author of *Ladies of the Manor: How Wives and Daughters lived in country house society over a century ago*, the preservation of familial reputation was crucial for a woman, of Victorian England. Marriage was "...an important social definition..." (Horn, 2014:18) in a family's reputation. In Book two chapter eight, Mrs. Yeobright is arguing with her son about Thomasin's failed marriage to Wildeve. It is imperative for them to marry, as neglecting the issue would be "...a great slight to me and my family" (Hardy, 2006: 41). However, Mrs. Yeobright questions her niece and wonders if "[her] love for [Wildeve] has changed..." (Hardy, 2006: 100) her inquisition is meant to show her affections for Thomasin. Prior to this conversation, Thomasin questions why her actions are worthy of ridicule and enquires why she is treated as if she is a miscreant. Here is a moment of introspection where Mrs. Yeobright acknowledges the judgment of others is often erroneous and she, herself, often participates in those judgments. Yet she disregards the thought by bypassing the subject, not wanting to confront her prejudices. Mrs. Yeobright vehemently supports arbitrary traditions in order to protect her family yet she simultaneously disregards their well-being. Clym attests to his mother's callousness by declaring they "must think of Tamsin now." (Hardy, 2006: 140) Moreover, Mrs. Yeobright feels guilty regarding her decision and begins to question it; is Wildeve "kind to [her]?" (Hardy, 2006: 180) She feels obligated to social conventions and views herself as a tool in which to uphold female gentility. She is a woman in British society who has conformed to the surroundings that tell her to hold the family's social standing in high regard.

A MORAL COMPASS

Mrs. Yeobright is first introduced as, "...a well-known and respected widow of the neighborhood, of a standing which can only be expressed by the word genteel" (Hardy, 2006: 32). Her character is tied to society. Her title and her genteel standing delineate a persona. By painting Mrs. Yeobright as a nameless woman, the novel inadvertently asks what defines her. She performs the role of a proud woman and is described as being wise, "with well-formed features of the type usually found where perspicacity is the chief quality enthroned within" (Hardy, 2006: 32). She is cited as a perfect entity; a proud lady-like woman, who can do no wrong. However, her nobility stems from a fear of being morally egregious. In book two, chapter eight, for example, Mrs. Yeobright is told she is wrong for marrying her niece off and subsequently denounces Thomasin "Of course, if they had married at that time in a proper manner, I should have told you at once" (Hardy 140). She is merely

following societal conventions and chooses not to see herself in the wrong. According to Pamela Horn, upper-class Victorian women were likewise seen as a moral compass, who “were expected to cultivate their character, mind and abilities for the benefit of those around them rather than themselves.” (Horn, 2014: 9) There is a tragic undertone to Mrs. Yeobright’s disposition. Her countenance betrays an air of fragility. An example of this occurs in book three chapter six, Mrs. Yeobright feels “great relief” (Hardy, 2006: 180) to see her niece following a fight with Clym. This interaction alludes to a sense of loneliness. She is expected to exude perfection yet she also has her weaknesses.

THE GENTEEL WOMAN

Hardy describes Mrs. Yeobright as genteel, ergo, she is linked to upper-class society, and thus to the societal system. He details the causality for Mrs. Yeobright’s noble characteristics stating her relations to her husband, a farmer, and her father, who was a curate. She covets her position, as it brings her prestige. Nevertheless, her feelings do not manifest from an introspective view, rather it stems from how others perceive her. Just as she defines herself by those around her, Mrs. Yeobright defines individuals using a grandiose society. In book four, chapter five her convictions are evident as the old woman “...now beheld [Clym] as a furze-cutter and nothing more” (Hardy, 2006: 232). Mrs. Yeobright regards her son’s labors as shameful once she observes him as a low-class, laborer. Such an occupation does not carry prestige. From her perspective, Mrs. Yeobright has failed in maintaining her family’s status. Furthermore, Clym’s inferred hatred of his mother is indicative of Mrs. Yeobright’s failure of her role within society. Subsequently, in book four, chapter six she yearns to be unrestrained by societal expectations. The cause of her anxiety is the catalyst disclosing society’s overwhelming power over her. Mrs. Yeobright covets her identity yet is simultaneously imprisoned by it. The omittance of her name emphasizes her societal roles as widow, mother, and aunt. This is all she is. Her identity gives her power, yet she cannot transcend conventions. Her identity is as a woman. Her identity is that of gentility. The labels which she attaches to herself are what define her.

CONCLUSION

Mrs. Yeobright’s role in the narrative is to serve as an archetypal woman among Victorian society. Her nameless character is a personification of the genteel culture. Mrs. Yeobright puts familial reputation above the well-being of her family. Moreover, Thomas Hardy portrays her in an antithetical manor to her genteel illustration. Gentility is her undoing. Thomas Hardy utilizes his character in order to oppose the societal discourse of his time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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