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RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES: FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES

Special Issue Editors

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EGDON HEATH IN HARDY'S *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*: A NARRATIVE OF THE DARWINIAN CULT

MARIA SHAIKH

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Abstract

The paper "Egdon Heath in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*: A Narrative of the Darwinian Cult" presents Egdon Heath, the setting of Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native* (1878), which is a microcosm of the whole universe. The Darwinian theory has been applied to the novel *The Return of the Native* to explore the inner consciousness of characters and their relation to the soul of the Heath. The paper demonstrates that the continuous struggle to reach great heights by overthrowing opponents gave rise to the theory of 'Social Darwinism'. Also, the Heath is not just a place where the action takes place but it is a locale governed by Darwinian laws of 'Survival of the Fittest' and 'Natural Selection of Species'.

Keywords: Darwinian Cult, Evolution, Survival of the Fittest and Natural Selection of Species

Paper

The purpose of my paper "Egdon Heath in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*: A Narrative of the Darwinian Cult" is to delve into how core aspects of Darwinian literary theory are reflected in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Charles Darwin's groundbreaking work *Origin of Species* (1859) created an upheaval among the Victorians. It shattered their religious faith as *Origin of Species* by Darwin was a proof that all human beings descended from apes which falsified all scriptural doctrines that glorified the

power of god. Literature depicts that common people in the Victorian era felt as if they were helpless creatures trapped in the vast abyss of the universe heading towards its own destruction. They now did not look at god as their protector and so the ever-consuming fear of annihilation has been expressed in the literary works of the day.

Thus, Darwin's theory of evolution was slowly replacing the biblical tale of creation. Their religious orthodoxy was challenged by scientific evidence. Darwin established a link between human species and the animal kingdom by identifying the similarity in the "facial musculature" (Evolution) and other human attributes inherited from apes. With Darwin's discovery of man's animal descent, people could no longer be proud of their 'noble race' and no one could prove that 'man is created in god's image'. The Victorians were revolving in ceaseless doubt and they could not believe that:

The Garden of Eden is an ignorant myth; that the doctrine of original sin has no foundation in fact; that the atonement is an absurdity; that the serpent did not tempt, and that man did not fall. (Ingersoll 358-359)

Applying Ingersoll's views, it is observed that an individual found himself/herself dispossessed from the 'Great Chain of Being'. S/he was no longer the master of the universe as Darwin proved that all human beings are nothing

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but “cosmically inconsequential bundles of stardust, adrift in an infinite and purposeless universe” (Raymo 160). However, in Victorian society, god fearing people rejected Darwin’s principles and they held on firmly to their religious beliefs but intense suffering and continuous absence of god made them feel that they were lost in a desolate wasteland.

In every age, human beings have lived a meaningless life constantly battling against the mighty forces of fate in a ruthless environment. Their struggle to live and fight for life is termed as “survival of the fittest”. However Charles Darwin described the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ by the procedure of natural selection of species differently.

According to Darwin, Natural Selection occurs through interaction between individual species and their environment. These organisms that can adapt themselves to harsh natural environments have more strength to live longer and greater chances of giving birth to healthy progeny than weak creatures. These feeble creatures who find it difficult to survive in these circumstances are eliminated to avoid the transmission of weaker genes. However, nature doesn’t undertake that strength alone may guarantee survival as lot depends on ‘chance’. The evolutionary process leads to slow and gradual change over long historic periods causing variations among species. Of course, it is the randomness of chance that causes these variations. Furthermore, it is only chance that allows the survival of the fittest.

However, scientists proved that not only the animal kingdom but also all human kind is vulnerable to succumb to the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection. So people were

disappointed as they lived in a world that was controlled by chance and fate. Moreover, one of the greatest universal laws that controlled the world is change. It is that power that mercilessly devastates those who fail to change. The determination of humans to live compelled them to adapt themselves to these modifications. But this entire struggle was futile as everything was finally left to chance. Hence the uncertainty of the purpose and design of nature and uncontrollable change made them feel pessimistic about life.

The biological phenomenon of survival of fittest examines how scarcity of resources makes the battle among organisms in the animal kingdom fierce. It promotes competition in which stronger species that readily adapt themselves to hostile environments survive. However, towards the nineteenth century, scholars applied this principle to human society to describe their inexhaustible desire to compete in the capitalist economy. This continuous struggle to reach great heights by overthrowing their opponents gave rise to the theory of ‘Social Darwinism’. Within the social hierarchy, both the ‘desire to live’ and ‘desire to compete’ determines an individual’s fitness in a harsh competitive world with limited opportunities.

Therefore, Darwin throws light on the process of evolution of animal life but later on his theory was considered appropriate to describe even the progression of human life. The main points that construct Darwinian thought include the elimination of weaker species and their defective genes to improve quality of life and the multiplication of stronger organisms by reproduction. Their ability to adapt to changing environment is the measure of their strength. The

inheritance of powerful/ weaker genes either improves or reduces the capacity of adaptation of these living organisms. So heredity is a dynamic force that is interlinked with survival. So an individual struggles with forces of heredity operating within them and the environment that is an external reality. The environment may take the gigantic shape of the infinite cosmos or cruel fate. But, however hard they may struggle to change in order to find a place in the universe; chance can thwart their attempts and lead to eternal doom. So the laws of natural selection can be greatly altered by chance. More important than anything else is that humans are the descendant of apes and so they are as trivial as any living creature on earth. All aspects of human pride which include wealth, intelligence and knowledge vanish before the might of fate.

Charles Darwin's ideas had a profound influence on Thomas Hardy who envisioned a frightening world in which human souls were succumbing to the brutal forces of fate. In Hardy's fiction, fate is synonymous to Chance, Time, Circumstances, Nature, Universe Providence, Nemesis and the Immanent Will. His novels are structured around an individual's painful struggle for existence and his/her determination to live in a pitiless Darwinian world. These supernatural forces are full of vengeance against him/her- they simply ignore their virtues and work together to push them towards their destruction.

Hardy's heroes never accept defeat in fact they are great warriors who fight till their last breath. They wrestle with invisible powers to keep their honour intact even though they know that they cannot overcome fate. They are champions who know that they are powerless and they will definitely be losers yet they put up a fierce battle

with fate. They have a daring spirit as they do not bend easily and they challenge these unseen forces. Their unbearable pain moves us as they refuse to break and they suffer with dignity. Therefore, his heroes appear grand in their suffering.

Hardy, thus, presents a Darwinian world in which men are struggling for their existence by waging a war with these mysterious occult powers. It is a godless world in which there will be no punishment for acts of disobedience. Yet his characters retain their goodness. S/he is still a benevolent being who has not lost his/her virtues. Another important feature is that Love still forms the essence of this selfish Darwinian world.

Darwin describes the beautiful landscape of nature torn by strife:

It is interesting to contemplate on an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling the damp earth....are dependent on each other in so a complex manner. (Darwin 403)

In all his works, Hardy also presents an eternally blind and selfish struggle in both the life of the animal kingdom and human beings. Darwin shows us how even birds with a beautiful singing voice kill and eat insects for their survival. Similarly, Hardy, too, describes how the ivy, the holly and the serpent can strangle, choke and hiss at their prey for their existence. Nature is the scene on which the struggle for survival takes place.

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy depicts the setting, Egdon Heath, as a living character. It is much more than a geographical location; it is the wild spirit of nature that has taken human form. It exhales darkness and when


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all its vegetation and animal life which were its inhabitants sank in deep sleep, the heath would wake up and listen.

The heath was a long stretch of land unfit for agricultural purposes. The gloomy landscape of the heath had its own sombre beauty. Its elegance came from the primitive brown clothing of the dark foliage and the soil that added grandeur to the heath. The mysterious gloom and loneliness on its face gave it a haggard appearance; it was a barren waste that spelled out forthcoming disaster.

Beneath nature's subtle beauty was her capricious reality. The heath possessed wild beauty that would act as a destructive agent. With the publication of *Origin of Species*, for Tennyson and other Victorians, 'Mother nature' became "red in tooth and claw". The heath will destroy its foe-civilization. It punishes severely those who interfere with its workings and even those who challenge its sacred natural laws are not forgiven.

So every inhabitant of Egdon Heath must accept the supremacy of the heath. Egdon is a microcosm of the whole universe and it has survived evolutionary processes for centuries but it remains unchanged. Generations have passed, things never remained the same and every trace of life was destroyed by time but the heath never changed. Hardy describes the permanence of its indestructible natural surroundings in the following lines: "The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers changed, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained." (Hardy 14)

The heath's strong instinct of survival, its desire to remain the way it is and its eternity demonstrates that nature can never perish. His heroes may be in possession of great knowledge

but nothing can save them from the clutches of death. They are victims of fate and even time turns their pride to dust. So the Christian view that the world was created for man and the divinity of his soul makes them rise above all creation was false. This ageless heath with its mystifying powers casts doubt on the immortality of the human soul.

Egdon Heath is a distinct purposeless, mindless, selfish entity that wants to crush the hopes of mankind. It has a colossal titanic form but no soul. The inhabitants of the heath are cursed to live tragic lives; the heath being the cause of their tragedy. It keeps on inflicting pain by affecting their lives with crisis but as any pitiless tormentor it remains unmoved. Hardy describes the heartlessness of the heath in the following lines:

Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis—the final overthrow. (Hardy 12)

Its inhabitants are doomed to entrapment in the prison of the heath. The heath killed Eustacia Vye and Wildeve when they are trying to escape from Egdon. It appears as if it is waiting for ages to suddenly pounce on them to bring about their final overthrow and finally their death gives the heath sadistic pleasure. The heath engineers their downfall as it hates to see the happiness of mankind.

Eustacia, was the raw material of divinity, the dark soul of the heath- a superior being is swallowed by the heath. Both she and Wildeve

reflect the wildness, passionate and the impulsive instinct of the heath. The heath was threatened by their resemblance to it and so it was threatened by them. Both of them stood for civilization as they were of foreign origin and so the fear of conquest might have turned it hostile to them. The heath saw them, especially Eustacia, as competitors and eliminated them for its survival.

She walked alone without any fear in the darkness of the night on the heath. Therefore she dominated the surroundings of the heath by exerting her power. Both of them also refused to recognize the sovereignty of the heath. In doing so, they aroused the anger of the heath and made it jealous.

Eustacia hated the heath and even Wideve had no real love for it. She tells Wildeve- "Tis *my cross, my shame*, and will be my death!" "I abhor it too," said he. (Hardy 91)

The heath becomes his foe because he also abhors it. The process of filtering out 'maladjusted' beings as Eustacia and Damon by their death because they hate it takes place in the heath governed by Darwinian laws.

They meet their death because of their epicurean desires. Heredity plays a great role as Eustacia has inherited the sensuality of her musician father while licentiousness and carnal pleasure characterises Wildeve. Eustacia feels fights against inner forces of heredity and the outer heath as she lived a fashionable life in Budsmouth. Her dislike for melancholic heath, her failed marriage with Clym, his refusal to go to Paris – the land of her dreams- everything tears her soul apart. She could never think of living all her life here. So for the heath, although she represents the strongest women of her sex, yet her failure to

adapt to changed circumstances makes her an unwanted element. So in keeping with Darwinian laws, the heath discards her. In *On Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin writes that usually the species who adapt to change survive. Eustacia dies of nostalgia and the cruel surroundings do not want to sustain her. The heath sees her as a poisonous element that must be eliminated as it allows only the ones who love it to live within its peripheries.

Another important point is how Wildeve sins against nature by disturbing the ecological balance of the heath. He occupies an area of the terrain that was originally heath land which Hardy describes as Wildeve's Patch in the following lines:

A plot of land redeemed from the heath, and after long and laborious years brought into cultivation. The man who had discovered that it could be tilled died of the labour; the man who succeeded him in possession ruined himself in fertilizing it. Wildeve came like Amerigo Vespucci, and received the honours due to those who had gone before. (42)

This clearly demonstrates that Wildeve was in possession of cursed land. He snatched forcibly what belonged to the heath. So it would never forgive him. If the man who ploughed this infertile stony land died of hard labour and later the man who fertilized it was ruined, then it also foreshadows Wildeve's tragic destiny.

Similarly Clym, too, wants to bring civilization to the heath by educating the community thereby uprooting its pagan ancestry. The wrath of nature punished him with blindness since he tried to change nature's course.

Heredity also plays a significant role in developing Clym's character. He inherits his father's simplicity and selfless nature that compels him to renounce the glamorous world of Paris for civilizing the natives of the heath. His stubborn nature comes from his mother because of which he never forgives Eustacia and then she dies. His idealism choked Eustacia's dreams but because of his adamant nature he doesn't listen to her and till the end of the novel, it is his self sacrificing nature that makes him preach to the ignorant populace of the heath. Thus there was a war between his core inner nature that he can't change due to the influence of heredity. His internal self is in conflict with the external forces of the heath representing the environment that sowed the seeds of his tragedy.

The element of chance heightens the tragic flaw in Clym's character. Some of these "chance" events are his marriage with Eustacia, loss of eyesight, Eustacia's meeting with Wildeva, and the closed-door scene; everything leads to his destruction. But although he is a victim of fate and keeps on suffering, he rises to the grandeur of a tragic hero.

Hardy also describes how the heath folk had more faith in the superstitious pagan beliefs rooted in tradition rather than complex Christian rituals. Civilization gave rise to Christianity but pagan rituals rooted in the past are a part of his unconscious. Charles Darwin *In Descent of Man* points out that he has descended "from a savage delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide without remorse...and is haunted by the grossest superstitions." (404-5)

The ancient ritual of lighting bonfires has spiritual significance but "to light a fire is an

instinctive and resistant act of man, when at the winter ingress curfew is sounded throughout nature." (Hardy 23) This means that man's instinct of survival that drives him to burn the fire. Susan Nunsuch pricking Eustacia with a needle in church and when she burns her effigy after which she dies immediately talks about their blind adherence to black magic practised in pre-Christian society. The point here is that the simple heath folk believed strongly in these pagan customs rather than praying to an inaccessible god.

Hardy systematically describes the evolving facial appearance of human race as follows:

In Clym Yeobright's face could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future..... The view of life as a thing to be put up with replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilization, must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure... (Hardy)

Generations to come will bear a tragic moan imprinted on their faces. The transmission of their predecessor, Clym's "facial musculature" together with the expression of sorrow, is definite in a tragically evolving world.

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