

The famous – and infamous – are immortalized in many biographies. But what of the so-called ordinary? I say "so-called ordinary" because, on closer observation, no one is really ordinary, are they? What I mean is those not considered notable – the obscure and the unknown. These are relegated to being portrayed in the realm of fiction. And it is the degree of genius of their creators which determines whether they are notable as characters to be long remembered.

When I was in high school, I read novels containing notable characters written by Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, the Brontës, Wharton, Eliot, Hemingway – all great writers. I don't remember why I thought Hardy might also be one of them. What I do remember is that I picked up a copy of Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. It was not a school assignment. After reading the first seven pages – a dreary description of a dreary landscape onto which finally appeared two human beings, each going his own way: an old man in a navy captain's coat and a young man who was totally red – I came to the conclusion that this was the WORST novel I had ever read. And I cast it aside.

Several decades passed before I found it again and picked it up. There were the same seven pages, of course. Nevertheless, I persisted.

The dreary landscape is Egdon Heath. A heath is a tract of infertile land and, thus, uncultivated. It is, instead, covered with wild grasses and ferns and short shrubs, like heather and gorse (called furze by Hardy). *The Return of the Native* begins on November 6, Guy Fawkes Day in England, and ends on the same day one year later. The heath begins then as a dark, brooding, and foreboding place and transforms as the seasons progress into a colorful landscape of flowering purple heather and yellow furze, inhabited by insects, birds, reptiles,

rabbits and untamed heath ponies, only to return once again to its autumnal state of gloom.

The English composer, Gustav Holst, most famous for his orchestral suite *The Planets*, went with Hardy for a walk on a heath and dedicated his 1927 tone poem *Egdon Heath* to Hardy.

Holst captures in music the heath's majestic and somber atmosphere. Hardy depicts it in the novel as eternal, with a Neolithic burial mound in the center, and bisected by a Roman road.

It is the backdrop for all the characters' thoughts and actions. Shakespeare in *As You Like It* tells us that,

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women
merely players;
They have their exits and their
entrances,

Egdon Heath is Hardy's stage, upon which his characters live in isolated cottages and upon which they walk – to visit each other, spy on each other, have trysts, hold holiday festivities, and cut furze for feeding livestock and fueling fireplaces. They live in a rural world of about 1840, (the year Hardy was born), before the advent of the steam engine and the arrival of the railroad. It is the world into which Hardy was born in a thatched-roofed cottage in a village in Dorset, in the south of England. Hardy pays tribute in the novel to what one might call the "simple" people of the heath, the rustics, the people he knew in his childhood. They form a sort of Greek chorus, watching and commenting on the goings-on of the main characters. Hardy endows these folk with a good deal of down-to-earth common sense. At the same time, he writes of still-lingering superstitions among church-going people, casting curses and creating voodoo-like dolls. These were the people Hardy knew as a child, working on the heath he crossed on foot for several miles each day going to and from school.

Hardy was not only a realistic naturalist, he was also a realistic psychologist.

While Sigmund Freud was still in medical school, Hardy describes how the unresolved conflicts, impulses, sexual desires and unconscious motives of the main characters influence their lives.

Vivian Gornick, in her book, *Unfinished Business: Notes of a Chronic Re-reader*, says, "I read over and over to feel the power of Life with a Capital L. as it manifested (thrillingly) through the protagonist's engagement with those external forces beyond his or her control. In this way I felt, acutely ... the work of ...Hardy." Personally, I think, to Hardy, "Life with a Capital L" is human nature as we deal with the various circumstances confronting us.

Sir Leslie Stephen, now known primarily for being Virginia Woolf's father, published Hardy's early works but refused to print *The Return of the Native* in the magazine he edited. To him, its contents were not suitable for a family magazine. There was simply too much Life with a Capital L in it, including illicit (not explicit) sex. This was, after all, the middle of the Victorian Age. In 1878, the novel appeared in 12 monthly installments in another magazine. The serial format made compelling reading for me. On my second go-round with the novel I became eager to continue, to find out what comes next.

I hesitate to summarize the plot, and its various twists and turns, for fear of lapsing into melodrama, if not downright farce. If one can do justice to novels by quickly summarizing their plots, then why bother reading, much less writing, them? In *The Return of the Native* it is the character of the characters that is pivotal. The ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclites, tells us that Character is Destiny, and Hardy agrees. When the characters are up against societal conventions, community traditions, and fraught personal relationships, their traits impel their choices, leading to their actions and the resulting consequences. Nature, often called Mother Nature, is completely indifferent and, while flowering beautifully in heather purple and furze yellow, proves lethal with a snake bite and a violent storm. On top of that, the characters are

subjected to what Hamlet calls the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," or what we now call the fickle finger of fate, in the form of coincidences, missed opportunities, and chance, or just plain luck.

But what of the two characters I abandoned when I was a teenager: the totally red one and the one in the navy captain's coat? The red man is Diggory Venn, covered in reddle, a chalk-like substance he sells from a wagon, criss-crossing the heath, for farmers to mark their sheep so they can keep track of them. He is the disappointed suitor of Thomasin Yeobright who, nevertheless, continues to love her and is determined to be her protector. The Navy captain has retired to the heath with his granddaughter, Eustacia Vye, but he is oblivious to her needs. His one true love is the sea.

Thomasin Yeobright is a conventional young woman whom Hardy describes as "firmness with a gentle heart." She marries Damon Wildeve who refers to her as "a good little woman." Thomasin ultimately sees that Diggory Venn was "kinder to her than anyone else." Damon Wildeve, on the other hand, is a feckless man, a failed engineer who has come to the heath to run the inn. He is controlled by his impulses of the moment and describes himself as "cursed with sensitiveness." He is the on-again, off-again lover of Eustacia Vye; she calls him a "chameleon." Wildeve marries Thomasin to spite Eustacia when she considers him not worthy of her.

Hardy compares Eustacia Vye to a Greek goddess, filled with self-interest, sexual passion and "smoldering rebelliousness." She calls Diggory Venn's lack of selfishness "absurd." The heath is a jail to her from which she desperately longs to escape while, at the same time, fulfilling her great desire to be "loved to madness" by someone. When her pride and delusions of grandeur collide with the harsh realities of Life, with a Capital L, she falls into

what Hardy calls "a depression of spirits."

The native who returns is Clym Yeobright. He has been working in Paris, but the glitter was unfulfilling. Now he wants to establish a school near the heath that he loves for poor, rural children and he plans to spend a considerable amount of time in preparation by reading to first educate himself. (There is an element of autobiography here for, beyond grade school, Hardy himself was self - educated. After apprenticing in London to an architect, he married and returned to live by the heath in Dorset where he was born.) Naturally, Clym is captivated by Eustacia while at the same time calculating that he could use her as a schoolmistress. She, meanwhile, is jealous that Wildeve has married Thomasin and, she thinks, she can induce Clym into returning to Paris – with her. After they are married, they see their desires thwarted, but never recognize their willful blindness and lack of empathy toward each other. Mrs. Yeobright, Clym's mother and Thomasin's aunt, says of their estrangement, "Their troubles are of their own making." They, however, blame only each other and fate. Clym declares he "is ill-used by fortune," while Eustacia exclaims, "How I have tried and tried to be a splendid human and how destiny has been against me." The passion between Wildeve and Eustacia is unquenchable and rekindled; they impulsively decide to run off together, with calamitous consequences.

This is not a soap opera, no matter how it sounds. D. H. Lawrence, a big admirer of Hardy's work, calls it a "great, tragic novel." But I will give the last word to Virginia Woolf. In 1926, she went to visit Hardy, then 86, at the large brick house he had built next to the heath of his childhood. To her, he seemed an "unworldly and simple old man." She later wrote, "In short, nobody can deny Hardy's power – the true novelist's power – to make us believe that his characters are fellow-beings driven by their own passions and idiosyncrasies, while they have – and this is the poet's gift – something symbolical about them which is common

to us all... Thus it is no mere transcript of life at a certain time and place that Hardy has given us. It is a vision of the world and of man's lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination, a profound and poetic genius, a gentle and humane soul."