Hardy's Great Success As A Delineator Of Women In The Return Of The Native

One striking aspect of Hardy as a novelist is his portrayal of women. Conspicuously successful as he is in portraying men (though within a narrow range), he is even more eminently successful in his delineation of women (though here also the range is limited). Within his limitations, Hardy's portraits of women are superb. The figures of women are perfectly realistic and convincing, as are those of men. Marty, Bathsheba, Eustacia, Mrs. Yeobright, Thomasin, and Tess are among his most successful creations. Hardy's sensibility to feminine charm and his power to discriminate its distinguishing quality are the chief means by which he makes his heroines live: whether it be Fancy's willful innocent coquetry, or Bathsheba's ardent glowing smiles and tears, or Anne's demure rural neatness, or Eustacia's somber gorgeousness.

Three Important Characters

The three important women characters in The Return of the Native are Eustacia, Mrs. Yeobright, and Thomasin. A minor woman character who also deserves some notice is Susan Nunsuch, a member of the rustic group. The three principal women offer interesting studies in contrast. Eustacia and Thomasin are as unlike each other as any two women could be; and as for Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright, the contrast between them is striking too.

Eustacia versus Thomasin

The portrait of Eustacia drawn by Hardy is highly impressive, besides being elaborate. Hardy gives us a set description of this woman, and the description is undoubtedly thorough. We have first succession of the usual light touches that bring her gradually forward out of the unknown—a motionless figure in the distance on the peak of a gloomy barrow on the vast Egdon Heath, a profile against the clouds suggesting Sappho and Mrs. Siddons. After this Hardy enters upon a full chapter which is marvelous in the richness and splendor of its description, of which every phrase is salient and arresting. The method of conveying Eustacia's splendour is suggestive, like that adopted by Marlowe in conveying to us the exquisite loveliness of Helen in his play Doctor Faustus. Hardy tells us less what Eustacia is like than what she suggests and what she stands for. He does not say that her hair is black; he tells us that a whole winter does not contain darkness enough to form the shadow of her hair; as for her eyes, they are Pagan, full of nocturnal mysteries. She is not described as a handsome brunette, but her presence brings memories of Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights. She is not languidly passionate, graceful, and sweet-spoken; but her moods recall the lotus-eaters and the march in 'Athalie', her motions the ebb and flow of the sea, her voice the viola. Hardy's description of Thomasin stands no comparison at all with this portrait of Eustacia which glows with color and poetry. Thomasin has a simple, rural charm and grace having none of the glamour and splendor of Eustacia. Thomasin is a lovable person in her own way. She is described as having a fair, sweet, and honest country face reposing in a nest of wavy chestnut hair. Here is a face 'between pretty and beautiful:' the groundwork of this face is 'hopefulness'. Hardy lends a poetic touch even to this description when he says that Thomasin seemed to belong rightly to a madrigal—to require viewing through rhythm and harmony. Thomasin is a living figure to us from the way Hardy's

description conveys her characteristic attraction to us. The sweetness of her personality is fully conveyed to us.

These two women are entirely different from each other in their temperaments, their outlook upon life, and their reactions to persons, situations, and events. Eustacia is haughty, proud, vain of her beauty, reserved, somewhat mysterious, and indifferent to public opinion. Thomasin is gentle, modest, humble, affectionate, and very sensitive to the opinions of her neighbors' and others. When Wildeve is unable to marry Thomasin at the outset of the story. Thomasin is heart-broken, the chief reason for her sorrow being her fear of what people will say. Thomasin is hardly able to endure the situation, and is almost on the verge of collapse at the turn of events. In Thomasin's place, Eustacia would have flared up and created a furore when the marriage plans went awry. Thomasin is, on the whole, a passive kind of character, even though she shows a lot of firmness, and even rebelliousness against her aunt, in her decision to marry Wildeve despite her aunt's opposition. Eustacia is always self-assertive, and vehemently so. To take only one example, she refuses to budge an inch from her position when the reddleman urges her not to stand as a wall between Thomasin and Wildeve. She is highly conscious of her social prestige too, as when she tells the reddleman that it is beneath her dignity to talk to him, and as when, later in the story, she feels humiliated by Clyin's having adopted the occupation of a furze-cutter. She even thinks it beneath her dignity to have Wildeve as a lover, and it is always as a last resort, for want of a better man, that she allows him to make love to her. Thomasin, though not much lower than Eustacia in the social scale, has much less of this snobbery, even though she thinks that the reddleman does not have enough social respectability to be acceptable to her as a suitor.

Eustacia's aspirations are widely different from those of Thomasin. Eustacia's mind is constantly obsessed with thoughts of Paris. She would like to share in the joys and pleasures of the fashionable life of a big city, her life in a village being a kind of prison to her. She has no love for her fellow-creatures, as she herself says. She is self-centred and her unfulfilled longing for city-life deepens the natural gloom of her temperament. Thomasin, on the other hand, is the product of the country, is fully satisfied with her environment, has no aspirations beyond the village of Egdon, and has a naturally hopeful and cheerful temperament.

Thomasin is a good, sincere, faithful, honest, and dependable girl. Wildeve is not wrong when he describes her as 'a confoundedly good little woman'. Indeed, he finds her such an excellent creature that he would not like to deceive her. When Eustacia asks Wildeve if he thinks Thomasin to be more beautiful, he replies that he cannot really decide between her and Thomasin. This shows that Thomasin does have certain qualities which raise her to a higher moral position than that which Eustacia occupies, even though Thomasin is devoid of Eustacia's glitter and glamour. By comparison with Eustacia, Thomasin is certainly a homely girl cut out to make an excellent 'home-spun' wife which Eustacia can never be. Thomasin loves Wildeve steadfastly and it is only after she has become a widow that she can entertain the notion of marrying the reddleman. Eustacia, on the other hand, is a wavering, vacillating, and fickle-minded woman. She gives up Wildeve as soon Clym appears on the scene. She turns to Wildeve again when her hopes of going to Paris are dashed to the ground and when Clym chooses to become a furze-cutter. She leaves Clym when Clym rebukes her for the manner in which she had behaved towards his mother. She decides to run away from Egdon Heath with Wildeve's assistance, and is even willing to consider the possibility of having Wildeve as a lover once again. This kind of behaviour should arouse our disgust for a woman who is perfectly devoid of any scruple where her own caprice and her ambition are concerned, and who proves

faithful neither as a sweetheart nor as a wife. She is thoroughly selfish, undependable, and even dishonest. That we are still fascinated by her and remain under her spell till the end is due to the fact that Hardy loves her despite all her faults and lavishes all his resources of language to build up a personality whose charm is irresistible.