

Inescapable Egdon Heath

-- An Analysis of Eustacia's Failure in Fighting Against Destiny

Lizhi Hou

Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Trade, Guangzhou 510430, China

Abstract

Eustacia is a literary Heroine in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. Through all her life, Eustacia tried to escape from Egdon Heath--the place where she lived, but failed and demised consequently. Drawing on text analysis, this paper probes into the reasons for her failure in fighting against destiny, pointing out that her tragic flaw and destiny are separately the internal and external factors that lead to her failure.

Keywords

Eustacia; Fight; Destiny; Failure; Reason.

1. Introduction

Of all the heroines in Hardy's fiction, Eustacia is the only one who fights vigorously for her free will throughout her whole life. This is why she is referred to in this paper as a fighter against her destiny. Despite all the difficulties on her way, Eustacia never stops dreaming of escaping Egdon Heath. However, her death marks her failure, testifying to the author's view that no one can escape from their doom.

Without any doubt, Eustacia is a tragic figure. As Lance Butler puts it, she is "a tragic stature suggested by the references to Lear and Prometheus" (Butler, 1978:43). All her life, Eustacia struggles to fight against her own destiny, but her death in the boundary river marks her failure to escape Egdon Heath. Until the moment of her death, Eustacia lives within the territory that she struggles to escape. She fails to break the confinement which destiny sets on her and thus she loses the battle with it.

2. Factors that Lead to Eustacia's Failure

Many critics, like Williams and Butler, argue in their articles that Eustacia is somehow forced to live on the Egdon Heath. It indeed seems that some force keeps Eustacia on the Heath, although she is presented with chances to escape. However, she does not catch hold of the opportunities to leave, due to her own flaws. Thus, it might also be argued that it is Eustacia's character that plays the decisive role in the factors leading to her failures and eventual demise.

2.1. Internal Reason

Dissatisfaction is what Eustacia is overwhelmed with. She lives on Egdon Heath with her grandfather, but she is not satisfied with her life. Her potent and insatiable character is the root of all of her pains, as Wind argues:

To be loved to madness--such was her great desire, but there was nobody mend or great enough to do so. She was ever in a spring of discontent, and one can never conjecture of phase or situation of anything like a permanent nature in which she would ever be contented. There was insatiability about Eustacia, restlessness, an unceasing demanding. She had to live at a hotter pace: she had to burn up quicker than anybody else. (1966:56).

What Egdon Heath impresses upon Eustacia is bleakness and remoteness. Her longing to live in a metropolitan city sets her apart from the other folks on Egdon Heath. She feels suppressed and is unable to exist in conformity with the people there. Egdon turns into Hades in her eyes and, as Hardy puts it, "we see her in a strange state of isolation" (81). The repeated theme in her prayers reflects her demanding nature: "O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die" (80).

Even considering the strict norms of the Victorian era, it would not be fair to state unequivocally that it is wrong to pursue what one longs for. However, beyond any doubt, Eustacia's discontent with her life in Egdon Heath becomes the inner motivation for her conduct which ultimately leads to her demise.

Before getting married to Clym, Eustacia is offered two opportunities to escape from Egdon Heath. The first comes from Wildeve who asks Eustacia twice to go with him to America, but she is not satisfied either with Wildeve or with America. In fact, she considers Wildeve to be a less than ideal suitor and America to be too far away. So, she declines both. The second chance is offered to her by Venn. In order to help Thomasin win her love, Venn goes to visit Eustacia, and asks her to leave Wildeve. He wants to take Eustacia to Budmouth and even offers her a job to look after an old lady there. However, Eustacia is not satisfied with the job she is offered, so she refuses Venn too. Thus, Eustacia's dissatisfaction also makes her lose the second chance to make her dreams come true. What awaits Eustacia is the path of her purposeless struggle, paved by her contradictory actions and confused choices, which she continues to tread until she meets her doom.

It is undeniable that dissatisfaction is both the driving force of her action as well as the obstacle that prevents Eustacia from fulfilling her dreams. In addition, vanity and her concern for superficiality are other Eustacia's characteristics which contribute to her failure. She says to Clym, "Never mind what is--let us only look at what seems"(242). To a certain degree, Eustacia's vanity might also be taken as the reason why she misses the opportunity to escape Egdon Heath. Due to her vanity, Eustacia refuses Wildeve, because she wants a more decent match. It is also due to vanity that she is unwilling to work as a maid. Thus, she loses precious chances for making her dreams come true. Furthermore, vanity alienates Eustacia from Egdon Heath, that is, from the people in her surroundings. Vanity also blinds her, leaving Eustacia with a sense of false superiority over the other people on the Heath. Just as the narrator puts it in the novel, "[s]he behaves like a queen without realms". (79)

Eustacia's sense of her own otherness in the environment, in which she lives, deprives her from the feeling of belonging. Her bizarre behavior evokes a loathsome response from the community in Egdon Heath. This, in turn, strengthens her sense of isolation. Additionally, her vanity also blinds Eustacia to the love of the others for her. To Eustacia, love does not stem from emotional affection. Rather, it is prompted by competition and her need to climb the social ladder. Thus, Eustacia's values are in conformity with her time and may be understood as a product of her environment.

Her love for Wildeve does not arise from the bottom of her heart. Part of it is due to her rivalry with Miss Thomasin. When she hears that Miss Thomasin no longer desires Wildeve, Eustacia thinks that her victory is humiliating. Her love for Clym, the successful diamond merchant who returns from Paris to his native Egdon Heath, is also not genuine. Hardy faithfully captures Eustacia's spirit in the novel when he describes her feelings for Clym: "She had loved him partly because he was exceptional in this scene, partly because she had determined to love him, chiefly because she was in desperate need of loving somebody after wearying of Wildeve" (166).

Eustacia's love for Clym is partially due to her need to fill in the vacated place in her heart and partly to the girl's determination to improve her social status. Thus, by no means is Eustacia's

love for Clym a result of her wholehearted emotional affection for him. When Clym begins to study hard to pursue a career of a local schoolmaster and even decides to eke out a living by becoming a furze-cutter, Eustacia's dreams are blasted as she realizes that, instead of climbing the social ladder and living abroad, she is married to a common local labourer and destined to stay forever on the Heath. It is at this point that she is tempted by the information that Wildeve has inherited a large amount of money, thus becoming able to make her dreams come true.

Eustacia's decisions about her love life are closely related to her desire to have a better social status and be different from the people in her surrounding: "She only valued rest to herself when it came in the midst of other people's labour. Hence she hated Sundays when all was at rest, and often said they would be the death of her" (80). From this example, it can be easily inferred that she enjoys standing out among the people who surround her. In addition, Eustacia enjoys the privilege of possessing things that the other people don't have which is the only way for her to satisfy her vanity. Being vain and smug, she tends not to admit her fault for her own actions. Instead, Eustacia puts the blame on destiny in the grip of which she indeed is: "Yet, instead of blaming herself for the issue she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot" (353).

When Clym quarrels with her about Mrs. Yeobright's death, Eustacia's vanity prevents her from openly and honestly confessing her own actions. Instead of admitting her fault, she separates from Clym and moves back to her grandfather's home.

From among her choices, Eustacia goes for the ones which she finds more suitable for achieving her aim of leaving the Heath. However, her last action, opting for the same aim, brings death on her. This is interpreted as the tragic "fate" of Eustacia, reflecting Hardy's pessimistic view and his concept of Immanent Will. However, it would be edifying to ponder on Eustacia's character in order to fully understand the relationship between the forces which compel her to act in a certain way and her own personality.

One important point to be mentioned about Eustacia's character is her dependence. She is ambitious in her own way, but rather than relying on herself, the girl depends on the others for making her dreams come true, which makes her impotent and inept to act. This is a vital flaw which directly leads to Eustacia's failure and demise. Instead of managing to fight for her dream independently, all she does is to count on the others, that is, on the men in her love life. When she risks her life to pursue a way out from the constraints of her existence on Egdon Heath, Eustacia becomes active, taking control of her life. However, when she ties her hopes to the men in her life, her subjectivity becomes suppressed so that she is doomed to fail in the pursuit of her dreams.

2.2. External Reason

In addition to Eustacia's own character, as perhaps one of the most obvious causes of her failure, what significantly contributes to the developments leading to the girl's death, is the uncontrollable destiny. The concept of an overpowering destiny is an enduring theme in Hardy's major novels in which the author exposes his tragic view and pessimism as part of his philosophy of life. In *The Return of the Native* Hardy's tragic view and pessimistic stand focus on the main heroine as well as the other major characters who meet their doom.

The death of Eustacia is an illustration of the author's philosophical view on destiny. Throughout her entire life Eustacia has been trying to escape Egdon Heath. However, her tragic death in the boundary river marks her failure. Alive or dead, she is confined to Egdon Heath.

Pondering occasionally on the forces which keep her on Egdon Heath, Eustacia herself believes that what happens to her is the work of destiny:

She could show a most reproachful look at times, but it was directed less against human beings than against certain creatures of her mind, the chief of these being Destiny, through whose interference she dimly fancied it arose that love alighted only on gliding youth--that any love she might win would sink simultaneously with the sand in the glass (79).

In Eustacia's opinion, destiny is the "chief" agent which keeps her in Egdon Heath. On her way home, after separating with Clym, Eustacia cries, "I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control!" (422). For Eustacia, it is destiny which is beyond her control. She understands the power of destiny which is uncontrollable and which dominates and crushes people in its unique way. Eustacia's inner monologue illustrates Hardy's view on destiny.

To some extent, Eustacia is tactful. She has tried different methods to achieve her goal. The core of her strategy relies on her relationships with men who are the heroine's means to achieve her aim. From Wildeve to Clym, and then from Clym to Wildeve, Eustacia's actions are aimed at making a bond or tie which ironically keeps her in confinement. However, the breaking of these ties inevitably puts her on the tragic path of her destiny.

Clym, who makes up his mind to pursue a career as a schoolmaster, also illustrates through his life experiences the author's view that destiny guides the lives of people:

He grew up and was helped out in life. That wiggery of fate which started Clive as a writing clerk, Gay as a linen-draper, Keats as a surgeon, and a thousand others in a thousand other odd ways banished the wild and ascetic heath lad to a trade whose sole concern was with the especial symbols of self-indulgence and vainglory. (199)

It seems as though Clym holds the idea that instead of positioning oneself for a certain job, destiny may be responsible for placing us in our respective job positions. Guided by this notion, Clym maintains his ideals, though frustrated by his position as a furze-cutter. However, he embraces what he believes destiny has allotted him. Examined from the same perspective, the issue of whether or not Clym would have been treated in the same way if he had succeeded as a schoolmaster, would most probably also be at the mercy of destiny, rather than depending solely on his own efforts. Furthermore, the fact that Eustacia loses the great hopes she has for him, also influences Clym and all the developments, leading to his agony afterwards.

In addition, when Eustacia asserts that she dislikes and even hates the people on the Heath, Clym replies: "There is no use in hating people--if you hate anything, you should hate what produced them" (219). Obviously, in Clym's opinion, destiny is responsible for the way how people behave, for it is its indistinct power which guides the lives and behaviour of people.

Clym has also told Eustacia, "Well, what must be will be" (294). This fatalistic statement implies that if something is doomed to happen, it is unavoidable. Thus, whatever people do to dodge or change it, it will happen the way it should. At this point, Hardy's view on destiny coincides with fatalism.

After developing acute eyes' inflammation, due to reading in poor light, Clym attributes once more his problems, this time with his vision, to destiny. He believes "[t]o be doomed to behold the world through smoked glass for an indefinite period was bad enough, and fatal to any kind of advance." (296). When Eustacia tells Clym that she wants to go to a village festival, he says: "[a]s for me, I will stick to my doom" (304). It is clear that the power of destiny or doom upon the characters is asserted in the novel, unveiling thus an important component of Hardy's philosophy of life.

In addition to Eustacia and Clym, Wildeve is also a character in the novel conveying the author's view on destiny. Upon seeing the bonfire signal from Eustacia, Wildeve murmurs to himself with resignation: "Yes--by Heaven, I must go to her, I suppose" (58). He clearly appreciates the

strong emotions Eustacia has for him. However, instead of attributing the cause for her love to himself, he assigns it to the arrangement of Heaven. When Wildeve says to Christian, "some men are born to luck, some are not" (266), there is a fatalistic implication in his words which also exposes Hardy's philosophy of life. This is in fact the simplest way in which Hardy's fatalistic view on destiny can be interpreted. In the same way, the author's understanding of the antagonistic working of destiny can be inferred from Wildeve's words to Eustacia after the dance during the village festival: "Fate has treated you cruelly"(311). Thus, through his characters Hardy conveys his view that human lives are guided by destiny.

3. Conclusion

Turning to Eustacia, it is unarguable that her tragic flaws have put her on the path which leads to her doom. At the same time, her drowning in the boundary river reflects the mighty and uncontrollable work of Fate. Hardy's idea that human lives are in the hands of destiny is once again asserted through the words of his character Clym: "Well, these sad and hopeless obstacles are welcome in one sense, for they enable us to look with indifference upon the cruel satires that Fate loves to indulge in" (243).

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