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Ruhr-Universität Bochum

Englisches Seminar

The Function of the Minor Characters  
in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*

The **title page** contains: . . .

- a) the exact formulation of the topic;
- b) the title, semester, and lecturer of the seminar for which the paper has been written;
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Whilst the title page is included in the page count, the page number "1" is omitted. Hence, the first page number that appears is the "2" on the contents page.

Paper for the Seminar

"Thomas Hardy"

Winter Semester 2004/05

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The **table of contents** appears on the second page. It describes the structure of the paper, indicating the page on which each section or subsection begins.

Chapter headings must contain exactly the same wording as in the text proper.



Titles of independent publications, i.e. of books or journals, should be **italicized**. (Exceptions: the Koran, the Bible).

A **source** must be acknowledged not only if it is quoted from directly but also if it is paraphrased. The use of a source must be documented immediately. Listing it in the bibliography or referring to it somewhere else in the paper is not enough.

Since the bibliography contains a complete list of cited works, the **author's name** and the **page numbers** generally suffice to document a source in the main text of the paper (if possible, sources should not be indicated by footnotes).

**Footnotes** are numbered consecutively throughout a paper. The existence of a footnote is indicated in the main text by a superscript Arabic numeral. The numerals should be placed immediately after the phrases containing the quoted material; they should follow, rather than precede, punctuation marks.

**Footnotes can be used for additional evidence** which is relevant at a particular point in the paper but whose inclusion in the main text would interrupt the flow of the argument considerably.

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy's novels are all set in "Wessex," a quasi-mythical region in southern and south-west England. The native community of this area was of particular interest to Hardy, and in *The Return of the Native* this community plays a greater role than it does in other works by Hardy.

This paper will analyse the function of the rustics on the levels of setting, character, point of view, plot, and theme. It will be shown that, in *The Return of the Native*, the significance of the rustic characters is not limited to providing mere background scenery or local colour; instead, these characters fulfil various important functions such as commenting upon the main characters, offering an alternative to the intellectualised world of the main characters, and providing a form of comic relief.

## 2. The Place of the Minor Characters in the Structure of the Novel

### 2.1. Setting

*The Return of the Native* is set on Egdon Heath, a vast area in Hardy's fictitious Wessex. All the twists and turns of the plot occur on the heath, which takes on the form of a closed microcosm of human existence. While some critics have claimed that the heath itself may be regarded as the major character (Fricker 228), the role of the heath people must not be neglected. The rustics set the stage on which the main characters enact their tragedy; and yet they are more than "bush[es] on legs."<sup>1</sup>

The natives' relationship to the heath has been a subject of Hardy scholarship for some time. While formerly critics claimed that the heath people live in harmony with nature (Holloway 48), more recent criticism has come to acknowledge that this relationship is not very harmonious. Von Ziegesar, for instance, argues that the heath is "doomed to decay" from the very beginning of the novel (52).

Indeed, there are several hints in *The Return of the Native* that the rustics' relationship to the heath is at best ambiguous. At the very beginning, after the lighting of the bonfires, the natives are set against the primeval natural powers of the heath, which are described as destructive:

1 Hardy himself chooses this image: "Every individual was so involved in furze by his method of carrying the faggots that he appeared *like a bush on legs* till he had thrown them down" (65, emphasis added).

Quotations which cover more than three lines must be indented three to five spaces. The spacing is single; the quotation marks are omitted.

It seemed as if the bonfire-makers were standing in some radiant upper storey of the world, detached from and independent of the dark stretches below. The heath down there was now a vast abyss and no longer a continuation of what they stood on; for their eyes, adapted to the blaze, could see nothing of the deep beyond its influence. (66)

Quotations must also be accompanied by a bibliographic reference that enables the reader to locate the passage in the original.

The fire in this context alienates the rustics from their native soil; they do not seem to be part of the heath any longer. [ . . . ]

A similar description of the heath is to be found later on in the novel when Mrs Yeobright and Olly Dowden make for the town:

Down, downward they went, and yet further down – their descent at each step seeming to outmeasure their advance. Their skirts were scratched noisily by the furze, their shoulders brushed by the ferns, which, though dead and dry, stood erect as when alive, no sufficient winter weather having as yet arrived to beat them down. (86)

This descent from the heath back into town resembles a descent into hell (Pater-son 216). Here again the heath appears in opposition to civilization.

[ . . . ]

The rustics have come to accept the limitations the heath imposes upon them. The main characters, on the other hand, struggle to reform the living conditions of the rural community. Yet despite their best efforts they fail, as the example of Clym shows. The main characters' failed attempts at reform can be interpreted as Hardy taking sides with what has been termed "the old world" of the natives (Grimsditch 87). However much Hardy might sympathise with this "old world," which resists the infiltration of modernity as best it can, he is also aware that this world cannot last. At a closer look, we can see that the rural world is already on its way to modernisation.

Short quotations up to three lines are marked by double quotation marks.

## 2.2. Characters

[ . . . ] More than anything else, the rustics stand for continuity and the preservation of custom. Although it has been convincingly shown that Hardy did not idealise the rural world against Clym's "new world" ideas of social and educational reform (von Ziegesar 52), the stability of the rustic community is certainly an indicator of the fragility of modern society. Compared to the rustics, the modern characters seem like a critical and endangered species (Fricker 232). [ . . . ]

From an ethical point of view, the rustics represent "a still more limited and earlier stage of moral and intellectual evolution. They represent older, less conscious forms of fear and aspiration" (Hyman 79). Being less conscious, the rustic characters are more comical than their modern counterparts. Thus they provide a much-needed comic "relief to the sad 'twilight' tinge" of the major characters (Grimsditch 75). [ . . . ]

Single quotation marks ('...') indicate a quotation within a quotation.

2.3. Point of view [ . . . ]

2.4. Plot [ . . . ]

2.5. Theme [ . . . ]

2.5.1. Religion

At first sight, the rustic community appears to be religious in a traditional Christian way. At a closer look, however, it becomes obvious that "Christianity has cast only a veneer" over the community's ancient, superstitious beliefs (Grimsditch 74). With the exception of a few characters (such as Humphrey), the rustics are still "pagans at heart [...], unmoved by any deep belief in Christian theology" (*ibid.* 90). [ . . . ]

If one wishes to omit a passage from the middle of a quotation, one must indicate this by [...], i.e. an ellipsis which is placed in square brackets to signal that it is not in the original.

The quotation is from the same source as the previous one, only from a different page. If the quotation is from the same source AND the same page, you write only *ibid.*

2.5.2. Superstition [ . . . ]

2.5.3. Education [ . . . ]

### 3. Conclusion

As we have seen, the minor characters are given considerable space by Hardy because they fulfil a number of important functions: as contrasting characters, they direct the readers' attention to the value system held by the major characters; as a kind of epic equivalent to a "chorus," they comment upon and challenge this system; as a community, they provide comic relief from the tragedy that permeates the lives of the main characters. The rustics' constant presence does not only lend the novel a regional touch (Butler 56); it also provides the reader with an insight into the mind of (nineteenth-century) rural man. It shows how, during the period of industrialisation, rural communities coped with various challenges to their established worldview, suggesting that the rustics' down-to-earth view of life represents, in the final instance, a valid alternative to the morally and emotionally stunted world of modern man.

Works Cited

An academic paper must contain a bibliography, i.e. a list of all the sources that have been used. It is placed at the end of the paper.

For a book, give the author's name, the title in italics, place, publisher and year of publication. Follow the examples listed here in the use of punctuation marks.

Butler, Lance St. John. *Thomas Hardy*. Cambridge: CUP, 1978.

For **articles in collections**, give first the title of the article, then the title of the collection. (For further details see below under journal article).

Fricke, Robert. "Hardy: *The Return of the Native*." *Der englische Roman: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. 2 vols. Ed. Franz K. Stanzel. Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1969. 2: 215-50.

Goetsch, Paul. *Hardys Wessex-Romane*. Tübingen: Narr, 1994.

Grimsditch, Herbert B. *Character and Environment in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. New York: Russell, 1962.

In **English titles**, capitalise all words except articles, prepositions, and the following words: *and, or, to*; always capitalise the last word.

Hardy, Thomas. *The Return of the Native*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

Hyman, Virginia R. *Ethical Perspective in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. Port Washington, WI: Kennikat, 1975.

Paterson, John. "The 'Poetics' of *The Return of the Native*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 6 (1960): 214-22.

A **journal article** requires the following information:

- author of the article;
- title of the article in **double quotation marks**
- book titles within article titles are italicised;
- journal title in italics;
- volume number;
- year of publication in **round brackets**;
- page numbers.

Ziegeler, Detlef von. *Romananfänge und Romanschlüsse bei Thomas Hardy: Versuch einer formorientierten Interpretation*. Göttingen: Kümmerle, 1971.

Title and subtitle of book, separated by a colon, in **italics**.

**Place** of publication, publisher, and **date** of publication; if impossible to ascertain, add "n.p." (no place of publication given), "n.p." (no publisher given; this is no mistake: the two abbreviations are indeed identical), or "n.d." (no date of publication given). If more than one place is given, list only the first.

Honesty Declaration

I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that all passages and ideas that are not mine have been fully and properly acknowledged.

I am aware that I will fail the entire course should I include passages and ideas from other sources and present them as if they were my own.

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Signature

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Date