June 1986

The Magic of Metaphor in The Return of the Native

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The Magic of Metaphor
in The Return of the Native
by CHARLES E. MAY

Critical controversy about nineteenth-century fiction has often centered on the generic question of whether a given work is to be read as a novel or a romance. This has especially been the case in the past twenty years since Northrop Frye not only warned us that in reading fiction we must begin by establishing a work’s genre but also suggested a theoretical distinction between these two fictional forms based on the concept of characterization. Frye postulated that the difference between the two forms springs from the fact that the novelist deals with personality, “with characters wearing their personae or social masks,” whereas the romancer does not attempt to create real people so much as “stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes.”

Although Frye warned that pure examples of either the novel or romance were not to be found, that prose forms were always mixed like racial strains in human beings, his theory established no way to read works as actual mixtures of the two forms—only a way to read works as either one form or the other. “There is hardly any modern romance,” Frye said, “that could not be made out to be a novel, and vice versa.” Consequently, critics have approached nineteenth-century fictional characters as either psychologically-motivated real people acting within a novelistic social similitude or as mythically-motivated archetypes acting within a psychologized allegorical code. Heathcliff and Lord Jim are only two of the more obvious examples. Characters in the works of Charlotte Brontë, Dickens and Hardy have also been treated thus alternatively. (As an aside here, the relevance of which will become apparent later, psychoanalytic criticism is similarly divided between those critics who analyze fictional characters as if they were real people on the therapeutic couch and those who interpret fictional characters as if they were embodiments of concepts in the Freudian metapsychology.)

Such an either/or approach to a mixed genre is a reductive use of theory and does little to further the study of genre as a guideline to interpretation. I think the issue deserves another look. While I will retain Frye’s discriminants of psychological character versus psychological archetype,

I hope to find a mediating principle between the two to show how a fictional figure in a “modern romance” can be read as both at once rather than one to the exclusion of the other.

I focus on Eustacia Vye in Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* for several reasons stemming from critical debate about Hardy’s art in general and about this novel in particular. First of all, criticism of Hardy’s fiction has been split between realistic and romantic readings at least since 1949 when Albert Guerard resurrected the grand old Victorian as a modern symbolist. Evidence from Hardy’s notebooks indicate that he indeed was aware of the problem of the novel-romance dichotomy and was continually trying to find an effective synthesis of the two. Again and again he affirms that although as an individual talent he was concerned with essences rather than with existents, with the invisible rather than the manifest; as a writer within the tradition of the novel, he had to find a way to make essences visible and believable. Such an attempted synthesis has been the concern of authors of “modern romances” from Hawthorne’s creation of a “neutral territory somewhere between the real world and fairy-land” to Flannery O’Connor’s fictional combination of “mystery and manners” and her “reasonable use of the unreasonable.”

Although Hardy’s concern with the synthesis of novel and romance can be seen in all of his fiction, and consequently all of his major works have been interpreted as either one or the other, *The Return of the Native* seems to be the source of more disagreement and bafflement than the rest. The work has been variously called tragedy, parody, myth, social realism, and antichristian document. Eustacia Vye is one of Hardy’s most puzzling creations, whose curiously bifurcated nature always seems to evade critical efforts to characterize her. One critic says her story is both myth and case history; another calls her both tragic heroine and parody of a heroine. Furthermore, many other elements in the work have been more quarreled about than clarified. Egdon Heath has been alternatively interpreted as hard physical reality and as purely symbolic device; the accidents and coincidences that dominate the plot have been called both the fault of weaknesses in the characters and the result of Hardy’s philosophic determinism; the framework of magic and superstition that surrounds and infuses the action of the work has been termed both grotesque parody and animistic gratuitousness.

Although I certainly will not try to mediate all these disagreements or synthesize all these dichotomies, I do hope to offer a theoretical framework for their mediation and synthesis by concentrating on the mixing of the romance and novel forms *vis-à-vis* the character Eustacia Vye as both psychologically real person and psychological archetype. I take as my point of departure a text that is often cited as marking the beginning of the so-called mythical method of fictional narration—Thomas Mann’s famous essay, “Freud and the Future.” Here Mann explicitly calls for a modern fiction that mixes the psychological and the mythical, for he af-
firms as truth the Schopenhauer-Freud perception that life itself is a "mingling of the individual elements and the formal stock-in-trade; a mingling in which the individual, as it were, only lifts his head above the formal and impersonal elements." Much of the "extra-personal," Mann insists, "much unconscious identification, much that is conventional and schematic, is none the less decisive for the experience not only of the artist but of the human being in general." Echoing T. S. Eliot's argument about literary forms in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Mann says that when an author gets the habit of seeing life as mythical, he gains a knowledge of the "schema in which and according to which the supposed individual lives, unaware, in his naive belief in himself as unique in space and time, of the extent to which his life is but formula and repetition."3

Our interest in fictional characters, Mann implies, is, regardless of the events in which they are enmeshed, always centrally located in the process by which they try to find their identity, the means by which they attempt to answer the age-old Oedipal question: Who am I? In such a process the two forces of the subjective and the schematic are decisive. As Robert Langbaum has described it, when you realize that introspection leads to nothing but endless reflection, you see that the only way to find out who you are is to don a mask and step into a story. "The point is," says Langbaum, "at that level of experience where events fall into a pattern...they are an objectification of your deepest will, since they make you do things other than you consciously intend; so that in responding like a marionette to the necessities of the story, you actually find out what you really want and who you really are." Echoing Mann, Langbaum says "psychological interest passes over into the mythical at that psychological depth where we desire to repeat mythical patterns. Life at its intensest is repetition."4

However, neither Mann nor Langbaum tell us how a character in a fiction can desire to repeat mythical patterns, nor how a psychologically real person can be transformed into a psychological archetype by such a desire. We must assume that as the psychological character, thinking, speaking, acting much like a person in real life, attempts to answer the question—Who am I?—he or she seems to create his or her own individual story. However, because story is always schematic and conventionalized, the character is transformed into an automaton-like figure governed by his or her place in the story itself. Thus, the character seems to be the determiner of the schema which in turn determines the character. Such talk is too general to be of any help in understanding the mixed nature of novel and romance unless we can isolate the specific mechanisms by which the psychological passes into the mythical, that is, the

means by which the individual story is transformed into the schematic. I
cannot depend on the Jungian hypothesis of inherited archetypes to do
this, for that would be negating the individual. Rather I must find a way
to trace the conventional nature of the story to its source in the desires of
the psychological character and then show how this conventional schema
transforms the character into an archetype of desire. I hope to do this by
focusing on the effect of the magic of metaphor on the character Eustacia
Vye.

The competition we perceive in a single work between novel elements
and romance elements springs from the competition in a single character
between our perceiving the character as either a psychologically real per-
son, that is, conscious, or as a psychological archetype, that is, un-
conscious. This tension can also be expressed as a competition between
those metonymic and metaphoric devices which Roman Jakobson says
are manifest in any symbolic process. The fact that metonymy exists as
a relation based on context and contiguity, and metaphor is based on sub-
stitution and similarity, means that the former can be analyzed by ref-
erence to the context of a work whereas the latter must be interpreted in
reference to an implicit code. When we analyze a character as if he or she
were a real person, we approach the character in terms of the context of
the similitude of a real world the story presents; when we interpret a
character as an archetype, we must discover the latent structure of the
plot, that is, the schema or code which makes the character an archetype
by virtue of the position he or she holds in the fable itself. The former is
a response to what is individual, subjective, and metonymic; the latter is
a response to the traditional, the schematic, and the metaphoric.

As a way to see how metonymic and metaphoric devices interact in the
kind of mixed fiction we are dealing with, it is perhaps best to begin with
the extreme form of the metaphoric or romance pole, that is, the allegory.
In an allegory, the only way to approach the characters is by reference to
their position in a preexistent code. An analysis of the metonymic context
leads nowhere. Angus Fletcher suggests the code-bound nature of the
allegorical figure when he says that if we were to meet an allegorical
character in real life, we would think the person driven by some central
obsession. The obsessive-like behavior of the character is, of course, a
result of his or her actions being totally determined by the position he or
she holds in the preexistent code. The difference between an allegorical
character and a character in a romance is that the romance figure not only
acts as if obsessed because of his or her position in the story, but also
seems obsessed in reference to the similitude of real life created in the
work itself.

This combination seems most effectively achieved when a psycholog-

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ically real character’s obsession is so extreme that he or she projects the obsession on someone or something outside the self and then, forgetting that the source of the obsession is within, acts as if it were without. Thus, although the obsessive action takes place within a similitude of a realistic world, once the character has projected something inside outwards and then has reacted to the projection as if it were outside, this very reaction transforms the character into a parabolic rather than a realistic figure. Ahab, Gatsby, Heathcliff, Kurtz come to mind as examples.

The best place to begin this consideration of how these processes change Eustacia from psychological character to psychological archetype is at her death, when at the moment she plunges into the pool Susan Nunsuch fashions an image of her, sticks it full of pins and destroys it in the flames. Ruth Firor, in her study of Hardy’s use of folklore, says “even the most casual reader cannot escape the feeling that . . . [Susan Nunsuch’s] image is partly responsible for Eustacia’s death.” However, since we cannot account for this responsibility psychologically (for Eustacia does not know of Susan Nunsuch’s actions), nor can we explain it supernaturally (for this would violate the naturalistic plot of the story), we must account for it metaphorically. Since Eustacia is referred to as a witch throughout the story, both literally by the folk and figuratively by Clym, we could say that Eustacia the witch metaphorically destroys herself by means of the witch-like sympathetic magic of Susan Nunsuch’s destruction of her image. This would be an unjustified metaphoric interpretation, were it not prepared for psychologically by Eustacia’s repetitive compulsion to project her image and her actions on the external world.

Hardy makes this clear when Eustacia tries to excuse her action after she has turned Mrs. Yeobright away from her door: “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.” The last words we hear from her as she stands on the heath, “a perfect harmony,” Hardy says, “between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without,” are: “How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! . . . I do not deserve my lot! . . . I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control!” (p. 422).

Eustacia is one of those people Freud describes who “all their lives, repeat to their own detriment, the same reactions without any correction, or who seem to be dogged by a relentless ill-fortune.” A closer inspection, Freud says, “shows they are unwittingly bringing ill fortune upon themselves. Thus we explain what is called a ‘daemonic’ character as being due to the repetition compulsion.” And the ultimate extreme of the

8. Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 353. Subsequent references to this, the Greenwood Edition of Hardy’s novels, will follow the quotation in the text.
repetition compulsion, as Freud tells us in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is that “urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things,” that is, the death instinct. Such an “expression of the inertia inherent in organic life” is projected by Eustacia onto the heath which becomes for her its embodiment. “The world seems all wrong in this place,” she tells Clym, and indeed the colossal Prince whom she feels rules her lot is the “colossal animal” the heath seems to be as she stumbles across it to Rainbarrow and her final destination at Shadwater Weir.

Because, as Eustacia says, she lacks an object to live for, because she feels she is a queen who has lost those hearts and realms to be queen of, her melancholy results, as Freud describes the state in “Mourning and Melancholy,” from setting up inside the ego the supposedly lost object. Instead of an object-cathexis, the result is identification. The libido which flows into the ego as a result of the identification brings about secondary narcissism. Eustacia not only projects her need for hearts onto Wildeve and Clym, she projects her need for a realm onto Egdon Heath. The chapter entitled “My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is,” ostensibly about Clym, also characterizes Eustacia. Her identification with the heath is suggested in the early Queen of Night chapter when Hardy says she has imbibed much of what is dark in its tone and made complete at her death, for then her face, eternally frozen into a “momentary transition between fervour and resignation,” reflects the “Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression” that opens the novel—a face also caught in a transition between day and night which gives it the appearance of life and death at once.

Eustacia makes the metaphorical and magical mistake of imposing her own psychic state on the external world and then reacting to that state as if it were external, just as Ahab does with Moby Dick and Gatsby does with Daisy. The result for Eustacia, just as it is for those characters, is that she becomes transformed into a parabolic figure in a fable of her own creation. This mistake is the mistake of primitive man which Freud calls the “omnipotence of thoughts” and which Geza Roheim calls “the magical principle.” It is Freud's awareness that this principle is at the basis of metaphor that makes him declare that only in a single field of our civilization has it been retained, “and that is in the field of art.”

This metaphoric, magical projection transforms Egdon Heath into the animistic world that it is in the novel and into a reflection of Eustacia herself. True to her surname, Eustacia's vying with the heath is a repetitive vying with the self so that each effort she makes to escape it leads her inevitably to a narcissistic confrontation with it. This is manifested as a repetition compulsion that leads her finally to plunge into

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her own image in the “gashed and puckered mirror” formed by the “vortex” of Shadwater Weir, even as throughout she has tried to escape the heath for a “vortex” of the social world—Paris. It is Freud’s repetition compulsion manifested as Aristotle’s reversal of intention. Like Oedipus, Eustacia meets the destiny she unknowingly created in the very process of trying to escape that destiny.

The ambivalence we feel about Eustacia as a character—whether she is a real person acting on her own desires or an archetypal figure being acted upon by the schematized story of which she is a function—results in that feeling of the uncanny Freud describes when we are uncertain as to whether a character is a human being or an automaton. The source of the feeling is the same, for Freud says the repetition-compulsion revives the old animistic magical way of thinking and consequently creates the feeling of the uncanny.\textsuperscript{14} The act of projection, parallel to the primitive omnipotence of thoughts and the metaphoric process, is a reminder of the old magical, thus god-like, act; and it is characteristic of Eustacia from her first appearance in the story when she calls up Damon Wildeve simply to prove her power and looks upon him when he arrives “as upon some wonderous thing she had created out of chaos” to her final destruction by Susan Nunsuch’s magical and metaphorical doll.

Eustacia’s projection of her longing for the “abstraction called passionate love” onto Clym Yeobright leads to two related metaphoric projections central to understanding her transformation from psychological character to psychological archetype. After she first hears Clym’s voice and has fallen “half in love with a vision,” she has a dream which Hardy says has as “many ramifications as the Cretan labyrinth,” and from which one episode, “in which the heath dimly appeared behind the general brilliancy of the action,” remains:

\begin{quote}
She was dancing to wonderous music, and her partner was the man in silver armour who had accompanied her through the previous fantastic changes, the visor of his helmet being closed. The mazes of the dance were ecstatic. Soft whispering came into her ear from under the radiant helmet, and she felt like a woman in Paradise. Suddenly these two wheeled out from the mass of dancers, dived into one of the pools of the heath, and came out somewhere beneath into an iridescent hollow, arched with rainbows. “It must be here,” said the voice at her side, and blushingly looking up she saw him remove his casque to kiss her. At that moment there was a cracking noise, and his figure fell into fragments like a pack of cards. (p. 138)
\end{quote}

Although Eustacia cries out that the face was meant to be Clym, her role in the mummers’ play, in which she plays a night in armour who keeps her visor closed to conceal her identity, suggests that the knight in her dreams is indeed herself. The image of the \textit{corps morcelé}, or the body in bits and pieces, is fulfilled when she plunges into the “gashed and puckered” mirror of the weir.

The pools that dot the heath are reflectors of Eustacia's own image through the book and thus foreshadow her inevitable and final plunge into the self. Mrs. Yeobright pinpoints Eustacia's situation when at the end of their divisive argument about Clym she says, "You, Eustacia, stand on the edge of a precipice without knowing it." And when she leaves, "Eustacia, panting, stood looking into the pool." The pool as narcissistic mirror appears again after Mrs. Yeobright has been turned away and struggles alone across the heath. When she meets Johnny Nunsuch, the little boy Eustacia has supposedly bewitched, he asks what has made her so down: "Have you seen a ooser?" "I have seen what's worse," Mrs. Yeobright replies—"a woman's face looking at me through a window-pane." That an ooser—a grotesque mask made to scare people—is here a reflection of the self is made clear by the boy's seemingly artless, but here quite artful, reply: "Once when I went to Throope Great Pond to catch effets I seed myself looking up at myself, and I was frightened and jumped back like anything" (p. 340).

Eustacia's final situation as the action of the book comes full circle a year and a day later when the pagan bonfire is repeated indicates her completely divided state of both psychological character and psychological archetype. "Her state was so hopeless now," Hardy says, "that she could play with it . . . and Eustacia could now, like other people at such a state, take a standing point outside herself, observe herself as a disinterested spectator, and think what a sport for Heaven this woman Eustacia was" (p. 403). The difference between Eustacia's play at the beginning of the book when she called up Wildeve to show her power and her play now is that now her projection of her own narcissism has moved to that inevitable extreme whereby she is emphatically both player and plaything.

Consequently, although her last words manifest her psychological rebellion against her fate, her final image manifests a "statelyness of look" that had at last found "an artistically happy background." The eternal rigidity of death freezes her into a transitional state between the fervour of her psychological character and the resignation of her archetypal position in the fable of her own making. The Return of the Native is Eustacia's return to her self.

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