IRONY AND HEROISM: BIBLICAL AND CLASSICAL ALLUSIONS IN *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*

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Readers of Thomas Hardy seem perpetually unable to define exactly what kind of novel *The Return of the Native* is, and they attempt to evaluate it solely in terms of its adherence to the prerequisites of tragedy. Yet, they are often puzzled about a large number of situations parallel to such tragic stories as those of Cain, Jesus, Oedipus, and Prometheus discordantly blended within the single text with much irony to which the hero of the novel is exposed. So are critics, who are roused to examine the novel's claim to being a tragedy. Peter Casagrande, noting that most of the religious and mythical overtones related to Clym Yeobright are hypocritical or ironical, demonstrates that this well-intentioned hero is "the reformer who neither reforms himself nor his people" (170). Michael Millgate voices his reservations about the appropriateness of seeing Clym as a Christ figure; instead, he sees him "in a deliberately ironic sense" (148). Marjorie Garson goes yet further by pointing out that he is "a virtually schizophrenic reader" of the Bible in the concluding scene (79).

While these critics differ among themselves, they are united in showing that close consideration of *The Return* invites a conclusion that this novel accords ill with the traditional notion about a tragedy. Is it then apposite and valid to say that the novel is not so much a tragedy as a grim satire or even an ironic comedy? This question inevitably draws another question: what sort of hero Clym really is — a comic hero or a tragic? The answer may not be a cheerful or comforting one, but this question can, I believe, shed a new light on *The Return* and its hero.

I

In a recent book Robert Langbaum observes that *The Return* "brings to a

* I should like to thank Professor Norman Vance of the University of Sussex for his advice and encouragement on this paper.

climax the series of pastoral novels . . . [and] is also the first of the great tragic novels constituting Hardy's major period" (67). *The Return* may be called a pastoral-tragedy. Yet, just as it goes beyond the tradition of pastoral by its pessimism and concern with death, it deviates from the most significant norms of conventional tragedy as well. We cannot overlook a central fact to which Hardy takes pains to call our attention in the novel; the sources of his literary imagination are in fact products of biblical and classical myths. As Joseph Campbell points out, the mythological mood is, in general, inimical to tragedy (67). More particularly, the principal recognition in *The Return*, which is less of the flaws of the hero than of the flaws in the universe, is an obvious departure from the Christian tradition, because Christian tragedy as a genre has secularized the Christian Fortunate Fall: the reward of virtue is redemption, as George Steiner remarks: "Christianity offers to man an assurance of final certitude and repose in God" (332). Christianity also stresses that God metes out a retribution for any transgression of his law. But the failure of Clym Yeobright is not to be regarded as punishment for either a transgression of God's law or a grave error in moral judgment. Certainly, as a post-Darwinian writer and poet of "Hap" (1866), a poem which "reflects the indifference of the universe to human fate" (Pinion 5), in *The Return* Hardy takes a critical look at some of the basic doctrinal tenets of Christianity, especially the power of a superintending wisdom and justice. Hardy's writing, situated within the post-Christian climate of the nineteenth century, does not provide the ultimate reconciliation between man and "god."

We can interpret *The Return* in terms not only of its philosophical (or cosmological) dimension but also of its psychological elements, and find meaning by the conflict between Clym and Mrs. Yeobright. As we know from the Fifth Commandment (Ex. 20 : 12), Christian moral doctrine holds that children must honor and obey their parents. It is obvious here that there is one major source for the central incident of the novel; the story of King Lear (which Hardy casually mentions in his 1895 preface to *The Return*). But another important source can be identified; the story of another king, King Oedipus, the story which concerns the mother-son relationship as well as "a search for knowledge" (O'Brien 10). Thus Clym's tragic experience, his relationship with his mother and with the mechanical workings of a chaotic universe, is philosophically and psychologically interiorized and well accommodated into this hybrid novel of biblical and classical

sources.

In *The Return* Hardy has given priority to the deeper passions of humanity rather than the surface representation of events, diverging from the conventions of classical tragedy, in which, Aristotle explicates, "the plot . . . is the first essential of tragedy, its life-blood" (40). An 1878 notebook entry reproduced in *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* gives an accurate account of Hardy's "modern" view of tragedy, tragedy of human psychologies, not of a plot: "A Plot, or Tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by the said passions, prejudices, and ambitions" (122). Hardy's view of tragedy parallels that of Scholes and Kellogg, who affirm that it stresses the psychologies of characters and has metamorphosed "the ritualistic-romantic quest for the Grail . . . into the psychological search for identity" (237). Hardy's treatment of his characters' psychologies convinces readers of *The Return* to view it as "modern" and as an "unclassical" shift of genre. Rosemary Sumner's assertion endorses this view of the novel: "Hardy is quite consciously formulating a new psychological theory 50 years before Jung" (118).

Hardy's description of the psychological realm of the characters tends to be allusive: *The Return* is very allusive, with Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible and Shakespeare being echoed over and over again. Although few critics have noticed, the *Aeneid*, a book "of which he [Hardy] never wearied" (Hardy 1984, 61), and *The Return* share a particular mythic configuration, a pattern of quest for a "sacred knowledge." The *Aeneid* has been interpreted as the allegorical education journey of the return home, the return of the hero "to the mother country . . . and there [he] must renew the ceremonies of his people" (Lewis 47). The *Aeneid* and *The Return* have the loneliness, suffering, and defeat of the heroes and the death-resurrection motif in common.[1] In addition to basic plot and characterization, further coincidences between the concerns of *The Return* and those of classical quest myths are distinct. According to Charles W. Eckert, in a classical quest myth "initiation involves the hero's separation from his mother and tyrannizing woman" (43). This view reminds us of Clym's "separation" from his mother and "tyrannizing" of his wife Eustacia. The Prometheus

[1] For a thematic discussion of the *Aeneid*, see Clausen 82 and Otis 90.

myth is also among the important and most obviously regarded of the literary precursors of *The Return*. All these suggest that *The Return* includes many variations on classical myths. This allusive richness of the novel in classical as well as biblical sources accounts to a large extent for the artificial, literary quality that has been noted in the narrative; for to consciously depict characters repeatedly in mythological terms is to create a fictional world. In this world Hardy proposes, as Peter Widdowson has noted it, "the limits of fictional realism for depicting the real social forces, pressures, contradictions, and exploitations" (74) on the one hand and calls attention to the underlying pattern reflecting the archetypal scheme of rebirth, transgression followed by suffering, which informs the central myth of Christianity, the Fall of Man and his Redemption on the other. Not surprisingly, Clym's educational voyage in life includes many motifs found in "initiatory" myths and rituals.

As a whole, *The Return*, a new departure from his original concern with pastoral, depicts the defeat of the hero's ideal and its aftermath. This reflects the shift of the view in the author's side. In this psychologically plotted novel, Venn the reddleman, a rather simple type who resembles Gabriel Oak in character ("Venn replaced Oak" [Gregor 79; see also Langbaum 98].), although acting as a catalyst, relinquishes the role of protagonist to Clym. He is new in the sense that his perspective is not limited to the small arena of community. In his study of the genesis of *The Return*, John Paterson reveals significant revisions that Hardy made in respect to the sphere of Clym's life; the dimension of his world has exceeded the boundaries of Wessex by the revision of the "Ur-version," in which he is sent to Budmouth to work at shop, to the present version which depicts Paris as the place where he works (36–7). Hardy's shift of the point of characterization reflects his shift of perspective from community to individual. Like his archetype Oak, Venn is the embodiment of the values of the happy, healthy, and humane community-idyll, while Clym as a new hero dwells on the much wider arena of moral codes; hence his sense of being an outcast in the last chapters of the novel. Hardy modulates the conclusion of the novel in which Clym's human suffering and isolation are counterbalanced by the happy marriage of Venn and Thomasin. They live in a world of wish-fulfillment which the Victorian reading public were accustomed to expect, though it just barely touches actuality.

Reality refuses to be confined by literary conventions. Readers soon learn

that Clym's return to his homeland is the most difficult part of his life, since, having achieved "a world-wide name" (172) in Paris, "the centre and vortex of the fashionable world" (109), he must now attempt the less glorious and more arduous task of impressing upon a mundane, indifferent, and selfish society the truths that he has learned. The dramatic conflict begins when he finds his ideal frustrated by recalcitrant reality: people's indifference to his plan. One of the heath-dwellers says: "He'll never carry it [his educational scheme] out in the world. . . . In a few weeks he'll learn to see things otherwise" (173). Hardy addresses the problem of this well-intentioned intellect, his estrangement from the world of pastoral innocence.

The "chorus" of the novel ("I think he had better mind his business" [173].) and his mother (178–9) announce and exemplify the way of survival, which to some extent moralizes the error of Clym's tragic daring. To walk the path that they delineate, however, is not to be Clym. For, seeing a life "as a scientific game" (Hardy 1984, 107), they speak of a materially affluent life. Their view is earthbound and passive. The heroic choice is not between alternative paths of self-fulfillment but between the self-destructiveness of mighty strivings and the salvation that demands self-sacrifice and the denial of heroic aspiration. For inevitably man's attempt at greatness must break against a universal order, which is predicated on, and which demands human obedience and denial.

Certainly Clym's failure and self-sacrifice are early predicted by the authorial comment (175) and by a biblical allusion. When Hardy refers to Clym as John the Baptist (174), he associates Egdon Heath with the wilderness of Judaea (Mat. 3: 1) with a further echo of John's doomed encounter with Salome, a daughter of Herod (Mat. 14: 6–11). Hardy repeatedly gives such explicit and emphatic attention to Clym's posture as a man in the wilderness. His encounter with Eustacia, a witch-like beauty and a nineteenth-century Salome, in the "wilderness" is delineated to some extent by analogy with the story of Keats's "wretched wight" who comes across and is charmed by "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (See Wheeler 1979, 143–4). But his own stance is hardly that of the hollow-eyed Romantic wanderer always searching for the fearful yet enticing vision. Egdon heath is less a place of wandering than a place of trial; less an Old Testamental than a New Testamental wilderness.

Clym returns to this "wilderness" as a "savior," however ironical it may

prove. His compassion for suffering humanity (he compares his altruistic ethic to St. Paul's by quoting from Rom. 8: 22: "the whole creation [is] groaning and travailing in pain" [177].) and love for his fellows place him in the company of the nearly saint-like. In point of fact, coincidentally he returns home on Christmas Day. His return points out the direction which the plot is taking. In *The Return* Hardy has dramatized events analogous to the most sensational events in the history of Jesus Christ, his birth and resurrection. The 1912 text of *The Return* portrays Clym on Rainbarrow (or "Blackbarrow" in the earlier editions) as thirty-three years old, the age at which Christ was crucified. As is observed in the note to the Oxford edition, Hardy intended by this revision to portray Clym by analogy with Christ (473). He does not say that Clym is a Christ figure or he is like Christ, but the analogy with Christ is more than obvious.

The other revisions of Hardy's text concern Clym's social position in Paris. The revisions have highlighted his self-sacrificial character by changing his original post as a manager to a jeweler's manager in the 1878 book version and finally to manager to a diamond merchant in the 1895 version (Paterson 63; Gatrell 43). The revisions suggest that the more financially rewarding his position becomes, the larger sacrifice he has to pay when giving up his post. Clym is doomed to make the greatest sacrifices until the end of the novel — the loss of his mother and wife, and his own eyesight, the sacrifices which he never expected:

> He wished to raise the class at the expense of individuals rather than individuals at the expense of the class. What was more, he was ready at once to be the first unit sacrificed. (74)

The theme of sacrifice is thus frequently sounded in early portions of the book, later to be developed, echoed, or reversed — as references to such biblical and mythical figures as Prometheus, Oedipus, St. Paul and Christ.

The other obvious biblical allusion occurs at the turning point of the action, which also coincides with one obvious psychological preparation for the great change in Clym, his survival in Shadwater Weir (Bk. 5, Ch. 9). If we look for any cause of his regeneration, however, it must be not only through psychological analysis but through consideration of the biblical and mythical aspects of the novel, which signal the quasi-death and resurrection of the novel's intended victim, Clym. Christ's death and resurrection follow

his agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Mat. 26: 36; Mk. 14: 32 etc.). In *The Return* Clym's "death" and "resurrection" are suggested by comparing the darkness of the night of the cataclysmic event at Shadwater to "the agony of Gethsemane" (358). Note that when Clym is saved from Shadwater Weir, he looks "like Lazarus coming from the tomb" (380; Jn. 11: 1– 44). Ironically, however, this mock baptism representing Clym's rebirth sets the tone for his harder initiation into the world's realities.

The coincidence of his return to Egdon with Christmas day is, of course, another implication of his resurrection. Critics who have been attending to the ritualistic backgrounds (Christian and pagan alike) of the novel point out that the Fifth of November ritual Hardy depicts in the opening scene has its origin in a Celtic ritual of death and rebirth of the year (Fleishman 117; Firor 198). The story of *The Return* itself corresponds with the cycle of seasons — the birth-death-rebirth of the year: it begins with the depiction of the November bonfire and ends with the description of Mayday, when there is Maypole dancing. The other ritual, the mummers' play, originates in a prehistoric death-and-resurrection ceremonial, the rite of killing the old year (the Saracen) and bringing in the new season (Saint George). Allusions to and associations with resurrection, or rebirth abound in *The Return*. The cosmic cycle of the novel is complete, as eternity begins. Certainly, Clym finds "unforeseen factors operate in the production of immortality" (387) in Egdon Heath. His own spiritual regeneration, however, leads him to no redemption from the pain and suffering of life.

II

We have from the beginning of the novel a single, unified expectation that no longer can any man be heroic in the world of *The Return* where his safety and success depend ultimately upon the trickery of fate or, to use Hardy's phrase, the "waggery of fate" (170). We are made aware that Clym is heroic and that he is human and therefore fallen, because the novel is packed with allusions to tragic heroes, though Hardy is ambiguous about Clym's future career: "He had been a lad of whom something was expected. Beyond this all had been chaos" (169). To follow him through the six books of *The Return* is to discern a rather perplexing development of his tragic character. Introduced by the rustic chorus's "tribute" to his intellectual precociousness (106), Clym initially seems to verify this claim, when he succeeds in a diamond business and has "made such a world-wide name"

for himself (172). Paradoxically, however, his intellect finds his job "the silliest, flimsiest, most effeminate" (173), and it inadequate for his aspirations. Thus he embarks on his Promethean quest for knowledge and "salvation" of people. This confirms his position as pre-eminent among the heath-dwellers.

But such exalted stature is short-lived. We soon witness Clym, the socially and intellectually revered youth, cutting furze amidst nameless insects — acting more like an ignorant rustic than a high-minded, would-be teacher who, as he intends, benefits his kind. By constantly reducing Clym to the level of an insect ("a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse" [253]. See also 192, 278.) while comparing him to Prometheus, a demigod and Titan, the novel suggests the paradox that, on the one hand, man is but a speck, a mutable thing and, on the other, that he can "rebel in high Promethean fashion against the gods and fate" (257). With such an emphasis on the paradox of man's situation, it is no coincidence that *The Return* offers a superstructure functioning beyond man's actions. Venn's maneuvers motivated by goodwill, ironically, culminate in Mrs. Yeobright's death. They function as malign forces unrestricted by a greater, benign power which the rustics of *Far from the Madding Crowd* identify with "a happy Providence." In the absence of such a power we are forced to see that the specific nature of Clym's "crime" is not so important to the meaning of the novel as the fact of his general humanity and his position as a mutable mortal.

The tragic dimension of the novel thus is subordinated to the controlling ironic idea that no man is left undiminished by a world without a cosmic justice. Even a character like Eustacia, "Queen of Night," or "an Olympian girl," is part of this general dimension. But this irony can contribute to make this novel truly tragic. As Nietzsche affirms in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "Man's highest good must be bought with a crime and paid for by the flood of grief and suffering which the offended divinities visit upon the human race in its noble ambition." (63–4). Clym's goodness and his suffering because of it are suggested by his own comparison of himself to Job (402). But Job returns to his original circumstances with a fortified faith after the trial, while Clym suffers only to give up his ideals.

Hardy also makes his tragic hero distinct from Shakespeare's by letting Clym outlive other victims. In stark contrast to *The Return*, Shakespeare's tragedy requires the death of the protagonist, because the finality of death is

sufficient to convince the audiences that the character has achieved his ultimate definition as a truly Christian, tragic hero and that his suffering is meaningful in a just universe.[2] On the last page of the novel Clym who stands on Blackbarrow, speaking to people, has endured more personal tragedy than most and been visibly subdued and dignified by the experience (411). The scene is biblically resonant. In *The Return*, however, there being neither Christian heaven nor divine truth, the world is unpredictable and ironic. Hardy's intention here is the ironical reversal of the idea that it is every Christian's duty to imitate as perfectly as possible Christ's self-sacrifice.

The closure of the novel reveals that Clym's choice of life as an itinerant preacher is a sort of compromise and that not all the heath-dwellers understand him (412). This defeat of his dream and his rebirth is presented with irony, which is as much a characteristic of this novel as idealism. Particularly, with superb irony Hardy makes the climax of Clym's choice of the passage from 1 Kings, the biblical story of King Solomon, who did not refuse his mother's "small petition" but lied to her (2: 19–20). His sermon expresses the magnitude of his loss. Now there will be no "return," and he must live forever in company with the terrible sense of committing the Fifth Sin and without any hope of redemption. Unlike Christ who was crucified and died calling to his Father (e.g. Mat. 27: 46), Clym calls to his mother: "O my mother, my mother: would to God that I could live my life again, and endure for you what you endured for me!" (411). His call records all the anguish over what he has finally known, the knowledge he has so blithely ignored during the euphoria of his self-complacency. But, if the subject of *The Return* had only been reduced to the conflict between Clym and Mrs. Yeobright and to the dead Mrs. Yeobright's rule over Clym,[3] it might have ended with the suggestion that the chance of their reconciliation is lost for good and all. This is not Hardy's point. His conclusion, however ironical it may seem, markedly diverges from the biblical vision of human progress from the fall, through redemption, to paradise.

In this scene the Oedipus image again comes to attention as central importance. Clym's life is an enactment of the life of Oedipus, who, Teiresias, the blind prophet, prophesies, will be

[2] Cf. Elton 3–8, 335–8; Battenhouse 131–203.

[3] See, for instance, Garson 79: "It is as though his mother, in her death, has put a spell on him, destroying not only his happiness and peace of mind but also his critical intelligence."

a foreigner, but shall be found
Theban by birth — and little joy will this
Bring *him*; when, with his eyesight turned to blindness,
His wealth to beggary, on foreign soil
With staff. (452–6)

Clym's determination to solve the mystery surrounding the death of his mother turns into the intolerable knowledge which clearly Hardy intended to allude to Oedipus's similar determination culminating in his plucking out his own eyes. This sequence of events, the combination of Aristotle's *anagnorisis* (discovery or recognition) and *peripeteia* (a sudden change of fortune), serves to heighten pity and fear of readers who have already known about the "fact," and in so doing accomplish the *catharsis* of these emotions.[4] Hardy's poetic justice demands that his Oedipal hero be punished with blindness.

The highly ironical finale of the novel has especially troubled modern critics. The pressure exerted by the modern critical temper does not, however, effect a thorough-going revolution in understanding of *The Return* and its hero. It is true that the "ironists" like Casagrande and Millgate have displayed considerable ingenuity, but no profundity in terms of the evaluation of Clym. This novel first and foremost concerns the correspondence between word and deed, between intention and action, and between language and consequent events. By the end of the novel, we find Clym's ideal shattered, Mrs. Yeobright's prophecies fulfilled, and Eustacia representing a discrepancy between her words ("How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman" [359].) and deed, which Mrs. Yeobright might suspect stems from the internal qualities of this "voluptuous idle woman" (204). By the means of irony, the novel prevents the intrusion of sentimentality both in the hero and readers. It is true that Clym is a romantic and idealistic hero aspiring to nobility in deed and character and that his actions sometimes reflect the tendency to hear only what he wishes and to see only the evidence which confirms his pre-established vision, but he is an object of irony in appearance only. The novel's irony enhances his stance. Irony contributes to draw distinctions between the genuine and the false.

Despite the affinities between Clym and Christ, *The Return* does not conform to the Christian tradition, by ultimately affirming the victory of

[4] For a discussion of Aristotelian terms of tragedy, see Leech 63ff.

good over evil, specifically, the victory of love over hatred. Hardy ends the story with ambiguity about the Christ-like hero's future. This ambiguity suggests the other point that Hardy seems to want to make: Hardy is questioning here whether Christian love can contain the redemptive possibilities implied by his analogy between Clym and Christ on the Mount in the concluding chapter. Whether or not the above-said supposition is acceptable, the full implications of irony and ambiguity remain through the end of *The Return*. In either case, the Edenic stage of Clym's life is now over.

III

The last scenes of *The Return* present a momentous progress in Clym's insight, a triumph of awareness over illusion. He reaches his intellectual maturity in which he perceives that the universe is chaotic and that there is no cosmic justice, though his perception persuades him to accept his own damnation. He also can see a paradoxical truth that those who follow their illusions in the pursuit of happiness are the ones who produce the misfortunes. This is an ambivalent vision of human misery as the stepping stone to human grandeur. Clym's illumination is simultaneously an accomplishment and a failure, an ascension and a decline, and a victory and a defeat. From this stage of illumination Clym finally can look back at the choices he has made and ahead to the responsibilities that, as the result of these choices, he must shoulder. Thus he is initiated into a new role.

With his hopes of educating people shattered, he becomes desperately aware that the pattern of his life had been based on the incorrect assumption that fate was essentially an agent of good. The novel highlights the moment of his epiphany which happens when Clym realizes what "a first cause" is. The moment comes after the completion of his initiation — his harsh experiences of the deaths of his mother and wife:

> Human beings, in their generous endeavor to construct a hypothesis that shall not degrade a first cause, have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own; and, even while they sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears. (387)

Clym becomes greater than a Promethean figure: he becomes a man capable of facing his destiny and declaring his own accountability for it. Hardy stresses Clym's questioning of cosmic justice by referring to Psalm

137: 1, a lament sung by Israelites in the Exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. He seems to parody their faith in God's providential purpose. In attempting to show that the cosmos is just and orderly, such interpretations as theirs inevitably concentrate upon humanity's shortcomings, asking themselves to see the immorality and unreasonableness of their own behavior, to condemn and cast themselves out as scapegoats. But here Hardy depicts Clym's realization that not the Israelites but, to use Hardy's own phrase in *Jude the Obscure*, a "somnambulant" first cause (361) is most eligible to bear responsibility for their suffering.

Now that Clym recognizes the world as it is and accepts the limited human life that man inevitably leads in it, no longer does he delude himself with a scheme for teaching "people the higher secrets of happiness" (316). Unable to assert himself on the basis of his human forces alone, he turns into a disenfranchized and unpatronized preacher who proclaims his satisfaction in being able finally to speak to "his kind." The resolution of the underlying dramatic conflict between man and "God" requires the abandonment of authority. Clym's purgatorial suffering after loss and hardship and his "reduction" in the end can point toward such an abandonment. In such an abandonment originates the tragic insight with which Clym ends his youth.

The scope of Clym's life-story is the thirty-three years of Christ's life. The effect is to take the story out of time, and transform it into myth, canonizing the hero. When Hardy considers Clym's "sin," he imagines it as an instance of archetypal transgression. Hardy's interest in *The Return* is neither a story of moral development of a protagonist who challenges and eventually is accepted as a full-fledged member of a community (as in the *Bildungsroman*), nor a story of a person who has come to a full recognition of his relation to universal sin and redemption (as in the Pauline Epistles). He has dramatized, not his hero's weaknesses, but his almost overwhelming moral strength for its symbolic connotations and universal meaning through his biblical and mythical allusion. In an immediate realistic sense, as Millgate and Casagrande see, Clym is an ironical figure of Christ. But his experience has another, overriding importance, and it is made explicit: it is to demonstrate human "sin" and the absence of divine grace.

In this regard it is worth our while to comment on an otherwise unremarkable analogy Eustacia draws between her husband and St. Paul: "though Paul was excellent as a man in the Bible he would hardly have

done in real life" (284). Eustacia's allusive assessment of Clym may be casual and satirical in her mouth, but it is purposeful and literal in Hardy's pen. Blindness links him to Oedipus and Prometheus, but its specific significance provokes a more concrete resonance with the well-known biblical account of Paul's blinding conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9: 1–18; 22: 1–16; 26: 9–18). Clym and St. Paul share blindness and its ensuing "conversion." Paul had been "an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3: 5). But after the conversion he transcended national and cultural boundaries, as his affirmation in his epistle to the Galatians shows: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (3: 28). Clym's transcendence of the parochial view parallels Paul's transcendence of Hebrew law: "the more I see of life," he explains to Eustacia, "the more do I perceive that there is nothing particularly great in its greatest walks, and therefore nothing particularly small in mine of furze-cutting" (257). Paradoxically enough, his blindness entails his attainment of a profound and wider outlook upon people and community. Though as much as Clym's "conversion" resembles Paul's, closer scrutiny indicates significant variations from the biblical pattern.

The telling departure from biblical narrative is that Hardy and Clym are much less confident of his present authority than St. Paul as the speaker and protagonist of the Epistles of Paul. Hardy's narrative voice is tentative and vulnerable, partly because, as John Goode has noticed, "[l]anguage and landscape in Hardy's novel . . . become the embodiments of the trace of human desire and need" (58) and partly because the narrator is not omniscient. Hardy's frequent use of such words as "perhaps," "possibly," and "seemed" suggests this tentativeness and vulnerability.

His protagonist is more humanly realized than his biblical counterpart (Paul). These general categories help describe the important difference in point of view between Hardy and Paul. The Pauline Epistles, which include his own spiritual autobiography, posit a crucial disparity between the narrator and the protagonist. The narrator speaks from the level of grace, recounting the story of a man on the level of nature. Consequently, the redeemed speaker sees his former fallen self with the most acute irony, explicitly measuring the disparity, and knowing the denouement in his dramatic conversion scene. In Galatians, for instance, we can see an effective presentation of his original, pagan self by the converted narrator: "how that

beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it" (1: 13). The narrated protagonist's turmoil and the narrator's calm express the vast cleavage between the levels of nature and space, and, of course, the wondrous results of conversion. Rebirth into "a servant of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1: 1) is the very heart of the narrative mode of the Epistles. In contrast to Paul's Epistles, "Aftercourses" of *The Return* depicts Clym's "inevitable movement onward" (365), because his process of founding a new "religion" is a continuous, ongoing struggle.

Unlike Paul, whose "authority . . . [derives] from a single historical moment, his personal encounter with his master on the road to Damascus" (Kermode 384), Clym never turns a demarcated corner; the encounter between humanity and divinity never persists; yielding both the irony and the ambivalence of the story. With this combination of affinities and differences, Hardy typifies the modern literary epiphany, which deducts and subverts the biblical model's theological claims, and reclaims them within a "modern" tragedy. The deviation of the post-Christian epiphany from the biblical original appears with particular clarity. It is in effect clear that Clym's choice is related to his heavy guilt trip for the disobedience to his mother (402, 410–11), but it is not at all clear till the end of the novel that he ever fully transcends his travail. Throughout the narrative, Clym appears to inhabit a land midway between the contrarieties: "He might be said to be its [Egdon Heath's] product" (175), but "he would not stand still in the circumstances amid which he was born" (170). In the same vein, elsewhere Hardy writes that "[h]e had been a lad of whom something was expected . . . [but] beyond this all had been chaos" (169). These are typical of Hardy's portrayal of Clym; thereby he lets us suspect that his hero is a "new" tragic hero who, to use Northrop Frye's phrase, "is somewhere between the divine and the 'all too human'" (207).

St. Paul's suffering and conversion are a prelude to a creative process in which the old self is martyred through service to abstract and spiritual, but not solipsistic, values. But, though Clym is presented as a figure of spiritual regeneration, he has not attained his own redemption nor does he embark upon an apostolic mission. Instead, he preaches on "morally unimpeachable subjects" (412). Paul's spiritual biography leads the protagonist (his past self) from sin to redemption. While Hardy's sinner yearns to transcend his obsession with his mother, he is tugged and ensnared by it. The predominant quality of Clym's struggle in the novel is the concrete particularity of

Hardy's own struggle. The difficulty of unifying and completing a story predicated on the absence of orthodox belief, may explain why Hardy had such trouble setting up his hero as a Christian tragic hero. The Christian account presents an optimistic view of immortality since it teaches that eternal existence is possible for humans who live righteous lives and hold correct beliefs (e.g., Rom. 1: 17: "The righteous shall live by faith."). In contrast, bereft of the spiritual organizing principle, Hardy's attempt to put together the story of the "righteous" hero must have been very frustrating, and never resulted in a single unified text, particularly, concerning the conclusion of the novel. As is well known, Hardy originally intended the novel to be open-ended, dissenting from "the older novelists [who] used to like to wind up a narrative by telling us what happened to everybody 'afterwards'" (Scholes and Kellogg 237). Yet there is a great difference between the conventional "afterwards" and Hardy's "Aftercourses" in terms of conclusiveness.

A modern tragedy forms no concluded plot, and Hardy's "Aftercourses" provides, to use Dr. Johnson's words from *Rasselas*, a book familiar to Hardy from his childhood (Hardy 1984, 21), "the conclusion, in which nothing is concluded" (175). Clym's journey is one of education only in the sense that he learns that the conventional formula for happiness are delusions. He ends wiser only in knowing that his quest is futile. There is nothing more to accomplish when Aeneas, one of Clym's classical archetypes, overcomes Turnus, gains Lavinia, and settles in ancestral Rome (*Aeneid* Bk. 12). His circular journey implies that life is a closed system; innocent insecurity, education, and an earned return to possession. But that is what Hardy is denying in *The Return*. Clym's story continues beyond his choice of his vocation. He will have another story to tell, as his own words suggest: "I have *two* ideas in my head, and no others. I am going to keep a night-school; and I am going to turn preacher" (402; italics mine).

In the midst of this destructive act of the traditional literary tenet, Hardy has invoked a post-Christian design. He systematically compares his hero to Paul or Christ, as much to test as to affirm his absence of redemption. It is Clym's failure and the novel's modernity that establish the fundamental inadequacy of earthly glory and values. This sense of "irremediability" we feel in the last scene of the novel shows that *The Return* is a "[r]eal tragedy . . . where the tormented soul believes that there is no time left for God's forgiveness" (Steiner 332). Hardy has subverted the inherited genre

of tragedy in order to question of another inherited design, God's design of the moral universe. His structural strategy is to undermine with irony the inherited design invented by man that assumes the universe can have its own ordered purpose, a design dictated by God. His strategy may be destructive to another set of formal assumptions about happiness after death, one of the most characteristic Victorian ideas of heaven (Wheeler 1990, 120–21). Clym, a "modern" tragic hero, cannot be rescued by the Christian pattern of the Fortunate Fall.

Clym's nobility lies in his suffering and self-sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice is found as a central theme of *The Return*, both in the sense of sacrifice offered and sacrifice demanded. His choice of life as an open-air preacher as self-sacrifice is somewhat correspondent with Nietzsche's view of "Higher man's mission" as "not the leading of inferior men, but working on them as a foundation" (Nietzsche, *Will* 329). The goal for present man is, Nietzsche contends, to prepare the way for the coming of the future great man; in this process of serving the future, of acting a bridge to a higher form of man, he must fail and sink in order that the "Ubermensche [Superman]" may arise (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 9–10). There is an obvious parallel between "Higher man" and John the Baptist, both of whom herald the advent of "a greater man." One specific reference in *The Return* links Clym with John (174), who "ushers" Christ into his mission. With this analogy Hardy suggests that Clym bridges the present and the future on the one hand, while leaving unsaid about who "a greater man" is.

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What then distinguishes the tragic from the satiric or the ironic? The difference, I think, lies in the man-made significance created by the hero's final gestures. Through these gestures, Clym shows an awareness of his fate and defies it by freely choosing the posture he wishes to strike at the moment of his destruction. In *The Return* such final gestures reaffirm his initial image, a self-sacrificial hero. But when I say that his final gestures reaffirm the personality that he presented at the outset, I must add that they affirm it with a very great difference, or "reduction": he may repeat his earlier outward behavior, but the intervening collapse of his ideal and beliefs has altered the ground and meaning of any gesture. Clym, as a tragic hero, at first knows, or at least believes to know, how to act because he relies on a scheme of authority external to himself; in the course of the

narrative, this authority is stripped from him, so that by the end he is creating himself in a free space beyond morality (church dogma), social relations (including blood relations), or even natural facts (geography). Clym finally refuses to accommodate to circumstances which would confirm his definition as a biblical and classical hero. It is in this light that we can justify the tragic plot by arguing that Clym cannot expect redemption from his suffering. *The Return*, far from being a satire, is a mixture of genres — a mixture of ironic, heroic, and tragic elements, which ultimately resolve themselves into a tragic conclusion.

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Received August 14, 1995

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