Summer 2000

Why Wildeve Had to Die: Mimetic Triangles and Violent Ends in The Return of the Native

Jeff Massey Ph.D.
Molloy College, jmassey@molloy.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng_fac

Part of the Education Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons
DigitalCommons@Molloy Feedback

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.molloy.edu/eng_fac/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at DigitalCommons@Molloy. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Works: English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Molloy. For more information, please contact tochter@molloy.edu, thasin@molloy.edu.
Why Wildeve Had to Die

Mimetic Triangles and Violent Ends in 
The Return of the Native

JEFF MASSEY

Much ink’s been spilled in critical discourse,
o’er who loves who and who does worse;
Pure white desire drives blinded Clym,
dyed-red Diggory and trusting Tamsin.
But talk of those who’re doomed to die,
they ponder not Wildeve but Eustacia Vye.

Although significant critical attention has been directed 
toward understanding Eustacia Vye’s death in Hardy’s The 
Return of the Native (1878), substantially less has been paid to 
the other corpse fished from Shadwater Weir, Damon Wildeve. I feel 
the reasons behind his death remain largely unexplored. Damon and 
Eustacia, in many ways so similar to one another, meet an identical 
end beneath the waters of the drainage pool. No small critical effort 
has been directed towards understanding Eustacia Vye’s death, be it 
simple suicide, narcissistic death wish (Mitchell), pagan necessity 
(Giordano), or punishment for gender transgression (Deen).

Perhaps the most compelling recent reading is Dixie Lee Larson’s 
“Eustacia Vye’s Drowning: Defiance Versus Convention” (1993) in 
which she describes Eustacia’s drowning as Hardy’s (mis)representa-
tion of a “common nineteenth-century stereotype, the motif of the 
drowned woman” (55). Traditionally, the “stereotype of the drowned 
woman effectively deals with the threat that the illicitly-sexual woman 
posed: the distressed and shamed woman, full of self-loathing and 
abandoned by all, ends her life by drowning” (61), leaving behind
only a beautiful body with "the implication that she has been cleansed of any stain or blame" (62). Larson emends this motif to better suit Hardy's defiant Eustacia, concluding that the stereotype of the drowned woman continues operative, even as it changes from being an act of punishment and purification to move towards being an assertion of selfhood (62).

Larson's logic, otherwise persuasive, falters when she attempts to dismiss Wildeve's parallel behavior in a hasty footnote:

While Wildeve is just as guilty of indiscretion as Eustacia, male sexual activity was seen as normal and therefore without the stigma so often attached to female sexuality (63).

Gender stereotypes aside, Larson's answer begs the question: why does Wildeve then drown with Eustacia? Does his death fulfil some esoteric paradigm of the drowned man? This unfortunate dismissal of Wildeve's drowning when examining Eustacia's death is typical of the critical corpus, which tends to treat Wildeve as a minor character. Hardy's text repeatedly underscores the similarly inconstant natures of Wildeve and Eustacia, and I believe their common nature may be seen as leading to their common death. I do not believe that one can propose a logic for the death of Eustacia without proposing a linked cause for Wildeve's hitherto identical demise.

Far from being a minor love-interest of a major character, Wildeve may be read as the linchpin around which the multiple romantic triangles in The Return of the Native revolve, the fulcrum upon which the entire novel balances. There are three romantic triangles:

2. Eustacia–Wildeve–Thomasin Yeobright
3. Wildeve–Thomasin–Diggory Venn

Wildeve, significantly, is the only character to play a role in all three. A graphic representation of the linkages between these three triangles shows even more clearly the central role Wildeve plays in the goings-on at Egdon Heath:

```
CLYM           WILDEVE               DIGGORY
          📝❤️  📝❤️  📝❤️
          EUSTACIA      THOMASIN
```

118
Following this chart, it is neither the “goddess-like heroine” Eustacia Vye nor the returning native, Clym Yeobright, who may rightly be called the central character in Hardy’s romantic novel, but Damon Wildeve.

The relationships among the characters within these triangles and Hardy’s representation of their probable motives largely determines the success of their relationships, and ultimately the fate of the characters themselves. I believe that by interpreting these romantic triangles according to a limited Girardian theory of mediated relationships we may better understand why, as Clym cries out at The Quiet Woman: “Those who ought to have lived lie dead; and here I am alive!” (Hardy 293). In short, I propose that the mimetic motivation underlying the violent results of these triangles leads to the double deaths of Damon Wildeve and Eustacia Vye.

At the root of Rene Girard’s literary theory lies the proposition that all desire is ‘mimetic,’ or imitative, in nature (Girard 146). In simplest terms, Girard claims that as subjects, we do not desire any object for its own sake, rather we desire an object because someone else, our ‘model’ or ‘mediator’ desires that object. The subject and the object are not linked directly by desire, as in traditional thought, but share a relationship only through a rival mediator. All relationships are therefore triangular, consisting of subject, object and mediator (145).

This necessarily triangular relationship can take two forms, either ‘external’ or ‘internal,’ as determined by the ‘distance’ between the subject and mediator in terms of time, space or condition (i.e. social, fiscal). The possibility of direct interaction among the participants, especially between the subject and the mediator, defines the nature of the mediation and the probable result of such object competition (Livingstone 54-57).

In external mediation, the model or mediator, whether “real or imaginary, legendary or historical” (Golsan 1), is removed from immediate interaction with the subject: the mediator is distant. No personal rivalry or competition can ensue, as the subject’s imitation of the model and consequent desire for the object do not directly affect the mediator. Examples of such external mediation abound in Girard’s early examinations of “great literature.” Don Quixote’s imitation of the legendary knight Amadis of Gaule, particularly his imitation of Amadis’s desire for Dulcinea del Toboso, exemplifies Girard’s theory. Quixote vows to imitate his hero in deed, word and love, and so constructs his own Dulcinea del Toboso from his image of the farm girl Aldonza Lorenza. Insofar as the subject (Quixote) mimics the mediator’s (Amadis’) desire, the object of desire (Aldonza) is
Dulcinea. The object itself has no intrinsic value in Girardian terms. No conflict arises from this externally mediated triangular relationship because the subject and the mediator have no direct contact (Golsan 2-3).

Such a peaceful triangle cannot be maintained in an internal mediation. Here the model is physically present, and shares the time/space condition of the subject. As the subject imitates the desire of the model and both pursue the common object, the model becomes a rival and obstacle to the subject, and vice versa (Girard 146). While the internally mediated object still holds no intrinsic value in Girardian terms, its appearance is likely to differ from the object in an externally mediated triangle. Rather than an ideal (i.e. the Holy Grail) or a substitutive object (i.e. Dulcinea a.k.a. Aldonza), the internally mediated object is likely to be something specific and physical (i.e. Guinevere, a lover common to both subject—Lancelot, and model—Arthur). Any decrease in temporal, spatial and conditional distance between the subject and mediator which defines the internal mediation is likely to decrease the distance between the subject and the object as well. The object then may become attainable by the subject, a fact which is not lost on the mediator. What begins as a singular imitation of the mediator by the subject becomes an active rivalry between the two for a common object, as the mediator engages in mimesis as well, viewing the subject as his own mediator. The desire of the one reinforces the desire of the other. Girard calls this echoic mimesis “reciprocal” mediation (Golsan 8). Again, neither subject nor mediator desires the object for itself, each only mimics the other’s desire for that object. Rivalry escalates when the adulation of the mediator as the source of desire conflicts with the hatred of the mediator as obstacle to desire: the subject has entered a “double bind—a contradictory double imperative” (Girard 147). As subject and mediator converge upon the single object, their individuality blurs under the aegis of common desire and reciprocal imitation.

Inevitably, such competition for a single object leads to confrontation and violence. Neither subject nor mediator can be satisfied—even the attainment of the object by one is unsatisfactory, for the object is not the true goal, but the imitation of the rival’s desire. Mimetic desire, it seems, can never be satisfied. In Girardian terms, internal mediation must always result in conflictual mimesis and violence (Golsan 32).

While I do not believe that Girard’s theory can be applied as a universal theorem, I do think that his basic theory of mimetic desire, and his proposed link between mimesis and violence, can be employed effectively as a strategy of literary criticism.
To this end, I propose that:

1. the triangular relationships within *The Return of the Native* can be examined in terms of internal and external mediations
2. the textual evidence revealing character motivation and desire may suffice to establish such triangles without assuming Girard’s ubiquitous mimetic desire (this is not to dismiss the underlying nature of mimetic desire, only to focus criticism on the necessarily limited actions portrayed in the novel)
3. by following the role of Damon Wildeve in the three triangular relationships drawn above, the reader may deduce a reason for his violent end
4. a similar reading of Eustacia Vye’s role in her two triangular relationships would lead to parallel conclusions
5. the other characters differ from Wildeve and Eustacia in significant ways, excusing them from such violent ends

Throughout *The Return of the Native*, Wildeve’s character is expressed directly. His involvements with both Eustacia and Thomasin reveal him as a man motivated not by any direct desire for an individual, but by the desires of others for some individual. His early relationship with Eustacia and his secondary relationship with Thomasin are both nebulous affairs, of uncertain motivation and questionable depth. His relationship with Eustacia, before he becomes aware that another man desires her, seems exceptionally coy. He remarks to Eustacia that “such natures as yours don’t easily adhere to their words. Neither, for the matter of that, do such natures as mine” (Hardy 51). Both Eustacia and Wildeve are self-admittedly inconstant and noncommittal.

However, once Wildeve learns of Clym’s interest in Eustacia, a strong desire surfaces within him: “the old longing for Eustacia had reappeared in his soul: and it was mainly because he had discovered that it was another man’s intention to possess her. To be yeaming for the difficult, to be weary of that offered; to care for the remote, to dislike the near; it was Wildeve’s nature always.” (Hardy 170).

Later, Hardy reveals more of Wildeve’s mimetic nature as he dances with Eustacia:

As for Wildeve, his feelings were easy to guess. Obstacles were a ripening sun to his love, and he was at that moment in a delirium of exquisite misery. To clasp as his for five minutes what was another man’s through all the rest of the year was a kind of a thing he of all men could appreciate (205).
Whatever her relationship with Wildeve may have once been based upon, Eustacia no longer has any value as an object; she is now desired simply because Wildeve desires another man’s desire. He has fully engaged in a mimetic relation with his mediator, the unknowing Clym, in strict observance of the Girardian paradigm:

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it* (Girard 145).

And before the novel closes, Wildeve’s mediator will be seen as a rival in his eyes.

Having arrived near Shadwater Weir to meet with the fleeing Eustacia, Wildeve is suitably shocked by the appearance of his mediator, Clym:

The sight of Yeobright at once banished Wildeve’s sober feelings, who saw him again as the deadly rival from whom Eustacia must be kept at all hazards (Hardy 287).

Clym too, recognizes Wildeve as a rival, a “traitor,” and the extent of the external mediation becomes apparent to them both. They have entered the Girardian double bind, the contradictory double imperative which presages violence.

Upon hearing a body, presumably Eustacia’s, fall into the weir, the rivals turn as if one man, grab lanterns and hasten to their supposed object. Already their actions mirror one another, and as the scene progresses, they alternately follow each other’s lead. Distinctions necessary for individuation and self-identity blur under the aegis of common desire: the two have become undifferentiated. Wildeve incautiously leaps into the (significantly) circular pool towards what he perceives to be Eustacia (his desired object). Clym, “imagining from Wildeve’s plunge” that their common object of desire is in the weir, enters into the whirlpool as well. As Clym loses his footing to the spiralling current, he is “carried round to the centre of the basin, where he perceived Wildeve struggling” (Hardy 288). Together, the two men succumb to the whirlpool, failing to reach their common desire—as Girard would have predicted. Mimetic desire can never be achieved (Girard 152). Diggory Venn arrives, and attempts to rescue “a man” from the whirlpool, only to find that he has found two men, fused as if into one:

[Diggory] flung away the hatch, and attempted to drag forth the man. This was a matter of great difficulty, and he found as the reason that the legs of the unfortunate stranger were tightly embraced by the arms of another man, who had hitherto been entirely beneath the surface (Hardy 289).

Rarely has a Girardian “doubling” been so dramatically revealed.
Having dragged the two rivals out upon the grass to separate them, Diggory sees that the “one who had been uppermost was Yeobright; he who had been completely submerged was Wildeve” (Hardy 290). The vocabulary of submersion in the text significantly reflects the roles of subject and mediator. Wildeve, appropriating Clym’s object of desire, occupies a position metaphorically beneath him. The loss of identity associated with the final stages of Girard’s mimetic spiral is reflected in this final scene as well, as their two bodies are intertwined, and must be forcibly separated. No distinctions remain when the two are pulled from the weir; both appear dead. Eustacia is then found in a similar insensible state (Hardy 290).

Significantly, Clym survives. Of the five participants in the triangular relationships presented, the two most actively represented in the text as having mimetically inspired motivations, Wildeve and Eustacia, die. This is not a claim that the other participants in the two internally mediated triangles⁵ are without mimetic desire: in a Girardian view there is no true desire for an object. Mediators may not realize that they are in fact mimetically inspired⁶, but the mimesis occurs nonetheless (Girard 145). The violence that inevitably arises from any internally mediated relationship results from the echoic mimesis, the “reciprocal mediation,” produced by both subject and mediator. Where this violence finds expression, and why, remains the object of investigation.

There are, I believe, three ideas available within the Girardian paradigm which may help to explain the deaths of Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve. The first is perhaps the least strictly Girardian and the most romantic. Eustacia and Wildeve are, textually, the most actively mimetic⁷. This overt evidence may suggest a connection between the degree of mimetic desire expressed and the final expression of violence. Is there a special correlation between apparently self-conscious mimetic desire and a Girardian ‘death-wish,’ propelling the mimetically driven character to a violent self-destruction? Given Girard’s general dismissal of “Freud’s famous ‘death-wish’” (Girard 145), I do not believe that he ever proposed such a theory. But perhaps there is some validity in the use of such correlations when analyzing this novel in particular.

The final two proposals I offer are more strictly Girardian, concerning the relationships between character position (as subject, mediator, or object), and the possibility of interplay between overlapping mimetic triangles. The following graphic representation of the three primary mimetic triangles in The Return of the Native will perhaps provide a comprehensible description of such interlaced desires and multiple roles.
According to the Girardian paradigm, only the two internally motivated triangles (#1 & #2) will result in violence. In these, Wildeve and Eustacia share common roles, albeit in different triangles. In triangle #1, Eustacia is the object while Wildeve is the subject—motivated by strong mimetic desire (in rivalry with Clym). In triangle #2, Wildeve is the object, and Eustacia the subject—motivated by strong mimetic desire (in rivalry with Thomasin). When they are objects, both are primarily passive. When subjects, both are active and self-aware, realizing the source of their desires and the rivalry that exists between themselves and their mediators.

While it is not unheard of in Girardian terms for the object to be destroyed by the violence of an internally mediated relationship (Girard 152), I find it far more likely that the violence generated out of the conflict between subject and mediator will be directed at one of the rivals. As the rivals strive for their common object and become undifferentiated, the desire for the object, the desire for the rival’s desire, and the desire for violence (Girard 148) converge, and violence ensues. In such a state of undifferentiation, I believe the drive to self-destruction may very likely satisfy the subject’s need for violent expression. In the case of two subjects so strongly motivated by mimetic desire, directing their imitative desire at one another as objects in overlapping internally mediated triangles, the violence seems to have expressed itself in parallel self-destructive acts at Shadwater Weir.

In sum, the subjects within internally mediated relationships who follow the Girardian paradigm most actively, those who desire mimaetically, are driven to violence, and in this case, to violent self-destruction. Wildeve and Eustacia, by desiring objects not for the object’s sake but in mimetic response to perceived rivals, engage in internally mediated relationships which are doomed to violent ends. The two characters, so similar in motivation, locked in overlapping triangles of
desire, drowned together as violence finally erupts from their mimetic conflict.

Clym Yeobright, although apparently desiring Eustacia only for her own sake, suffers loss through violence after unwittingly participating in an internally mediated triangle in which his object (Eustacia), acting as subject in an overlapping triangle, mimetically desires another object (Wildeve). Thomasin Yeobright suffers similar violent loss within an internally mediated triangle as her object (Wildeve), acting as subject in an overlapping triangle, mimetically desires another object (Eustacia). Only Diggory Venn, having altered his social state, removes himself from a potential internally mediated triangle and successfully avoids violence by establishing an externally mediated triangle.

In the end, of the four characters engaged in internally mediated triangles, “two were corpses, one had barely escaped the jaws of death, another was sick and a widow” (Hardy 291). The fifth character, who alone remained within a single externally mediated triangle, “was the only one whose situation had not materially changed” (Hardy 292). In Girardian terms, the mimetic desires in *The Return of the Native* behave as they ought: spawning violence.

**WORKS CITED**


NOTES

1 With apologies to John Wilmot and regards to St James' Park.

2 Who, in my opinion, is never “abandoned by all” as the motif requires. Eustacia may not realize that Clym has sent her a letter of reconciliation (and so might still feel abandoned by him), but Wildeve at least has continued to make his interest apparent to her.

3 A demonstration of Wildeve’s central importance in the novel is more fully discussed in John Magee’s article, “Hardy’s Return of the Native” (1995). Even if we do not accept Wildeve as the central character, his critical treatment as a minor character appears to me suspect.

4 Wildeve’s later relationship with Thomasin is based on much the same motivation as his renewed interest in Eustacia: he desires to possess what another man wants. Mrs. Yeobright alerts Wildeve to the rumor that “another man has shown himself anxious to marry Thomasin” (Hardy 79), which in part motivates Wildeve to renew his suit. Another motivation seems to lie in his desire to revenge himself upon Eustacia by marrying Thomasin (Hardy 131). However, the primary evidence of Wildeve’s nature is revealed in his relationship with Eustacia, and his relationship with Thomasin seems almost a shadow of that relationship.

5 Diggory Venn, as Wildeve’s mediator in their triangular relationship with Thomasin, avoids entanglement in an internal mediation by removing himself from the condition of his subject. That is, by becoming a reddyman, Diggory distances himself from Wildeve socially, and takes himself out of direct rivalry for Thomasin. This removal must come socially (or at least in some way conditionally), for as John Magee notes, Hardy’s novel follows the classical unities of time and space (216). Temporally and spatially, then, all the characters in the novel are in position to engage one another through internal mediation. Only a change in condition may remove a character from such a conflict. Diggory effects such a change. His eventual attainment of his object, Thomasin, does not directly result from any conflict within the Wildeve—Thomasin—Diggory triangle. Wildeve is removed from that triangle as a result of violence from an overlapping internally mediated triangle.

6 Clym and Thomasin are both mediators in separate internally mediated triangles, but textual evidence of their mimetic desires is sorely lacking. They seem interested in their respective objects (Eustacia and Wildeve) for the sake of the objects themselves. Again, according to Girard, they are mimetically involved, as no desire exists without mimesis. However, for the purpose of textual comparison, Eustacia and Wildeve have the lion’s share of mimetically inspired desire.

7 I have already gone to some length to establish Wildeve as an example of Girardian mimetically inspired desire. To go to similar lengths to describe Eustacia Vye as such is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I believe Eustacia is at least as mimetically driven as Wildeve. Hardy describes her at greater length, and allows the reader more insight into her character. She also appears to be more self-aware of her own motivations, which include an acknowledgement that her desire for Wildeve is largely based on Thomasin’s desire for him (see Hardy 77, 81, 82, 83, 205). She also acknowledges a desire to harm her rival, a mimetically inspired violent act (see Hardy 67, 74). She even seems to understand the difference between love of an object and desire to love (see Hardy 56, 58, 275). In short, I believe the text suggests evidence to equate her position in the Girardian paradigm alongside Wildeve. The two are of similar nature, similar motivation, and similar ends.