Nature always wins:

A close reading of a passage from Thomas Hardy’s *The return of the Native*

The farmer, in his ride, who could smile at artificial grasses, look with

solicitude at the coming corn, and sigh with sadness at the fly-eaten

turnips, bestowed upon the distant upland of heath nothing better than

a frown. But as for Yeobright, when he looked from the heights on his

way he could not help indulging in a barbarous satisfaction at observing

that, in some of the attempts at reclamation from the waste, tillage, after

holding in for a year or two, had receded again in despair, the ferns and

furze-turfs stubbornly reasserting themselves. – Hardy (173)

Nature always wins. This idea, this fact, is generally known, and it was obviously one that Thomas Hardy knew well in the late 19th century. His novels, especially *The Return of the Native*, explore questions such as ‘are people important?’ or ‘is space indifferent to what we do to it?’ and in the passage I have selected to close read I believe these questions can be answered. The passage’s images of decay and failed cultivation, long sentences, and insertion of a characters observation illustrates the novel’s overarching theme: the pointlessness of life.

Hardy opens the passage in which this smaller section was taken by acknowledging that the people in Egdon saw it as a place out of time, strange, and “few cared to study it” (173), but eventually someone had cared enough to attempt to cultivate the land. Claiming and cultivating land seems to be an unconditional characteristic of human nature, and Hardy is acknowledging this when he says “The farmer, in his ride, could smile at artificial grasses…” According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, artificial means “made or produced by human beings rather than occurring naturally, typically as a copy of something natural, contrived or false.” This word usage by Hardy is significant because we can conclude that he critiquing humanity’s interference and abuse of the natural world.

He continues the passage “look with solicitude at the coming corn, and sigh with sadness at the fly-eaten turnips, bestowed upon the distant upland of heath nothing better than a frown.” The singular farmer that he focuses on is actually a stand in for all men, all cultivators. The farmer looks with solicitude, care or concern, at the successful attempt at cultivating and producing goods from the land, while also saddened by the failed attempt. This could be Hardy saying that man is never satisfied with success, that success leads to desire for more. The heath is an area of open uncultivated land; it’s a land that seems to resist people and human interference. The image of the fly-eaten turnips is a sign of decay, a sign that the land is taking back what came from it, and the farmer can only frown at this because he cannot interfere with nature or its reclamation. This gives us a sense of pointlessness. If the land takes back and undoes everything one puts into it, what is the point in attempting to change it at all?

The passage chosen is eight lines long and made up of only two sentences. The length of these sentences give us a sense of continuity. This continuity is a reflection of the land, of nature, and how it will continue long after human habitation and disturbance. “But as for Yeobright, when he looked from the heights on his way he could not help indulging in a barbarous satisfaction at observing that, in some of the attempts at reclamation from the waste, tillage, after holding in for a year or two, had receded again in despair, the ferns and furze-turfs stubbornly reasserting themselves.” His protagonist, Clym Yeobright seems to be well aware of this continuity and pointlessness in attempting to manipulate the land to human will. He feels “a barbarous satisfaction” in knowing the land will return to its natural state even after it has been poked and prodded by human hands. Barbarous, meaning savagely cruel; exceedingly brutal, primitive or uncivilized. He takes pleasure in the natural decay, in such a way that Hardy is saying that Clym is uncivilized. He is uncivilized in the sense that he does not have the desire to cultivate and change his surroundings to benefit himself like most of humanity. He knows the futility that comes with cultivation, especially cultivating the heath, which seems unchangeable and cruel in its unwillingness to cooperate with human interference.

Hardy’s own thoughts about nature seem to be reflected in Clym. He knows that the reclamation, the process of claiming something or of reasserting a right are pointless. Humans cannot assert their right on nature because nature does not care and will never yield to human will. The tillage, or preparation of land for growing crops, is futile because the land will return to the way it was before being temporarily transformed. The plant life of the heath reasserts itself, just as all of nature will reassert itself after humans are gone. This passage reflects the futility of cultivation and attempting to change fate. Nature always wins, and as Hardy was well aware, life is pointless.