Abstract — This article explores the question of education in Thomas Hardy’s The Return of the Native from the point of view of the didactic aspirations of the novel’s main protagonist, Clym Yeobright. Written before the advent of the Education Act, Hardy’s novel provides an underlying critique of compulsory education of the masses as well as a questioning of the nature of education through the dramatisation of a range of differing attitudes, from the jealous guarding of traditional rural values to the quest for self-betterment and the romantic desire for escape. In spite of the autobiographical features that went into the creation of Clym, Hardy’s avoidance of self-identification with his hero is apparent in his implicit criticism of the pretentiousness of his didactic aims and his representation of his ambivalent character traits. However, an alternative sense resides in the text whereby Clym finally acquires the spiritual awareness and human sympathy he previously lacked through his re-appropriation of the natural values transmitted to him by the natural world of the heath which, in the final analysis, may be considered the real educational force of his life.

Keywords: Hardy, education, didactics, community, humanism