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Unearthly Nature: The Strangeness of Arbospaces in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*

ABSTRACT

Commonly acknowledged as one of Thomas Hardy's most environmentally-conscious literary accomplishments, *The Woodlanders* (1887) provides fertile ground for a stimulating and topical ecocritical debate. The intricate correlation between the natural and the human—indicated by the very title—undergirds the structure of the text and creates unique narrative collisions while simultaneously propelling the development of the plot. The multiple references to the sphere of the paranormal—realized in the passages pertaining to local lore and, most significantly, in the descriptions of the setting—reflect the conflation of superstition and uncanniness, which adds otherworldly overtones to the novel. The article analyzes these qualities insofar as they shape the portrayed landscape—specifically, the woodscape—as a realm whose essence continually balances between the fantastical and the real. It also examines how the natural and human elements are reciprocally subsumed by means of anthropomorphic language and how this occurrence can be interpreted through the lens of intertextuality. By focusing on these rather antithetical concepts, I wish to demonstrate how the boundaries between them are elided, thus preserving an aura of ambivalence that pervades the novel.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, supernatural, trees, ecocriticism, arbospaces.

A NOTE ON THE NOVEL

Serialized in *Macmillan's Magazine* from May 1886 to April 1887 and published in three volumes the same year, *The Woodlanders* was identified by Hardy as one of his "Novels of Character and Environment"—a phrase he first used in the "General Preface" to the Wessex Edition of his works from 1912. As Linda Joyce Baker specifies, "environment" in this context is not merely defined as the geographical area inhabited by the characters, but it also encompasses the manner in which those characters adapt to their surroundings (3). Therefore, the intricate correlation between the natural and the human undergirds the structure of the text, which is indicated by the very title. Moreover, Ronald Draper classified this work—alongside *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874)—as one of Hardy's three pastoral novels, pointing to its faithful depictions of rural life and agrarian culture (47). Interestingly, as noted by Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, such an attempt to classify Hardy's environmental realism can be set against the recent tendency in ecocriticism to reconsider the pastoral as a critical mode (700).

In fact, many scholars benefit from the thematic profusion of *The Woodlanders* by viewing certain scenes through the prism of the pastoral elegy. Such is the case with David Lodge, who, by referring to the circumstances of Giles Winterbourne's death, remarks how evident the representative qualities of the genre are in the description of nature mourning its carer. Moreover, Lodge mentions the fact that Hardy, being well acquainted with classical Greek literature, must have been equally familiar with the tradition of the pastoral elegy and thus must have consciously incorporated it into his text (26). A similar observation is made by Lesley Higgins, who, in addition, distinguishes the pattern of melodramatic characterization through the distinction between natives and interlopers. This distinction, which can be summarized as a clash between the traditions of the rural and the sophistication of the urban, is easily identified by the reader as the fundamental tension that animates the narrative (115–16). Curiously, it also represents the very essence of the pastoral genre, which relies upon the entrance of courtly, sophisticated strangers into a less complicated, idyllic countryside (Fayen 99).

These remarks testify to the potential for a stimulating and topical ecocritical debate, affirmed by the novel's consideration of ecocentric themes (Blin-Cordon 1). Further, the text's historical context is equally worth considering since, on the one hand, it involves the primarily cultural and aesthetic (not ecological) concept of nature constructed by Wordsworth, while, on the other hand, being confronted with the patrician and elitist approach to both aesthetics and nature, embodied by John Ruskin

(Taylor 879–80). Another layer of complexity which may be explored is the recurring legacy of Darwinism and the fact that, in *The Woodlanders*, a nature sympathizing with the suffering of human beings (expressed in terms of pathetic fallacy) is replaced by one essentially Darwinian, always engaged in a ruthless struggle for survival (Draper and Draper 51). This is why, as noticed by Higgins, the novel is permeated by the author's keen awareness of evolutionary realities, which add a disconcerting subtext of degeneration and extinction that is simultaneously natural and cultural and that consequently reveals a more arcane—or even threatening—facet of Hardyan nature (111). This facet, proper to the sphere of the paranormal, is realized in the passages referring to the local lore and, most significantly, in the descriptions of the novel's setting. Although its presence may seem unimposing or even irrelevant at first glance, it is essential to the full comprehension of the storyline since it constitutes one of its driving forces, shaping the characters' fate and spotlighting their connection to the land that transcends the boundaries of mere agricultural dependence. However, considering how this somewhat haunted reading of the novel's landscape is entrenched in ecocritical theory, it seems apposite to review some of its core premises.

A NOTE ON ECOCRITICISM

Set against the backdrop of the surge in cultural theories, ecocriticism formally emerged in the 1980s as an activist mode of literary studies, deeply rooted in the science of ecology and the ethics of environmentalism, the main purpose of which was to address the environmental crisis of the late 20th century (Remien and Slovic 4–5). As indicated by Greg Garrard, “the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (5). Further on, Garrard points out the interrelation between ecocriticism and ecology (5), with ecology being understood as a worldview that places emphasis on environmental connectedness (Ghazoul). He also stresses how vital it is for ecocritics to aspire to surmount the two disciplinary boundaries and to consequently form their own ecological stance, which could be then transposed into literature. The interdependence of those scientific fields becomes all the more pertinent if we consider the extent to which ecocriticism arises from the reaction to humankind's alienation from nature, brought about by the disenchantment related to modern science and technology (Remien and Slovic 5). We can therefore observe how the ecocritical movement as such is inextricably linked to various spatial and

societal changes, as well as to the cultural and ideological repercussions that originated from them. Thus, as Dana Phillips pithily puts it, nature viewed through the lens of ecocritical perspective is “thoroughly implicated in culture, and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature” (577–78). In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty undergirds this commentary by acknowledging that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (xix). The idea, albeit tinged with a dose of antinomy, is prefigured in Hardy’s novel and will be more closely examined in the later part of the article.

When it comes to the literary precursors of ecocriticism, Alice Jenkins emphasizes the importance of Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (1845–62), since its far-reaching scope and scale reflect the ideal of a unifying, holistic science that would transcend disciplinary boundaries (89). As Jenkins notes, the pillars of Humboldt’s proto-ecocriticism reside in his stylistic, generic and historical predilections, amongst which one may single out the act of privileging art that sees human and non-human nature as equally compelling and that does not objectify the non-human by treating it as a mere chattel (92–93). Despite Humboldt’s ethically questionable position towards natural exploitation and industrialization, which he considered essential for human progress (96–97), Jenkins admits that the ideological legacy of *Cosmos* to modern ecocritical thought is incontestable. She addresses this statement by arguing that

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[*Cosmos*] develops a nature politics that focuses on the benefits to humans of exposure to and understanding of the natural world. If one of the fundamental goals of modern ecocriticism is to investigate culture in such a way as to prompt change in dealings with nature, *Cosmos*’s position is almost the complement of this: through engagement with nature, humans alter their cultural activities, resulting in greater political and intellectual liberty. Though Humboldt values nature for itself, he values human engagement with nature, whether through scientific or literary means, for a combination of moral and political reasons. (95–96)

The notion of an inextricable link being forged between culture and nature dovetails with the previously mentioned theoretical components of ecocriticism, as well as with Hardy’s depiction of the relationship between the woodlanders and their land. Indeed, central to the novel’s structure is the way in which the individual perceptions of the trees—together with notional involvement in the landscape—jar and coalesce within Little Hintock, thus shaping the interactions between the characters and fostering the ecology of interdependent perspectives (Burton, “Thomas Hardy” 64).

In addition, human engagement with nature holds a supplementary importance in view of the idea that ecocriticism functions as a reaction to human detachment from place, and that it acts upon the consequent sense of deracination, brought about by the lost sense of closeness with the land (Miller 696). As stressed by Derek Gladwin, the notion of place as such represents a fundamental principle of ecocriticism because of its application in both literary and ecological theories and its eventual contribution to the development of one's own ecological awareness (140). Thus, from the perspective of ecocritical thought, one may infer that there exists a palpable connection between the human self and the natural place, and the disruption of such a connection may result in a feeling of placelessness and an undermined sense of one's own identity for, as Neil Evernden remarks, "[t]here is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place" (20). Therefore, in order to prevent the loss of the sense of place—and thereby the sense of self—one engages in the extension of the boundary of the self into the environment by imbuing it with life and thus regarding it as animate (19). This practice constitutes the very essence of the literary device called pathetic fallacy, which is elegantly alluded to by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*, where he states: "For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (6–7). However, what may be now regarded as a literary device meant to reinforce or reestablish the inner connection with the natural world by infusing its elements with one's own feelings, was originally considered by the author of the term as a corruptive and perverse practice.

Indeed, John Ruskin, who developed the notion of pathetic fallacy in 1856, treated it with a fair amount of disdain (as the word "fallacy" may suggest), believing it to result from the indulgence in violent emotions which distort and consequently falsify our perception of external things. For Ruskin, this kind of fallacy is committed by the lesser artist who, instead of espousing the value of faithful artistic representation, dilutes it through his over-emotional perspective (Morris 249). Moreover, the act of succumbing to the siren song of pathetic fallacy eventually renders the human ignorant of meaningful messages that they could have found in natural elements and that would help them relate to the external objects. As such,

[t]he pathetic fallacy is committed whenever death is preferred to life, whenever destruction is preferred to creation. Morality fails and the fallacy is engendered when man is *isolated* from man or from nature.

Morbid sensibilities are pathetic because they are partial and thus do not engage “the entire human spirit.” Morbid sensibilities are a sign of imbalance and incompleteness. They are pathetic because they turn man to feed upon his own petty substance rather than upon the great and massive substance of nature. (261, emphasis mine)

Therefore, this literary device—in principle closely linked to the central concepts of ecocriticism—may paradoxically result in even further alienation from the natural world, widening the gulf between the falsehood of perception and the truthfulness of objective observation. This is why Ruskin advocated the idea of the individual realizing that neither they, nor nature, may exist only for themselves and that one must learn to feel at home in the realm of nature, which would remain unaffected by human affectation (251). With this sentiment in mind, it is apposite to embark upon a closer analysis of Hardy’s text and observe how ecocritical thinking may be detected in a novel published at a time when a form of ecocriticism *avant la lettre* was already being performed by those Victorian scholars who dabbled in a critique of such notions as industrialization, enclosure, and the relationship between literature and science (Taylor 879).

THE LAND AND THE OUTLANDER

Reconsidering the argument provided at the beginning of the article, it now seems all the more plausible to state that the environmental consciousness in Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* is conveyed distinctly and powerfully. The fitting affiliation to the novels of “Character and Environment,” as well as the text’s concise but telling title, attest to a work in which the agrarian spirit of Wessex manifests itself in a particularly palpable way, and in which the influence exerted by the landscape upon its dwellers is preternaturally intense. From the opening scene, which evokes the image of an old coach-road that circles the abundant woods and orchards, the reader encounters a cryptic parallel existing between the setting and the human countenance (Bate 15). Thus, it can be observed that

[t]he *physiognomy* of a deserted highway expresses a solitude to a degree that is not reached by mere dales or downs, and bespeaks a tomb-like stillness more emphatic than that of glades and pools. To step . . . from the edge of the plantation into the adjoining thoroughfare, and pause amid its emptiness for a moment, was to exchange by the act of a single stride the simple absence of human companionship for an incubus of the forlorn. (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 35, emphasis mine)

Indeed, a few lines later one learns that the desolation oozing from the land has a tangible impact on those within its vicinity, making the first human figure who appears in the text feel “more alone than before he had emerged upon the highway” (35).

The vividness of the description confirms Constance Rose Nutt's statement about the artistry with which Hardy imparts a sense of melancholy to the landscape (34), but it also casts a different light on the narrative significance of the non-human. In fact, upon closer consideration, the premise of the novels of “Character and Environment” aligns with Evernden's previously cited idea that the individual is contextually defined by place, since their position as its fixed component offers the only existential affirmation (20). This in turn ties in with the practice of animism, based on the act of extending the human self into the environment, thus imbuing it with a certain life force (19). Therefore, a mystical continuity is created, which simultaneously constitutes the essence of Ruskin's theory of imagination, where nature's powers are realized in humans and human emotions are expressed in nature (Morris 257–58). From this perspective, *The Woodlanders* represents a work that, in addition to being environmentally conscious, places this consciousness at the very centre of its structure, with the characters' identities and livelihoods being organically dependent on the land they inhabit and cultivate.

The land impresses itself upon the woodlanders' lives on many levels, primarily in relation to their way of perceiving the world. Indeed, as Jonathan Bate notes, both Winterbourne and Grace are influenced by the landscape differently, for Giles's perception is conditioned by the local rurality, whilst Grace—due to her urban education—holds onto the image of a broad lawn in the fashionable suburbs of a fast city (16). Between this pair of childhood sweethearts comes Fitzpiers, whose main function is to further confound Grace's newly-developed duality of vision. Thus, the clash of her former identity as a village girl with that of an educated but estranged urbanite contributes to Grace's feeling of placelessness. Importantly, her status as an outlander is underscored both by Fitzpiers and by Grace's initial inclination towards him. As such, the doctor's ignorance of the community's history being embedded within the environment differentiates him from the locals, who, by remaining attuned to the collective memory retained by Little Hintock, forged an almost biographical and historiographical acquaintance with its every element (18). The idea of a mystic connection between the inhabitants and their natural habitat could be explained by Schama's comparison of the greensward to a remnant of a pastoral dream, whose enduring myth harbours another landscape, hidden beneath a veneer of contemporaneity (16). This second landscape, condensed within the memory which envelops

the village, is visible to its fixed residents but impenetrable to Fitzpiers, whose sojourn in nature as a modern man is bound to remain superficial and self-motivated (Bate 18).

Furthermore, due to his incongruous social position, the character displays an acute mistrust towards the outside world, evocatively referenced in the passage describing a nocturnal ride through the forest, during which it becomes known that “[t]he surgeon, having been of late years a town man, hated the solitary midnight woodland . . . It often occurred to his mind that if in some remote depths of the trees an accident were to happen, his being alone might be the death of him” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 145). Were one to place this attitude within a concrete historical context, one could refer to Paul Segal’s outline of 4th-century Greece and the prevailing tendency to no longer define people’s essence through the otherness of the external elements but rather to enclose it within the confected framework of the *polis*. Hence, by shunning the natural, the 4th century strives to elevate the human and make of it a byword for dignity and excellence (Segal 42–43). Fitzpiers’s sense of defencelessness may therefore stem from the fact that the night forest emerges as a spot where the ideological constructions of civilization are mercilessly challenged and their underpinnings suddenly appear alarmingly frangible. This creeping disquietude aligns with Ruth Heholt’s concept of haunting which, by creating the collapse of rationality that defies the notion of time, space and dimensionality, effectively befogs what is firm and graspable (Heholt and Downing 7). From this perspective, the woodscape of Little Hintock trespasses Fitzpiers’s conventional topological confines. Instead, it symbolizes a land where otherworldly associations constitute the primary token of identification, shaping the transpersonal experience of its permanent inhabitants while continuously perplexing the more pragmatic newcomers, for whom the underlying strangeness eludes all reification.

THE NATURAL AND THE CULTIVATED

Similarly, a fuller exploration of themes essential to Greek literature could inspire a comparison of Little Hintock to Bruno Snell’s concept of Arcadia as the “spiritual landscape,” where each image acquires a metaphorical meaning and where myth and reality constantly intrude upon each other (306). This analogy is implied by the novelist himself, who on one occasion calls Giles and Grace “two Arcadian innocents” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 309). However, in Hardy’s version of events, the cultivated and rationalistic Fitzpiers irrevocably dissipates the Arcadian “tender feeling” by indulging in carnal relations with Mrs Charmond (Snell 288). In this context, *The*

Woodlanders is pervaded by the sense of lost nature, pertaining both to Grace's disconnect from her native land and the reader's own realization that the reserved approach of Fitzpiers is more relatable than the unique environmental sensitivity personified by Giles (Bate 20). Thus, the passage in which the young woman gets lost in the woods and is clearly bewildered by the changes that have taken place there during her absence, she exhibits a misguided overfamiliarity with her surroundings and places her in stark contrast to the figure of Giles, described by Hardy as looking and smelling

like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider, which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. (*Woodlanders* 235)

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To account for this recently developed disparity between the two characters, it is useful to consider Hillary Tiefer's remark, according to which Hardy's output is marked by the continual opposition between the characters who are natural—i.e. who adhere to the essential laws of nature—and those who are cultivated and therefore uphold arbitrary laws that equal social expedients (208). In *The Woodlanders*, this contrast is particularly evident, since the arrival of the cultured Fitzpiers becomes the catalyst for the events that will impact the collectivity of Little Hintock. Furthermore, the character itself may be regarded as the embodiment of Hardy's interpretation of the Arnoldian concept of culture, defined as an idea of perfection in doing, thinking and behaving, supposed to ensure peace, joy and serenity in one's life (Jadhav 247). However, Hardy's interpretation of the same concept is more ambiguous and rather unfavourable, since its application leads to the denial of one's true self and deracination from the native soil. Bate finishes this characterization by devising a fitting comparison, according to which the move from the state of nature to that of civility resembles the fall of humanity (16). Despite the ambiguity, typical of Hardy's treatment of various social subjects and positions, it looks like the narrator of *The Woodlanders* also insinuates that the process of self-fashioning and education to which Grace was subjected resulted in a significant spiritual impoverishment and that, because of it, "[s]he had fallen from the gold old Hintock ways" (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 74). Grace's later regretful realization of the fact, encapsulated by the remark that cultivation only brought her "inconveniences and troubles" and that she wished she "worked in the woods like Marty South" further confirms the paradoxical impression that although culture aims towards the betterment of the self, it eventually leads to its nullification (251).

However, Megan Ward offers a more complex interpretation of the polarity between nature and culture, pointing to the fact that *The Woodlanders*' sceptical depiction of cultivation arises from its ambivalence regarding nature. The author clarifies this statement by indicating how the agrarian vision of nature presented in the text is in itself a result of cultivation, here construed as a series of agricultural processes like digging, shaping and planting (867). Indeed, what Hardy himself seems to indicate is that the line between nature and culture becomes virtually indistinguishable in a world considering cultivation successful only when it resembles the nature from which it came (872). In discussing the subject of Victorian ecocriticism, Jesse Oak Taylor also paints nature as an absence that is either potential or imminent, since, from the human perspective, it remains in a state of perpetual withdrawal (881–82).

At this point, one could contest the latter part of the observation made by Peter Remien and Scott Slovic, according to whom the natural world stands as humanity's metaphysical other and is thus opposed to culture (7). Indeed, taking into account Ward's analysis, it appears that one is defined and therefore dependable on the other, and that both concepts exhibit traits of polymorphism, while consistently establishing the characters' relatedness to their surroundings, and creating various narrative collisions between them.

THE NATURAL AND THE HUMAN

Having touched upon the coalescence of nature and culture, it is equally important to examine the overlapping of the natural and the human elements whose depiction in the novel corresponds with the above remark about nature being humanity's metaphysical other. In her article on dendrography, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller evokes the opening phrase of another of Hardy's novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which suggests that "[t]o dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature" (Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* 33). Analyzing this quotation more profoundly, one notices how, by having recourse to an anthropocentric perspective, Hardy suggests an intimate closeness with the sylvan space which sensitizes its residents to the finest distinctions in the sounds occurring within the forest (Miller 705). Thus, Hardy represents his characters in the same register as the trees, producing an effect of environmental realism rather than of realist individuation (706). Such an affiliation of the human to the arboreal constitutes a thread repeatedly featured throughout the novel. Its presence comes across as especially strong in the chapter mentioning the act of felling, where the

precarious situation of the oaks is imprinted upon them in a disconcertingly human-like manner. Thus, one witnesses how

[e]ach tree *doomed* to the flaying process was first *attacked* by Upjohn . . . After this it was barked in its erect position to a point as high as a man could reach. If a fine product of vegetable nature could ever be said to look *ridiculous* it was the case now, when the oak stood naked-legged, and as if *ashamed*. . . (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 166, emphasis mine)

The anthropomorphic language applied to the sylvan realm, as well as the comparison of its fate to that of an executioner's victims (166), imparts a candid sympathy to the passage, while highlighting the tangible impact of agricultural practices upon the environment. In his evocative article, Tzachi Zamir remarks upon trees as being emblematic of sadness and grief due to the ascription of visual similarity between branches and arms raised or lowered in lament (442). Were one to apply this analogy to the above quotation, the characterization of flayed trees as mutilated corpses comes across as all the more piteous. The same haunting emotional charge is masterfully physicalized in Berlinde De Bruyckere's installation *Cripplewood*.

Importantly, the blending of the human with the natural does not occur one-sidedly, but is in fact reciprocal. As Anna Burton observes, people themselves are rendered arborescent, thus becoming an inherent part of the silvicultural lineage. The confusion of both arboreal and human existences is meant to illustrate the significance of the position that the trees—as well as the land upon which they grow—occupy in the collective psyche of Hintock (“Thomas Hardy” 63). Indeed, Hardy continuously stresses the centrality of this space, presenting it as a repository of multiple narratives and histories that co-exist amidst the boughs, as well as in the residents' minds (Burton, *Trees* 138). This mysterious union seems fully incarnated by the character of Giles, who is endowed with “a marvellous power of making trees grow,” ensured by “a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak or beech that he was operating on” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 93). Indeed, Winterbourne's remarkable sympathy is said to confer to his fingers “a gentle conjurer's touch” (94), which bears a resemblance to magical abilities befitting a sorcerer. Moreover, Giles's visceral presence in the novel may inspire a new way of interpreting the text, one based on the idea of viewing the trees as people and the people as trees, thus recognizing the characters as rooted, budding, leafy and abloom (Cohen par. 6–7).

Another character exhibiting arboreal qualities is Marty South, whose life and work are explicitly centred around the woods. In fact, the so-called “treeness” of Marty constitutes a trait both like and unlike other identity

categories, connecting her to forms of existence with a wider compass than the human (par. 12). In this regard, one could compare Marty to the mythological figure of a hamadryad, since her essence—just like the three-nymph’s—appears to be presented as being absorbed by the woodland on a metaphysical level. Such an occurrence is indicated in the scene of the planting, where Marty empathizes with young pines by detecting similarities in their shared fates. The anthropomorphic energy exuded by the saplings makes Marty aware of “[h]ow they sigh directly we put ’em upright, though while they are lying down they don’t sigh at all . . . It seems to me . . . as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 95). Nevertheless, George S. Fayen stresses that Hardy’s decision to introduce traces of personality into natural processes should not be construed as a pathetic or consoling fallacy but rather as a sign that the search for familiar features in the outdoor realm testifies to the need for mindful self-identification in a mindless universe (98–99). This statement could be supported by another instance of trees acting similarly to humans, more precisely in the passage about the fierce struggle ensuing between the plants and the saplings. In this case, the humanescent traits are not meant to elicit a form of sympathy, but, instead, to intensify the aura of anxious and ruthless rivalry in a place where

[t]he Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, *and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling*. (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 83, emphasis mine)

This exposure of the woodscape’s sordid underbelly, together with the cut-throat competition of its components, harks back to Darwin and his reluctance towards the idea of conceptualizing nature as a perfectly fixed image, namely a face whose features can be fathomed and delineated with the utmost accuracy (Willingham-McLain 73).

THE ARBOREAL AND THE ARBO-MYTHICAL

Nevertheless, apart from the more primitive and earthbound descriptions, the novel also displays a more esoteric vision of the woodland, defined by Peggy Blin-Cordon as supernatural. In her article on the subject, the author points to the text’s insistence on the occult powers which reside in the woods and which contribute to the uncanny atmosphere that pervades it, thus rendering it a liminal space where more receptive denizens can

feel the presence of the dead, or at least the presence of past lives (4–5). And while for Isabelle Gadoin it is silence that functions as an incorporeal intermediary between the living and the dead (50), such an idea could be extended to the landscape itself, through whose mediumship this inter-realm communication occurs. Hence, the forest provides an essential habitat for ancient pagan myths, like those describing old, hollowed trees as the tombs of gods slaughtered on the boughs and encased within their bark (Schama 16). The description of the Hintock thicket at nighttime fittingly conveys this otherworldliness, seeming to lurk under the guise of “the creaking sound of two over-crowded branches in the neighbouring wood . . . rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalized sorrows of the trees” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 47).

The author's conspicuous display of this fixed spectral presence within the forest lays the narrative foundation for a realm which is conducive to the occurrence of unordinary happenings and which therefore imposes upon its residents a suspension of rational thinking. This is suggested in the passage describing one of Little Hintock's contiguous villages, Marshcombe Bottom, as “intensely dark with overgrowth, and popularly supposed to be haunted by spirits” (282). Curiously, a commentary about the supernatural phenomena, made by Hardy himself, discloses the novelist's belief: “[b]etter be inconvenienced by visitants from beyond the grave than see none at all”; Hardy expounded upon this statement, claiming that “[t]he material world is so uninteresting, human life is so miserably bounded, circumscribed, cabin'd, cribb'd, confined. I want another domain for the imagination to expatiate in” (qtd. in Archer 45). Indeed, the eeriness which typifies the descriptions of the Hintock woodland may inspire the impression that, apart from bespeaking writerly finesse, it is meant to reflect the vagaries of fate in deeper and richer hues, such as cannot be found in a purely anthropocentric setting. Moreover, the woodland exposes the arbitrariness of various misfortunes that befall the locals and that cannot be avoided, even through their atavistic practices and traditions. Thus, despite human exploitation, the trees retain their intimidating phantomish essence, by means of which they repeatedly question and undermine civilization's hegemonic hold (Blin-Cordon 6).

As it happens, in the introduction to the novel, Lodge notes that the alliance between the woodlanders and the woods is considerably contingent upon superstition (21). This is adeptly evidenced by the story of Marty's father, John South, and his peculiar apprehension towards an old elm which grows in his garden. When his health begins to fail, South's fear intensifies, eventually convincing him that “the tree 'tis killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow. He'll come down upon us and squat us dead”

(Hardy, *Woodlanders* 123). Certainly, a striking feature in the passage is the application of a personal pronoun in reference to a (supposedly) inanimate object, all the more testifying to the rootedness of mystical beliefs that subliminally condition the locals' spatial responsiveness. Moreover, the persistence of those beliefs within the community is confirmed by Marty's comment on her father's obsession, according to which "[o]thers have been like it afore in Hintock" (133). In his article on the pervasiveness of folklore in *The Woodlanders*, Peter Robson identifies a variety of fantastical tales that are elicited from the locals and that can "only . . . be accounted for by supernatural agency" (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 168). One of them relates to the genre of folk belief known as the "cockstride ghost," where the spirits of deceased wrongdoers are bound to a specific place—usually a pool or a swamp—from which they can only escape at the rate of one cockstride per year (Robson 88). The fact that the belief is mentioned in the novel by one of the bark-rippers proves that the paranormal is omnipresent and therefore may be detected in every recess of the Hardyian woodscape, provided that one's perception of such happenings is sufficiently honed. Moreover, the idea of these deeply entrenched atavistic impulses serving as topographical anchorage for the denizens aligns with the statement that, at its chimerical core, haunting amounts to an unusually active engagement with places in a given time (Paphitis 4).

Eventually, John South becomes the victim of the old elm, dying from the shock caused by its cutting-down, wrongfully ordered by Fitzpiers. Interestingly, in her richly informative work, *The Long, Long Life of Trees*, Fiona Stafford reveals the pertinence of Hardy's preference for this specific species, pointing to the overlap between its botanical make-up and cultural connotations. Thus, she acknowledges that elms' shallow rooting dangerously predisposes them to falling during strong winds or dropping large limbs without warning. And, touching upon a more artisanal aspect, Stafford remarks that the resistance to rot rendered elms a valuable source of planks for coffins (200–01). The representation of these deathly qualities in the novel, although dismissed by Maxwell Sater as overliteral and therefore risible (100), validates the interpretation of Hardy's trees as individualized entities which can directly impinge upon human lives and consequently expose their disposability.

Nevertheless, the character who gives the impression of being the most affected by what Blin-Cordon defined as "arboreal menace" (4) is Giles Winterbourne. In fact, upon analyzing the poignant—albeit indirectly recounted—scene of his agony on the forest floor, a contrasting vision of nature may be conjured up, such as the one depicted in the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne. There, the nymph, frantically pursued by

Apollo, finds refuge from her would-be aggressor in the boughs of a laurel tree, into which she is transformed by her father and river god, Peneus. Through this merger of the humanoid and the terrestrial, nature emerges as a divine shelter, able to free Daphne from the violence of Apollo's sexual desire. When comparing the myth's portrayal of the natural world to that contrived by Hardy, one may realize the extent to which the two visions are at odds with one another. Indeed, Hardy's account exposes the inherent indifference of the Hintock woodland, which, while able to intimate a form of attachment to its carer, does not display enough solicitude to bring him succour in the moment of distress and, what is more, remains unfazed by his suffering. Hence, in this case, the fusion with the landscape contains more sinister undertones, since its completion—imposed upon the protagonist rather than being presented as a choice—equals his eventual demise. Therefore, the deplorable circumstances of Winterbourne's death reveal the duality essential to nature which, as observed by Drake, always assumes "a serpent in the Garden" (251). Here, the duality manifests itself in the workings of rain, storm and wind: elements that can never be tamed or propitiated, regardless of the environmental devotion of their victim.

However, a certain disconcerting quality marks these accounts, consequently drawing a parallel between the fates of their protagonists. As it happens, the unions, although circumstantially different in the two stories, can be interpreted as valedictory rites of passage, at the end of which the characters' sense of self is irrevocably stifled. Zamir illustrates this metamorphosis in vividly poetic tones, defining it as an act of stripping individuals of the particularity of their own matter which—due to its irreversible rearrangement—can no longer be registered or welcomed by others (446). Therefore, the attainment of harmony with the natural world comes at the highest price imaginable since in both instances it compels the protagonists to shed their earthly existence, either literally, that is by means of a fantastic physical transmutation, or figuratively, through death.

In conclusion, the woodland depicted in Hardy's novel constitutes a realm steeped in paradox: partially domesticated by agrarian practices but all the while othered by atavistic attitudes and feelings, it casts a spell upon its dwellers, adroitly blurring the distinction between imagination and reality, and therefore rendering the two concepts equally potent and essential to the full comprehension of the narrative. Finally, the presence of the supernatural oddities, alluded to in the descriptions of the novel's setting, confirms the impression that beneath the deceptively benign surface of Hardyan arbospaces thrives a ghastliness whose spectre never ceases to haunt its human denizens.

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