

THE SYMBOLISM OF NATURE IN THOMAS HARDY'S WESSEX TALES AND NOVELS

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Abstract: *Analysing the lives of the protagonists in Thomas Hardy's Wessex Tales and Novels, this paper aims at answering the following questions: Is their destiny shaped by a certain determinism lying in the environment? Do their decisions and feelings influence the natural surroundings by means of outward projection?*

If a mythical and archetypal reading will favour the assumption that the characters' reactions depend upon the cycles of nature, a psychoanalytical interpretation will focus upon the assumption that natural descriptions are in fact nothing but a representation of the characters' inner self.

Although apparently in contradiction, the two approaches reveal different facets of the same truth: in Hardy's tales and novels, nature is not just a mere decorative location; it is profoundly and uniquely bound to the characters' lives and destinies, sometimes becoming a character in the story.

The following pages were written as a tribute to Hardy's "dream country" (Alexander 7)¹ and his extraordinary talent, which allowed him to portray the struggle of individuals in tales and novels "set against a background of immemorial traditions and customs" (Galea 180). Receiving high critical attention, Hardy's prose has been generally acclaimed for its symbolic intensity and vivid evocation of atmosphere. It is not our intention here to identify the real places which Hardy directly or indirectly makes reference to in his literary work. What we are mainly interested in is to understand the complexity of the symbolism of the Hardy environment, which either influences the characters' decisions and lives or is just a mere reflection of their innermost emotions and feelings. In both cases, the interrelationship between man and his natural surroundings becomes a unique characteristic of what we can rightfully call the Hardy style.

The Victorian writer himself seems to have been troubled by the fact that his readers might misinterpret his idea of natural background. Consequently, in the Preface to *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Hardy indicates that the locations in his novel belong to a fictional

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¹ Used by Hardy to refer to Wessex, the denomination is adopted by Alexander in order to clarify the degree of reality and fiction in Hardy prose.

world, a “region of dream and mystery” (4)². First adopting the word “Wessex” in the chapters of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy regretfully admits that he did not anticipate the use of the term outside his fictional world:

Since then the appellation which I had thought to reserve to the horizons and landscapes of a merely realistic dream-country, has become more and more popular as a practical definition; and the dream-country has, by degrees, solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from. (4)

Disappointed that his readers might not seek to comprehend the message he wants to send, the writer simply asks them to forget about the real world and step into the dream-country he has imagined. Moreover, in the General Preface to the Wessex Edition of 1912, Hardy clearly emphasizes his desire for his characters and places to acquire universal value:

Thus, though the people in most of the novels (and in much of the shorter verse) are dwellers in a province bounded on the north by the Thames, on the south by the English Channel, on the east by a line running from Hayling Island to Windsor Forest, and on the west by the Cornish coast, they were meant to be typically and essentially those of any and every place where

Thought’s the slave of life, and life time’s fool

– beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal. (3)

Following Hardy’s wish for universality, we have not restricted our analysis only to those tales and novels which the author has grouped under the heading “Novels of Character and Environment” since we consider the setting represents a vital element in all his literary pieces, the “Romances and Fantasies” and the “Novels of Ingenuity” (1) included³. Far from being exhaustive, our analysis will focus on a double-layered interpretation of the role and functions of nature in Hardy’s prose. On the one hand, we will highlight the mythical and archetypal significance of the relationship between man and nature and on the other hand, we will attempt to illustrate the idea that natural surroundings are designed to mirror the protagonists’ tormented lives.

At first sight, the setting of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, as reflected by its title, depicts the image of “some kind of melancholy Arcadia” (Awano 11). The picture of a perfect rural life, in which man and nature are organically bound envisages the Arcadian

² The supporters of the psychoanalytical interpretation of Hardy’s tales and novels will conclude that nature is only an outward projection of the characters’ inner self.

³ The justification Hardy provides for his own classification of his tales and novels is slightly ambiguous and has been probably based more on sales figures rather than issues such as themes, plot, setting, characters, style, etc.

archetype derived from people's idealised image of the world. Throughout the novel, the characters' stories develop in accordance with the four seasons. In the preface to the novel, Hardy draws the attention to the fact that the members of the Mellstock parish choir go "on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week, through all weathers, to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes" (3). His remark anticipates the subsequent symbolism of the novel.

The description of the bitter wintry conditions under which the parish choir assembles no longer reminds us of an idealised pastoral landscape, but more likely of a realistic scenery. The characters' symbolic names such as Dewy or Leaf add new elements to the analogy man-nature. As leaves in the wind, the protagonists lead an ephemeral life dependent on the cycles of nature. Not surprisingly, *Under the Greenwood Tree* consists of four parts, each of them entitled as one of the four seasons and describing seasonal episodes as a Christmas supper, a nutting or a honey-taking. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the cycle of seasons is easily traceable if we look at the references to the days celebrating saints: St. Thomas's Day (10), Purification Day (42), White Monday (46), Lady Day (78, 279) and White Tuesday (160). On the same wavelength, Galea considers that in the first of Hardy's great tragedies, *The Return of the Native*, "human experience is an echo of the cycles of nature" (184). The arrival of autumn is signalled by the Fifth of November bonfires; the role of the Ancient choir of the Greek tragedies is now played by the group of furze-cutters who gather on the heath or at the Silent Woman where they come with the intention of congratulating Wildeve and Thomasin on their assumed marriage which did not actually take place because of a lack of license or more likely because of Wildeve's reluctance to marry her. Clym Yeobright is expected home for Christmas and his return is viewed as a sign of hope and rebirth, especially for Eustacia who deludes herself into believing that he is the man to take her away from the heath. The reconciliation and marriage of the two couples (Tamsin Yeobright – Damon Wildeve and Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright) is possible only in spring since this season is associated with the prospect of a happy ending. Nevertheless, Clym's determination to remain on the heath and the gradual weakening of his sight will purportedly lead to the inevitable outcome: the death of both Wildeve and Eustacia. The summer is the season of tragic revelations such as Eustacia's disappointment with Clym and Mrs. Yeobright's unexpected death on the last hot day of August. The next Fifth of November marks the ending of a tragic cycle, whereas the new spring comes with the Maypole Festivity and brings about Thomasin's marriage to the faithful Diggory Venn.

From a wider perspective, the four cycles of the natural world have been associated by Frye with four narrative patterns (spring/comedy, summer/romance, autumn/tragedy and winter/irony; satire) out of which the mythos of autumn and the mythos of winter seem to better define Hardy's novels. Many Hardy characters become an embodiment of the tragic hero who has the potential of being superior and dreams of happiness, but will never achieve his goals due to the puzzling complexities of life entrapping him in a pre-determinism inscribed in the natural surroundings. As representatives of Mother Nature, the women in Hardy's prose are indeed memorable

tragic figures, victims of their illusions and of circumstances. Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* and Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are perhaps the most powerful women characters ever created by Hardy.

Included by Giordano among Hardy's "self-destructive" characters, the mysterious, dark-haired Eustacia Vye is a goddess of the night and of the magnificent Egdon Heath, which she paradoxically hates and rejects, hopelessly dreaming of the glamour of city life. Her irretrievable hybris is her indifference towards the cycles of nature, or the combination of pagan and Christian rituals dominating an ancestral mode of existence. Her hostility to the heath is irrational and foreshadows her damnation and ultimate death as she herself confesses to Wildev: "Tiss my cross, my shame, and will be my death!" (71).

If the seclusion of the heath leads Eustacia to desperate acts, the isolation and loneliness of the beautiful Vale of Blackmoor could be the reason for Tess's innocence and her seduction. A microcosm of the world, Hardy's Wessex is used in this novel to follow Tess in the different stages of her unhappy life. Sîrbulescu advises the potential readers of the novel to "be aware that Tess's life begins and ends in spring, that she falls in love during the fecund summer months, and that she marries, ominously, in the dead of winter" (218). The summer richness of the Talbothay's Farm where Tess meets Angel contrasts with the desolation of Flintcomb-Ash, the farm on which Tess got a job after Angel Clare's departure.

Forced to pay for the sin of a member of her ancient family who once killed a young woman, Tess's efforts to improve her condition are doomed to failure from the beginning. Even if her gesture to kill Alec is in fact a necessary act to restore the natural order of things and an understandable act of revenge against the man who destroyed her life, Tess's murder is still a fatal hybris which requires sacrifice and restoration. Rejected by the Christian church, Tess finds shelter in the "heathen temple" of Stonehenge, a symbol of eternal stability and equilibrium, "older than the centuries; older than the D'Urbervilles" (268). The remnant of a very old civilization which worshipped nature by bringing human sacrifices, Stonehenge suggests the insignificance of man in the face of nature and fate as well as the futility of his efforts to fight against Blind Destiny.

Like Antigone or Iphigenia, Tess disposes of her earthly assets and advises Alec to continue life by marrying her younger sister Liza-Lu and begetting children. Angel's ritual marriage to his sister-in-law would symbolize his union with Tess, but in a purified, improved version of the world. Her depersonalization and resurrection in spirit is the normal consequence of the miserable life of "a pure woman, faithfully presented." Similarly to Eustacia or Tess, the male protagonists in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *Jude the Obscure* are powerful figures engaged in a perpetual struggle with the cruel forces of the universe.

The Dionysian myth is at the centre of Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* since Henchard's drunkenness tempts him to commit the unforgettable sin of selling his wife Susan and his daughter Elisabeth-Jane to a sailor, Newson, for five guineas. When he is sober again, Henchard is seized by remorse and seeks redemption, making a twenty-

one-year vow to touch no drink. Settling at Casterbrifge, the hay-trusser initially proves that strong will and determination can change man's fate. After eighteen years, Henchard becomes a highly respected grain merchant and mayor of the town of Casterbridge. In spite of the fact that he spends most of his life trying to make amends, Henchard continues to make one mistake after another. Reunited with his wife and daughter, he remarries Susan and treats Elisabeth with affection. The problem consists in the fact that, during his separation from Susan, he has had an adventure with Lucetta, whom he now abandons in favour of his lost family. As if he can never appreciate what he has, Henchard mistreats both his daughter and Donald Farfrae, the young Scot who becomes the mayor's manager in his corn business. The beginning of his downfall is near. He soon receives one blow after another: Susan dies; Elisabeth-Jane proves to be Newson's daughter for Henchard's daughter had died; Lucetta marries Donald Farfrae who prospers in a separate business as Henchard's fortunes decline.

Without being aware, Henchard chooses a profession which is dedicated to Dionysus because according to Frazer "there are indications, few but significant, that Dionysus was conceived as a deity of agriculture and the corn" (344). A Dionysian atmosphere is again evident at the end of the novel when the inhabitants of Mixen Lane resort to the procession of the skimmington, an archaic ritual meant to punish the unfaithful woman who has deceived her husband without his knowledge. Seeing the ignorant revelers accompanying a donkey upon whose back are the effigies of Henchard and herself tied together back to back by the elbows, Lucetta is so shocked that she has an epileptic seizure and dies through miscarriage. Thus, she is punished for her mistake and becomes "the scapegoat of their frustrations and promiscuous life" (Galea 192).

Rash and impetuous, Henchard commits the final mistake of telling Newson that his daughter is dead. When Elisabeth-Jane finds out the truth, she behaves in a true Oedipian fashion and does not forget Henchard although his actions have been dictated by his love for her. Henchard's death is symbolic since he is ready to accept his punishment as an act of self-denial, of dissolution and extinction in the middle of nature.

Correspondingly, Jude Fawley from Hardy's final novel lives under the sign of Dionysus too. His strong inclination to drinking is one of the factors which contribute to his decline. Moreover, the child archetype could be applied to the character of Jude, of whom we find out that he is an orphan. Another interesting character in the novel is Little Father Time, Arabella's son by Jude who hangs the younger children and himself and embodies the binary nature of the child archetype.

As in all his tales and novels, topography is important in *Jude the Obscure*. Each section of the novel is named after a town, first Marygreen, then Christminster, then Melchester, Shaston, "Aldbrickham and Elsewhere" and "Christminster Again." Perhaps Jude's greatest error is that he rejects rural life following Eustacia Vye's tradition. He longs for a life as a scholar and the scene in which he catches a glimpse of Christminster from a distant hill near Marygreen is memorable because of Jude's idealization of the place, which is illuminated by the setting sun and looks like a heavenly Jerusalem.

Last but not least, a few lines have to be dedicated to a brief overview of Hardy's *Wessex Tales* and *Life's Little Ironies*, his most notable collections of short stories which, even if less elaborated, reveal the same fascination with old superstitions and rituals. The cycles of nature influence the characters' actions, as it also happens in Hardy's novels. In *The Distracted Preacher*, the revival of nature in spring provides the background for Stockdale's growing interest in Lizzy Newberry. The shepherds in *The Three Strangers* do not seem to be bothered to live in complete Arcadian isolation and they are willing to accept the whims of the weather in a house "exposed to the elements on all sides" (14). Anxiously waiting for her husband and children, Joanna Jolliffe in *To Please his Wife* is witness to the passage of the seasons from their optimistic departure in spring to "the long dreary winter of their absence" (64).

Critics have not remained indifferent to the connection between the Hardyian settings and the characters' state of mind. For example, Enstice notices an evolution in Hardy's novels, a progressive shift from the simple, concrete, and realistic settings of the early works to complex, abstract, and perceptual psychological and mental worlds of *Tess*, and especially, *Jude*, from the "enclosed" landscapes of town, village, farm, heath and woodland to the "landscapes of the mind" (XI), literary settings which exist only in the minds of the author, readers and characters. Going even further, we will prove that Hardy's earliest fiction is an illustration of the how natural surroundings are a representation of the characters' emotions and feelings too.

The picture of the woods in *Under the Greenwood Tree* is an attribution of human feelings to nature: "At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall" (5). In Freudian terms, it could be argued, the woods stand for a symbol of our deep, wild subconscious seen as an integral part of the natural world. The symbolism of the trees acquires new meanings in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* where Elfride and Stephen find shelter in the middle of nature in a place where "no wind blew inside the protecting belt of evergreens, wasting its force upon the higher and stronger trees forming the outer margin of the grove" (16). The protection of the forest is only apparent because, for the modern psychoanalyst releasing the uncontrollable forces of the subconscious may lead to dangerous situations. As we will see later in the novel, Elfride follows the same love pattern in the same settings with her new wooer, Henry Knight.

Similarly, the love story of Lady Viviette Constantine in *Two on a Tower* is the story of her quest for self-discovery, of her struggle between her "id," the psychological reservoir of one's instincts and most primitive urges and her "ego" or the conscious self. The former allures her to the younger Swithin St. Cleeve who experiences for her the Oedipus complex or the desire of every male child to sleep with his mother. The latter determines her to obey to the moral rules of society and finally give up Swithin and marry the older bishop. The setting is again a representation of her inner struggle. The Great House she lives in is surrounded by "darkness" (18) and the lovers' meetings can only take place under the cover of darkness. Reminding us of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,

young Swithin asks Lady Constantine to imagine “your mind feeling its way through a heaven of total darkness” (24), in other words, freeing her unconscious desires or fears. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the symbolism of the setting is further enriched by the reference to the tower, a phallic symbol designating the place where Lady Constantine meets Swithin and secretly plans to marry him. The storm which breaks out when they decide to elope is again a symbol of the intensity of Viviette’s feelings: “a circular hurricane, exceeding in violence any that had preceded it, seized hold upon Rings-Hill Speer at that moment with the determination of a conscious agent” (75).

Egdon Heath, the setting in *The Return of the Native*, is also a symbol of darkness. As Cohen notices, “Hardy presents human inwardness as materially contiguous with the external surface of the earth” (IV). Hence if the heath is a dark, dangerous place for Eustacia Vye, for Thomasin there were no “demons in the air, and malice in every bush and bough” (292). The wildness of the powers of nature is once more an indication of the characters’ hesitations or torment. In the final scene of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Stonehenge becomes “a Very Temple of the Winds” (267), reflecting the characters’ rout and despair. The chromatic element enhances the dramatic atmosphere, gradually grasping the passage from darkness to dawn, in fact Tess’s awakening and the end of her inner quest. The coming of light is the coming of death for the unconscious.

In the same way, we can look at the topography in *Jude the Obscure* as “not just a neutral background for the action but an essential embodiment of the characters’ dance of desire” (Miller XXI). The protagonist’s devastating passion makes him toil up the hill to Shaston to meet Sue again, though she is now wedded to Phillotson or drives him to a five-mile uphill walk from the train station in Alfredson to visit Sue for the last time. The characters’ movements can be traced on a map of the mind because they portray their inner struggles.

No matter if we resort to a mythical and archetypal reading of the Hardyian prose or to a psychoanalytical interpretation, the analysis will prove a valuable source for the understanding of the symbolism of nature which acquires poetical representation especially throughout his novels. In spite of Hardy’s wish to see his Wessex as a universal setting, we cannot deny the high degree of local specificity, which asks for a deeper insight into the ancient embroidery of myths, archetypes and rituals. On too many occasions nature becomes a mirror of the characters’ inner self so we cannot overlook a possible psychoanalytical interpretation as well. To sum up, even if they ask new questions and set forth new arguments about the role and functions of setting, both approaches help us to reveal some of the reasons for Hardy’s characters’ intrinsic bond to nature.

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