



Thomas Hardy's Nature Symbolism: A descriptive theoretical study

El-Tag El-Nour A. Ibrahim¹ . Yousif Omer Babiker²

^{1,2} Sudan University of Science and Teachnology -College of Languages

ABSTRACT:

This study aims to highlight the use of nature symbolism in Thomas Hardy's novels of Characters and Environment. The study investigates one of Hardy's most accomplished writing techniques in terms of his symbolic employment of natural features.

The importance of this study emerges from the fact that Hardy's attitude of story-telling, along with his nature symbolism, has recently come to be associated with eco-critical studies; which enhances eco-critics, as a literary genre, to find its right way to the modern literary criticism.

Hardy's nature symbolism has proved to open new horizons for environmentalism; he has drawn the world's attention to the importance of nature. Accordingly, a great number of pressing groups are now starting to raise environmental issues in relation to global environment crisis.

Key words : *symbolism, environmentalism, nature, eco-critics.*

المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على توظيف "رمزية الطبيعة" في روايات توماس هاردي والتي تعرف بـ " روايات الأشخاص والبيئة ". الدراسة أيضاً تبحث أحد أهم الطرق التي اتبعها هاردي في تكنيك كتاباته الأدبية، ألا وهي طريقة "ترميز الطبيعة" في السرد الروائي.

إن أهمية هذه الدراسة تتبع من حقيقة أن تناول هاردي لرمزية الطبيعة ارتبط مؤخرًا بدراسات "النقد البيئي"، و الذي أسهم بدوره في ظهور وبلورة هذه الدراسات كمدسة نقدية حديثة.

إن طريقة هاردي في تناوله للظواهر الطبيعية في رواياته وعلاقة ذلك بالإنسان مهد الطريق وفتح آفاقاً واسعة لما يعرف الآن بـ " الأدب البيئي "، وهذا بدوره أدار أنظار العالم، وخاصة جماعات الضغط التي تطالب بالحفاظ على البيئة، إلى ضرورة معالجة المشاكل البيئية الراهنة.

كلمات مفتاحية: الرمزية، الأدب البيئي، الطبيعة، النقد البيئي.

INTRODUCTION:

Symbolism originally refers to a literary poetry movement that emerged in France about 1880. And, its reached its highest level about 1890. Thus, Symbolism, in general, is the practice or art of using

an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, a person, a place, or an object can all have symbolic meanings.

In the Western culture symbolism is believed to have been derived from three main sources; the Western folklore heritage, the Old Testament and the Bible. As a literary device, symbolism is indirectly aimed at emphasizing particular concepts and themes, and it evokes rather than describes. It is basically concerned with impression, intuition and sensation.

However, in Hardy's novels, particularly those which are known as *Novels of Character and Environment*, the author usually suggests a certain mood or emotion. He actually concentrates on the natural features; including natural phenomena, plants, animals and insects which are employed to symbolize or hint at a particular event, instead of saying it blatantly. Nevertheless, the concept of symbolism in modern literature and art has extended to reach broader horizons, including the use of symbol to represent physical things and abstract ideas.

Theoretical Background

Writers in general, and poets and novelists in particular, use literary devices to add layers of meanings to their writings. One way of employing this writing technique is through the means of symbolism. The symbols that writers use are usually well known in literature or culture. Understanding the symbols being used, can help enhance their connection to the story, to the poem or any other literary work.

This in turn, leads to profounder appreciation, and a better understanding as well. In our modern time, of course, and with the huge diversity of media, there are different ways that help understand symbolism; for instance, consider how movies, television, and music videos use symbols of sound and

light effects ...etc. to immediately make the audiences think of, or associate with other things which might apparently seem to be irrelevant.

In Western culture, most of the symbolic concepts have been derived from religious traditions or Greek background. According to one Academic Language Institute (www.studyzone.org), colors, natural elements, seasons of the year, dawn, darkness, animals, birds and insects are the most commonly used symbols in English literature. In her book *The Dictionary of English Literature*, Dorothy Eagle (1970 ; 558) states that, "Symbolism is a French poetry movement which appeared when the poems of Mallarme and Verlaine were becoming known, and reached its highest about 1890".

Symbolism, in this sense, aimed at evoking feelings rather than describing events. Thus, its main purpose is associated with impression, intuitions and sensations.

'Nature', which is mainly linked with symbolism, is termed in Greek as *physis*, and in Latin it is *natura*. At first it was referred to as the nature of something, as in Lucretius, the dramatic monologue by Lord Tennyson titled *On the Nature of Things*. But it came to stand alone, perhaps by means of phrases such as 'the nature of everything', to mean the universe or the natural world. Ovid, the ancient Roman poet, (43 B.C -18 A.D) mentioned "nature" as featureless before the creation (*Met*; 1.6).

According to late ancient sources, The Orphics, a Greek mystic religious group, praised *Physis* as the mother of all, all-wise, all-ruling, and immortal; hence, the term *Mother Nature*, appeared for

the first time, but the personification was not sustained for long. The more ancient myths about Gaia (*the earth*) must also have contributed to encourage this kind of personification. A good example is Homer's *Hymn to the Mother of All* whose two fascinating opening lines are :

"I shall sing of well-founded Earth,
mother of all,
Eldest of all, who nourishes all things
living on land."

It is to be observed that both Greek and Latin words for "nature" and "earth" (Greek *gaia*, *ge*, Latin *tellus*, *terra*) are feminine. Later, it was referred to as Mother Nature as in Lucretius' (*ibid*) *alma Venus*.

Thus the word 'nature' is used in ancient Roman and Greek poetry to mean the word 'earth'.

Nature as an allegorical figure was also mentioned in Bernard Sylvestris and Alanus de Insulis; the latter's '*Complaint of Nature*' influenced *The Romance of the Rose*, where Nature is personified as the '*Mistress of Venus*'.

Significance of the Study:

This study is intended to draw the attention to the importance of nature in our lives; and to the relationship between man and the "still nature."

To many critics, the notion of exploiting the existence of nature in literary works has enhanced much of new literary movements such as Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism; which view nature in the literary writing in a different way. Because of nature glorification in literary writings, special concern about environmentalism is brought under focus.

In addition, global attention has been drawn to the romantic interest in nature, an interest which has significantly

revolutionized effective new world concepts in terms of nature preservation.

Hardy's Novel of Characters and Environment:

Hardy's profound knowledge of the Greek and Latin cultural heritage has enabled him to make use of tremendous references in order to enrich his narrative. In his works of fiction that are known as the Novels of Characters and Environment; which include *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Return of the Native* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. In them, he creates a kind of a central axis between nature and human emotion. In fact, Hardy is incomparable when he mingles human emotion with the natural details to portray a particular situation or feeling. He addresses the human ego with deep emotion and makes the reader listen to his characters in emotional and vivid pictures. Thus, his symbolism follows the same trend of touching and effectiveness.

It seems that Hardy's nature symbolism comes in with response to the existence and movement of nature itself. He believes that humans and other living things are of physical and spiritual natural symmetry, an idea which later was adopted by the movement of Transcendentalism. This movement emphasizes the idea of man relating himself with nature. The Transcendentalists believe that God expresses himself through nature and if human beings relate themselves to nature; actually they are relating themselves to God. This view eventually emphasizes the idea of the "*unity of the universe*" which is basically associated with the Naturalists.

Hardy also employs symbolism to enhance his narration technique and

make his literary work richer and colorful. In addition, using such writing technique has proved to give the meaning profound dimensions. Although *Far from the Madding Crowd* has some of the qualities of Shakespearean comedy, most of the Novels of Character and Environment also known as "The Wessex Novels" such as *The Return of the Native* are tragic in the general conception, and thus, nature is employed to reflect human behavior. Symbolism, in this regard, is an additional layer of meaning as well as an effective literary device to convey the writer's point of view. The conclusion is not always, however, entirely happy, as Hardy frequently reminds us of the future of "Rural England". As can be seen in the case of the marriage of the enigmatic Diggory Venn as an inseparable part of the consequence of Hardy's modification of his original plan to satisfy the readers of his serial version.

Despite an obvious fascination for those capable of powerful emotions and tragic fates, Hardy nevertheless expresses sympathy for the lower orders. Then rapidly departing their ancestral cottages in search of a better standard of living in the "urban roar". In a lyric, Hardy conveys this meaning; "Where the Picnic Was" of England's industrial cities. Hardy attempts to record such customs as the mumming in *The Return of the Native* and such superstitions as the fetishistic wax doll for these folk-ways were being swiftly destroyed, along with the old folklore and orally-transmitted ballads and tales, by education, migration, and printed books and papers. Where sometimes, he hints, or makes gestures to symbolize or foreshadow future predictions.

Hardy's symbols in these novels are of different forms : figure of speech such as an object, a person or a situation where layers of meanings can be given. However, the author sometimes uses metaphors that are laden with symbolism. For example, comparing two things that are not similar, then showing what they have in common, as will be explained.

Hardy's Novels of Character and Environment convey a strong sense of fatalism, a view that in life human actions have been predetermined, either by the very nature of things, or by God, or by Fate. Hardy dramatizes his conception of destiny in human affairs as the "Imminent Will" in his poetry. By his emphasis on chance and circumstance in the plots of his stories, Hardy consistently suggests that human's will is not free but fettered; this idea, in fact, is derived from the general conception that Hardy believes in; "the law of nature". In both *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, for example, he employs chance coincidence as more than a mere device of plotting. Dick Dewey in *Under the Greenwood Tree* is called away to a friend's funeral on the same day that his beloved, Fancy Day, is to debut as the church organist, and Angel returns to Tess from Brazil and near-death after she has established a common law marriage with Alec. Things in "Nature" are left for natural evolution. This vision may well explain Hardy's fondness of the eco-system in its natural arrangement.

Color Symbolism:

Generally, colors are used by poets and novelists to symbolize different meanings in their literary work in many

ways. Sometimes colors can be used to describe clothing of characters, or in the setting of the story.

So, they are mainly used to describe more about the characters or the situation. Here, for example, are some colors and their symbolic denotation in the Western culture:

White for the good, purity, innocence. Black for evil. Red for love or courage. Blue for beauty and loyalty. Purple for royalty. Gold for wealth and power. Green for hope, growth and new life. It is important to observe that landscape, which reflects the green color, is not only a descriptive background in a typical Hardy work of fiction; it is a living and dynamic force that reflects the characters' inner motivations and helps determine their actions and responses. Hardy is frequently inclined to create both actual and symbolic landscapes by using different sets of symbols for each novel but almost with unified themes.

Trees and Seasons Symbolism:

It may be observed that the title of the novel; *Under the Greenwood Tree*, for example, is suggestive of the implication of the tree and the reference to the 'Tree of Creation'. Thus, the idea of the *Unity of the Universe* is strikingly present.

Close reading of the Novels of Characters and Environment will take us through different events and situations. Yet, commonly demonstrates how the author employs natural elements, animals or plants, to symbolize other physical things, or to foreshadow future events. Other symbolic features in the novel above mentioned, are the *trees*. Hardy lists sets of a great variety of plants with special significance to apple trees. An apple tree in Christian

references symbolizes the underlying story of Eden and the story of the Fall. More pastoral elements have been employed among others including the seasonal cycles. Hardy seems to divide *Under the Greenwood Tree* into four parts to coincide with winter, spring, summer and autumn, the year's four seasons. Each part comprises a number of chapters. Symbolism of seasons, in general, as Michel Feber's (1999; 183) states: "Symbolism (in this sense) is selected from the years' slow rounding of the four seasons to represent the circle of life". Many of the meanings of the trees and flowers, beasts and birds, for instance, that are found in this novel depend on their comings and goings at specific seasons of the year. Indeed, seasons of the year have long been applied metaphorically to human lives, as can be observed in this conventional passage from *The Seasons* by James Thomson (1923; 265):

“See here thy pictur'd Life,
pass some few years, Thy flowering
Spring,
Thy Summer's ardent strength,
Thy sober Autumn passing into age,
And pale Winter comes at last, And
shuts the Scene”.

In the same context, Hardy employs the four seasons in his novel symbolically. He starts with winter to symbolize the end of the traditional rural lifestyle, signaling the beginning of a new era, that of Dick and Fancy which will come with spring. Summer and autumn are symbolic of plant's bearing of fruit, they imply reproduction and events.

Sometimes natural phenomena are used as symbols for time of life and other different things. For instance, here are the denotation of natural elements and other different things: dawn for liberty

and new era; night for death; sunrise for new beginning; sunset for the end; fall for middle age; spring for youth and new life; summer for young age; winter for old age.

Animals, Birds and Lower Creatures Symbolism:

In his novel *The Woodlanders*, for instance, Hardy skillfully employs a number of natural elements to symbolize or to foreshadow most of his story events. He predicts future losses in terms of wildlife and eco-systems. Dale Kramar (1985;23) comments that "It is a lost mythology as well as the rape of the woods by ruthless predators from the modern world". Even the trees in the book can be seen as silent mourners for Giles' loss. In his book *Hardy's Woodlanders*, Ralph Stewart (1990; 48) states that "One of the most important episodes in Thomas Hardy's *Woodlanders* is John South's rather early and unexpected death". Unlike other critics, he further explains the symbolic message about the incident and thus he comments "John South is afraid of a giant tree next to his house. Fitzpiers, the outsider, cuts the tree down in the middle of the night as a good deed towards South, when South wakes up the next day, sees the tree is gone, he dies from shock". This can be understood in the same context of Hardy's symbolism in relation to his pessimistic outlook and his fears about the future of the rural life. The episode clearly refers also to the destructive effect of the incomers from the "modern world" upon the traditional world of *The Woodlanders*. The same can be said in his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*; that the title of the novel; *Under the Greenwood Tree*, is suggestive of the implication of the "tree" and the reference to the 'Tree of

Creation' and, to the idea of the *Unity of the Universe* too, which is always present in most of Hardy's novels.

Nonetheless, Hardy is sometimes an optimist; for the scene in which he gathers multi-ecological features, thus described: "when the landscape appeared embarrassed with the sudden weight and brilliancy of leaves, when the nightjar comes ..., when the apple trees have bloomed, and the orchard-grass become spotted with fallen petals, when the faces of the delicate flowers are darkened by the honey- bees ...when the cuckoos, blackbirds and the sparrows become noisy and persisting intimates ..." (*Under the Greenwood Tree* ;133). This is an optimistic portrayal, hence, the symbolic implication of the streak of delight signals prelude to the couple's reunion and marriage. To confirm this idea, Hardy concludes the story by the singing of a nightingale, and when Fancy hears a loud musical voice, she says delightedly "Oh it's the nightingale". (*Under the Greenwood Tree* ;146).

The nightingale in the English literary heritage has been reckoned as the most spectacular bird in English literature. It has been numerously mentioned in thousands of poems from Homer to the twentieth century poetry. Even in ancient times it acquired an almost formulaic meaning as the bird of spring and mourning as well. Later on, the bird (nightingale) came to imply and be associated with love. Feber (1999; 200) states that : "Homer linked the bird with love and spring in the *Odyssey* and, it is *Venus* the goddess of spring, who makes the bird sing a song of love "

The same tradition is found in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, where the nightingale is defined as the bird "That

clepeth (calls) forth the grene leves newe"
(1985 ; 351).

In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which stands a landmark in Hardy's works of fiction, he astonishingly employs symbolism of ecological features to add impressive and touching layers of meanings to his themes and issues. Tess, the heroine of the novel, is also viewed by many critics as one of the most symbolic character in all Thomas Hardy's fictional works; she is a plain symbol of nature. In his writings, he is often inclined to illustrate and symbolize the theme of "Ache of Modernism". This is the most dominant theme in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, which, as has been noted by critics that, the novel portrays, in a symbolic way, the energy of traditional ways and the strength of the forces that are destroying them. Nature in the novel is personified in a woman called Tess. Angel's middle-class fastidiousness makes him reject Tess, a woman whom Hardy often portrays as a sort of Wessex Eve, in harmony with the natural world. If anyone abuses her, he actually abuses the common sense of nature! When he parts from her and goes to Brazil, the handsome young man becomes so ill that he is reduced to a "mere yellow skeleton". All these instances are typically interpreted as indications of the negative consequences of man's separation from nature, both in the creation of destructive machinery and in the inability to rejoice in pure nature.

Moon Symbolism:

Almost in each one of his novels of Characters and Environment, Hardy tells us about the emergence of the moon, when the country music band march towards the church before midnight. The author refers to the moon as

feminine, " The moon, in her third quarter, has risen since the snowstorm"(*Under the Greenwood Tree*;16).

In Latin and Greek culture the moon is symbolic of virginity and chastity. Symbolism here is of two folds; Hardy's intention is to imply Fancy's chastity and purity as Dick's joins the band with the sole intention of meeting his beloved, Fancy. On the other hand, the mention of the 'snowstorm' implies and foreshadows troubles that may obstruct Dick's endeavors to win Fancy's heart.

The moon is also associated with the church, and it is believed that it is a representation of the moon in Christian culture, as Michael Feber (*ibid*) has observed : " The church has been represented by the moon, shining benignly with the reflected light of Christ the sun, and the date of Easter is set as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox". In some parts of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* the moon is present. Tess, the story's number one character, is frequently seen in the moonlit nights with her friends. Feber adds "In Christian iconography, the Virgin Mary is sometimes shown with the moon under her feet".

Hardy's symbolism is sometimes very difficult to notice despite his obvious inclination to use it as a writing technique. Many critics attribute this to his special concern about the country people's lifestyle which, in a way, may be associated with good and bad omen, particularly at the author's time.

The Sense of Place:

Critics are now looking with great interest to glorifying what they call "*regionalism*" to represent world literature in a global sense. From this perspective, the concept of " *The Sense of Place*" has emerged.

The word "place" has come to mean a variety of things to the modern critics of fiction in general, and to the eco-critics in particular. At the simplest level, it usually refers to a writer's artistic use of a highly particularized physical environment, geographical region, or human community. 'Place' in this sense, has had many uses. One is, of course, the increased symbolic role played by the "setting" since the gothic era.

The concept of *The sense of place* as detailed in different places in Hardy's fiction is of special importance, for it provides a realistic, countrified backdrop against which the characters lead their lives, struggling with untoward circumstances. Hardy's study and accurate portrayal of nineteenth century rural society in Dorset and the surrounds of 'Wessex' of his novels seem to have helped him provide and present a microcosm of human life through which he has managed to comment on the universal conditions of human existence. However, in a typical Hardy story, the natural world is often described in great detail, and is made more significant than a mere setting against which the narrative unfolds. Hardy establishes a reciprocal relationship between environment and characters directly and symbolically, as it has been mentioned above. This helps to create a kind of interaction which serves to demonstrate the changing position of humans in the post-Darwinian Victorian period. The narrative voice is meant to depict the natural world in the same way that the appearance of different individuals are described, and vice versa. This kind of technique removes the sense of authority from

human hands, and helps place humans within the natural world, rather than ruling above it. As has been observed by Richard Altick (1991 ; 339) in his book *The Presence of the Present : "A Sense of Place"*, refers to the physical objects that filled and defined places, also it provided Victorian novelists with a rich new language for revealing aspects of character and registering subtle and not-so-subtle social, class, and moral distinctions". Beyond these more common senses of the term, John Alcorn (ibid; 112) gives the concept of place a post-Darwinian twist.

In *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence*, Alcorn coins the term "naturism" to describe a school of writers who use the concept of 'place ' in a special manner that involves both landscape and setting. "The naturist world," as Alcorn emphasizes, "is a world of physical organism, where biology replaces theology as the source of both psychic health and moral authority." Hardy, in this regard, seems to add more flavor to nature by using it in a symbolic way which makes him closer to both romanticists and realists.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, Hardy's classification clearly demonstrates the importance which he frequently attaches to the interaction between human life and the geographic surroundings, and the generating power of environment that determines the lives of the characters who inhabit it; which is related to the old notion that links between man and nature in different ways.

Hardy employs a number of techniques in his novels of Character and Environment; including metaphors and symbolism. Hence his ability, for

instance, to encapsulate the whole sense of the meaning and lesson of the story of both Tess Durbeyfield and Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

It is obvious, that the main character, Tess Durbeyfield is symbolic of purity and simplicity, while the second, who develops into Tess of the D'Urbervilles, is symbolized for nature spoiled and destroyed by modern life's complications. This seems to be stunning. Nevertheless, Hardy expresses pessimism and his worries about the future of rural England. Penny Boumelha (*ibid*;16) points out that Hardy " stresses the fact that Tess's individual story is precisely not the unique destiny of the exceptional, but rather the potential fate of any member of her sex and class in a society so determined that what is written on the body can never be erased". This idea is a general attitude, Tess's symbolic use as to reflect violation of nature in a particular place, can represent this kind of abuse anywhere.

Hardy's emphasis on nature shows, to some extent, the influence of the Darwinian theory on him. The role of fate and circumstance is of special importance in the plot of each of his stories. This echoes and underlines the evolutionary ideas, the effect of place upon chance, extinction, and survival.

Hardy's intention is to stress the important issues that are related to the welfare of the human race and the need for a life of peace. Nature and literary regionalism are obviously Hardy' favorite issues. Hence, his dedication of all his time and effort to the call for defending rural England and its wildlife. He remained absolutely loyal for his beliefs, even

in his retirement, he continued to emphasize the same themes and issues. Hardy is inclined to identify and stress the important correlation between humans and their environment, and highlight the significance of the interaction between them.

He claims, "...an object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious *Nature*". Thus, his writing technique removes the sense of authority from human hands, and helps place humans within the natural world, rather than ruling above it by means of a set of symbolic indications.

Conclusion:

To sum up, that Hardy's symbolism is unique in personifying natural elements when it associates with human behavior. With great talent, he employs literary symbolism through the use of green nature's positive aspects such as renewal, fertility and rebirth, as well as the counterbalancing wild, destructive, uncontrollable aspects of nature.

Close reading to the aforesaid novels, shows how Hardy's work of fiction uses nature as a basis for understanding human nature, suggesting that man is always already in *Nature*, and *Nature* is forever in him.

Despite the fact that Thomas Hardy belongs to the Victorian literary era, we can come to a conclusion that his themes and issues are absolutely different from those of his contemporary writers. He shows special interest in nature. His name has become associated with some literary terms such as '*sense of place*', '*unity of the universe*', '*mother earth*', '*inspiring nature*' and so on.

Hardy is believed to have revolutionized *nature* by resorting to it as a source of symbolism and inspiration. He is reckoned to have gone beyond the limits of a particular event in his narratives. His description of landscapes, for instance, is intended to make contrasts which helps him draw the reader's attention to the damage caused by the machine to the wildlife during his time. Hardy has come up with valuable philosophical views about nature and its importance in our lives. These views go far beyond the factual level of ecology as a science to a deeper level of self-awareness and "Earth wisdom". It is worth stating that his philosophy highly concerns both the living and non-living world. He seems to have viewed our world with new vision. Hence, Hardy is believed to have broadened the narrow limits within which the assumptions and values of his views have later been considered. He paved the way for a number of contemporary literary views that came to be adopted by critics of Modernism Movement, including the concepts of "Deep Ecology", "Environmental Literature", "Eco-system", "Eco-feminism" and even *Naturalism*.

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