

Exploring the Symbolism of Nature in the Works of Thomas Hardy: An Eco-critical perspective

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Abstract: This paper seeks to portray the employment of symbolism as connected with certain manifestations of nature in Thomas Hardy's novels from an ecocritical perspective. It examines Hardy's symbolic use of natural aspects, including flowers, trees, animals and other elements of the pure Wessex landscape of Hardy's novels. The significance of this research stems from the fact that Hardy's style and use of nature symbols has been linked to eco-critical studies, which helps the literary genre of eco-criticism find its proper place in contemporary literary criticism. Through exploring Hardy's naturalistic novels, mainly *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), this study tries to show how symbolism of natural scenery and human behaviour are intertwined to create a better understanding of the characters's psychological and sociological connections.

Keywords: symbolism, eco- criticism, nature, environmentalism, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

استكشاف رمزية الطبيعة في أعمال توماس هاردي: منظور بيئي نقدي

الدكتورة / أريج سعد المطيري

جامعة حفر الباطن | المملكة العربية السعودية

المستخلص: يسعى هذا البحث إلى تصوير استخدام الرمزية المرتبطة بتجليات معينة للطبيعة في روايات توماس هاردي وحسب المنظور البيئي النقدي الحديث. يدرس هذا البحث استخدام هاردي للرموز الطبيعية المتعلقة بمقاطعة وسكس الخاصة بالكاتب وخاصة الحيوانات والأزهار والأشجار وملامح أخرى، وتكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة في أن أسلوب هاردي السردى واستخدامه لرموز الطبيعة قد تم ربطه بالدراسات البيئية النقدية، مما يساعد في أن يجد هذا النوع الأدبي مكانه الصحيح في النقد الأدبي المعاصر. ويساعد البحث من خلال دراسة أعمال هاردي الروائية وخاصة رواية (تيس أوف ذا دوربيرفيلز 1891) أن يضيف ربطاً بين المشاهد الطبيعية في الرواية والشخصيات الفنية وكيفية فهم الأبعاد النفسية والاجتماعية لعلاقاتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرمزية، النقد البيئي، الطبيعة، السمات الطبيعية، البيئة، تيس أوف ذا دوربيرفيلز.

Introduction

As ecocritical studies show, the emphasis on Hardy's green novels discusses Hardy's depiction of the relationship between characters and their environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human experiences. In carrying out this study of Hardy's novels from the perspective of ecocriticism, this article merges the use of symbolism as the main tool used to cover the natural responses of the characters in throughout his novels of wide natural environment of Hardy's Wessex. Symbolism, as a historical and artistic movement, emerged in 19th-century France and Belgium (Abrams and Harpham, 2015), profoundly influencing poetry and other media, like music and visual arts. Rooted in the publication of Charles Baudelaire's groundbreaking work, *Les Fleurs du mal* [The Flowers of Evil] (1857), this literary movement sought to transcend material reality through evocative and metaphysical expressions. Between the 1860s and 1890s, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine created the Symbolist style, a unique way of writing and making art that focused on suggestion, symbols, and indirect meaning instead of clear descriptions. This style aimed to express emotions and deep ideas through symbols rather than showing things as they really are. The word "Symbolist" was first used by critic Jean Moréas. In art, Symbolism came from the darker side of Romanticism but was different because it was calm and structured instead of wild and emotional. (Denisoff, 2001)

Symbolism is the depiction of dual corresponding realities at one level of reference. Wilson (1999) defines symbolism as an attempt to convey unique personal sentiments via a meticulously considered and intricate combination of ideas expressed in an array of metaphors. Similarly, Bowra (1983), Abrams (1996), and Johnson (2019) expand the understanding of symbols, emphasizing their ability to represent meanings that go beyond their surface appearance. This tendency to uncover the deeper psychological and emotional aspects of human experience, makes symbolism a vital tool in literature, one that effectively conveys the complexities of an advanced era. Symbolism goes beyond just telling a story or showing an image. It is a thoughtful practice that reveals the deeper nature of reality. By linking the physical world with the spiritual and emotional, symbols act as a bridge between what we can see and what we cannot, helping us understand life's mysteries, the human experience, and the emotions that shape it.

Symbolism in literature refers to the use of symbols, objects, characters, or events that stand for something beyond their literal meaning to convey deeper meanings, themes, or ideas. Writers use symbolism to explore complex concepts like love, death, identity, and human nature. It allows them to communicate abstract or emotional ideas in a more vivid and impactful way. For example, in William Blake's poetry, the rose often symbolizes both beauty and suffering (Abrams, 1996). In Herman Melville's *"Moby Dick"*, the whale represents nature's power, the unknown, and obsession (Martin, 2009). Similarly, in George Orwell's *"Animal Farm"*, the farm animals symbolize social classes, political figures, and ideologies (Bloom, 2009).

The Symbolist movement began in the late 19th century as a response to Naturalism, which focused on showing life in a very realistic and detailed way. While Naturalism looked at the external world and aimed for accuracy, Symbolism was more focused on emotions, inner experiences, and things that can't be easily seen or explained (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). Instead of focusing on the real world, Symbolists explored dreams, emotions, and the unknown, often using myths, legends, and mysterious images to express these deeper ideas (Harrison, 2016). By using symbols, writers could convey complex ideas and emotions without directly explaining them, making their stories richer and more meaningful.

Hardy's works and their use of Symbolism and Naturalism show a blend of both literary movements, which helps to explore the complexities of human experience and the natural world in his novels. Naturalism in Hardy's works is evident in his portrayal of the characters' lives, shaped by social conditions, environment, and heredity. Like the Naturalists, Hardy emphasizes how external forces influence individuals, often leading them to tragic outcomes. In novels like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's characters are subjected to the harshness of their environments, and their lives are shaped by these uncontrollable factors. This reflects the Naturalist view that humans are victims of their circumstances, much like the characters in Émile Zola's novels (Harrison, 2016).

However, Symbolism also plays a significant role in Hardy's writing. He often uses symbols to convey deeper emotional and philosophical meanings. For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the stone circle and Tess's white dress symbolize her innocence, while her later fall reflects her fate tied to both societal expectations and her personal choices. Similarly, in *The Return of the Native*, Hardy uses the heath as a symbol of both freedom and confinement, reflecting the inner conflicts of his characters. These symbols help to convey abstract ideas, emotions, and the mystical elements of human existence, which align more closely with Symbolist principles (Abrams & Harpham, 2015).

Hardy's blending of both movements allows him to present not only the stark realities of life but also the internal emotional world of his characters. By using Naturalism, Hardy explores how societal and environmental factors shape his characters' fates. At the same time, his use of Symbolism adds emotional and philosophical depth, emphasizing the complex relationship between the individual and the world around them. This leads to the view that Hardy's attempt at naturalist tendencies coincides with the modern ecological explorations in literary texts. "Ecocriticism", which is a late twentieth century discipline, has been defined by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", it "studies relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world" (p. xviii - xx).

According to Pippa Marland (2013) Ecocriticism is "An umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere" (847).

Notwithstanding the different waves of ecocriticism, mentioned by Marland (2013), the main interest for ecocriticism remains to "investigate the role of the natural environment in literature" (Al Qudah & Al Ahmad. 2024. P. 379). Nature has always been a backdrop for literary plots and scenes ever since the early times of Shakespeare and the romantic poets. Attempts at exploring the ecocritical values in the works of Hardy are numerous. They, however, center on two important novels, *Jude the Obscure* (1895) (Ninčetiović, 2022) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) (Vanjani, 2021, Bertrand, 2022a).

In her study, "An Ecocritical Reading of Hardy's *The Woodlanders*: Supernature and EcoGothic", Blin-Cordon. (2022) discusses the effects of industrialisation on the pure environment of Wessex. She contends that since one of the aims of ecocriticism is "the study of the interactions between organisms and the environment," the relations between men and their environment and vice versa; the novel, then, merits the status of an ecocritical debate. (2)

To begin with flowers, Hardy's works are often loaded with flowers as symbols to convey deeper emotional and thematic meanings, reflecting the characters' inner lives and relationships. This method of symbolism is particularly evident in his novels like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where flowers represent a wide range of emotions, from innocence and purity to love, desire, and death. For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy uses flowers to symbolize Tess's innocence and purity, especially through the imagery of the white flowers that surround her in the early parts of the novel. Tess's white dress and the flowers she encounters in the story, like the daisy and hawthorn, highlight her initial purity and her connection to nature. However, as Tess's life takes a darker turn, the symbolism of flowers shifts to reflect her tragic fate. Flowers like the red poppies and roses later represent the themes of guilt, sexuality, and loss of innocence, showing how nature mirrors the inner turmoil of the characters (Abrams & Harpham, 2015).

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, flowers are used to reflect the nature of the relationships between characters. For example, Bathsheba Everdene, the protagonist, is associated with the rose, symbolizing both beauty and passion. The different flowers given to her by her suitors—such as wildflowers from Gabriel Oak and lavender from Boldwood—represent their feelings for her and the varying nature of their love. The changing symbolism of flowers also ties into the shifting dynamics of these relationships and Bathsheba's emotional growth (Harrison, 2016).

In these works, Hardy's use of the language of flowers serves not only as a method to convey deeper meanings but also as a way to connect human emotions to the natural world, suggesting that the landscape, like flowers, is intertwined with human experience. Flowers in Hardy's novels are more than just natural elements; they are part of the symbolic language he uses to explore the complexities of life, love, and fate.

Bertrand (2022a) suggests that Hardy's novels, which are often classified within the pastoral genre, actually offers a deeper ecological commitment by focusing on the interactions between characters and their environment. Considering it one of the most phenomenologically evident novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), "is one striking example of a work that introduces ecological reflections under the cover of the eponymous character's adventures" (Bertrand, 2022a, 3). Spiritually, Tess has been transplanted in the Wessex natural scene: "she was, for one thing, physically and mentally suited among these new surroundings. The sapling which had rooted down to a poisonous stratum on the spot of its sowing had been transplanted to a deeper soil" (Hardy, 1898, 129). Here, the environment plays a significant role in shaping the lives and emotions of the characters. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, Hardy uses the Wessex landscape to mirror Tess's emotions. The settings around her, like the heath, symbolize both her purity and the harsh circumstances she faces. At first, the natural world around Tess reflects hope and innocence, but as her life becomes more tragic, the environment shifts to reflect her emotional pain and isolation. As Hardy suggests, the environment is not just there; it interacts with Tess's

fate and serves as a symbol of her struggles. It's not just a background but an active part of the story, often reflecting the inner feelings and struggles of the characters. The natural world often represents the fate and challenges the characters face, showing how their lives are influenced by forces they cannot control.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy does something similar with nature. Jude has big dreams of becoming educated and escaping his working-class background, but nature works against him, just like society does. The rugged hills and cliffs of Wessex represent the obstacles that stand in his way, reflecting his inner conflict and sense of entrapment. The landscape is a metaphor for Jude's battles against both his personal desires and external limitations (Gatrell, 2006).

Hardy often presents nature as indifferent to human suffering, almost as if it's a force of fate. As Miller (2011) points out, nature in Hardy's Wessex is both beautiful and unforgiving, echoing the complex, often contradictory emotions and experiences of his characters. The landscape changes over time, just like his characters are shaped by the passing of time and the societal forces around them. Nature reflects these shifts, making it clear that people's lives are heavily influenced by things they can't control.

In Hardy's work, the environment actively influences the characters' emotions and fates. As Purdy (2014) observes, nature symbolizes both external challenges and internal struggles. It reflects the characters' emotional and spiritual states, making the relationship between them complex and meaningful. Hardy does not merely use nature as a backdrop; his characters are deeply connected to their environment, highlighting how fate and external forces shape their lives. Through nature, Hardy paints a world where human agency is constantly challenged, adding depth to his stories.

Color symbolism plays an important role in literature, conveying emotions, themes, and character traits. In Thomas Hardy's works, color often represents the internal states of characters or symbolizes broader themes such as fate, love, and loss.

For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy uses the color red to symbolize both temptation and tragedy. Tess's red dress at the beginning of the novel marks her as a woman of beauty and vitality, but it also foreshadows the tragic events that will follow. The red symbolizes her innocence that will be lost, but also the passionate force of her emotions and the sacrifices she must make. This color reflects both the vibrant and destructive forces at play in Tess's life (Hardy, 1998b).

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy uses the color white to symbolize purity and innocence, especially in relation to characters like Sue Bridehead. However, as the novel progresses and Sue experiences pain and disillusionment, the color white becomes associated with repression and societal constraints. The shift in the symbolic meaning of white illustrates Sue's internal conflict as she navigates the boundaries between societal expectations and personal freedom (Hardy, 1998).

Throughout Hardy's novels, color symbolism adds layers of meaning to the text, allowing readers to better understand the complex emotional and psychological landscapes of the characters. It helps convey the characters' experiences without overtly stating them, enriching the narrative and giving deeper insight into the characters' worlds.

In addition, Hardy's use of color symbolism is often linked to the broader themes of fate and nature. For example, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the color green is associated with nature's vitality and life, contrasting with the darker, more somber colors that symbolize fate and loss. Green symbolizes growth and possibility, but also the challenges that come with change and the passage of time (Hardy, 1992).

In Thomas Hardy's novels, trees and seasons are used as symbols to represent deeper meanings about life, death, and personal growth. These symbols are important in understanding the characters' emotions and experiences.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the tree near Tess's home symbolizes her connection to nature and her innocence. As the story progresses and Tess faces hardships, the tree's condition changes, reflecting Tess's decline. The tree's death mirrors the end of Tess's youthful innocence, showing how she is impacted by her tragic experiences. For example, after Tess suffers, the once strong tree is now a symbol of her own suffering and loss (Hardy, 1998b).

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, trees are associated with comfort and safety. Bathsheba often finds shelter under trees, which represent the stability she seeks. However, as her relationships become more complicated, the trees start to symbolize confusion and emotional distress. For example, when Gabriel and Bathsheba's relationship goes through struggles, the setting with trees shifts to reflect their emotional journey (Hardy, 1992).

The changing seasons also serve as powerful symbols in Hardy's work. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, spring represents Tess's youthful energy and hope. However, as the story moves into autumn and winter, Tess faces despair and tragedy. The seasons mirror

Tess's life: her innocence in spring, loss in autumn, and death in winter. This shows how time moves on, and Tess cannot escape her fate (Hardy, 1998b).

In *Jude the Obscure*, winter is used to represent sadness and hardship, as Jude feels cold and isolated in his struggles. Spring, on the other hand, offers brief moments of hope, but these are soon overshadowed by the difficult circumstances that Jude faces. The seasons in this novel reflect the characters' emotional ups and downs, emphasizing the unpredictable nature of life (Hardy, 1998a).

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, trees and seasons are not just part of the background; they represent important aspects of the characters' lives. Hardy uses them to show how nature and human experiences are deeply connected. Animals, birds, and lower creatures are frequently used as symbols to explore themes of human nature, fate, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. Tess' life has been greatly shaped and affected by the company of animals. Tess has been seen as a personification of nature, an idea supported by her ties with animals throughout the novel. Her early misfortune begins when she falls asleep while driving to market and causes the horse's death; at the Trantridge Dairy she becomes a poultry-keeper; in the Froom valley she and Angel fall in love near the cows; while on the road to Flintcomb-Ash, she finds some wounded pheasants and kills them to ease their suffering. The incident of the mercy killings of the birds reflects her mental and psychological trauma: on her way to FlintcombAsh, after her abandoning by Angel, she finds many injured pheasants, and feeling pity for them, she tries to cease their agony by killing them:

"Poor darlings – to suppose myself the most miserable being on earth in the sight o' such misery as yours!" she exclaimed, her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly. "And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me." (Hardy, 1998b, 298)

These creatures often serve to reflect the inner lives of the characters, as well as to emphasize Hardy's ideas about the environment, society, and the cycle of life.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy uses animals to symbolize innocence and suffering. Tess's horse, Prince, is a key symbol of her purity and the hardships she faces. When Tess is forced to sell the horse, it marks a loss of innocence and signals the beginning of her emotional and physical suffering. The death of the horse reflects the death of Tess's youthful dreams and aspirations: "[t]he atmosphere turned pale, the birds shook themselves in the hedges, arose, and twittered: the lane showed all its white features, and Tess showed hers, still whiter" (Hardy, 1998, 39). She is herself, as Angel calls her, the "daughter of Nature" (Hardy, 1998b, 136).

Similarly, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene's sheep represent vulnerability and helplessness. Bathsheba's care for her sheep shows her sense of responsibility and her attempts to control her life. However, the deaths of some of the sheep highlight her struggles and the unpredictable nature of life. These animals serve as a mirror to Bathsheba's own personal growth and challenges (Hardy, 1992).

Birds are another powerful symbol in Hardy's works, often representing freedom, confinement, or the spiritual state of characters. In *Jude the Obscure*, the bird that flies through Jude's window symbolizes hope and freedom. However, the bird's eventual death also signifies the fleeting nature of hope in Jude's life. It acts as a reminder that, although the desire for freedom exists, it can often be crushed by life's harsh realities (Hardy, 1998a).

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the motif of birds appears frequently as a symbol of both freedom and captivity. Tess is compared to a bird in several scenes, particularly when she is in the fields or forests. This comparison symbolizes her natural beauty and her connection to the earth, but it also highlights her vulnerability and the fact that she is trapped by society's expectations and her own circumstances.

Lower creatures, such as insects or smaller animals, in Hardy's works often symbolize the fragility of life and the harshness of fate. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the image of the small, helpless insect being crushed by larger forces is a recurring theme, symbolizing Tess's powerless position in society and her struggles against the forces that control her life. Hardy frequently uses such creatures to highlight the smallness of individual human lives in the face of greater societal and natural forces (Hardy, 1998b).

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy uses the symbol of the dog to represent loyalty and the consequences of neglect. The dog, which Michael Henchard treats poorly, mirrors Henchard's own flawed nature and his relationships with others. The dog's fate reflects Henchard's own decline and the consequences of his decisions (Hardy, 2007).

Through his use of animals, birds, and lower creatures, Hardy deepens the emotional and symbolic layers of his stories. These creatures are not only part of the natural world but also serve as metaphors for human conditions, reflecting themes of innocence,

suffering, freedom, and fate. By integrating such symbols into his novels, Hardy emphasizes the connection between human experiences and the broader natural world.

The moon is a recurring symbol that carries rich metaphorical significance in Thomas Hardy's works. Often, it represents themes such as fate, change, and the passage of time, while also reflecting the emotional states of the characters and their inner worlds. Hardy's use of the moon, in both its phases and its association with light and darkness, deepens the complexity of his narratives and characters.

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the moon plays a symbolic role in reflecting Tess's destiny and the forces beyond her control. The moon, often appearing in scenes of crisis or change, can be seen as a representation of fate—something that is constant and inevitable, yet constantly changing. For instance, during Tess's tragic moments, the moon is often described in ways that suggest it is a witness to her suffering, illuminating the path that leads to her downfall. The moon's shifting phases symbolize Tess's changing fortunes and the cyclical nature of her life (Hardy, 1998b).

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Hardy uses the moon to depict Bathsheba's isolation and the reflective nature of her emotions. The moonlight often appears during scenes where Bathsheba is left to ponder her relationships and the consequences of her actions. The moon, with its cold, distant light, symbolizes the emotional distance she feels from those around her, particularly when she grapples with her feelings toward Gabriel and Troy. The quiet, solitary light of the moon suggests a form of introspection, a theme that runs deep throughout Bathsheba's character development (Hardy, 1992).

The moon also holds romantic and spiritual significance in Hardy's works. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the moonlight often bathes Tess in a soft, ethereal light, symbolizing her purity and idealized beauty, especially in her moments of innocence before the harshness of the world overtakes her. It serves as a contrast to the darker, more brutal aspects of life, offering a fleeting vision of a perfect, almost otherworldly existence that is doomed to fade. This duality of light and darkness reflects Hardy's belief in the tension between idealism and reality, a theme prevalent in his works (Hardy, 1998b).

The moon is also symbolic of the passage of time and the cycles of life. In *Jude the Obscure*, the moon appears during moments of reflection on the past and the inevitability of time passing. For Jude, the moon can represent both a reminder of lost opportunities and a symbol of hope, as its regular cycles offer a sense of continuity despite the passage of time. This dual function of the moon mirrors the themes of time's relentless progression and the characters' struggles to find meaning in their lives (Hardy, 1998).

Through his use of the moon, Hardy explores themes of fate, change, isolation, and time. The moon is not merely a passive object in the sky but serves as a powerful symbol that illuminates the emotional and spiritual landscapes of his characters. By using the moon as a metaphor for these deep themes, Hardy enhances the emotional resonance of his works and invites readers to reflect on the cyclical nature of life and the human condition.

In conclusion, Hardy's use of symbolism is unique because it connects nature to human emotions and fate. He shows both the gentle and harsh sides of nature—its ability to bring growth and renewal but also destruction and unpredictability. His novels reveal that nature is deeply linked to human life, suggesting that people and the natural world are inseparable. Hardy's writing also reflects ecocriticism because it shows how Hardy's descriptions of nature highlight the effects of human actions on the natural world. They also suggest that Hardy's work encourages people to respect and live in harmony with nature. (Akhter & Tabassum, 2023).

Akhter and Tabassum (2023) discuss Hardy's awareness of nature and connect his work to ecocriticism, which explores how literature reflects the relationship between humans and the environment. They argue that Hardy critiques modern development for disturbing the balance between people and nature. Their study highlights how Hardy's descriptions of nature mirror the ongoing environmental crisis, urging readers to consider the importance of protecting the environment, a central theme in ecocriticism. Similarly, Heidari (2016) examines Hardy's ecological consciousness in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, emphasizing how Hardy portrays the relationship between characters and their natural surroundings, reinforcing his environmental awareness.

Although Hardy was a Victorian writer, his themes were different from those of his time. He had a deep connection with nature, and his works reflect ideas like the unity of the universe and the bond between people and the earth. His descriptions of landscapes are not just for setting the scene; they show how industrial progress harms nature, emphasizing the profound and reciprocal relationship between characters and nature, which reflects ecocriticism's focus on how literature can highlight human impact on the environment.

Hardy also developed deep ideas about nature's importance in human life. He saw the natural world as something more than just scenery—it carried emotional, spiritual, and environmental meaning. This way of thinking is a key part of ecocriticism, which studies

how literature shapes our understanding of nature. Heidari (2016) supports this by showing how Hardy's narratives depict nature as a force that both influences and reflects human experiences. Hardy's ideas later influenced modern approaches like Deep Ecology, Eco-feminism, and Environmental Literature, which all explore the relationship between humans and the earth (Akhter & Tabassum, 2023). His work remains relevant today, inspiring discussions about literature and the environment.

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