

**Ecological Alienation in *The Woodlanders* (1887):
The Repercussions of Industrialization and Mobility
On Human-Nature Relationship**

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Abstract

This article explores the ecological implications of mobility as represented in Thomas Hardy's regional novel *The Woodlanders* (1887). By mobility, I refer to nineteenth century phenomenal exodus to the city; the ceaseless migration and constant movement of countryside folks and work force towards the city, as a result of economic shift from traditional modes of production towards a much more industry-based economy. I explore ecological notions of "proximity", "connectedness", "belongingness", versus "remoteness", "alienation" and "otherness" in relation to the natural world and the environment, highlighting characters' multifaceted perceptions, associations and interactions with the moorlands, forests and the natural landscapes of Little Hintock, as delineated in *The Woodlanders* (1887). I argue that the negative repercussions of mobility are obvious in Hardy's characters like Edred Fitzpiers, Grace Melbury, and barber Percomb, whose experience of the rural landscapes is one of alienation, remoteness and homelessness. Moving back and forth between the countryside and urban areas, these characters experience a haunting sense of dislocation, disconnection, and estrangement from the natural world. This estrangement from nature and countryside life plays largely into the characters' othering of both humans and non-humans, experiencing various feelings of dislocation and separateness, propelling them to look down on countryside folks and their modes of being.

The nineteenth century was a period of massive and unprecedented socio-economic change in Great Britain. The epoch's emerging Industrialization enabled the country to move towards a much more modern society, attracting the world's attention as an unconquerable international economic force. However, in the light of its burgeoning

economic advancement, and with the epoch's emerging urbanization, mass clearances, and enclosures, also bifurcated the thorny issues of class-based discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and many other issues which disrupted especially the structure of the rural society all over Great Britain. In fact, nineteenth century exigencies of modernity did not only shake the foundation of the British society at large, but it also created a haunting sense of environmental anxiety which will later on develop into a crisis in our modern times. Undoubtedly, the escalating environmental dilemma we are currently facing is deeply rooted in nineteenth century socio-economic changes.

The writing of *The Woodlanders* (1887) was certainly shaped by nineteenth century unprecedented economic changes which transformed the British social structure for decades to come. Indeed, Hardy's writing came at a specific age when technological progress started to pose real threats to the rural landscape and the rural economy of Wessex countries. This eventually came to exert a tremendous impact on the writer's perception of the natural world and his delineation of human and non-human interaction more specifically. Simply put, in the long history of nineteenth century industrialization was wrought the degradation of the natural world, an issue which continued to inform Hardy's literary practice. As Jonathan Bate expounds, "Hardy died in 1928 with a knowledge of the automobile, the airplane, the gramophone record, and the radio," (Bate 542) and I am inclined to add that he lived to witness the threshing machine proliferating into the region of Dorset and irrevocably altering its landscape. Thus, an admirer of nature, scenic beauty and a staunch advocator of rural stability, Hardy found in literature a cogent means to devise stories of rural deprivation, disintegration and loss of stability as well as peace, all of which was an inevitable outcome of nineteenth century social upheavals.

A regional writer and a devoted admirer of Wessex's lush moors, abundant forests, hills, sweeping vistas of landscapes, and scenic beauty, Hardy was particularly horrified by the time's growing scales of mobility; more specifically, the migration and relocation of rural laborers to the city. As Elizabeth Caroline Miller explains, Hardy was mainly concerned with the escalating issue of rural rootlessness (Miller 696), which he overtly expressed in "The Dorsetshire Laborer", originally published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1883. Through this essay, Hardy expresses his sympathy towards nineteenth century rural dwellers who were forced to lead a precarious life after Agricultural Capitalism caused irreparable disruption in their community. Hardy writes that "a result of this increasing nomadic habit of the laborer is, naturally, a less intimate and kindly relation with the land

he tills than existed before enlightenment enabled him to rise above the condition of a serf who lived and died on a particular plot, like a tree” (qtd. in Miller 696). Due to the encroachment of machinery into the rural sphere, the locals “have lost touch with their environment” (696).

The repercussions of nineteenth century Industrialization and the incessant mobility to which it paved the way is a key thread in Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1887). Arguably, the novel confronts the grim realities of poverty, unemployment, instability, social disintegration which befall nineteenth century rural Wessex, changing the lives of the rural denizens irrevocably. Along with this scathing social critique, however, there is a modern kind of impulse underlying Hardy’s writing across *The Woodlanders*, which I prefer to call eco-critical. Indeed, across this novel Hardy’s critique of nineteenth century Industrialization and its subsequent aftermath of ongoing mobility is not only limited to the social consequences it provoked; he simultaneously touches upon its ecological implications. More specifically, Hardy documents the characters’ multifarious associations and interactions with nature, illuminating different instances of proximity and remoteness from landscape, connectedness, alienation from, and sometimes otherness of nature. It is the aim of this paper to explore these complex and multifarious ecological relationships.

Undoubtedly, social mobility, a strikingly recurrent theme in Hardy’s novels, has long been a subject of interest to many commentators and scholars. A long line of critics, dating back to the writer’s time and persisting through the 1990s until the present day, have sought to understand Hardy’s vision of mobility, urbanization, industrialization and their subsequent repercussions on the rural society of Wessex. A survey of the existing scholarship demonstrates that critics’ take on Hardy’s representation of mobility is limited to its socio-economic and cultural aftermaths, shedding light on questions of rural disintegration, the dynamics of class and power, the reformation and dissolution of rural culture, local customs, beliefs and traditions. For instance, this is the case of Roger Ebbatson (2009), Ralph Pite (2002), Peter Widowson (1989), and P.B. Pinion (1968). In contrast to these critics, my study of mobility in Hardy’s novels is nested within the nascent field of ecocriticism,¹ exploring the ways in which accessibility to the rural as well as relocation to big cities, according to the writer, seems to mould human and non-human bonding.² Hence, while previous studies are sociological in nature, my study foregrounds a completely different approach, exploring the ecological ramifications of nineteenth century social mobility. More specifically, I examine the ways in which rural

relocation to cities reshaped rural identity and human association with as well as perception of the natural world.

Nineteenth-century ecology: the alienating impact of industrialization and urbanization

A hallmark of nineteenth-century Great Britain is the Industrial Revolution, whose foundation was an exponentially developing manufacturing system, majorly based on mills and factories. Due to the proliferation of industry, mechanical agriculture became rife, especially with the development of complex farming equipments: the invention of the reaping and threshing machine, for instance. In fact, the Industrial Revolution introduced all the necessities of luxurious and exuberant life – at least so for the few privileged wealthy families of the Metropolitan cities – yet in its very history was wrought the degradation of the eco-system, a worrying phenomenon that would engage the human mind for the decades to come. During the time when industrial manufacturing was advancing exponentially, the natural world continued to be its main source and supplier of energy: just like the engines which kept machinery working, nature was to fuel a wide range of industries and keep them going. To express it succinctly, at the heart of economic growth laid the evil of human dominion over nature and the development of a consumerist mindset that considers nature only in terms of the benefits it yields (Parham 53). Nineteenth century Industrialization, to use the words of eco-critic John Parham, produced “a colonial attitude towards the environment: a ruthless exploitation of natural resources and the arbitrary transformation of the environment with no regard for regional traditions and experiences” (Parham 153).

Hardy documents this historical reality across *The Woodlanders* (1887) which, accentuating characters’ complex relationship to the Hintock woodlands, captures the environmental havoc wrought in Agricultural Capitalism. The trees in the novel are diseased, which can be attributed to the excessive barking work practised by timber dealers and tradesmen, like John Melbury. Indeed, scientific research has recently confirmed that barking can be detrimental to trees’ health, for “without bark the tree cannot transport sugar from its leaves to its roots. As the roots starve, they shut down their pumping mechanisms, and because water no longer flows through the trunk up to the crown, the whole tree dries out” (Wohlleben 18). Overloaded with symbolic underpinnings, John Melbury’s overtly utilitarian approach to the Hintock woodlandst, his timber trade as well as the inhabitants’ excessive exploitation of the woods’ resources

encapsulates a pessimistic viewpoint that, for Hardy, it is high time to reconsider our relation with the environment. Hence, Hardy's writing across *The Woodlanders* (1887) – and other novels like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1894) – bears notice to the nineteenth century rising concerns about the ecological degradation that was primarily rooted in the Industrial Revolution.

The enclosures, introduced by the British parliament throughout the eighteenth century, further endorsed the instrumental view of nature as well as people, chiefly the less privileged rural dwellers who then presented a shrinking minority that strove and struggled to ensure its survival. During the Agricultural Revolution of 1600-1750, the main factor which contributed to the boost of the Industrial Revolution, forests and pastures were cleared away and turned out into farmlands that would supply the population with food. With the introduction of the enclosure laws, the common land that once was worked by rural farmers was divided into large farms enclosed by hedges and stone walls and became the legitimate property of land owners. Now that the land came to the hands of land-owners, nature became instrumental in making high profits. On the one hand, working the land became a source of capital for landowners as a surplus of food was aimed at to be sold at high profits; so was it for those who provided the landowners with the required agricultural equipments that would increase the yield (Horn 26-46). On the other hand, one can easily imagine the expenses of clearing out forests to create farmlands: the variety of fauna and flora that would unfold naturally in the wilderness is now suppressed in the favor of growing barley and wheat. The true meaning of the enclosure laws then was the ownership of the natural world, the instrumental use of the land to increase monetary profit, therefore, complete alienation from nature and deplorable ignorance of its intrinsic value. Hardy's *Tess* (1891) marks the incursion of the reaping machine into the agrarian landscape, which, although it facilitated agricultural work, produced a capitalist mode of labour which enslaved rural dwellers to long hours of arduous work, but also compromised the biodiversity of Wessex, threatening the existence of diverse species of fauna and flora:

Rabbits, hares, snakes, rats, mice, retreated inwards as into a fastness, unaware of the ephemeral nature of their refuge, and of the doom that awaited them later in the day when, their covert shrinking to a more and more horrible narrowness, they were huddled together, friends and foes, till the last few yards of upright wheat fell also

under the teeth of the unerring reaper, and they were everyone put to death by the sticks and stones of the harvesters (Hardy 137).

What is revealed here is that, for Hardy, the proliferation of machinery into the natural landscape means inescapable ecological violence, which will incur irrevocable damage on the physical world. Indeed, the proliferation of the threshing machine, the reaping machine, without also forgetting the railways, not only disrupted the countryside's old ways of life, but also brought disastrous damage to the physical features of landscape which were changing beyond recognition.

Furthermore, within the ideology of the enclosures was wrapped not only the subjugation of nature, but also the disintegration of the rural community. Now that the farmlands became under the control of the landowners, the farmers, miserable and impoverished, were faced with dismaying conditions: they had "no opportunities any more for gleaning at harvest time, no common pasture for their cattle, no sources of free fuel or ponds to fish" (Strong 406). In his novel, *The Woodlanders* (1887) for instance, Hardy chronicles the dissolution of the rural community and enacts a sneering critique against the injustices of the class system which entraps Giles Winterborne and Marty South and brings about their eventual demise.

The dissolution of the rural community and the degradation of life standards pushed so many people to escape to cities. The pursuit of better life, education and work opportunities in mills and factories induced rural dwellers to leave their farms behind to pursue the luxuries of urban life. In 1780 Great Britain was an agricultural society with 80 percent of the population working as rural farmers; conversely, by 1880, 80 percent of British citizens were city or town dwellers and only 20 percent lived in the countryside. Industrial cities like Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool and Bristol experienced unprecedented population growth. Statistics and historical records showed that in 1801 Birmingham and Manchester had a population of between 71, 000 and 75, 000; In 1831, Birmingham's population density jumped to 144,000 and Manchester's to 18,000 (Strong 395). To express it succinctly, the period of time dating from 1815 and 1835, Great Britain "changed from being a nation of country people to a nation of townspeople" (McDowall 132); a factor that would determine people's quality of life for the ensuing years.

Nineteenth-century burgeoning mobility changed Britain's geography beyond recognition; this is especially the case of Hardy's beloved Dorset, which he celebrates

across his narratives, using the moniker Wessex.³ In fact, Hardy was especially grappling with the myriad issues of ecological alienation, rootlessness and rural disintegration as rural dwellers were ceaselessly relocating to the city. Hardy documents this socio-ecological shift in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), where he vividly delineates the shrinking population of the countryside: “there was lower Mellstock, the main village; half a mile from this were the church and vicarage, and a few other houses, the spot being rather lonely, though in past centuries it had been the most thickly-populated” (Hardy 27). In the same novel, the narrator alludes to the proliferation of a network of trade routes into the region of Dorchester, the physical setting of the novel. As the narrative illustrates, these routes played a major role in connecting the Mellstock parish with the metropolitan city of London: “the wood was intersected by the highway of Casterbridge to London at a place not far from the house, and some trees had of late years been felled between its windows and the ascent of Yalbury Hill, to give the solitary cottager a glimpse of the passer-by” (Hardy 104). Hence, as a consequence of nineteenth-century socio-economic transformations, Dorset could also afford greater mobility as well as connection to a wider national sphere, thus becoming less isolated. However, along with this mobility, openness and freedom of movement, there were also rising the haunting concerns of rural rootlessness as well as alienation from nature and the land, the theme I extensively explore in the next section.

The ecological implications of mobility: propinquity vs. alienation from nature

The human interaction and perception of landscape is often complex and intriguing. According to Katherine Brace, landscape can evoke a sense of complete fusion in the world, which erases the dialectical perception of the internal and external as two autonomous and separate entities (Brace 53). Nevertheless, the human experience of landscape and the natural can be one of absence, dislocation, and alienation, which contribute to an ever existing “unbridgeable gap” between the self and space/place. In other words, the human association with nature can be characterized with remoteness rather than propinquity, alienation instead of belongingness, and separateness instead of connection. In the words of Brace: proximity might induce “not familiarity and recognition (let alone fusion); instead it gives life to a distance and an estrangement. The closer you get, the more an unbridgeable gap seems to impose itself” (Brace 57). Jean-Lus Nancy forges the term “Uncanny”, with which she means un-homely, a coinage which emphasizes the separateness characterizing humans and the world: “the space of

strangeness and estrangement” (qtd. in Brace 58). I strongly concur with Brace and Jean-Lus that people interact with and perceive landscape in completely different, and sometimes, contradictory ways, experiencing either a sense of proximity or alienation, connectedness or separateness from the natural world. I also emphasize that different experiences of landscapes and contradictory feelings of propinquity and remoteness are primarily rooted in socio-economic factors, and alienation is attributable to the sense of disorientation wrought in continual mobility. In fact, *The Woodlanders* charts a comprehensive understanding on how socio-economic factors, especially mobility, are interwoven into characters’ association with the natural world and their eventual estrangement from/ entanglement with the eco-sphere.

The Woodlanders opens up with the image of a male figure, cautiously stepping into the unfamiliar lush landscape of Little Hintock. This figure, we come to realize later, is barber Percomb who comes from London on a business pursuit to purchase the hair of Marty South, one of the country’s lower-class denizens, in order to sell it to the wealthy lady Felice Charmond. Having long been accustomed to the exuberant life of the Metropolitan city of London, the barber finds himself lonely in the unfamiliar Little Hintok, confronting its densely wooded forest. He is, therefore, intrigued, fearful of the locality and unable to figure out his way: the barber is “puzzled about the way,” “trying,” in vain “to find short way,” the narrator expounds (Hardy 06). With his intimidated and cautious steps, it is obvious that the barber neither has knowledge of the geography nor appreciation towards the surrounding environment, thereby consolidating his disconnection from the rural order. According to the narrator, the barber’s attire, overtly lavish and extravagant, and his unfamiliarity with the environment set him apart from the country proper and define his estrangement from the woodlands:

It could be seen by a glance at his rather finical style of dress that he did not belong to the country proper; and from his air, after a while, that though there might be a somber beauty in the scenery, music in the breeze, and a wan procession of coaching ghosts in the sentiment of this old turnpike-road, he was mainly puzzled about the way (Hardy 42).

At stake in this formulation is a pastoral mode that celebrates belonging rather than longing, connection to the land rather than aesthetic yearning, which are lacking in the

barber's character. Undeniably, what contributes to this sense of disconnection from the natural is the barber's lifelong experience of remoteness from the countryside proper.

Similar to the barber, Edred Fitzpiers' exposure to city glamour contributes largely towards his alienation from the countryside life and, even more, to his othering of the rural folks. Edred is compelled to stay in Little Hintock and his sole purpose is to pursue his scientific and philosophical ambitions. During his stay in there, he fails to develop any sense of connection with the rural folks, and he is completely alienated from the Hintock woodlands and environment:

I've come all the way from London today, said Fitzpiers. Ah, that's the place to meet your equals. I live at Hintockworse, at Little Hintock and I am quite lost there. There's not a man within ten miles of Hintock who can comprehend me. I tell you, Farmer What's your name, that I'm a man of education. I know several languages; the poets and I are familiar friends; I used to read more in metaphysics than anybody within fifty miles; and since I gave that up there's nobody can match me in the whole county of Wessex as a scientist. Yet I am doomed to live with tradespeople in a miserable little hole like Hintock! (Hardy 212)

A rural descendent from Oakbury Fitzpiers, Edred "returns to nature", only to become "a tourist-observer" of the Hintock woodlands and its inhabitants (Moore 141). Exposed to urban culture in the early phases of his childhood life, Edred becomes "a refined appreciator of culture" (Moore 151). Perceiving himself to belong to a "higher" and "better" social class, he rejects any association with the rural folks. Hence, Edred looks down on the rural denizens, and he disapproves of Grace's mingling with her rural companions. Eventually, he gives up on Grace in favor of Mrs. Charmond who belongs to a higher social rank, and he elopes with her to the city, where they truly belong.

Similarly, in her return from town to Little Hintock, Grace Melburry grapples with various feelings of displacement, dislocation and rootlessness, where she seems to lose connection with Hintock moors and the woodlands. Passing by the forest, Giles Winterbourn draws Grace's attention to the apple trees, yet she only perceives them in terms of their physicality: she cannot distinguish between "the bitter-sweets and John-apples". Exposed to urban culture in the early phases of her teenage life, Grace, who "once possessed a woodlander's sensibility", now becomes a mere stranger in her native land (Moore 151). In contradistinction to Grace, given his daily interaction with the

woods, Giles is fascinated by and familiar with the different types of the apple trees, which invite meditation on the intersection between identity and place. In effect, the wooded landscape here is a “central material and symbolic object onto which the emotions and identity[ies]” of Giles are attached (Ritter and Dauksta 160). In the words of Harrison, the trees are “the living tissue of time”, and “indispensable parochial monuments, landmarks, milestones and other points of reference by which each person can take his or her own bearings in time and place” (Ritter and Dauksta 139). Obviously, what conditions Giles’ feelings of kinship with the natural is his day-to-day interaction and engagement with the surrounding environments.

In effect, the novel debunks the pastoral myth of rural stability and harmony to uncover a sharp discrepancy between fantasy and reality. Indeed, Grace hardly reconciles her old experiences of the forest with the present reality. Returning back to nature, Grace’s interaction with the Hintock woodlands is based solely on the leisure opportunities they offer to her, although she is inwardly attached to it through the memories of the past. Grace’s vision of the woodland is ostensibly clouded with a sense of longing and nostalgia and her experience of it is haunted by childhood reminiscences:

At the moment of their advance they looked back, and discerned the figure of Miss Melbury who, alone of all observers, stood in the full face of the moonlight, deeply engrossed in the proceedings. By contrast with her life of late years they made her feel as if she had receded a couple of centuries in the world’s history (Hardy 145).

In the forest Grace recalls “the homely faithfulness of Winterbourne” (Hardy 336). Grace’s experience of the forest here reflects childhood innocence and the purity of Arcadian love when she was in proximity with the natural world, yet this pastoral connection to nature is forgone with Grace’s exposure to urban life.

It is obvious that the narrative exploits the experience of nostalgia and longing to foreground the tension between pastoral yearning and felt experiences, where Grace ultimately rejects her romantic past, to cling, instead, to conceptions of civilized culture. An idyllic past is replaced by various feelings of economic insecurity which entraps Giles and stymies his romantic aspirations. While looking at the forest through the veil of nostalgia, Grace’s actions are socially mediated and culturally constructed: while still captivated by her past love, she submits willingly to the orders of her father who aims at elevating his social position. Thus, she gives up on Giles and yields easily to the

influence of the socially superior Fitzpiers. Where Grace finds in the forest a haven for leisurely walks, she still finds it quite difficult for her to inhabit it. Hence, she becomes a “tourist of fashion” (Moore 153) in her own country, and instead of seeking reconnection with rustic life, she seeks solace and thus accompanies Charmond for “the possibilities of a refined and cultivated inner life, of subtle psychological intercourse” (Hardy 163). While Grace is ostensibly connected to her rural surroundings by the means of daily walks, she inwardly rejects the pastoral mode of life as it impedes her material aspirations. Hence, the text gestures towards nineteenth century industrialization and mobility and the ways in which it affected human’s experience and perception of the rural and the natural world. For Grace, to live in a rural district is to also suffer the different meanings of deprivation and confinement. It is this very reason which had motivated John Melbury to send Grace to the city to acquire a refined education which would secure her a respectable social position. In fact, Grace would have never dreamed of such a privilege, if she had spent her childhood in Little Hintock. Therefore, for Grace, childhood innocence is a transitory and brittle phase which introduces her and Giles into adult life when the experiences of heartache and disillusionment are inevitable. Similarly, her connection to the natural world becomes a mere past experience which whirls away when she decides to cling to a more “sophisticated” urban culture.

Along these anti-pastoral tropes of alienation and disconnection, the narrator provides a contrasting vision of the rural denizens, displaying the ways in which the woodlanders’ life experiences are intricately interwoven with the forest’s space. Hence Hardy’s denizens frequently interact with the wood through daily activities, idle walks and seasonal agricultural work, which underlies a sense of indissoluble connectedness to the natural. For instance, while conducting their work in the forest, Hintock dwellers find an occasion for community gathering and an opportunity to rejoice in recollections of the past and the ancient stories they experienced in the forest. The barking work, for instance, offers a leisurely experience, where Mr Melbury and other rural farmers indulge in telling “ancient timber-stories” (Hardy 136). With such instances which mark characters’ feelings of strong connection and association, the novel illustrates moments of forest culture which serve to mitigate the dual perception of forest-civilization. Unlike Grace and the barber, rural dwellers still reciprocate a continuously intimate relationship with the woodlands, living in proxy with the natural landscape.

While living on the edges of the woodlands, the woodlanders’ “identity”, as Pat Louw observes, “is closely formed by the forest, which gives them a sense of belonging”

(101). I agree with Louw and further argue that the novel displays a deeper form of engagement and connection, drawing attention to a material component of selfhood and identity. In fact, Giles is co-extensive with nature; the wood's basic materiality is infused in him:

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 and bred among the orchards (Hardy 204).

Here the narrative construes rural identity as a materially embodied reflex, a scent and sensation reflected from Giles. Furthermore, the text breaks the human/ nature boundary, constructing Giles' identity in terms of natural material substance. In the words of Grace, Giles incarnates "Nature unadorned", whereas her husband is "the veneer of artificiality" (ibid). Rural denizens like Giles and Marty, often in contact with the forest, exhibit a profound "level of intelligent intercourse with Nature" (Hardy 326) which marks their familiarity with the wood:

The casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon the wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods had been with these two, Giles and Marty, a clear gaze. They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing; to them the sights and sounds of night, winter, storm, amid those dense boughs, which had to Grace a touch of uncanny, and even of the supernatural, were simple occurrences whose origin, continuance, and laws they foreknew. They had planted together, and together they had felled, together they had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet. From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces when brushing through them in the dark either could in like manner name its sort afar off. They knew by a glance at a trunk if its heart were sound, or tainted with incipient decay, and by the state of its upper twigs the stratum that had been reached by its roots. The artifices of the seasons were seen by them from the conjuror's own point of view, and not from that of the spectator (Hardy 326-327).

This passage pinpoints the various ways in which the visual, tactile and acoustic engagement with the forest's landscape has a visceral effect on Giles and Marty, filtering into their sense of rural identity. In fact, their ears are attuned to the sounds of birds, winds and the hissing of tree leaves, their sight is ever entangled with the forest landscape, thus reading its intricate structures as alphabets, and the fabric of their bodies corresponds well to the caresses of the tree boughs and enables symbiotic interaction. It seems that long familiarity with the woodland as well as its visceral impact contributes not just to Giles' and Marty's formation of "place perception" (Ritter and Duaska 164), but to their sense of rural identity as well. Hence, Giles' and Marty's experience of the forest unveils a deeper level of material enmeshment, which substantiates J. Grange's argument that "trees in forest landscapes often present themselves as dominant in our field of vision" for "our eyes are so fixed that the space in front of us dominates our consciousness" (qtd. in Ritter and Duaksta 162).

Furthermore, the novel portrays a sense of collective rural identity where the forest landscape has a visceral and psychological impact on local inhabitants. This impact has a strong implication on their feelings of awe, relaxation, admiration, joy and comfort. These effective entanglements are reflected through the local's strong bounding with the natural world. While passing by the forest landscape, the mind faculties of the local dwellers of Hintock seem to be overtaken by its physical presence: "their lips moving and heads nodding in animated private converse, remained in cheerful unconsciousness that their mannerisms and facial peculiarities were sharply defined to the public eye" (Hardy 07). The passengers' reaction to the view reflects the vibrant impact of the forested landscape on their vision and its ingrained existence in their sub-conscious mind. It is this subconscious impact that materializes into a sense of identity, whose main marker is an indissoluble attunement to the natural world.

Finally, the narrator resorts to means of parallelism to demonstrate a sense of regional identity inherently expressed through a subconscious aptitude to relate and associate with forest landscape. Chapter one, for instance, draws attentions to the ways in which forest landscape shapes the narrator's experience of identity, but not that of an urban citizen as embodied in the figure of the barber. Where the narrator's senses are attuned to the natural world, the visual perception of the barber is directed more to the buildings which stand for the urban world where he belongs to: where "only the smaller dwellings interested" the barber, he also seems to be indifferent to and even repulsive

towards the “smells of pomace,” “the hiss of fermenting cider” and “the scent of decay from the perishing leaves underfoot” (Hardy 09). Through the responsive attitudes of the barber are reflected the ways in which urban life contributes to a mental and physical alienation from the forest and the natural world. This alienation feeds into the barber’s disconnection from the natural world, a factor which conditions his unsustainable perception of the non-human world. At the end of the novel, the barber declares that “Great Hintock is bad enough – but Little Hintock – the bats and owls would drive me melancholy-mad! It took two days to raise my sprits to their true pitch again after that night I went there” (Hardy 357). In comparison, the narrator is attuned to the rhythms of nature; his visual perception of trees revives in him a sense of belonging to the natural world. This is mainly expressed in a sense of admiration and awe, and a subconscious realization and fascination with the forest’s plant life: “the next, which stood opposite a tall tree, was in an exceptional state of radiance” (Hardy 9). This subconscious pre-occupation with the tree showcases the mysterious way in which the vibrant matter of trees dominates our visual perception.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the ecological impact of nineteenth-century mobility, as depicted by Thomas Hardy in *The Woodlanders*. I have argued that underlying Hardy’s writing is an eco-critical impulse, pondering myriads forms of human and non-human association and interaction. Central to Hardy’s ecological awareness is the question of mobility, and how propinquity to and remoteness from the countryside shapes characters’ perception of the natural world in the specific context of nineteenth-century Dorset, and thus how it ultimately dovetails into their construction of identity. I have concluded that Hardy’s novel *The Woodlanders* engages the ecological notions of proximity versus remoteness, connectedness versus alienation, and kinship versus otherness. Obviously, Hardy’s writing charts nuanced and complex forms of human-nature relationships that are inherently opposed to each other and even irreconcilable. Undeniably, mobility is a key factor influencing human’s interaction with the local and the natural.

Notes:

¹ Ecocriticism is the study of nature representation and human/ non-human relationships in literary works. William Rueckert first coined the notion of ecocriticism in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecology” (1979), where he pointed out his initiative to “develop an ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature” (Glotfelty and Fromm 107). Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty expounds, “takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (xix).

² It is worth noting here that there are a couple of studies on Thomas Hardy and Ecocriticism; I can cite Jonathan Bate (1999), Richard Kerridge (2010), Susanne Heinzl (2016), and Samman Ali Mohammed (2017). My eco-critical perspective here elaborates on, but also complicates the existing scholarship, bringing to the fore much more nuanced eco-critical insights and conducting an in-depth analysis of the connection between mobility and ecological alienation in Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*, which has only been mentioned in passing, and sometimes implicitly, by earlier critics. More specifically, my study is distinct from the work of other critics in a sense that it foregrounds an underlying entanglement between rural landscape and rural identity and how mobility affects the process of identity construction, resulting in alienation from nature.

³ It is worth mentioning here that “Wessex” is the name of an Anglo Saxon kingdom, which Hardy uses to lightly fictionalise the specific geography of Dorset (Hardy, Preface 27).

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