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The Art of Supernaturalist Narrative in Thomas Hardy's Novels

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Abstract: The artistic achievement of Thomas Hardy's novels is manifested not only in their rich Victorian cultural connotations—conveyed through masterful scene-painting and vivid characterizations—but also in his distinctive natural narrative style and the consistently poetic tone with which he meditates on lived experience and the surrounding world. In Hardy's literary universe, nature is imbued with emotions, moods, and even intentions reminiscent of humans. Particularly noteworthy is his portrayal of animals, which leaves a lasting and profound impression. These creatures share a peculiar intimacy with the human protagonists, often engaging in a form of tacit communication that transcends the ordinary. Through this transcendental narrative strategy—projecting human emotions onto natural entities and refracting human consciousness, feelings, and personalities through animal depictions—Hardy vividly illuminates the inner psychological landscapes of his characters while simultaneously offering penetrating insights into the transformations of his era.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, novels, supernaturalist, narrative

1. Ethereal Animal Narratives

Animal narratives exhibit distinct patterns of evolution and development across different historical periods and authors. In Thomas Hardy's works, animals—much like human characters—serve as vehicles for exploring profound themes such as fate. The relationships he delineates between humans and animals also provide a meaningful lens through which to examine human interactions and the condition of humanity itself. Particularly noteworthy are his ethereal equine characters. In contrast to other British writers of his time, Hardy's approach to animal narration is distinguished by a consistent and coherent portrayal of horses, one that reflects the historical transition from the 19th to the 20th century. Through this portrayal, readers gain a tangible sense of the era's imprint and the author's deep-seated anxiety.

As a significant symbolic presence in Hardy's fiction, horses carry almost the same weight as his human characters. In his earlier novels, they are not only given melodic and endearing names but are often endowed with psychological depth and a hint of transcendental dimension. For instance, in Under the Greenwood Tree, the horse "Cunning," which accompanies Dick and Fancy Day, is depicted through lively actions—tossing its head and galloping joyfully—thereby mirroring the couple's spiritual elation and the bliss of their love (Hardy, 1872). In A Pair of Blue Eyes, "Pansy," frequently ridden by Alfred, becomes a medium through which Hardy conveys the young man's inner turmoil, anxiety, and restlessness amid his romantic entanglements with Stephen (Hardy, 1873). Through Pansy's impatience, Hardy subtly guides Alfred toward rationality. The horse's deliberate pace and prolonged pauses to drink water are not mere delays but narrative devices that help Alfred avoid impulsive decisions at critical moments. These actions stand in stark contrast to Alfred's agitated indecisiveness, presenting Pansy as a figure of steadiness and resolve.

In his mid-career works, Hardy employs

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contrasts between equine and human behavior to express a profound anxiety about societal changes. In The Return of the Native, two hardy ponies gaze intently at Wildeve and Venn, the intoxicated gamblers, whose clinking money and rattling dice disrupt the desolate silence of the heath (Hardy, 1878). Through the ponies' eyes, Hardy conveys apprehension and irony toward such scenes of moral dissolution. A similar technique appears in The Mayor of Casterbridge, where horses are shown huddling together and nuzzling one another patiently as they await harnessing—a portrait of gentle cooperation that contrasts sharply with Henchard's brutal act of selling his wife, which signals his loss of humanity (Hardy, 1886).

In his later novels, Hardy uses the tragedies of horses to underscore the era's devastating impact on human destiny. In The Woodlanders, horses are described as coarse-maned and multicolored, forced into harness from foalhood and obliged to pull carts day after day without respite (Hardy, 1887). In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, the noble old horse "Prince" is compelled to labor by lantern light in the dead of night—a time when all creatures should rest. Swept along by the tides of industrialization, "Prince" is burdened with tasks beyond what his aging, emaciated body can endure (Hardy, 1891). The accident that befalls him and his subsequent burial evoke compassion not only for the animal but for the plight of humanity itself. Hardy imbues "Prince" with a distinct historical presence, using this absurd tragedy to reflect the transformation of traditional England.

From Hardy's animal narratives, we discern a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between human and animal, emphasizing the inseparable wholeness of both. Beyond revealing the instrumental and symbolic roles animals play across historical stages, his narrative art invites readers to contemplate the intrinsic value and meaning of animal life as he portrays it. By examining his depiction of animals chronologically and in relation to shifting historical contexts, and by engaging deeply with the mystical cultural undertones, we may uncover Hardy's values and cosmology concerning society and nature—an endeavor whose contemporary relevance remains vital.

It is noteworthy that horses appear more frequently than other animals in Hardy's works and engage in more profound spiritual exchanges with humans. As close companions to characters such as Fancy Day and Alfred, horses like "Cunning" and "Pansy" assume roles almost akin to family members. Their unique names reveal the special attention Hardy affords them. Through daily interactions, Hardy continually constructs a relational mode of imagination—linking the moods, fates, and circumstances of horses to those of the human characters, thereby creating a complementary narrative layer.

This transcendental descriptive approach not only fosters an aura of mystery around the animals but also enhances the text's charm and magical quality. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that Hardy employs a cognitive mode distinct from modern rational logic—namely, the "law of participation," as conceptualized by Lévy-Bruhl (2014). This form of thinking transcends logical reasoning; it blurs the boundaries between subject and object, establishes mutual causality, and regards animals, the self, and society as a mystical unity. The law of participation leads people to perceive every river, mountain, and animal as living, breathing entities—much like humans themselves. It suggests that beyond the tangible world lies a transcendental one, inhabited by gods, spirits, and the souls of all things, mysteriously interacting with our own.

From this perspective, the animals in Hardy's works are not merely physical beings but symbolic and transcendental images, embodying his inclination toward a return to primitive mysticism and nature.

2. The Narrative of Mysterious Supernaturalism

In addition to evoking mysticism through animal narratives, Hardy frequently populates his texts with distinctive characters who further immerse the narrative in an aura of mystery. In Under the Greenwood Tree, for instance, the village

"conjure-woman," Elizabeth Endorfield, is enlisted by Fancy Day, who feigns illness through a self-injury ruse to secure her father's consent to marry Dick Dewey—a deception enabled by a cunningly devised charm. The Return of the Native presents Susan Nonsuch, who performs a chilling ritual against Eustacia Vye: crafting a wax effigy in her likeness and reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards to invoke demonic forces against her enemy. Similarly, in The Mayor of Casterbridge, the character of Mr. Fall, known as the "Wizard," earns the deep trust of Casterbridge's residents for his accurate weather predictions and other insights. Henchard's personal consultations with him underscore a sincere belief in his prophetic abilities. Further examples abound: the neighbor in The Woodlanders who offers to tell Grace's fortune, and Joan Durbeyfield in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, who constantly carries The Complete Fortune-Teller—each affirming the pervasive presence of supernatural forces within Hardy's fictional world.

What might strike contemporary readers as mere superstition functions, in Hardy's works, as a nuanced form of mysticism that synthesizes Christian and pagan elements. Instances such as Bathsheba and her maid employing the Bible and a key for divination, or Susan Nonsuch's inverted recitation of the Lord's Prayer during the effigy ritual, illustrate a narrative strategy that intertwines folk belief with spiritual practice. Hardy integrated extensive supernatural culture, knowledge, and custom into his novels, reflecting a world where rationality and mysticism coexist in tension.

Living in an age enamored with evolutionary theory and increasingly dismissive of supernatural beliefs, Hardy nonetheless infused his literary works with both scientific imagery and magical undertones. As Angelique Richardson has observed, influenced by thinkers like Lafcadio Hearn, Hardy ventured into supernatural realms without entirely abandoning a scientific framework. His deep connection to rural life afforded him a wellspring of faith and unconscious intuition, allowing him to explore superstition in ways that did not outright contradict science. In doing so, he expanded the definition of scientific inquiry within the novel to include the irrational and the unconscious.

Confronted with a cultural shift wherein folk customs were being supplanted by rational thought, Hardy challenges the rigid opposition between supernatural belief and scientific reasoning. History, he suggests, cannot be arbitrarily dissected according to the teleological standards of evolutionism—judging the past by present-day values risks rendering history perpetually subordinate and devoid of authentic meaning. In reality, science and imagination need not be antagonistic; as Hardy's fiction demonstrates, they often intertwine intimately. He maintained that scientific knowledge should not be divorced from spirit—an outlook vividly illustrated in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, where he strives to harmonize science, theology, faith, and imagination.

Richardson argues that Hardy was acutely aware of the complex interrelations between science and imagery, and of the need to reexamine modes of perception. In response to the emotional dislocations of modernity, Hardy exhibited an ambivalent stance toward science: while he believed scientific exploration could expand human freedom, he also recognized its potential for misuse. Through his integration of scientific and imaginative thinking, he continuously probed the possibilities and limits of free will (Nie Zhenzhao, 2014).

Likewise, Hardy's engagement with mysticism serves as a critique of the limitations of human understanding. The naturalist scientific paradigm, which dismisses mystical experience and relies solely on experimentation, operates under the conviction that knowledge and power can resolve all problems. It insists that within any scientific domain, only empirically verifiable and logically connected phenomena are worthy of study. Hardy foresaw that applying this same reductive logic to human-nature relationships or to questions of value could result in a profound loss of deeper insight.

In Hardy's cosmological vision, natural

phenomena—mountains, rivers, forests, and animals—are endowed with spirituality. The boundaries between savagery and civilization, like those between human and animal, often transcend dualistic thinking. From his perspective, personhood is not exclusive to humans but extends to non-human beings, including animals and plants. Humans and nature are not locked in a subject-object dichotomy; rather, they exist in an intersubjective relationship characterized by mutual permeation and fluidity.

Hardy recognized that modernity, rooted in dualistic thought, continues to dominate humanity's understanding of the world. Through his mysterious and supernatural narratives, he continually exposes the dangers of this modern impulse—which, through brute force and reductionism, fractures the near-wholeness of nature and culture.

3.Hardy and the English Naturalist Literary Tradition

Indeed, the naturalistic narrative art employed by Thomas Hardy represents a significant tradition within English literature. In Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature, Georg Brandes not only outlines the relationship between English literature and naturalism but also delineates its boundaries, with particular emphasis on the connection between English writers and natural narrative (Brandes,2018). Hardy himself articulated his understanding of naturalism in his personal notebooks, asserting that the true naturalists were not Zola or the Goncourts, but rather Thoreau and Whitman (Bjork, 1985). Furthermore, as reflected in critiques by Brandes, Emerson had already established a link with the English naturalist tradition: "He visited Wordsworth twice" and documented their mutual impressions. As a central representative of English naturalism, "Wordsworth and Coleridge spoke of what they considered the two essential elements of poetic creation: the ability to adhere faithfully to the truth of nature, so as to evoke the reader's sympathy, and the power to captivate through singular and striking variations enhanced by the imagination" (Bjork,1985). Thus, it is evident that Hardy's narrative art, characterized by its profound affinity with nature, is deeply rooted in his national literary heritage. In other words, what he inherited was a distinctly English form of naturalism—one that prioritizes the real over the supernatural.

If Hardy's transcendental portrayal of animal imagery—and its evolution from symbolic representation to lifelike subjecthood—reflects contemporary meditations on humanity, fate, nation, and civilization, prompting deeper inquiry into the non-rational dimensions of human consciousness and thereby illustrating the progression of human civilization, then his depiction of geography, particularly Egdon Heath, offers a more direct reflection of humanity's tragic destiny under the sway of an ungraspable mysticism. This mysticism is rooted in the irrational aspects of human nature within contexts of historical change (Hardy,1878).

His narrative art, deeply informed by nature, is itself a product of this non-rational mode of thought. Like other radical Western thinkers, Hardy regards human beings as fundamentally irrational entities. He treats the sensuous individual self as both the essence and origin of the world, emphasizes the irreplaceability of personal existence and the authenticity of subjective experience, and seeks a path to freedom through the non-rational dimensions of human experience (Toynbee, 2000). This worldview is vividly embodied in the overarching imagery of the heath that Hardy constructs. A closer examination reveals that the heath in his writing is a space saturated with a primitive pagan ethos, where ways of life are deeply infused with a spirit of paganism.

Conclusion

The theme of pagan belief serves, to a considerable extent, to illuminate Hardy's neo-humanist philosophy. Through his critical dialogue with Christian culture and his literary exploration of religious faith, one discerns a profound reconsideration of the ethical relationship between humanity and divinity. Hardy's

individualized belief system underscores the wisdom and value he contributed to confronting the spiritual crisis of the West, offering a distinctive response to the erosion of faith wrought by secular mentality and materialistic pursuits.

For Hardy, nature constitutes a primordial force that elicits deep reflection and inquiry. Whether manifested through animal imagery or the brooding presence of Egdon Heath, nature in his works symbolizes essential human qualities—encompassing both innate rational faculties and intuitive emotional capacities. His tragic narratives underscore the destructive potential of humanity's animalistic, irrational dimensions, evoking a pervasive sense of anxiety and inviting deeper interrogation of human nature. Through the suffering of animals, he meditates on human vulnerability and resilience, while Egdon Heath embodies the raw, vital force inherent in the non-rational.

In summary, Hardy portrays a humanity that, through continually transcending its baser instincts, gradually attains a spirituality rooted in the primal authenticity of Egdon Heath—thereby reframing and demystifying the Christian doctrine of original sin. By cultivating the mind and spirit, he suggests the possibility of ascending from a state of "freedom-in-itself" to one of "freedom-for-itself." Through his depiction of the evolution from ancient mystical perceptions of nature to modern instrumental rationality, and ultimately toward a vision of nature as both autonomous and self-actualizing, Hardy achieves a powerful representation of the English national character during an era of profound transformation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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