# Woodland Natures: Knowing Vegetal Nature Through Sympathy and Anthropomorphism in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*

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Scholars of Thomas Hardy have long noted the various forms of knowledge depicted in his novels. From representations of rural skills and folklore to classical, scientific, and medical knowledge acquired in institutions, scholarship has tended to address what the presence of these forms of knowledge reveal about Hardy as an individual, or what they reveal about the social, economic, and industrial climate of the late Victorian period in which the novels were written.[1] *The Woodlanders* is equally invested in the theme of knowledge. The main woodland characters constantly seek to expand their knowledge and gain new practices of knowledge: Edred Fitzpiers pours over medical, science, and philosophy books late into the evening, Grace Melbury expands her academic knowledge and her social class through an education in the classroom, and Marty South quickly picks up new occupational trades like copse work and cider making. Categorizations of various forms of knowledge are helpful in identifying the nature of each form of knowledge—how they operate through the characters and what they reveal about Hardy's larger project in his novels—but, scholars has tended to separate these forms of knowledge into very distinct, sealed categories that may be untrue to the novel. While the characters themselves are very different from one another, their forms of knowledge are not always so dissimilar.

[1] See both Firor and Dillion for an in-depth study of folk history and traditions in England, their reception amongst 19th century scientific communities and upper-class city-dwellers, and arguments for Hardy's affective use of folk traditions in his novels. See Dewitt 94-125 and Beer 220 for an analysis of the presence of scientific knowledge in Hardy's novels. See Sorrum 179-199 where she discusses the impact of the burgeoning field of geography in the 19th century in the classroom, within Hardy's novels, and for readers of Hardy's novels. See also Mattisson for an exceptionally extensive discussion of science, medicine, and standardized classroom knowledge in Hardy's oeuvre and their social and historical context.

There often exists overlap between each form of knowledge and, throughout the novel, the characters' forms and practices of knowledge adapt.

This thesis seeks to push the epistemological vein of Hardy scholarship further and direct attention to what questions the novel is able to address through its attention to dynamic, rather than static and sealed, forms of knowledge. Through its attention to knowledge, I argue, the novel is able to work through questions of human-nonhuman relationships between the human characters and the trees in the woodland. Three questions I propose the novel asks are: *How does one know nature? How does one have a relationship with nature?* and *How does one know the nature of a tree?* The novel models ways in which the characters attempt to know and have a relationship with nonhuman vegetal nature through practices of communication and observation, and each character's respective form of knowledge informs the way they go about knowing the woodland trees. This thesis will focus the scope of its analysis on the folk knowledge of South, the medical and scientific knowledge of Fitzpiers, and the occupational knowledge of Giles and Marty, as they are the ones who interact most with nature and are involved in the episode with the elm tree in front of South's home, through which their forms of knowing nature are seen in action.

Additionally, in the novel's descriptions of vegetal nature and human interaction with it, Hardy would appear to be committing the "errors" of discredited philosophies of nature, namely anthropomorphism, which many ecocritics, environmentalists, and scientists regard as counterproductive and even problematic in discussions of nonhuman nature. This understanding will inform the second half of my argument. More than just an anthropomorphic representation of nature, the novel offers a way of thinking about

human-nonhuman interactions that is more nuanced, and in many ways anticipates the concerns of posthumanist theory. Thus, the second half of my argument will attempt to highlight the shared goals of *The Woodlanders* and posthumanist theory and draw connections between the practices of the novel's characters and posthumanist practices of engaging with nature. Further, it is these so-called errors, I argue, that ultimately allow the novel and its characters to know nature, have a relationship with nature, and know the nature of trees. This will reinforce my initial claim that the novel, through its characters' forms of knowledge, is invested in methods of knowing and interacting with nature. In this way, I claim that the novel is telling us in order to know nature and to have a relationship with nature, it is worth running the risk of incorporating sympathetic acts of anthropomorphism into any form of knowledge.

## ***The Elm Tree Episode***

The elm tree is introduced in passing early in the novel through a description of South and Marty's home. The introduction is so brief that one might almost miss the presence of the elm entirely: "[h]alf a dozen dwellings were passed without result. The next, which stood opposite *a tall tree*, was in an exceptional state of radiance, the flickering brightness from the inside shining up the chimney and making a luminous mist of the emerging smoke" (my emphasis, 9). Indeed, this passage is not even about the tree, but about the homes in Little Hintock. This elm, however, plays a larger role in the community than its seemingly inconsequential introduction would suggest. The "flickering brightness" emitting from the home is in fact due to the very presence of the tree in front of it. John South's fear that the tree will fall on his home and kill him is so debilitating that he can no

longer work. Thus, Marty is left to finish his work and make thatching spars late into the evening.

More than just the fear of being killed by the falling tree, South believes that his life and the life of the tree are connected. Their lives do bear similarities, such as their age (fifty-five, according to South), their place of birth (Little Hintock), and their lifelong residence (the house in which South still resides and the elm, just outside of it). South also attributes a great deal of agency to the elm. He claims that the elm has "human sense" and that it "sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave" (93); and, in some capacity South truly is ruled by the tree. He sits fixedly in front of his window all day watching the tree and when it sways in the wind, he mimics it with "abject obedience" waving his head in unison (84). Remarkably, the agency of this elm is apparently not unique, as South declares that "others have been like it afore in Hintock" (93).

In an attempt to help South, Doctor Fitzpiers and Giles Winterborne conduct experiments on the tree. Giles's "experiment" (91) involves shrouding, or cutting off, the lower branches of the elm. Fitzpiers's "experiment" (94) involves cutting down the elm entirely. These two experiments function through two different modes of knowing nature. Giles utilizes his occupational knowledge of trees and copse work in an attempt to work with the elm. His shrouding is meant to reduce the impact of the wind on the elm and lessen its swaying, therefore, lessening South's fear that it will fall. Fitzpiers's experiment operates through his medical knowledge and seeks to eliminate the object of South's anxious fixation and, as a result, eliminate what he calls South's nervous condition. Giles and Fitzpiers's experiments, however, do not consider South's form of folk knowledge

about the elm, from which his firm beliefs about its agency are derived. As a result, both experiments ultimately fail. Giles's shrouding, while reducing the force of the wind on the elm, makes it appear taller which increases South's fear of its large dominating presence, and Fitzpiers's removal of the tree gives South such a shock at seeing it gone that he faints and dies later that evening. From this incident with South, Fitzpiers, Giles, and the elm, three modes of knowing and interacting with nature are displayed: folk knowledge, scientific and medical knowledge, and occupational knowledge, respectively.

### *Folk Knowledge*

For South the elm has human sense and is sinister. He is under its rule and it signals his death. South's form of knowing the elm is based largely in British folklore traditions.[2] In ancient Britain, elms carried a "reputation as a tree of ill fortune" and were often associated with death (Jones and Cloke 35). Such sinister characteristics were likely attributed to elm trees because they often shed heavy or dead branches without warning or sign of decay, potentially causing injury or death to anyone nearby[3] Elm historian Richard Richens notes that the elm's tendency to shed branches was attributed to the belief that the tree was innately sinister and hostile towards humans and animals (128). Individual elm trees were

[2] My reading of South and the elm tree shares similarities with Dillion's chapter "Belief: Overlooking, Sympathetic Magic, Hag-Riding, and South's Tree." We both read South's relationship with the tree as being based in long established folk knowledge about elm trees and not an instance of plot device, pastoralism, literary device, or literal moment of supernaturalism. Dillion's and my ideas diverge at overlooking. I find her work on overlooking in general, and particularly her reading of the South-elm relationship as an instance of *mutual* overlooking, to be rich and generative, as it grants nonhumans with the ability to lookback. However, I remain skeptical that overlooking is at play in this instance, only because there appears to be no direct mention of or allusion to "overlooking" as a folk belief in the chapters involving South and the elm.

[3] See Watts 135 and Richens 101.

often described as targeting specific people, lying in wait sometimes for years for their moment to kill.

Jane Mattisson cites that William Barnes, a close friend of Hardy's, defined folklore as "a body of home-taught lore, received by the younger folk from elder ones in common life, and in forms of knowledge or faith, or mindskills and handskills" (13). So that folk knowledge may be seen as encompassing beliefs, perspectives, and trade skills as well as place-based knowledge about a specific region which can be both imbibed in the daily activities of "common life" or passed down orally from one generation to the next. Recall South's claim that others have been like this elm before in Hintock (93)—this is folkloric knowledge that would have been passed down through generations of woodlanders. While some scholars have read South's relationship with the elm as both mystical and mechanical,[4] as literary device, metaphor,[5] symbolism, or parody,[6] Hardy maintained that the folk elements in his writing were "such folklore as came into [his] mind naturally"[7] and that "every superstition, custom, &c. described in [his] novels may be depended on a true record of the same… & not inventions of [his]."[8] Born into the artisan tier of the laboring class, Hardy was not educated via the "home-taught lore" described by Barnes, in fact he received significant formal education, but he did draw inspiration for the folk elements in his novels from his experience growing up in a small Dorset community where many folk

[4] See Cohen 12 for his reading of South's relationship with the elm as one of both mystical and mechanical dependency.
[5] See Garrigan-Mattar 7 for his arguments about South's condition as a representation of fetishistic fixation.
[6] See Radford 147 where he discusses South's relationship with the elm as a parody of Giles's communicative relationship with the woodlands.
[7] *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy,* vol. 5.
[8] *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy,* vol. 2.

beliefs persisted well into the nineteenth century.[9] He also drew broadly from local parish records, from which the incident with the elm tree appears to have been inspired.[10]

### *Medical and Scientific Knowledge*

Fitzpiers's mode of knowing nature functions through his knowledge of science and medicine. Historically, medicine and science both resist social and cognitive biases. Alternative beliefs such as folklore and superstitions and excessive amounts of sympathy that may risk affecting the doctor's ability to diagnose and treat a patient or the scientist's ability to objectively conduct a study. Fitzpiers exemplifies this to the extreme in his lack of sympathy over South's death and disregard for the elm. During the incident with South and the elm, Fitzpiers insists the elm be cut down immediately declaring, "what's a tree beside a life!" (93). That Fitzpiers implies human life, when he says "a life," and does not need to clarify what kind of life he's referring to, suggests that he sees human life as the paradigm of life from which the tree is excluded. Despite his apparent claim for the value and singularity of human life, Fitzpiers does not display a great deal of sympathy or remorse over South's passing, stating "[d]amned if my remedy hasn't killed him!" and "[d]ismiss[es] the subject" in the very next sentence to inquire after Grace Melbury (94). It seems that

[9] See Mattisson 119-144 for more on Hardy's childhood in Dorest and his education.

[10] See Dillion once again. She reveals that Hardy seems to have based the account of South and the elm on a real occurrence: "Henry James Moule, director of the Dorset County Museum, mentioned in a letter to Hardy the recent killing of a certain hare in Dorchester, and the folk belief that punishment was fated to follow (which it supposedly did). Moule continued: 'I can imagine you taking this very strange occurrence up, as you did with South's elm-tree totem in *The Woodlanders.* Evidently Moule, who came from a Dorset family and had grown up with the culture of the country, recognised this kind of incident as having a traditional basis" (63-4).

Fitzpiers is more interested in what he calls South's nervous disease[11] and the neuropathology between the nervous disease and the elm than South as "a life."

When Fitzpiers's experimental remedy fails, it does not stop his study of South's mind, it in fact leads him to further opportunities for investigation. He next examines a sample of South's brain under a microscope in his lab, moving his investigation to a smaller scale from the psychological to the cellular level (119). His mode of knowing nature relates to life, both human and nonhuman, at the microscopic level of tissue and cells and the information transmitted between them. He tends also to reduce living things to their material substrate and view them simply as objects for study. In South, Fitzpiers sees only his brain and the properties in it that cause his nervous condition. Fitzpiers does not see the man as a whole or the set of beliefs that may be informing the man's nervous condition. Likewise, in his arrangement with Grammer Oliver to purchase her brain upon her death, Fitzpiers sees her only as a large head and with a large brain inside of it. He cannot sympathize with the women and understand why she might be deeply unsettled by the idea of selling her skull.

### ***Occupational Knowledge***

To Fitzpiers's "what's a tree beside a life!" remark, Giles states the tree should not be cut down until permission is granted by the owner of the property, Mrs. Charmond, and proclaims, "Tis timber…They never fell a stick about here without its being marked first" (93). In his argument against cutting down the tree, Giles makes a claim based on his knowledge of local felling practices and also a claim about the tree's economic value as

[11] The narrator, however, notes that it is fear "rather than any organic disease" that afflicts South (84).

timber.[12] As a tree planter and feller, apple-picker, and cider maker, Giles works closely with the woodland trees and has acquired a great deal of knowledge about them. His act of shrouding the elm also draws from this experience and considers ways to work with the elm to prevent its swaying in the wind, rather than simply eliminate the tree it all together. Giles's mode of knowing nature then is occupational. He learns about nature from his daily work in the woodlands with the trees and his interactions with nature are informed by those experiences. From his shrouding of the elm, he learns that, as an unintended consequence, shrouding also makes the tree appear taller.

Additionally, it is not only Giles who knows and interacts with vegetal nature in this way, but Marty as well. Marty has only recently taken up her father's copse work, but she has been planting and felling trees with Giles for a number of years. We are told that Giles and Marty can readily determine specific information about trees: from the sensation of branches brushing against their faces in the dark, and from the sound branches make when rustled by the wind, they can identify the species of the tree (298). Even though Giles conducts an experiment on the elm, his and Marty's mode of knowing nature, unlike Fitzpiers's scientific and medical knowledge, is experiential more than experimental. It is a kind of knowledge that is gained from observation and intimate interaction with the woodland trees. It has not been acquired through reading a textbook or conducting an experiment on bark or core samples, nor does it seem to be imbibed or passed down

[12] See Richen 125-126 where he explicates the legal history of elm trees as timber, "Under English common law, elm was one of the three kinds of trees, oak and ash being the others, which is everywhere accepted as timber" (125). He goes on to say that the manor estate, not the copyholder, retained rights to timber trees on the property.

generationally like South's folk knowledge. It is learned through work, and Hardy often sees work "as central to a kind of learning and relationship" (Williams 213).[13]

### *Who are the Woodlanders?*

Just as the characters engage in complex relationships with the woodland trees and practices that build knowledge of them, so too does the novel as a whole. Elizabeth Miller claims the "novel attempts a form of ecological realism" which she calls "dendrography" and describes as "a realism that strives to incorporate the trace and perspective of the arboreal" (698). When Miller says, the "perspective of the arboreal," I take this to mean that the novel strives to depict the nature of trees, that is, what it is like to be a tree in Hintock that is entangled in complex reciprocal relationships with the woodland humans. Which leads me to wonder, *Who are the woodlanders?* From this banal question, an equally banal response may be, *The woodlanders are those who live in the woodland*—but there may be something generative in this. It is not untrue to say that humans, animals, and plants all live in the Hintock woodland in which the novel is set. Similarly, both the humans and the trees in the novel are defined by place, most are rooted to place (South lived in the same home all his life, as did the elm, and many of the characters never travel far from Hintock). Additionally, the livelihoods of trees and humans are defined by the ecosystem in which they live. Given the novel's investment in trees, I suggest that both the humans and the trees are the woodlanders to whom the title refers. Perhaps, it is not coincidental that the elm tree is first introduced through a description of the houses in Little Hintock as the passage is describing the elm's home as well.

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[13] See Gregor 109 where he also points out that work for Hardy is synonymous with learning.

If the trees in the novel are also the woodlanders to whom the title refers, then the elm tree is very much a character in its own right. While, it is only alive and physically present for approximately three chapters, it plays a significant role in the lives of the characters and is the agential force that contributes to much of the action in the novel. Due to South's fear of the elm, he is no longer able to work. This forces Marty to stay up late to finish his spar making, which is when Percombe first sees her and her beautiful hair through the glowing windows of her home and convinces her to sell her hair to him for Mrs. Charmond. The elm's felling also sets in motion the downfall of the potential marriage between Giles and Grace. When the tree is felled, Giles loses not only his own home, but the properties manages as well. To Melbury, this makes Giles a less desirable match for Grace, and he begins to persuade Grace away from Giles. Giles is also forced to move outside of town into a small secluded cabin in the woods where he contracts typhoid for the first time making him more susceptible to the illness he eventually dies from.[14] Further, the elm's felling leads to the meeting of Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers. With Giles's house demolished, Mrs. Charmond's carriage runs over its remaining foundation on the narrow road and flips over, causing her injury for which she calls Doctor Fitzpiers to treat. Finally, through the incident with the elm, we are able to see several forms of knowing nature operate via the character's interactions with it and with each other.

## *The Woodlanders and the Proto-Posthumanist*

[14] Of Giles's illness, Fitzpiers notes, "[t]his seems like what we call a sequel, which has followed some previous disorder—possibly typhoid—it may have been months ago, or recently" (288).

Through *The Woodlander's* investment in, as Miller says, "incorporate[ing] the trace and perspective of the arboreal," I argue that the novel is working through questions of human-nonhuman relations and vegetal sentience. In these ways, *The Woodlanders* shares similar concerns with recent posthumanist projects. Ian Bogost defines a posthumanist as one who, "without rejecting our place in the world via antihuman[ism]," recognizes that the human is no longer the monarch of being and but is rather "*among* beings, *entangled* in being, and *implicated* in other beings" (original emphasis, 16-7). *Woodland* scholars often discuss the relationship between the trees and the humans as "entangled," "reciprocal," and mutually adaptative and note the agential qualities attributed to the trees.[15] Additionally, the woodland trees are frequently attributed agency and sentience through descriptions of them "sighing" (83), "rubbing each other into wounds" in a bid for space in the overcrowded woods and "vocaliz[ing] their sorrows" (15). As Giles shrouds the lower branches of the elm, the narrator states that each branch "quivered under his attack" (84). The cutting of the branches is characterized as an act of violence to which the tree responds by quivering. The double valance of the word *quiver*—an inanimate movement, or "(of a person) to make a movement of this kind as an expression of cold, rage, fear, etc." (OED)—carries the connotation of human emotion and serves to attribute sentience to the elm (it is also an act of anthropomorphism, but we will return to this). To push a bit further, this description of the elm quivering under the attack on its branches, might also operate to confirm South's assertion that the elm possesses "human sense."

In her biography of Thomas Hardy, Claire Tomalin reveals that Hardy planted a small wood around his Max Gate home—the location from which he wrote *The*

[15] See Miller 698 and Cohen 12.

*Woodlanders.* She posits that he must have heard the trees sighing just as Marty did because "[h]e became their protector and would never have them lopped back or cut down, even when they grew into dense thickets. He spoke of 'wounding' them and refused to curtail the 'soft musical breathing' he had initiated" (201-2). This evidence in Hardy's journal of his sympathy for trees, his supposition of their ability to feel, and his depiction of trees as agential beings in his fiction, suggest that Hardy anticipated many of the concerns of posthumanism, and positions him as a kind of proto-posthumanist figure. Further, that in his journal Hardy uses the same language to express his feeling about the sentience of trees (the trees' breathing and the injury they suffer when being cut or trimmed) that he often uses in *The Woodlanders* suggests that those descriptions in the novel are meant as more than just artistic literary flourish. It suggests that in those descriptions Hardy indented to point to the trees' sentience.

### *"Intelligent intercourse with Nature"*

To expand upon the initial question that began this thesis—*How does one know nature?*— we can add, *How does one have a relationship with nature?* and, particularly, a relationship that acknowledges the nonhuman sentience of vegetal nature. One way the novel displays how to have a relationship with nature is through Giles and Marty's acts of communication with the vegetal woodlanders. Giles and Marty have "mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols" (298) of the woods and are able to, "read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing" (297) this, we are told, has put them in "intelligent intercourse with Nature" (297). More than just their ability to read signs, which tends to be a one-sided interaction, Giles and Marty engage in the interpersonal act of intercourse with nature. This

acknowledges two important things: that the vegetal woodlanders have their own language and that Giles and Marty are able to communicate through it or, if you will, "speak" it—"the tongue of the trees and fruits and flowers themselves" (298). In his essay, "To Hear Plants Speak", Michael Marder discusses the ways in which humans have historically attempted, and continue to attempt, to understand plants and plant communication through the fields of literature, philosophy, and science. Giles and Marty seem to read and communicate with the woodland plants through what Marder calls an interchange of two languages: the biosemiotics of vegetal life—the production and communication of information in living organisms through signs—and human signification. Whatever we know about plants, Marder claims, is due to a successful translation from vegetal biosemiotics to human signification (Marder 109). According to Marder, plants articulate a physical form of self-expression, as opposed to a verbal one, it is these expressions or signs which the tree has produced about itself that Giles and Marty read: "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" (298). They translate these signs into information which they use to interact with the tree during their work planting, felling, and making cider. For Marty and Giles, the woodland plants are "coherent living beings with their own modes of expression," and it is those expressed signs and symbols that they use to communicate with the trees (Marder 118).

### ***Anthropomorphism and Metaphorism***

As I have argued, *The Woodlanders* is invested in depicting sentient vegetal nature and human relationships with it that recognize its sentience. There are, however, moments

when the novel, and its characters, commit the so-called errors of philosophies of nature that ecocritics, environmentalists, and scientists have discredited, namely anthropomorphism. Recall the narrator's descriptions of the trees' "sighing," as trees do not have lungs or mouths to exhale air from, the *use* of the word "sigh" is an anthropomorphic description. Additionally, South's characterization of the elm as sinister, tyrannical, and hostile is anthropomorphic, as this places human personality traits onto a nonhuman being. Critics of anthropomorphism cite that it is unproductive at best—as it clouds any real expressions of nonhuman being—and problematic at worst—as it lends to a narcissism which sees the human self in all nonhuman life. However, I would like to push past this negative conception of anthropomorphism. I claim the novel offers a productive and beneficial model of anthropomorphism, particularly through Giles and Marty.

While Giles and Marty's "intelligent intercourse with Nature" recognizes the unique modes of expression of vegetal beings, there are moments during Giles and Marty's interactions with the woodland trees when they *do* anthropomorphize and superimpose human emotion and meaning onto the trees. This takes place when Marty attempts to vocalize and explain the nature of plant being. While planting fir saplings in a location that was clearcut for timber months before, Marty hears the plants "speak." She exclaims of the young firs, "How they sigh directly we put 'em upright, though while they are lying down they don't sigh at all" (59). This is Marty's first minor act of anthropomorphism. Her assertion that the fir sighs however is not contested, the narrator describes the event as it takes place and Giles bears witness to its occurrence: "She erected one of the young pines into its hole, and held up her finger; the soft musical breathing instantly set in which was not to cease night or day till the grown tree should be felled—probably long after the two

planters had been felled themselves" (59).[16] What is neither confirmed nor denied by the narrator, or by Giles, and what may be called into question as Marty's larger act of anthropomorphism is her interpretation of the cause of the saplings' sighing. She conjectures, "It seems to me… as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be" (59). In this moment, Marty attributes human emotions and human life experiences to the trees. According to Marder's claim for ontological fidelity to plant communication and expression, it would seem that Marty is edging dangerously close to an act of anthropomorphism that would superimpose human-ness over vegetal expression. However, this is where Marder's proposal for ontological fidelity to plant expression and communication falls short.

While Marder's work is generative in its validation of forms of nonhuman plant communication and through breaking down the anthropocentric prejudice that considers human verbal language and cognition as the only true form of language, it does not provide a model of *how* to communicate the nature of plant being and plant communication to other humans. For even if we consider the plants on their own terms without anthropomorphizing, and practice the successful translation of vegetal biosemiotics to human signification, how do we express plant being—what it is like to be a plant—without anthropomorphizing? This, I argue, is the third question *The Woodlanders* works through in its inquiry of vegetal sentience and human-nonhuman relations: *How do we know the*

[16] In this moment, Giles notes that he has "never noticed" the trees sighing when they are planted in the ground. Giles has never noticed it, but he does not contest that the sighing has occurred after Marty displays the occurrence. Additionally, that the narrator also describes the sighing as it happens in real-time, suggests that we are to take this expression of "sighing" as a real action of the trees.

*nature of a tree?* This is also an issue that Steven Shaviro takes up. Referencing Thomas Nagel's famous essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat," Shaviro explains,

> A bat's sonocentric experience—or for that matter, a dog's olfactocentric one—is so different from the oculocentric experience of human beings that we will never be able to literally feel, or entirely understand, 'what it is like' to be a bat or a dog. The best we can do is to create metaphors and similes—or as I would say, aesthetic semblances—that allude in some way to chiropteran or canine existence. (25)

This is precisely what Marty has done in her attempt to understand the saplings' sighing. Her supposition, "as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be" (59), is a simile. It uses the word *as* to draw a comparison between human being and plant being in order to attempt to explain plant being to Giles. Her use of this simile and the concluding clause "just as we be," implicitly acknowledges that the frame of reference for her description of the sapling is based on her own human experience. This acknowledgement is important because as Ian Bogost points out,

> [t]here is a considerable difference between accepting the truth of human accounts of object perceptions and recognizing that, as humans, we are destined to offer anthropomorphic metaphors…particularly when our intention frequently involves communicating those accounts to other humans. (original emphasis, 65-7)

Similarly, Marty's anthropomorphic simile is an attempt to understand and also to describe the experience of the fir saplings to Giles. Unlike, Bogost and Shaviro, Marder also does not consider the potentially fruitful relationship that may develop between human and nonhuman out of anthropomorphic acts such as this. While Marty can never truly know the experience of a young tree being planted in the ground, her anthropomorphic metaphor of

the sapling's experience allows her to engage in a relationship with it in which she recognizes it as a sentient, agential being.

### *"just as we be": Sympathy through Anthropomorphism*

Christine Roth claims that Hardy "relies on such anthropomorphic architecture for acknowledging the personhood of the nonhuman" (89).[17] As we've seen with the description of the elm quivering as Giles shrouds its branches, anthropomorphic metaphors and descriptions certainly do serve to break down species boundaries and draw attention to the personhood of the nonhuman. Roth's claim, however, is one about the effects of anthropomorphism as a literary and rhetorical device. I argue that in addition to these rhetorical literary strategies, the novel is also modeling, through its characters, some potential benefits in the literal act of anthropomorphism.

When Marty anthropomorphizes the experience of the fir being planting in the ground and says that it sighs because it is "sorry to begin life in earnest," this supposition seems to be influenced by her own emotional state at this moment. During this planting scene she laments, "I've three headaches going on in my head at the same time… a rheumatic headache in my poll, a sick headache over my eyes, and a misery headache in the middle of my brain" (58-9). Additionally, she has had to sell her hair to earn extra money, her father is unable to work, and she realizes her chances with Giles are slim (as at this point in the novel it looks as though he will marry Grace). It is likely that Marty herself is feeling pretty sorry about life in this moment. Nevertheless, the projection of her feelings

[17] Also see Christine Roth's essay for an informative and insightful discussion of Hardy's advocacy for animal welfare, beliefs in animal sentience, and strategic use of anthropomorphism in his later poems.

onto the fir inspires sympathy in her. Her declaration, that they are "sorry to begin life in earnest" suggests implicitly that she has imagined what it is like to be a fir and now sympathizes with the difficulties they will face in their lives as they struggle for existence. Operating in a kind of feedback loop, the anthropomorphism inspires sympathy in her which allows her to pay closer attention to and notice the expressions of the fir, such as its "sighing" as its placed in the ground.

Giles does not anthropomorphize the reason for the tree's sighing as Marty does, but he does foster sympathy for trees. It is said that there exists a "sympathy between him and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on" (58). This sympathy leads him to pay close attention to the trees and gain more knowledge about them. The trees Giles plants take root in "a few days" while a quarter of the trees the journeymen plant "die away" by summer even though Giles appears to shovel soil "carelessly" and even though both Giles and the journeymen "seemed to go through an identically similar process" (58). By the next page, however, when we witness Giles planting a fir, it is clear that while his shoveling may be carelessly done, his planting is not. His planting is described as "gentle" and "caress[ing]." He spreads the tree's roots out carefully and directs them deliberately towards the south-west because, as he says, "when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall" (59). This sympathetic perceptive taking of future struggles the trees may endure causes Giles to pay close attention to the life of the trees, their roots, and how they are affected by the wind in an attempt to help them. It also allows him to gain more knowledge about trees and learn successful planting methods—methods the journeymen have

evidently not learned—that endow Giles with the "marvelous power of making trees grow" (58).

Coincidently, as one deeply invested in the scientific pursuits, Charles Darwin anthropomorphized nonhuman life. Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter,* notes that when Darwin studied earth worms,

> he saw in them an intelligence and a willfulness that he recognized as related to his own. But the narcissism of this gaze backfired, for it also prompted Darwin to pay close attention to the mundane activities of worms, and what came to the fore through paying attention was their own, distinctive, material complexity. (124)[18]

Thus, to all of the questions the novel asks—*How does one know nature? How does one have a relationship with nature?* and *How does one know the nature of a tree?*— it is the act of anthropomorphism that provides an answer. Anthropomorphizing causes the human to look closer at the nonhuman being, which, as Bennett points out, leads to the human learning objective facts about the mundane activities of nonhuman beings—such as South's knowledge that elms drop branches unexpectedly and Giles and Marty's knowledge that the height of a tree's upper branches indicates the depth of its root system (298). From knowing objective facts about the nonhuman being, the human can have a relationship with nature—similar to Giles and Marty's "intelligent intercourse with Nature" which is founded on their ability to recognize the mundane signs and symbols of plant being. And, finally, while we can never truly know the nature and experiences of a tree, in the initial act of anthropomorphism, the human can sympathetically speculate and metaphorize based on

[18] Darwin's study that Bennett refers to was published in his 1881 book titled *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms, with Observations of their Habits.*

parallels seen between tree and the human—like Marty's speculating about the experience of the fir being planted in the ground.

Throughout this thesis, I have often made a kind of moral claim about the novel, that it models or displays certain practices through its characters that exemplify mutually beneficial and ethical ways of interacting with nature. I posit that this approach is not wholly without basis as in a 1901 interview with William Archer for *Pall Mall Gazette,* Hardy professed an underlying moral thread in his novels: "What are my books but one plea against man's inhumanity to man—to woman—and to the lower animals?" In consideration of his treatment of trees in *The Woodlanders* and his aforementioned refusal to trim the trees on his property, we might take the liberty to extend Hardy's sentiment about his novels to include a plea against man's inhumanity to trees as well. Further, while much has been written about the effects of Darwinism on Hardy's writing, for the context of this thesis it is sufficient to say that in "the discovery of the law of evolution," Hardy believed it "revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, [and] shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively" (*The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* 373). Thus, there is an ethics which governs the text and calls out to its readers. Further, as I've attempted to show, the literal act of anthropomorphism, as depicted through the characters in *The Woodlanders*, enables ethical and sympathetic relationships between the human and nonhuman beings.[19]

As the lifestyles and traditions of rural communities began to vanish in nineteenth century England, as folklore was increasingly dismissed by science, and as models of

[19] While there exists an entirely different discourse on sympathy, this thesis does not intend reference it in any way but only to use "sympathy" as it is understood in its most literal definition and in the context in which it is used in the novel.

scientific inquiry became the modus operandi,[20] *The Woodlanders* seems to advocate for a bit of sympathetic anthropomorphism when it comes to interacting with nonhuman life. For instance, Fitzpiers, in his attempt to cure South, does not anthropomorphize the elm and ends up killing the elm, and killing South.[21] Paradoxically, the act of anthropomorphism undermines the notion of human exceptionalism. It draws affective parallels between the human and the nonhuman and engenders a kind of sympathy in the former for the latter. For what is anthropomorphism but an act of sympathetic perspective-taking—trying to understand the nature of another.

### *Looking at Trees: A Clear Gaze and a Casual Glimpse*

As those who sympathize with the trees and foster a bit of anthropomorphism, Giles and Marty are said to look at the woods not as "spectators" (298) who view the "wondrous world of sap and leaves" with a "casual glimpse," but instead, they view the woods with a "clear gaze" (297). From looking at the bark of a tree Giles and Marty can tell if the wood inside is healthy or rotted inside and by viewing the upper branches they can determine the depth of a tree's root system (298). As such, I argue that this clear gaze—which is characterized by close attention to specific details of nonhuman beings and produces objective knowledge about the trees—is a product of their act of anthropomorphism. One might ask, how can Giles and Marty view vegetal nature clearly and objectively if they engage in the practices of anthropomorphism and sympathy with nature? As anthropomorphism sees human agency in nonhuman nature and sympathy involves an

[20] See Mattisson 11 where she discusses Hardy's novels as "chronicling the passing of an era."
[21] Many thanks to Agnes Malinowska for this particular insight and her contribution to developing this line of anthropomorphic argument.

inherently subjective viewpoint. I liken this back to Bennett's explication of Darwin looking at the worms. Darwin saw a semblance of his human being in nonhuman being, but the "gaze backfired" and counterintuitively caused him to pay closer attention to the worms exclusively (124). Likewise, Giles and Marty's sympathy and anthropomorphism have caused them to pay close attention to the trees and notice their unique, nonhuman, expressions.

There is also an interactional, and interpersonal, component which seems to be necessary to the clear gaze. After the elm is felled it continues to be implicated in various acts of gazing. It is not utilized for its timber and lies on the woodland floor as a spectacle for any passerby:

> The elm of the same birth year as the woodman's lay stretched on the ground. The weakest idler that passed could now set foot on marks formerly made in the upper forks by the shoes of adventurous climbers only, once inaccessible nests could be examined microscopically, [22] and on swaying extremities where birds alone had perched the bystanders sat down. (94)

The idler seems almost mockingly to put his foot on the marks left by the climber, the examiner of the nest views it invasively, even voyeuristically, if the birds are still present, and the bystander sits thoughtlessly on privileged branches that were once reserved for birds. These individuals, we may presume are the spectators to whom Giles and Marty's clear gaze is contrasted and those who view the woods with a casual glimpse. There is no sympathy displayed between these individuals and the felled elm, or for the birds who have been displayed from their nests, and there is also minimal interaction between them and

[22] We might even question the identity of this nest-viewer. Could this be Fitzpiers, expanding his study to the elm by examining it microscopically as he examined South's brain?

the tree. The adventurous climber—who is likely Giles, as several pages earlier he was described climbing to great heights up the elm to shroud its branches[23] —and his close interaction with the elm are replaced by the weak idler, the invasive nest-voyeur, and the oblivious perching bystander. These spectators walk on the elm, sit on the elm, view the elm microscopically close. These are passive, one-sided activities enacted *on* the elm. Despite this close proximity, resting on the branches of the elm and viewing the nest microscopically close, these residents are still described as spectators: those who watch without interacting or engaging.

Additionally, the clear gaze then is not achieved by mere force of proximity, be it visual or physical. South stares at the elm fixedly all day long but does not seem to achieve the clear gaze, he cannot see the elm as anything more than sinister, tyrannical, and life-threatening. Significantly, South has stopped working and stopped interacting with the elm. He only sits in front of his window watching the elm sway in the wind. He has become a spectator. South may be an example of a failed process of anthropomorphism in the context described by Bennett. He certainly anthropomorphizes the elm but he has not moved past the narcissistic gazing stage and onto to viewing the elm with close objective attention. He is also in such sympathy with the elm that he believes their lives are linked.

Incidentally, it is precisely because of his looking that South falls under the medical gaze of Fitzpiers. In many ways, this gaze operates on a microscopic level. As mentioned earlier, Fitzpiers perceives his patients as their material substrate on the level of organs, tissue, and cells (and then literally views their tissue under a microscope). This is because viewing

[23] See *The Woodlanders,* Oxford ed. page 84 for description of Giles climbing and shrouding the tree "far above the top of his ladder" and above the South's window. Also, page 85 where he is described as "climbing higher into the sky" and climbing so high that he could only be seen as a speck from the ground.

a being microscopically close not necessarily provide Fitzpiers with a better understanding of what it is like to be that being or put him in sympathy with it. Instead, it fragments and objectifies the being into its various parts as objects of study. The clear gaze is not magnified under the lens of the microscope, although, there are resonances between Fitzpiers's medical gaze and Giles and Marty's clear gaze. Both gazes are characterized by close attention and while Fitzpiers's gaze fragments the subject, it does provide objective medical knowledge about it—such as Grammer Oliver's head being unusually large for women. The medical gaze is also made interactional in the treating of patients. Unlike the clear gaze, however, the medical gaze does not begin with an act of anthropomorphism. Interestingly, though, despite Fitzpiers's refusal to anthropomorphize the elm and consider South's beliefs about it, the elm is not excluded from Fitzpiers's medical gaze. He operates on the tree in order to treat the man and, in prescribing the tree be cut down, he is implicitly acknowledging that the elm has some form of agency over South's condition. Perhaps, then, Fitzpiers is only lacking a little bit of sympathy for South and his belief that his life is connected to the elm's because, as it turns out, in some way, whether supernatural or psychological, South's life really was connected to the life of the elm.

## *"one plea against man's inhumanity"*

Finally, we circle back to where we began, with the categories of forms of knowledge: folk, scientific and medical, and occupational. While scholars have tended to discuss these and other forms of knowledge as separate categories sealed off from each

other, I argue that in *The Woodlanders* they are fluid and dynamic.[24] Throughout the novel, many of the characters continue learning and their primary form of knowledge shifts as they learn, unlearn, or forget. Upon her return to Hintock, Grace is no longer able to distinguish between the bitter-sweets and the John-apple trees in the orchard. Giles notes, "[i]t seemed as if the knowledge and interests which had formerly moved Grace's mind had quite died away from her" (38-9). Her primary form of knowledge has shifted from a kind of place-based environmental knowledge to an academic knowledge. Marty readily expands her occupational knowledge as she picks up new trades like her father's spar making and Giles's cider making. She also is especially literate. She, more than any other character, writes and communicates via letters which complicates her position in the occupation knowledge category.[25] By the end of the novel, even Fitzpiers appears to cultivate a bit of sympathy in his medical knowledge as he attempts to treat the typhoid-stricken Giles despite his believing that Grace has been living with Giles, and also saves Grace from suffering the same fate by giving her a vial of medicine.

That these forms of knowledge are not static, sealed categories, suggests the characters can incorporate new practices into their body of knowledge. This nuance, which scholarship has missed, is central to an understanding of Hardy's novel as a whole, and central to its moral and ethical plea against "man's inhumanity to man—to woman—and to the lower animals" and to vegetal nature. Practices of anthropomorphism, communication with vegetal nature or looking at nature with a clear gaze, which lead characters to know

[24] Thank you to Benjamin Morgan for his contribution to the claim that overlap exist between the knowledge categories.
[25] See Hardy's *The* Woodlanders, Oxford ed. 99 and 152 Marty writes on the walls of Giles's home and writes a letter to Fitzpiers about Mrs. Charmond's wig.

nature, have a relationship with nature, and know the nature of trees can be incorporated into any form of knowledge which the novel represents. The novel does not explicitly laud one form of knowledge over the other, nor does it denigrate any of them. Its treatment of traditional customs and practices of folk knowledge is "informed by empathy" while it simultaneously recognizes the value of rapidly expanding forms of scientific knowledge (Dillion 9). What it does advocate for, I argue, is fostering a little bit of sympathy for nonhuman nature, which may come in the form of anthropomorphism. "The imperative," Sorum says, "is to *try* to understand these other perspectives," even while Hardy acknowledges the ultimate difficulty of doing so (189). Hardy's novels are often characterized as possessing a tone of deep pessimism, but I believe glimpses of hope may be seen in *The* Woodlanders through its effort to reconcile the relationship between humans and nonhumans and extend the "ethical…[and] biological center of human consciousness to include those who had been shoved to its periphery" (Roth 93).

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