

Cultivating Arboreal Time in Hardy's Fiction

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ABSTRACT: Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Woodlanders* (1887) not only portray characters' woodland cultivation work but also shift the nineteenth-century novel form to accommodate arboreal time, or the timescale and biorhythms of trees' lives. Hardy's novels engage with arboreal time in two ways: first, they reflect on trees' longer lives compared to those of humans, and second, they attempt but ultimately fail to adopt coppiced and pollarded trees' recurrent tempo as the rhythm of their marriage plots. Through his attention to trees, Hardy challenges both the anthropocentric focus and linear progression of nineteenth-century realist plots of marriage and *bildung*. Critics have recently stressed Hardy's portrayal of ecological entanglement, which is particularly apparent in his blurring of character and setting. Here, I shift attention from character to plot, and from spatial contiguity to temporal disjuncture. I argue that by portraying the competitive interplay between human and arboreal time, Hardy's arboreal fictions teach their readers to accept the unknowability and inimitability of arboreal lives.

I. ARBOREAL TIME

IN THOMAS HARDY'S *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Woodlanders* (1887), characters' labor and leisure are structured by trees' seasonal changes. Characters in *The Woodlanders* engage in cider-making, winter tree-cutting, barking, and summer copse-work, while *Under the Greenwood Tree*'s protagonists marry when "the apple-trees have bloomed, and the roads and orchards become spotted with fallen petals."¹ Hardy's attention to trees' seasonal clock indicates his broader engagement with arboreal time, or the timescale and biorhythms of trees' lives. These

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arboreal fictions recount how humans' cultivation practices, such as the preservation of old trees and the techniques of coppicing and pollarding, which encourage recurrent, near-infinite growth in trees, extend the arboreal timescale and modify trees' tempo, or life-rhythms. I suggest that as Hardy recounts his characters' cultivation of trees, he undertakes a form of cultivation himself. In these novels, Hardy cultivates arboreal time: challenging the limited temporal scope and linear progression of the nineteenth-century realist novel, the era's preeminent fictional form, he instead inflects his plots with the elongated timescale and recurrent tempo of their trees. Hardy's experimental cultivation of arboreal time is fleeting, as these novels return, in the end, to the relatively short, linear time exemplified by his human characters' marriage plots. However, Hardy's attempt to inscribe his narratives with the timescale and tempo of their trees illustrates how, in addition to ecological entanglement, disjuncture and competitive interplay also shape human-nonhuman relations in shared natural and narrative environments.

Victorian and environmentalist critics have long recognized how Hardy's interest in the natural world prompted him to seek "a less anthropocentric literary form that would decenter the human," in Ivan Kreilkamp's words,² or "extend . . . [his novels'] range of sympathy to subjects far beyond the human," as Aaron Rosenberg puts it.³ George Levine calls this persistent interest in "nonhuman worlds [that] counterpoint the central preoccupations" of Hardy's human-centered plots a narrative "understory."⁴ Levine's term, which denotes plants growing beneath the forest canopy, captures both the multiple levels at which Hardy's plots unfold, with the human story only apparently taking precedence over detailed descriptions of nonhuman life, and the fact that in Hardy's novels humans and nonhumans, canopy and understory, are bound together in an interconnected ecosystem.⁵ Criticism centered on these novels' trees has emphasized this entanglement. William A. Cohen has argued, for instance, that *The Woodlanders* "systematically breaks down distinctions between human and non-human, and specifically between people and trees,"⁶ in order to show that "the human body and the natural world are of a piece, each shaping

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, ed. Tim Dolin (London: Penguin, 1998), 145.

² Ivan Kreilkamp, *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 116.

³ Aaron Rosenberg, "Infinitesimal Lives: Thomas Hardy's Scale Effects," in *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, ed. Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 184.

⁴ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3. Gillian Beer similarly describes how Hardy's novels typically feature "an ulterior plot," one that exists "beyond the control of humankind." Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 223.

⁵ Hardy's nonhuman interests have been parsed through criticism on Hardy's interest in animals and on the scale-shaking revelations of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, geology, and astronomy. See Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; Pamela Gossin, *Thomas Hardy's Novel Universe: Astronomy, Cosmology, and Gender in the Post-Darwinian World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007); Anna Henchman, *The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Kreilkamp, *Minor Creatures*; Levine, *Reading*; Benjamin Morgan, "Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy's Rocks and Stars," *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geological Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 140–41; Kevin Padian, "Evolution and Deep Time in Selected Works of Hardy," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Rosemarie Morgan (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010); Andrew Radford, *Thomas Hardy and the Survivals of Time* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003); Rosenberg, "Infinitesimal Lives"; and Anna West, *Thomas Hardy and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶ William A. Cohen, "Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy's *Woodlanders*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 19 (2014): 7.

the other.⁷ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller also points to the interconnection between the arboreal and the human in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, arguing that the novel represents “humans and trees in a similar register,” so that “human life” is portrayed as “thoroughly bundled with the ecosystem to which it belongs.”⁸ For Cohen and Miller, Hardy decenters the human by situating humans horizontally in the ecosystems they share with other beings. Their environmental readings of these novels emphasize connection and contiguity between humans and the trees that surround them, a blurring of character and setting that John MacNeill Miller characterizes as a “world without background.”⁹

In tracing how Hardy experiments with arboreal time in these works, I want to shift the focus from character to plot and from spatial contiguity to temporal disjuncture. As Hardy portrays ecosystemic entanglement between people and trees, he also shows how humans negotiate trees’ temporal difference from themselves. In contrast to humans, trees experience the world at different speeds, with different potential lifespans and different capacities for regrowth—a temporal disjuncture, or “incommensura[bility],” as Elizabeth Hope Chang puts it, that distinguishes human and arboreal time.¹⁰ This is not for the most part an aggressive or hostile incommensurability, as J. M. Miller identifies in Hardy’s portrayal of nature as “a monstrous, unfeeling aggregate that overwhelms and ultimately extinguishes the human spirit”;¹¹ nor do I see Hardy’s trees imbued with the “almost mythological agency” that Rosenberg traces in Hardy’s depictions of some “nonhuman systems.”¹² Rather, I read Hardy’s treatment of trees and arboreal time as aspirational. In these arboreal fictions, Hardy experiments specifically with elongating his novels’ temporal scope beyond the parameters of the human-centered narrative and constructing the plot as a series of recurrent, near-cyclical events, echoing trees’ capacities for regrowth, rather than as a one-way progression toward an end. In other words, Hardy attempts to shift the novel form to accommodate, and even run on, arboreal time.

In these novels, Hardy’s attempted shift to arboreal time is practiced in his attention to trees’ timescale, as these novels focus on old trees and meditate on arboreal life continuing after human death, and is tested in the novels’ tempo, particularly their marriage plots. Echoing the coppiced and pollarded trees that repeatedly start life over again, Hardy crafts recursive, cyclical plotlines in which human characters attempt to start their marriage plots over again, although their previous decisions have irrevocably shaped their lives. Hardy is “acutely alert of diverse time-scales,” Gillian Beer argues,¹³ but his examination of “the interactions between human and nonhuman time scales” leads, as Benjamin Morgan has argued, to a “failure . . . to reconcile these two scales of time.”¹⁴ If the environmental takeaway from Hardy’s merging of character and setting is that humans are entangled and interdependent with the environment, then these novels’ disjuncture

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Dendrography and Ecological Realism,” *Victorian Studies* 58, no. 4 (2016): 709.

⁹ John MacNeill Miller, “Mischaracterizing the Environment: Hardy, Darwin, and the Art of Ecological Storytelling,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 62, no. 2 (2020): 170. See Miller’s critique of the idea that “Hardy was a prescient ecological thinker, one whose insights are just now beginning to be appreciated,” *ibid.*, 150. Miller notes that Hardy was ignorant about many of the landscapes he described, *ibid.*, 149.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 101.

¹¹ Miller, “Mischaracterizing the Environment,” 150.

¹² Rosenberg, “Infinitesimal Lives,” 184.

¹³ Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 234.

¹⁴ Morgan, “Scale as Form,” 140–41.

between arboreal and human time calls attention to what Donna Haraway has called the “significant otherness” that separates human and nonhuman lives.¹⁵ Hardy’s arboreal fictions end by returning to human time, and so showing their readers how to accept human limits in unknowable, inimitable arboreal worlds. Although these novels fail to “reconcile” arboreal and human time, they do exemplify how the attempt to accommodate nonhuman, significantly different time can challenge the nineteenth-century realist novel’s anthropocentric and linear tendencies, yielding novels that read as dynamic contests between human-centered canopies and arboreal understories.

II. TIMESCALE

The long-livedness of trees exemplifies one aspect of the temporal disjuncture between human and arboreal time in Hardy’s novels.¹⁶ Hardy engages with the idea that because a tree “inhabits a longer time scale than humans and achieves a greater height than humans” it “assumes a wider and longer point of view”¹⁷ than humans’ more limited timescales. In *The Woodlanders*, for instance, the narrator describes how trees planted by the laborer Marty South and woodsman Giles Winterborne will be cut “long after the two planters should be felled themselves.”¹⁸ And indeed, after Winterborne dies Marty reflects that “he had spoken so truly when he said that he should fall before they fell,” as the trees are “at that very moment sending out their roots” while Winterborne lies buried.¹⁹ Although spatially proximate, with both Winterborne’s body and the tree roots underground, humans and trees inhabit different temporal worlds. As the novel looks forward to a time “long after” Winterborne’s and Marty’s deaths, the potential lifespan of trees enables Hardy to elongate the temporal scale of the realist novel and so “represent reality beyond realism.”²⁰ This disjuncture between arboreal continuity and human finality is reiterated in the novel’s closing scene, in which Marty, mourning at Winterborne’s grave, remembers aloud the larches they planted together,²¹ which Winterborne arranged to survive a “great gale” some forty years later.²² These trees will endure after their deaths and, implicitly, will also endure after the reader closes the book at the end of this last paragraph, in an imagined, post-narrative extension of arboreal time.

The Woodlanders and *Under the Greenwood Tree* also expand the scope of the novel beyond its relatively short-lived humans by lingering on exemplary old trees, which are described as keepers of history. Old trees were a particular focus of environmental writing throughout the nineteenth century. William Gilpin, the theorist of the picturesque, argues in his 1791 *Remarks on Forest Scenery* that old trees, or “splendid remnants of decaying grandeur,” record in their

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Plant biologists Josep Peñuelas and Sergi Munné-Bosch have recently argued that trees are “potentially immortal”: although trees can die due to diseases or attacks from pests, their “likelihood of dying from aging is, at best, negligible.” See Josep Peñuelas and Sergi Munné-Bosch, “Potentially Immortal?” *The New Phytologist* 187, no. 3 (2010): 564.

¹⁷ E. C. Miller, “Dendrography,” 710.

¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1998), 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁰ Rosenberg, “Infinitesimal Lives,” 184.

²¹ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 367.

²² *Ibid.*, 64.

form “the history of some storm, some blast of lightening, or other great event.”²³ In contrast to the dawning of “a modern, industrialized experience of time as . . . accelerated time” in nineteenth-century Britain,²⁴ ancient trees exemplify the long, slow passage of history. They act as “repositories of history,” as Christiana Payne puts it,²⁵ as they embody past events by changes in their limbs or the size of their rings. Old trees prompted their human viewers to reflect on how trees experience national as well as natural history. Jacob George Strutt, the author of *Sylva Britannica* (1826), describes “those venerable trees which seem to have stood the lapse of ages—silent witnesses of the successive generations of man.”²⁶ For instance, he notes how the Moccas Park oak has watched British history unfold, as “among [its] boughs the war-cry has often reverberated in former ages,” with the tree “witness[ing] many a fierce contention, under our Henries and our Edwards.”²⁷ Payne notes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries old trees were valued “as part of a general interest in British antiquities” in which “ancient trees were associated with old families and also with paternalism and benevolence”;²⁸ by the mid-nineteenth century, Payne contends, “the appreciation of trees came to be regarded as relevant to the entire population.”²⁹ Paul A. Elliott, Charles Watkins, and Stephen Daniels agree that in the Victorian period “ancient trees were celebrated,” with early environmentalist legislation, such as the New Forest Act of 1877, singling out old trees for preservation.³⁰

As old trees became more widely valued in the mid- and late nineteenth century, their association with a long view of natural and national history persisted. Surveying hazel and filbert walks in 1881, the nature writer Richard Jefferies imagines “men stroll[ing]” under them “with rapiers by their sides while our admirals were hammering at the Spaniards with culverin and demi-cannon.” Jefferies’ vision arises from seeing the old trees, which he describes as “like old story books.”³¹ Old trees have seen more of the human story in their long lives than humans will themselves see or pass on, at least without the knowledge transfer enabled by books (which are made of trees). As human history blurs into a near-undifferentiated description of “our Henries and our Edwards,” old trees represent a kind of arboreal deep time,³² an environmental experience of the sublime in which the imagination “open[s] out in relation to seemingly boundless objects,” as Emily Brady puts it.³³ Existing spatially alongside humans, trees observe generations

23 William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and other Woodland Views, (Relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty), Illustrated by the Scenes of New-Forest in Hampshire*, vol. 1 (London: Blamire, 1791), 9.

24 Trish Ferguson, “Introduction,” in *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*, ed. Trish Ferguson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.

25 Christiana Payne, *Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760–1870* (Bristol, UK: Sansom & Company, 2017), 109.

26 Jacob George Strutt, *Sylva Britannica; or, Portraits of Forest Trees Distinguished for their Antiquity, Magnitude, or Beauty* (London: published for the author by Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown & Green, 1830), xv.

27 *Ibid.*, 26.

28 Payne, *Silent Witnesses*, 22.

29 *Ibid.*, 182.

30 Paul A. Elliott, Charles Watkins, and Stephen Daniels, *The British Arboretum: Trees, Science and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 24.

31 Richard Jefferies, *Landscape with Figures: Selected Prose Writings*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Penguin, 2003), 160.

32 In contrast to the geologic deep time invoked in Anthropocene criticism, Hardy’s arboreal deep time is both shorter-lived and more entangled with human life. On geologic deep time, see Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth-Century Geology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); on geologic deep time and the Anthropocene, see Menely and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*.

33 Emily Brady, “The Environmental Sublime,” in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 177.

of human lives and centuries of human history. This temporal disjuncture between trees' longevity and humans' relatively short lives, which indicates a further disjuncture between trees' engagement in natural and national histories and humans' implication in relatively circumscribed stories, inspires the narrators of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Woodlanders* to linger, wonderingly, on descriptions of old trees.

Old trees are a constant feature of these novels, with their presence inspiring the novels' characters, and by extension the novels' readers, to contemplate the elongated timescale of arboreal life. In *Under the Greenwood Tree*, characters are visually framed by old trees: they must duck under their boughs to continue on their paths,³⁴ and at one point, in an odd trick of the eye fooled by shadows, a character's head seems to end in "the trunk of a grand old oak-tree."³⁵ Similarly, in *The Woodlanders*, frequent depictions of planting young pine saplings are balanced with descriptions of oaks and elms that are "wrinkled like an old crone's face."³⁶ These brief references suggest that the novels' human plots are unfolding in landscapes cultivated to preserve numerous old trees. The novels also prominently feature paradigmatic old trees that emerge out of the narrative understory as more fully imagined individuals. *Under the Greenwood Tree* describes an "ancient beech-tree, horizontally of an enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height," under which the novel's protagonists dance after their marriage and to which the novel's title, reiterated in the title of the chapter in which this tree is described, seems to refer. Because many trees lose their inner core and expand horizontally as they grow older, this tree's enormous girth is itself an indicator of its age, and is interpreted historically: "Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree; tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year; quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks; and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots."³⁷ A nurturer of lives, the tree is particularly suited to this role because of its dependable longevity. The tree's long presence is indicated both by the past tense and also by the human narrator's inability to estimate what the tree has seen—"many hundreds" and "countless families" describe a reiterative abundance of life outside the narrator's estimation, which extends beyond the temporal bounds of the human-centered plot.

In *The Woodlanders*, the protagonist Grace Melbury is similarly impressed with an "old beech" that appears to be the keeper of a long natural history: the beech seems to have experienced changes to its structure "in past times" and is now surrounded by "dead boughs . . . scattered about like ichthyosauri in a museum,"³⁸ a description that portrays the beech as a museum-like venue for accessing prehistoric time. These trees serve, as Anna Burton argues, as sites of "stories that recede into the past, and project into the future."³⁹ Belying moments when the forms of humans and old trees seem to merge, these depictions of long-lived beeches show that when the narrative lingers on old trees, it evokes a timescale that is so long-lived as to be as ungraspable by the novel's humans who dance in a magisterial tree's shade as it is by the rabbits that nibble on the tree's bark. In these moments, the novel's scale expands to accommodate the arboreal: human

³⁴ Hardy, *Greenwood*, 22.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁶ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 197.

³⁷ Hardy, *Greenwood*, 155.

³⁸ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 311.

³⁹ Anna Burton, *Trees in Nineteenth-Century English Fiction: The Silvicultural Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 139.

characters, and the plotlines centered on them, pause to look at trees and imagine the long span of arboreal experience that precedes and extends beyond human-centered stories.

Hardy engages in his most radical experiment in inflecting a novel with arboreal time in *The Woodlanders*, in which he crafts a plot-changing juncture between arboreal and human timescales. The novel recounts how the ailing woodland laborer John South is oppressed by the sight of an elm, which he insists “will soon be the death of me.”⁴⁰ As his daughter, Marty, explains, “The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave.”⁴¹ This tree is first shorn of its branches and then, on the doctor’s orders, finally chopped down. But this attempt to prioritize human over arboreal life and shorten a tree’s lifespan in order to lengthen that of a human is quickly overruled by the narrative. Instead of relieving South’s morbid obsession, the tree’s death causes him to die as well, with his life apparently bound to and ruled by that of the tree.⁴² While Hardy repeatedly stresses temporal disjuncture between the timescales of trees and humans, he also experiments in this passage with making trees’ experience of time an operative force—one that can draw human time into alignment with it, so that a tree’s lifespan exactly mirrors that of a human. Moreover, Hardy makes this unnatural early death of the elm a key node from which the novel’s plot progresses: South’s death sets in motion an inheritance plot that, in turn, triggers an unhappy marriage and leads to three more early deaths. The elm’s fall reinforces the significance of the novel’s arboreal understory, with Hardy’s plot machinations suggesting that humans’ apparent power over trees is eclipsed by trees’ apparent power over plot. In this moment, the arboreal understory overshadows the novel’s human-centered canopy.

III. TEMPO

In addition to experimenting with the disjuncture and irruptive juncture between arboreal and human timescales, Hardy’s novels also engage with arboreal time through his exploration of the tempo, or life-rhythms, of trees that periodically regrow after coppicing and pollarding, two cultivation techniques employed by his woodland characters. Coppicing and pollarding are methods of cultivation in which deciduous trees, especially oak, willow, chestnut, and hazel in Britain, are cut back in a particular way (nearly to the ground in coppicing, at a height five or six feet off the ground in pollarding). The parts of the tree that are cut back then regenerate with new sprouts, which are harvested for use as fuel or material, and the cycle begins again and “can be carried on almost indefinitely.”⁴³ Evidence of systematic coppicing in Britain dates to the Neolithic period,⁴⁴ and the practice was a mainstay of rural economies throughout the British Isles into the nineteenth century. While coppicing declined in the late nineteenth century, the practice persisted in some parts of England as late as the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴² Sympathetic connections between people and trees are a trope in folklore, one of Hardy’s interests. For instance, see J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1900), 395.

⁴³ Julian Evans, “Coppice Forestry—An Overview,” *Ecology and Management of Coppice Woodlands*, ed. G. P. Buckley (London: Chapman and Hall, 1992), 24.

⁴⁴ Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London: Phoenix Giants, 1997), 73.

⁴⁵ The decline of coppicing and pollarding has been attributed both to the development of plantation-style forestry and to industrialization, with the expansion of railways from 1840–70 bringing “cheap coal to the

During these practices' heyday, coppiced and pollarded trees were not only a renewable source of fuel and material, but also offered their cultivators opportunities to observe and engage in modifying the tempo of trees. Regularly coppiced or pollarded trees can live almost infinitely. Oliver Rackham describes how a cut-down tree "sprouts to form a stool, which gets bigger on successive fellings"; such "giant coppice stools are among the oldest living things in Britain." And they are still productive, as "stools are not men or machines; they do not die of old age or wear out; the process can go on indefinitely."⁴⁶ The arborist William Bryant Logan has described how generations of families returned to the same trees, engaging in a "reciprocal" process by which "One acted, and the other responded . . . One party harvested for its needs, the other lived longer and continued indefinitely upon the land";⁴⁷ coppices thus "co-evolved with the communities which used them," as G. F. Peterken argues.⁴⁸ As they exemplify human-nonhuman entanglement, coppiced and pollarded trees also signal the temporal disjuncture between human and arboreal timescales and tempos. Living beyond the age even of the monumental beeches in these novels, coppiced and pollarded trees are simultaneously ancient and perpetually young; they experience a near-infinite recurrence, a perpetual starting-over that persists across generations of human lives.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has argued that most narratives of the Anthropocene, this new geologic era named for humans' shaping of Earth systems,⁴⁹ are characterized by an "embrace of linearity," or "hard starts and full stops, plots with rising action, accelerated propulsions, catastrophic denouements"⁵⁰—or the successive beginnings, middles, and ends characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist novel's plots of marriage and *bildung*. Critics of Victorian literature have long argued that these novels achieve "a certain (imagined) stability of [their] representational worlds,"⁵¹ as their narratives progress in predictable ways under the narrator's omniscient direction; "traditionally realism is associated with determinism," Levine notes.⁵² As Elaine Freedgood has argued, this characterization of the century's fiction remains largely intact even as critics acknowledge how Victorian novels' "formal heterogeneity" challenges these assumptions.⁵³ Hardy's works are particularly known for experimenting with plots that defy the expectation of linear development. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth notes Hardy's interest in "discontinuities" and argues that "time is cyclic in Hardy, not linear."⁵⁴ Margaret Kolb describes this characteristic of Hardy's fiction as his "characters walk[ing] in circles. Willingly or unwillingly, they inevitably

countryside" and undercutting these traditional methods of harvesting wood. See Elliott, Watkins, and Daniels, *British Arboretum*, 16; Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: Dent, 1976), 103; and Rackham, *History*, 95.

⁴⁶ Rackham, *History*, 102.

⁴⁷ William Bryant Logan, *Sprout Lands: Tending the Endless Gift of Trees* (New York: Norton, 2019), 27.

⁴⁸ G. F. Peterken, "Coppices in the Lowland Landscape," in *Ecology and Management of Coppice Woodlands*, ed. G. P. Buckley (London: Chapman and Hall, 1992), 5.

⁴⁹ On dating the beginning of the Anthropocene, see Menely and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Anarchy," in Menely and Taylor, *Anthropocene Reading*, 26.

⁵¹ Elaine Freedgood, *Worlds Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), xi.

⁵² George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 56.

⁵³ Freedgood, *Worlds Enough*, 32.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 269–70.

wind up back at their beginnings.”⁵⁵ Readers of Hardy’s novels, from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896), know that Hardy’s marriage plots, in particular, often do not provide narrative closure, but rather prompt circuitous attempts to refashion lives.

What makes *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Woodlanders* distinct from these other works, I argue, is that these novels proffer cyclic, recursive human plots in settings structured by arboreal recurrence, and these cyclic plots aim for the kind of recurrent youth experienced by coppiced and pollarded trees. Reflecting his interest in portraying “an organic pre-industrial time-consciousness” in his Wessex novels,⁵⁶ Hardy envisioned the characters of *The Woodlanders* as engaged in “the handicrafts classed formerly as ‘copsework,’” which he describes as “almost extinguished” in a 1912 postscript to the novel.⁵⁷ Pollarding and, especially, coppicing are referenced frequently in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Woodlanders*. Characters move through landscapes studded with hazel coppices,⁵⁸ engage in all kinds of “copse-work,”⁵⁹ and lament injuries sustained during pollarding.⁶⁰ I contend that the arboreal cultivation work in which nearly all characters are engaged not only shapes the events of these books but also inflects Hardy’s experiments with the possibility of recurrent growth in his characters’ lives, and specifically in their marriage plotlines. Like the coppiced trees that surround them, Hardy’s protagonists aspire to shed their pasts and begin again.

Both novels center on romantic entanglements. *Under the Greenwood Tree* recounts the long and complicated courtship of Dick Dewey and Fancy Day, in which Fancy accepts another man’s marriage proposal while engaged to Dick.⁶¹ In the end, the two marry and dance under the greenwood tree of the novel’s title, though the novel’s final pages show that Fancy never undeceives Dick about her divided affections, so that their marriage is shadowed from the beginning not only by the shade of the greenwood tree, but also by the lost possibility of a different marriage. *The Woodlanders* traces romantic regret among many characters as it follows the progress of three love triangles: one involving boarding-school-educated Grace Melbury, her childhood friend Giles Winterborne, and Edred Fitzpiers, a young doctor recently settled in the woodlands; in another love triangle, Fitzpiers and an unnamed “South Carolina gentleman of very passionate nature”⁶² vie for the love of Felice Charmond, a wealthy landowner and former actress; and in the last love triangle, Grace and Marty South love, and mourn for, Winterborne.

⁵⁵ Margaret Kolb, “Plot Circles: Hardy’s Drunkards and Their Walks,” *Victorian Studies* 56, no. 4 (2014): 595.

⁵⁶ Trish Ferguson, “Hardy’s Wessex and the Birth of Industrial Subjectivity,” in *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*, ed. Trish Ferguson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 73.

⁵⁷ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 369. Anna Burton argues that *The Woodlanders* offers a “truthful representation of arboreal practice(s),” as suggested by “the prominence of references to *The Woodlanders* in written accounts of forestry history”; Burton, *Trees*, 142.

⁵⁸ Hardy, *Greenwood*, 7, 154.

⁵⁹ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 25–26. While “copse” now describes a small wood or thicket, in Hardy’s time “copse” was also used to refer specifically to a coppice (“copse, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2021), and Hardy refers interchangeably to hazel copses and hazel coppices (*Woodlanders*, 105 and 233–35, for instance). Rackham defines “copse” as a “spelling variant of coppice” (Rackham, *History*, 421).

⁶⁰ Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 31.

⁶¹ Hardy, *Greenwood*, 138–42.

⁶² Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 326.

Key scenes in the progress of these love triangles unfold either within coppices—Grace and Felice confront each other in a hazel coppice,⁶³ for instance—or with explicit consideration of the trees that surround these characters. Grace anticipates her marriage to Fitzpiers while examining “the sappy green twig-tips of the season’s growth,” which indicate steady vegetal persistence in contrast to the upcoming change in her own life.⁶⁴ After Grace and Fitzpiers’ marriage, the novel’s post-marriage plot reshuffles characters’ romantic attachments to align with their relationships to trees. Felice, who states that her house—described as “vegetable nature’s own home”⁶⁵—“oppresses” her,⁶⁶ is drawn to Fitzpiers, who feels similarly out of place in the woodlands.⁶⁷ Grace, who learned in childhood to distinguish varieties of apple trees at a glance,⁶⁸ sees in Winterborne a more suitable forest-raised partner: she imagines him “sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen, as she had seen him amongst the sappy boughs of the plantations: sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips,”⁶⁹ and is glad that he has, tree-like, “arisen out of the earth ready to hand” as her marriage with Fitzpiers founders.⁷⁰ The novel returns in its closing section to this idea that a human’s degree of comfort with trees is an important element in determining that character’s suitability for a romantic relationship. Grace, reflecting on how “Marty South alone . . . had approximated to Winterborne’s level of intelligent intercourse with Nature,”⁷¹ declares to Marty, “He ought to have married *you*.”⁷² One’s relationship to trees, the novel suggests, offers an index for determining a character’s “true complement in the other sex.”⁷³ Yet this reliance on a kind of tree-inflected matchmaking, which emphasizes the ways in which humans and trees are bound together and even resemble each other, is belied by the novel’s attention to the contrasting tempos of human and arboreal lives.

While the novel devotes most of its attention to the Grace Melbury-Giles Winterborne-Edred Fitzpiers love triangle, each of these overlapping plotlines is marked by a recursive form, as characters make romantic decisions only to regret and attempt to escape from them. Grace, for instance, is torn between her “old simple indigenous feeling” for Winterborne⁷⁴ and her fascination with “the handsome, coercive, irresistible Fitzpiers.”⁷⁵ Following her father’s preference, Grace marries Fitzpiers—but soon repents the match as a “frightful mistake.”⁷⁶ Fitzpiers, too, regrets his pursuit of Grace, noting that “his heart had played havoc with his principles in taking her to him.”⁷⁷ When he re-encounters Felice, whom he had known briefly in adolescence, he feels particularly frustrated with his decisions: “Why do I never recognize an opportunity till I have

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 234–47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 331.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

missed it, nor the good or ill of a step till it is irrevocable?" he asks himself.⁷⁸ But while Fitzpiers describes his marriage as "irrevocable," the plot experiments quite explicitly with the idea that it might not be. Not only does Fitzpiers leave Grace for Felice, but Grace, with her feelings for Winterborne rekindled, attempts to obtain a divorce and so be freed from Fitzpiers. For Grace, Winterborne, Fitzpiers, and Felice, their attempts to start over are also attempts to return to their youths and their lovers when young. The novel thus experiments with revivifying the past, recounting Fitzpiers' departure with Felice for the Continent, where they first met, and describing how Grace and Winterborne once again walk arm-in-arm in the woodland setting of their childhood. This effort to start over again, as though age has not progressed and marriage never occurred—to cut off the past and sprout new lives, in a resurgence of lost youth—echoes the tempo of the coppiced trees that surround these lovers.

When these novels' characters recognize that they cannot in fact live as coppiced and pollarded trees do, their acknowledgment does not prompt the tragic devastation of *Jude* or *Tess*, but rather a resignation to, and even contentment with, the temporal limitations of their non-arboreal lives. Grace's attempt to attain a divorce is fruitless—the "adamantine barrier of marriage"⁷⁹ persists—and, with "the curtain . . . fallen again between them,"⁸⁰ she again stops treating Winterborne as a lover. These love triangles are haunted not only by the irrevocability of the marital bond, but also by irrevocable death: by the book's end, Winterborne has died of typhoid and Felice has been murdered by her South Carolinian lover, who then kills himself. In contrast to the ancient yet ageless coppice stools that litter the novel's setting, the novel's characters live bounded not only by the "barrier[s]" and "curtain[s]" of human customs but also by the linear limitations of human lives. As the survivors of the novel's love triangles, Grace and Fitzpiers experience a different kind of recursive plot from those that they wished for: in the novel's final chapters, they once again turn to each other, "ma[k]e it up,"⁸¹ and so accept the fact of their marriage. As they do so, they plan to move two hundred miles from the coppiced woodlands where they first met to a city where, we might assume, they will not be surrounded by evidence of trees' capacity for endless recurrent youth.

IV. CANOPY AND UNDERSTORY

In *The Woodlanders*, Grace Melbury reflects that of all those who lived in the woodlands, only Giles Winterborne and Marty South begin to understand the woods. Winterborne and Marty "had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing . . . together they had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet."⁸² Marty and Winterborne are unusual, gifted with "a clear gaze" toward trees in contrast to others' "casual glimpses."⁸³ Yet even their tree-whispering has limits, given the "perceptive and scalar challenges" trees pose to human attempts to understand them,⁸⁴ and they must mediate trees' messages by translating hieroglyphs, collecting signs, and creating an alphabet out of trees' codes. Their dependence on such modes of translation

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 330–31.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁸⁴ Miller, "Dendrography," 702.

indicates that though trees' ways of being can be observed and interpreted by humans, trees remain significantly different from humans—they are “strange strangers,” as Timothy Morton might say.⁸⁵ Despite humans' ecological entanglement with them, trees cannot be truly known, and they cannot, these novels suggest, be fully imitated by humans in life, marriage, or the novel.

In closing, I would like to return to George Levine's description of Hardy's novels as divided structurally between a human-centered canopy and a nonhuman-patterned understory. Caroline Levine has described how rhythms, or the “temporal patterns of art and life,” are both “organizing and shaping” and “plural and colliding, jumbled and constantly altered,” with “each, thanks to the others, incapable of imposing its own dominant order.”⁸⁶ This collision of rhythms, which we could see as a kind of “jostl[ing]” in the “limited space” of narrative,⁸⁷ has an environmental echo: the dynamic play between canopy and understory in a forest. The forester Peter Wohlleben recounts how, when a space opens in the forest canopy due to one tree's fall, the understory trees take advantage of the unusual sunlight and shoot up to fill that space. The understory trees do not make it to the canopy before other trees extend their crowns and fill the open space, and they must wait until the next large tree falls to begin another race to the sunshine.⁸⁸ In Wohlleben's depiction, understory and canopy form an entangled community in which multiple beings contend for prominence. As Hardy's fictions cultivate arboreal time, his arboreal understories and the elongated, recursive time they represent similarly “jostle for limited space” with his human canopies and linear, limited human time. Hardy uses this competitive interplay between humans and trees, canopy and understory, to inscribe, in one final way, the rhythm of arboreal time onto the novel form. A

⁸⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 41.

⁸⁶ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 81.

⁸⁷ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13.

⁸⁸ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2016), 34–36.