The Woodlanders: A Metaphor of Character

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Metaphor alone can give a sort of eternity to style.

M. Proust

‘In truth,’ wrote Proust, ‘the events of a life present no interest when they are shorn of all the feeling which makes of them a poem.’ If we consider Hardy’s novels from this perspective, it appears that he has written for the purpose of recreating ‘the feeling’ which is the poetic side of experience. Since Hardy was first and foremost a poet he trusted that poetry could best match the language of the mind. How and by what means could poetry achieve this quality? Cynthia Ozick\(^1\) claims that poetry achieves this through metaphor, because metaphor is the poetry-making faculty itself. So what we find in a poem is metaphoric truth. Evidently, for Hardy, the important truth he wished to communicate was metaphoric truth. In other words, he used his creative faculty to transform experience into metaphor with which he could recompose ‘the feeling’. Hence the depth and richness of his texts.

Hardy took the opportunity for poetic as well as metaphoric treatment afforded by the subject of The Woodlanders, and we can discern three different layers of meaning in the novel. Hardy achieves this multi-dimensional effect by assimilating the personal and the impersonal. As Jean Brooks observes, ‘in The Woodlanders Hardy assimilates the personal movement of human life to the impersonal drive of nature’.\(^2\) Especially in the character of Giles Winterborne we are made aware of the co-existence of three different entities: first, Giles as an ordinary human being; second Giles as ‘Autumn’s very brother’ and ‘a wood-god’ representing ‘Nature unadorned’ (p. 213);\(^3\) and third, Giles as a representative of the woodlanders, an enclosed community with its own codes of living. No other character in the
book has been given this much depth and centrality, a fact which hints at where Hardy's sympathies lie.

In fact, Giles's multi-dimensionality also makes him in many respects suitable for Jungian analysis. The whole book resonates with his archetypal inheritance, he is 'the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation: sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen ... sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips'. Giles, in representing Nature, also represents the primitive unconscious state of man. In this context, the contraries Hardy explores in this book are Nature vs. Idea; unconscious vs. conscious; primitive vs. modern; rural vs. metropolitan.

Because Jung's analytical concept of 'the shadow' applies both to human beings and to societies, it is useful here to analyse Giles in relation to this concept. To be more precise, 'the shadow' works as an obstruction to self-realisation because it leads the person to inertia. Giles has been led to inertia because he is captured by his 'shadow'; thus, as the representative of Nature he stands for Nature's Inertia; and as the representative of the woodlanders, he stands for the community's inert, though in many ways respectable, habits of life. This is the reason why, in The Woodlanders, we are made aware that 'the individual character and the individual plot are there to serve a wider purpose'.

Hardy describes the woodland setting and 'the wood-environed community' in a brief but decisive paragraph:

It was one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation; where reasoning proceeds on narrow premises and results in inferences wildly imaginative, yet where from time to time, dramas of grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein.

(p. 10)

As Sumner points out, 'The village is static, enclosed, shut off by the woods from the world where change occurs ... the characters are subdued and acquiescent, making only muted attempts to change their situation when it becomes unbearable'. Due to the restricted nature of this environment there is a tendency towards conformity and acceptance and this leads naturally to a way of life which is primarily based on imitation. Thus the process of gaining individual