Development of Forest Imagery in English Poems

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Abstract. Forest is considered the roots of the British and is also the roots of the British and the most common imagery in poetry. This paper examines the forest as imagery shifts meanings from the paleolithic age to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the romanticism age, and the modernism. The meanings help people have a thorough understanding of forest changes under the influence of policies and religion, as well as British history. Prehistoric worship regarded trees as the connection between the earth and the underworld or the celestial world and as the residence of the ancestors. Gradually it blended into roman cultures and disappeared due to the Christianity abhorrence toward unorthodox cults. In the Renaissance, the forest turned into a place of danger with the strict punishment that applied to the royal forest and the Christian belief. The corollary of industrialization was environmental pollution. Poets from the eighteenth century rebelled against Roman cultures that had changed or expunged British original national spirits. Romanticism showed its ardent affinity to primitive nature and tried to regain the original spirits. Modernism takes on the effect of the wars and the literary traditions. Their appreciation of forests not only as a national symbol but also the environmental protection. The meaning of the forest passes on and takes on the characteristic of the time. The understanding of the forest is also the understanding of a nation.

Keywords: imagery · forest · national characteristic

1 Introduction

English poem, as one of the most significant genres of English literature, has been receiving the most attention in the world. Meanwhile, the forest, as emblematic imagery of English poems, constantly involves in English literature. Many works had been done to the examining of forest imagery in specific poems and neglected the basic introduction of the meaning. However, it may confuse readers with different cultural backgrounds when they first appreciate English poems that bear forests as imagery, while most researches are too detailed and professional for beginners, especially when they are not familiar with English culture.

This paper involves the origin of tree worship in England since the paleolithic age and summarizes the belief and its disappearance of it. Following the forest destruction and royal forest laws that were applied by the Normans tried to provide the historical

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background for the forest in the Middle Age and Renaissance England. Moving to romanticism, industrialization had done irreversible damage to nature. The proliferation of travel poetry proved the poets' preference for nature in confronting environmental pollution and utilitarianism. The missing primeval forests continued into modernism, which also brought postwar trauma into the literature.

The development of the forest or the tree imagery is determined by the historical context and also the evidence of history. Studying the shifts provides a thorough appreciation of poetry and a thorough understanding of British national traits.

2 Tree Worship in Paleolithic England

The tree is one of the most significant cultural characteristics in British history and is also important crucial to cultural expression, memory, and national identity. The worship of trees could be traced back to paleolithic times when people were assembling around the coast of England.

In paleolithic England, since trees reached their roots and branches, people considered the branches and roots of trees to stand for connections. Hence the ancestors took trees into account as the connection between the present life and the underworld or the celestial world. They believed trees were since they were not the output of agriculture, the god-given plant which processed powers (trees, unlike humans, were capable of rising from the dead). Thus, they regarded trees as a symbol of the divine being where their ancestors' spirits resided, together with their knowledge and past learning. Furthermore, they believed that evergreen trees represented immortality and that deciduous trees represented rebirth because of their perennially shed leaves and new growth. They also thought that trees could bring the dead back to life.

Though it seemed that the veneration of trees was the aspect of animistic belief, such as the belief that the ancestors' spirits would reside in trees, Della Hooke argued in her *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* that 'it seems more likely that it was not the trees themselves magical, but the fact that they were the dwelling places of deities whose hidden presence …is seen only by the eye of reverence. Deities dwelt in the forest, for it was wondrous, hidden, and secretive, especially under the influence of the development of agriculture which caused the shrinkage of trees' land' [1].

The veneration of trees was once widespread across Europe. They had similar cults toward trees and shared the same image that trees were populated by spiritual creatures. Like Celtic druids, pre-Christian Siberian shamans went on their spiritual journeys in the forest and eventually died in it. They were placed upon a tree platform to send their spirits to the other world with the belief that trees stretching branches and roots could be the ladder between worlds.

After the Roman Empire intruded into England, many new cultures from Western Europe were introduced into England through trade, cultural contact, and wars. The new cultures were widespread in England, southern Scotland, and Wales, but Ireland where retained its Celtic culture under the domination of the Romans. Though eventually, Christianity was the unifying factor in those areas, Ireland absorbed its ancient traditions (such as their reverence for trees) instead of eradicating them. Even though Christianity

was trying to expunge the pagan factors (animistic beliefs like tree worships) to proclaim its monotheism, the symbolism of trees would not be lost.

At the beginning of the first millennium AD, tree worship was a potent faith in Europe. Christianity, on the contrary, abhorred the heathen belief, such as spirits of the ancestors inhabited in trees, and was threatened by the powerful competitive belief. Thus, Christianity endeavored to expunge the tree worship. Trees were associated with prophecy and healing power, then forced to be reinterpreted as gruesome and evil powers. As it was mentioned in Deuteronomy 12.2: 'Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree' [2]. Trees, especially holy trees, had to be removed, for they were symbols of another religion; therefore, they had to be replaced or eradicated. So the living trees, as a symbol of relish, were transformed into the dead trees that made the cross.

The evidence of the role of Nature in Old English literature is minimal, partly due to, according to Jenifer Neville, there was no role to play in Anglo-Saxon Christianity, and the Christian church was not affinity any preoccupation with the beauty of the earth, not God.

Eventually, tree worship was impaired in England; however, despite the replacement and repression, the belief in the power of trees lingered in folk practices and folklore.

3 From Middle Ages to Renaissance

The majority of studies on forests, particularly the woods in the Middle Ages, paint a picture of densely forested primitive forests dispersed across the landscape and positioned close to settlements that were connected to other settlements by meandering trails, alleviating people's isolation. Bands of Robin Hood lived far into the forest. This lovely image appeared unrepresentative for Charles R. Young noted that humans timbered many trees in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, exactly as they had been doing since the Anglo-Saxon invaders started using agriculture [3]. The forest had been on the decline since the first assembly settled in this land.

Forest was considered royal property since William the Conqueror was enthroned in 1066 and started the dynasty of the House of Normandy. The policies of the royal forest did some protection for the forest from destruction and slowed the speed of inevitable encroachment of field upon the forest, though the intention was actually for their deer hunting. The royal forests were not all wood-loaded, and not all wooded areas were royal forests. Royal forests applied different forest laws, and the penalty for cutting trees in royal forests was four times that of outside; stricter penalties might be applied where needed. In the thirteenth century, about one-fourth of the land area of England was designated as a royal forest.

Because of their association with Zeus, Jupiter, Hercules, and the older Irish gods, as well as the fact that they were sacred to the ancient Hebrews and continued to be strongly identified with Norse and Teutonic gods, oaks were carefully protected during the Middle Ages. The English adopted oak as a sign of tenacity and commitment. Because Christianity saw tree worship as impermissible, the ash has maintained its relationship with healing in folklore and mythology. Other trees, such as the rowan and the holly,

were also thought to offer protection from evil. At that time, the elder was viewed as a wicked tree [4].

Admittedly, the protection of forests was the side effect of the royal forest. Protection of the king's deer was the underlying principle applied to all royal forests, regardless of whether the manor and woods within the forest were those of the kings or of someone else. Conservation policies for the royal forests were never directed towards the total preservation of the trees, though the oak was carefully preserved; as mentioned above, the cutting of trees was never ended. Replanting trees throughout the Middle Ages was not documented. The strategy of restricting tree-cutting continued to clash with the aim to maximize revenue from the forest. The massive devastation of forests in the sixteenth century served as proof of what would occur if the conservation of cutting down trees were to be abandoned.

With the conservation of cutting wood and restriction from the Royal, the forest turned into a place that contained outlaws like Robin Hood. Doubled with Christianity's exhortation, the forest eventually turned into a place of danger. Nevertheless, the forest was still the place that addressed poets' attention,

The trees of the incredibly Edenic garden of love were listed by Chaucer in *The Parlement of Foules*, following "mixed woodlands" rhetorical conventions used by following poets, including Edmund Spenser. Chaucer's forests have a peculiarly captivating character. Because of Chaucer's nature, everything seemed to be at the forefront. Chaucer saw a romantic quality in the forest. As soon as Sir Thomas from *The Canterbury Tales* into the woodland on his horse, he immediately experienced a lusty fit of craving for an elfin queen.

Edmund Spenser, on the other hand, in his poem *The Faerie Queene*, used the same rhetorical traditions as Chaucer. *The Faerie Queene* was the poem that, with the imitation of Virgil's Aeneid, expressed the poet's veneration towards his queen Elisabeth the First. In this poem, all the fights happened in the forests. Because as mentioned above, trees represented the connection between this world and the underworld or celestial world; consequently, the forest provided an appropriate place for a heroic knight engaged in a spiritual quest.

The forest in Spenser's work served as the starting point of the investigation but not as the scene of action; rather, it served as a place for reflection and repose. While this was going on, the activities on the plain were pretty straightforward, and the knights either won or were unhorsed. The actual conduct of the woods was mercilessly mocked by the list of trees, which symbolized a moral dissection of the cosmos of man. The chaos and rottenness hidden behind the woodlands' outward appearance of peace were hinted at in Spenser's forest.

The loss of woods persisted from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, but their effects persisted over time. Even if the original tree worship in England seemed to have vanished, many poets were nevertheless affected by nature. Although Christianity outlawed the adoration of trees, the forest continued to serve as one of the most important metaphors in English literature.

4 Forests in Romanticism

Britain's imitation of Italy on landscapes and buildings lost its national spirit of unbeautified nature. In 1772, Thomas Pennant, the first British tour guide, published his book A Tour in Scotland. He traveled to the sublime in British coastal areas that lacked access to transportation, so he had to reach by horse or boat and suffered from constant rain and wind. However, he thought it was worthy for it was the travel to true England and regaining natural virtue instead of leisure. The sublime was considered the cure for insipid hobbies and the statement of numbness which was precisely the reason for the British awful national statement. Long excursions were considered the connections with nature and away from corruption and industrialization in cities. William Wordsworth's The Prelude considered nature a place of innocent, and living in it could preserve the innocent from social experience and time [5].

The harmony of the woodland and Pope's exaltation of just governmental authority marked the beginning and end of Alexander Pope's *Windsor-Forest*. The current state of the forest stood in stark contrast to the evil reign of the Normans. The Normans operated as tyrants rather than lords, claiming total dominion and possession rather than shared usufruct. They even seized the environment. Pope saw the forest, which was regarded as royal property, as a natural and national resource. People at that time received the idea that nature demands equality, but culture creates inequality [6]. They called upon the return to nature.

'In the letter to his brother in 1798, Coleridge disavowed his regrettable involvement in radical politics and declared his decision to devote himself to the much worthier cause of deepening man's sensitivity to nature [7]'. He, or most of the poets at the time, believed that governments rise and fall like abscesses produced by certain fevers, and they are more likely to stir than cure man's evil inclinations. Nature, on the contrary, 'instills the love of the good and a gratifying one's hope for moral regeneration [7]'. Thus the proliferation of traveling literature under the influence of popular aesthetics of the picturesque.

The picturesque, in contrast to the beauty which resides in "smooth, gradually varying and uniform object [7]", or the sublime, which "thrives in terror, uniformity or shapeless infinity [7]", is characterized mainly by a variety and intricacy. It depends on "visible outlines and objects of a happy mean between the beautiful and the sublime…relieving the former of its languor and the latter of its solemnity [7]". The postulation of the picturesque was that nature "was inherently unified despite its dazzling variety [7]".

The idea that the canons of art offer a way to discover the harmony ingrained in nature's creation is one that Coleridge agreed with and is commonplace in picturesque aesthetics. He favored producing paintings in the form of words and held the view that art might reveal nature's untapped richness. He preferred to keep the landscape and human activity distinct because he believed that even a small overlap might interfere with the focus required to crack the secret code of a panoramic prospect.

Unlike Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth would second her fascination for Scottish scenery if the interaction with history or conversation drew her attention. Nevertheless, she could mingle in nature immediately after the interruption without a loss.

In the era of nature preference, the extolling of nature was intense and simple. The appreciation of nature, especially the nature separated from religion, was considered the protection of human innocent.

5 Forests in Modernism

After wars, to heal the wounds that were left by wars and to satisfy the protection of the environment, the British government built twelve forests. Forest, and particularly the language of woodland, are increasingly associated with political and administrative systems, as well as ideas of ownership, history, and identity. The forest has frequently been referred to in the literature as a place of enchantment, folklore, savagery, or shelter. As mentioned above, trees, or forests, did have these characteristics since tree worship was replaced.

A convoluted combination of governmental, political, and cultural identifications make up Forest. According to Amy Elizabeth Cutler, recognizing the forest as a zone of translation plays a significant role in language. According to Walter Benjamin, translating is like "calling into the linguistic forest without entering it [8]", as it is on the outside, facing the forested ridge. Since the Renaissance, poets have utilized many "translations," one of which is the notion of a woodland echo. "The woods shall to me answer and my echo resound," as Spenser put it. As in the legend of the nymph who lives in the woodland, the Echo whose job it is to reiterate the words of the speaker.

John Hollander said in *The Figure of Echo* that the "forest of echo occupies a domain of figurative languages as thick as any woodlands [9]." The term "echo" alludes to a variety of literary implications, including amplification, resonance, diminishing, distortion, delays in return, scattering, proliferation, and diffusion. People often have trouble telling whether they hear the woods or their own voice when they listen in the woods. On just one page of Eric Mottram's *A Book of Herne*, the echo appears in many ways. In modernist poetry, references to forests are commonly employed.

The contemporary woodland is a civic landmark as well—the calling of the forest into memory through art, culture, or science. As Stewart mentioned in his book *The Forest*, "you should lie down now and remember the forest, for it is disappearing [10]". People express their worry about losing the environment and the forest.

Moving beyond romanticism, eco-criticism of loss intensifies the misery of conflict. The sadness of the mass murders is concealed by the trees in the woodland where the fighting took place. In *the Forest Where they Fell*, by Zoe Skoulding, conveys her anguish toward the broken bodies. In Skoulding's poetry, the forest is a metaphor for memory in addition to an environment characterized by perfect simultaneity, ongoing development, and change. The unexplained falling bodies from the past are incorporated into the environment's dynamic makeup.

Modernism poets take on the concerns towards the environment from romanticism, engage the forest echo, and include their claim woodland memory in the sonnets. The progression of the timberland never stops but passes on and improves its meaning through time. Presently roots of trees are moreover respected as the roots of a country and its national traits.

6 Conclusion

From the paleolithic age, the ancestors had already aware of the importance of the forests, though it was the fear of the unknown. The ardent superstition eventually gave its way to religion and more sophisticated culture. The ups and downs of the forest are the same as British culture. The adoption of roman cultures and Christianity might expunge the original British traits, but eventually, the booming industrialization brought British spirits back to the primeval forests.

This paper, by studying the changes of meaning in forest imagery, concluded that though the culture may change through time, the British's attempt to connect with nature never ended. Whether it was superstitious cults in the paleolithic ages, the wondrous forbidden places in the Middle Ages, the place of innocent and human virtue in romanticism, or the place of history and environmental protection in modernism, the forest imagery never submitted but continued and resided in British spirits.

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