Abstract

This essay attempts to compare the fictional oeuvres of the Italian Nobel Prize writer Grazia Deledda and the Victorian English novelist Thomas Hardy in relation to the depiction of nature presented in their works. In particular, the research investigates the function of nature in Deledda’s *Reeds in the Wind*, set in Sardinia, and in three of Hardy’s *Wessex Tales* (“The Three Strangers”, “Fellow-Townsmen” and “The Distracted Preacher”) of south-western England. Due to a lack of appropriate secondary sources in English, the analysis of *Reeds in the Wind* is solely supported by direct citations. The inquiry into the three Wessex tales, on the other hand, is aided by critical essays and literature textbooks that deal with the importance of nature in Hardy’s fictional world. The goal of the essay is thus to investigate the role exercised by nature and its singular phenomena over the characters’ lives as a tangible realization of fate. Furthermore, it attempts to unveil the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of nature as an embodiment of the characters’ emotions, dreams and hopes.

The analysis of the books consisted mainly in finding paragraphs and passages of the stories where nature makes an appearance. It was crucial to take into consideration descriptive paragraphs of the countryside and weather but also any passage where singular natural elements stood out, paying particular attention to the role of the wind, the moon and the sea. The similarities between Hardy and Deledda were various. First and foremost the environment is portrayed by both authors in an extremely precise way to provide an accurate picture of the environment. However, nature is not only a background for the action but a direct influence on the characters’ lives. In this sense, nature is both a passive and an active protagonist: a stage for the characters’ adventures but also a pure embodiment of Fate to which the characters surrender completely.
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1. Introduction

In the decades following the Industrial Revolution, European society was thoroughly affected by topographical, technological and philosophical changes that influenced various aspects of the continent’s economy and politics, as well as attitudes towards culture, education and human rights. As countries began creating stable boundaries between nations, art in all its concretized forms was the very means that allowed ideas to be shared and spread all around Europe. It is not surprising then, to find parallel views of the world in areas of the continent that seem to have little to do with each other. As the gap between the bourgeoisie and the working classes deepened in a similar way all around Europe, philosophical and artistic reaction to social events also developed likewise defeating physical boundaries.

Realism is the perfect example of a movement that became rooted in all the main European countries by the end of the nineteenth century in a relatively homogenous way. At its core was the desire to describe (and often denounce) instances of society’s life in a precise and scientific way, employing the empirical methods of the Enlightenment. However, because realism as a movement spread over such a vast physical area - often assuming different names in different languages - authors that are now considered as realists did not always adhere to it too rigidly. In the case of Grazia Deledda and Thomas Hardy, this tendency to stray from the original path of Naturalists such as Zola brought an interesting twist to a literary movement whose language was often so detached that its moral intentions were lost in arid and lifeless depictions of the world. Indeed, the Realist desire to denounce the living conditions of lower classes was present in most of Hardy’s novels; similarly, in Deledda it became an almost post-colonial attempt to expose the so-called “Questione Meridionale” (the marginalization of Southern Italy) that afflicted Sardinia after the Unification. The most straightforward example of Deledda’s and Hardy’s adhesion to Realism (and Italian Verismo in Deledda) was rendered through the authors’ use of language. In order to create a realistic novel the language needed in fact to reflect or resemble the speech of local entities. As the employment of dialect alone was inconceivable, the solution came through the adoption of linguistic structures of local dialect applied to the national language. Thus, while curse words and speech are translated literally from Sardinian in
Deledda, the names of places and people are kept the same, and so is the word organization in verb-ending sentences. Similarly, Hardy renders lower class speech by writing precisely as it was spoken, often changing the correct spelling of the words. In addition, by adopting “very particular individual traits of speech to differentiate people” in idiophonic conversations, Hardy makes his novels harder to understand than those of Deledda’s (Wade, 45). “Hardy shows familiarity with the work of shepherds, dairymaids or smugglers. He was physically ultra-sensitive, as alert as Wordsworth to the sights and sounds of nature, but his acuteness of eye and ear extended also to the dress, the furnishings, the speech, the humour, the courtesies and the superstitions of the people among whom he had grown up” (Irwin, XI). Thus, precisely because of his meticulousness and emotional proximity to the settings of his stories, his attempt to construct a realistic frame for his tales is, as in Deledda, extremely successful and believable. It is worth noting that it is precisely this attachment to the environment that sets Deledda and Hardy apart from the most conservative Realists.

Despite conforming to some of the basic features of Realism, in fact, Deledda and Hardy leave the crude objectiveness of the literary movement out of their work, by introducing into their stories a lyrical frame that has more to do with the realm of dreams and memories than with pure reality. Magic is perennially present in Deledda, who makes traditional stories and superstitions essential elements of the surroundings. Creatures such as *panas*, the *ammattadore*, *Janas* and elves really exist in the countryside of her memories, not only influencing the life of characters as much as their companions in flesh and bones, but even dominating it, like servants of fate. Even in Hardy’s novels, the oneiric realm of the grotesque makes an appearance at the hands of natural elements, which often play with the characters’ features to make them look freakish, unnatural and even elfish (Paterson, 459). The lyrical setting of Hardy’s stories is finally rendered through a modern version of the Greek chorus, which does not stand simply as a background but is made of individuals who are integral part of the story and whose role is to “comment on the action and imbue much of it with a sense of the absurd as well as participating in the action and offering comic relief” (Morgan, 32).

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1 Women who died in childbirth (Deledda, 3).
2 The elf with seven caps where he hid his treasure (Deledda, 3).
3 Little fairies who weave gold cloth with their golden looms (Deledda, 3).
Nevertheless, the true protagonist of the lyrical world conjured by Hardy and Deledda is nature in all its forms. Their characters belong to the rustic environment of the countryside, a setting that should not be envisioned simply as a physical environment but first and foremost as a “place located at the emotive centre of being” (Wade, 43). In fact, rather than being merely a passive stage for life’s cyclical events, the raw scenery of rural Sardinia and the rainy county of Wessex actively lead the characters through their life journeys. Ultimately, both Deledda and Hardy’s nature represents the embodiment of the characters’ mind and soul, a symbol of the fragility of life and the harshness of destiny. This thesis will explore in depth the role of nature in Deledda’s *Reeds in the Wind* and some of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex Tales, specifically “The Three Strangers”, “The Distracted Preacher” and “Fellow-Townsmen”. It will look first and foremost at how nature reflects the characters’ emotions and influences their actions, in poetic pictures of anthropomorphic nature; in addition, it will show how the characters themselves are often represented as elements of nature. Finally, it will analyse the role of specific natural phenomena like the moon, the sea, the rain and the wind, taking into consideration their active influence on the characters and their passive existence as descriptive elements of the stories’ lyrical frame. Finally, we will see the importance of nature in fate’s conjectures and its relation with penitence, death and the universality of destiny gambling with the lives of human beings.
2. Deledda & Hardy: A Synopsis

In order to have a better understanding of this essay and the considerations here included, it is obviously necessary to be quite familiar with the events and characters enclosed in Deledda’s novel *Reeds in the Wind* and Hardy’s *Wessex Tales*. Thus, to facilitate the reading, it was decided that a recapitulation of events be enclosed here in a single chapter, so that this summary could be either easily avoided or promptly found at the reader’s discretion.

*Reeds in the Wind*, published in 1913, is Deledda’s most famous novel. It revolves around the misfortunes of the Pintor sisters (Noemi, Ruth and Esther), three not-so-young women of noble origins who lose their fortune because of madness and pride. After the sudden death of their mother, their strict father Don Zame locks the sisters up in his family manor, prohibiting them to go anywhere or have contacts with outsiders for most of their youth. One night, one of the sisters – the rebellious Lia – manages to escape clandestinely from the paternal manor, apparently causing the death of Don Zame, who is later found in the countryside with a single green mark on the back of his neck. In spite of Zame’s death, the three sisters continue living that same lifeless existence in the wildest of Sardinian counties, Barbagia. Solely aided in their daily efforts by their poor and old assistant Efix, the Pintor sisters manage to survive by selling their products outside of their village and by keeping away from the curious townsfolk and their own cousin Predu. When Lia’s only son Giacinto arrives from the mainland and knocks at their door, circumstances get even worse: Giacinto gambles his aunts’ small fortune away and borrows increasing sums of money from Kallina, the local usurer. Giacinto degrades his aunts even more by asserting that he wants to marry below his rank and ask for the hand of poor Grixenda. Efix, who feels guilty for convincing the sisters to host Giacinto, feels compelled to defend them and protect their interests. Hence, he sends Giacinto away so that Noemi, the youngest, might heal her broken heart; furthermore, he tries to secure the hand of rich Predu for Noemi so that she might finally live the life she was born for. When he fails and the bridge between the two worlds of desolation and wealth collapses, Efix flees to the mountains, which he sees as a place of redemption. There, he lives in poverty trying to make amends for the sins he committed in the past. Efix, in fact, was the one who helped Lia escape before
killing Don Zame so that he might never find her. However, it is only after months of nomadic penitence with some peculiar fellow beggars that he realizes the only way to atone for his sins is to help the sisters escape their life of imprisonment and misery and build for them a better life before he dies.

Just as *Reeds in the Wind* is set in Deledda’s native countryside, where she lived during her childhood, Hardy’s *Wessex Tales* take place in the rain-battered English countryside he knew so well - a place that is far from being idyllic but has all the taste of rural domesticity. “The Three Strangers” is perhaps the wittiest and most entertaining of the short stories. The events take place in a single rainy night in the poor hut of a local shepherd, who is celebrating the birth and christening of his second daughter. As the guests dance and chat in the small house, two travellers come to knock at the shepherd’s door, one after the other, to ask for a chance to escape the rain and rest for a while. As they sit close to the fireplace drinking and singing, the party finds out that the second traveller is a police officer on the hunt for a prisoner who has escaped jail that same night. In that precise moment a third traveller appears at the door in state of shock. Thinking that he might be the prisoner, the officer convinces the whole party to help him look for him in the wet countryside. However, when they find him sitting under a big tree, they realise the prisoner they were looking for was his brother – that is, the first traveller who knocked at the shepherd’s door and shared a beer with the officer himself.

The second story, “Fellow-Townsmen”, is completely different from the one mentioned above. Not quite as witty and funny, it focuses instead on personal tragedy and the cruel game played by Circumstances. Mr Barnet, the protagonist, has lived most his life passively as a spectator: he has married a woman he is almost repulsed by, he is wasting his money on building a property he does not care for, and the only friend he has, Mr Downe, seems to have the perfect marriage. When Mr Barnet finds out the love of his youth, Lucy Savile, lives in a cottage in the nearby countryside, he decides to pay her a visit and rekindle their friendship; however, his efforts fail, as she gently pushes him away and out of her life. In the meantime, Mr Barnet also attempts to find a friend for his wife in the small village, so that she might find solace in someone outside of their household and so that she might not feel lonely all the time. Mrs Barnet soon befriends Mrs Downe, but their relationship ends quickly as Mrs Downe drowns during
one of their outings at the beach. When Mrs Barnet recovers from her near-death experience, she moves to London, leaving Mr Barnet alone with his own regrets. In an attempt to help his friend Mr Downe, who has been completely devastated by the death of his wife, Mr Barnet proposes that he hire Lucy as a maid and teacher for his young children. Unfortunately, precisely when Mr Barnet decides to propose to Lucy, he receives news of her impending marriage to Mr Downe, leaving him and the reader to marvel at the curious circumstances and the irony of fate.

Finally, the last tale, “The Distracted Preacher”, tells the story of young priest, Stockdale, and his beloved Lizzy Newberry, a widow who becomes his hostess when his clerical duties force him to stay in her town for a while. Stockdale’s idea of Lizzy is that of a sweet innocent young girl. Rather than being in love with her, what he fancies is the idea of her. Hence, his shocked reaction when he finds out her secret does not come as a surprise. Lizzy is in fact a smuggler: along with a group of townsmen, she smuggles in from France whatever she can (liqueur in particular), storing the barrels in her own house and in the church. Every month when there is new moon, Lizzy sneaks out of her house to the harbour. If she knows there might be an obstacle that makes it impossible for the smugglers to move the barrels off the ship to the mainland, she starts a fire as a sign of alarm. At the beginning, worried for Lizzy’s safety, Stockdale accompanies her on her outings, constantly attempting to convince the girl to abandon her plans. However, Lizzy always refuses - not because she is in need of money, but because she enjoys the thrill of it all. Furthermore, she feels it is her duty to help her fellow townsmen who could do without the burden of taxes. When the King’s men finally manage to arrest the smugglers and try to bring them to London for justice, the entire town turns against them, stealing the barrels back. Stockdale is thus forced to leave for a couple of years to be a religious preacher someplace else. In fact, like Lizzy does not wish to abandon her illegal business, he cannot close an eye to what he feels is a despicable act and ignore his morality simply to marry her. The story ends with a quick note to inform the reader that, after a couple of years, Stockdale finally returns to Lizzy and marries her when her smuggling days are over.
3. Echoing Emotions

Human beings are in constant evolution in response to the unpredictability of life; consequently, so are their emotions, in an endless circuit of mutual influence. It is not surprising, therefore, to see how the environment around the characters of Reeds in the Wind changes according to their mood and vice versa. Human passion assumes the appearance of nature, as it happens to Noemi’s fervour, “carrying off all her sad thoughts like the passing wind strips a tree off its dead leaves” (Deledda, 95). Even more striking, however, is the way the positive and negative depiction of different settings is employed to show the contrast between the characters’ emotions, not only taking into consideration their feelings, but also the diverse results that might arise from their decisions. When Predu confides in Efix, expressing his desire to marry Noemi, the world changes instantly in the eyes of the old servant. Efix is elated and the world around him seems therefore fresh and alive, like in his memories: “Everything was different: the world had expanded like the valley after a big wind when the fog lifts and disappear” (Deledda, 130). Memories themselves have often a very positive connotation and the picture they evoke is always of an unspoiled countryside, peaceful like those long-gone days: “Everything is fresh, innocent and beautiful like when we are children and escape the house to run through the marvellous world” (Deledda, 130). In particular, Deledda often juxtaposes memories with beautiful scenarios of heavenly nature associated in particular to the arrival of spring and summer:

She could see the little church, gray and round like a big upside-down nest in the middle of the wide, grassy courtyard, the ring of stone cabins inside of which were squeezed people as many coloured and picturesque as a tribe of gypsies; the primitive colonnaded belvedere above the priest’s cabin, the blue background, the whispering trees, and the sea sparkling down below amid silvery dunes. […]Every spring gave her this restless feeling: life’s dreams blossomed in her again, like roses among the tombstones of the ancient cemetery. (Deledda, 29)

However, nature not only evokes instances of the past but also the happiness that that proposal might bring in the future. Thanks to Predu, misery might finally become only a vague reminiscence rather than something the sisters (and Efix himself)
constantly keep experiencing. Another contrast between death and life – between the sadness of the past and the hopes held by the future – is concretized by Predu’s beautiful mansion, full of life and pomegranate trees, and the distinct depiction of the town, of the castle in ruins, the raw euphorbia and Pintor’s house. At Predu’s everything is rich, juicy and peaceful, with “the reed trellis covered with green and black figs, violet grapes, and a split tomato veiled with salt in the large courtyard. The whole house breathed peace and wellbeing. Against the white walls, palm shadows trembled, and among the gilded leaves of the pomegranates the split red fruit showed their pearly seeds like baby’s teeth” (Deledda, 115). On the other hand, the yard in front of Pintor’s house is always silent and dead, while their once splendid mansion stands in ruins:

three small doors were below a wooden balcony that wrapped around the upper story, reached by an outer staircase in poor repair. A blackened rope, knotted and held by pegs substituted for the missing railing. The doors, supports, and banister of the balcony were in finely sculptured wood; everything, however, was in such poor condition that the rotted, blackened wood looked like it might crumble into powder at the slightest provocation, as though attacked by an invisible auger. (Deledda, 12)

The short description given by Deledda of Predu’s villa anticipates the ending, showing how the only way the sisters can get out of their lifeless existence is by crossing over to Predu, accepting him in their life and leaving ashes and death behind (Deledda, 91- 92). Noemi is in fact the real obstacle which comes between herself and her own happiness, “like someone sick who no longer hopes to get well” (Deledda, 94).

Despite the paralysis around Pintor’s house, the surrounding nature is still presented as multifaceted – desolate but hopeful: sometimes, in the silent yard delicate flowers bloom among the bones of the dead, like hopes for the future that rise from the death of the past. This presentation of the environment as duplicitous serves to poetically mirror the sisters’ status, and that of Noemi in particular. We see the house destroyed and in disuse (“everything was in such poor condition that the rotted, blackened wood looked like it might crumble into powder at the slightest provocation”, Deledda, 12-13), but there is always a beautiful and delicate detail to it, like the dainty décor of flowers and leaves on the cornices of the windows. Similarly, the three sisters
are surrounded by desolation and live in unfortunate circumstances, but their appeal is still intact; like fragile flowers that look out to the world from an old rough well, there is a hidden beauty in them, as well as a grain of hope to escape their dreadful existence (Deledda, 14).

As with Deledda, Hardy makes the environment often reflect this characters’ emotions and the contrast between the actuality of their lives and their innermost hopes, so that nature is “not just a neutral background for the action but an essential embodiment of the characters’ dance of desire” (Miller, XXI). In “The Distracted Preacher,” the revival of nature during the spring serves not only as a stage, but also as a visual representation of Stockdale’s passion for Lizzy Newberry: “the birds began to get lively, and a single thrush came just before sunset each evening, and sang hopefully. Cold blasts and brittle earth had given place to an oozing dampness more unpleasant in itself than frost; but it suggested coming spring, and its unpleasantness was of a bearable kind” (Hardy, 158). Similarly, in “Fellow-Townsmen” the initial scene set during a “dreary night” (Hardy, 74) perfectly describes Barnet’s life with his wife and their desolate marriage. In contrast, his newly re-discovered affection for Lucy is portrayed through the fire in Lucy’s house: “a roof detained his gaze: out of it rose a red chimney, and out of the red chimney a curl of smoke, as from a fire newly kindled” (Hardy, 88). Thus Barnet looks down to Lucy’s cottage, as the remembrance of his fiery love hides behind the red roof of his heart.

Contrasting depictions of various environments are present in “Fellow-Townsmen” as in Deledda and serve the same function: to reinforce the difference between Barnet’s lifeless existence and the joys that a life with Lucy might hold. In this particular tale, windows play an important role of transition between two worlds, exactly like Deledda’s ubiquitous stone walls. In fact, not only Barnet looks longingly at Lucy’s house from his high window as mentioned above, but he also looks out to her from a “window-niche which has as yet received no frame”(Hardy, 84) as he stands in his new house in the sod. Through the glass he sees the world around him: the “forbidden ground” of Lucy’s cottage lies ahead, with “beds of anemones, tulips, jonquils, polyanthuses and other old-fashion flowers” (Hardy, 84). The contrast could not be more striking: the half-finished house on the damp lane stands as a symbol for
his misery, and while he looks out his window, as if peeking through a hole to the merry grounds of imagination, what he sees warms his heart and fills him with desire for a more gratifying life. However, the scene changes again almost instantly as Barnet’s attempts to reinstate friendship are rejected by Lucy: “as he went a sudden blast of air came over the hill and spoilt the previous quiet of the scene. The wind had already shifted violently, and now smelt of the sea” (Hardy, 85). By mentioning the sea Hardy anticipates the death of Mrs. Downe: the smell of the sea is the smell of death, of a dreadful life, brought around by the same wind of passion that shakes the life of Deledda’s characters.
4. Anthropomorphic Nature

While the analysis of nature as a mirror to the characters’ soul, joys and torment is crucial to have an all-round understanding of its role, this is not the only part it plays in the authors’ stories. It is in fact both an external and an internal feature of the characters, which are often described as animals, elements of the environment, or as having animalistic traits. Thus, nature should not be seen only as a set for the action or a force that influences it, but as part of the characters themselves. Lia was “pale and thin like a reed” (Deledda, 14); poor Grixenda’s legs are “shining, straight and deer-like”; and “resembling a deer’s were her wide, humid eyes” (Deledda, 23); Noemi’s eyes, instead, are cold and limpid “like deep water” (Deledda, 17), while those of Kallina resemble those of a bird of prey (Deledda, 23). However, these depictions not only describe the characters’ physical features, but also, most importantly, their psychological ones. Grixenda is indeed innocent and delicate like a deer; Noemi, on the other hand, comes across as cold and dangerous, like icy waters, but also as transparent and beautiful in that danger. Like water, she is death and life at the same time. In addition, not only portrayed as animals, the townsfolk also assume the appearance of plants, flowers and other natural phenomena: the Baron’s suit had “the colour of the sun and mountains” (Deledda, 89); Natolia is the euphorbia, without thorns and apparently useless; Grixenda, instead, is strong and endures the furious strength of the elements like the pine on the river bank (Deledda, 125). It is interesting to see how the euphorbia is ubiquitous in Reeds in the Wind, but while it does not play an important symbolic role it serves to paint an accurate portrait of the wild Sardinian countryside, as it is indeed, along with the prickly pear, one of the most characteristic features of the island’s flora. Therefore, not only is it inserted in almost every descriptive frame conjured by Deledda, but it also plays an active part in the process of remembering. Memories have the scent of euphorbia and the roar of the storm, a nostalgic sweetness like that of “the mares’ melancholy eyes seemed full of sweet yearning” (Deledda, 59).

It can be said that nature is found in Hardy’s characters too, but in a less obvious way. Although his “narrative voice depicts the natural world in the same way the appearance of different individuals are described, and vice versa” (Barrett), he does so less often than Deledda. “This technique removes the sense of authority from human
hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it” (Barrett). Therefore, instead of employing images of animals or flowers as parallel to the characters, he focuses on their emotions and passions as physical manifestations of nature and its strengths. In “Fellow-Townsmen” the palpitation of Mrs Barnet’s heart is “gentle as that of a butterfly’s wing” (Hardy, 89). The convicted fellow in “The Three Strangers” “gaits” in the manner of a horse (Hardy, 6); the pimplles on the face of the hangman are poetically depicted as grog blossoms (Hardy, 9), while the third traveller is as motionless as the lonely ash under which he is found (Hardy, 19). Finally, in “The Distracted Preacher”, Lizzy’s eyes begin “to overflow,” when she parts from Stockdale, like a river’s waters (Hardy, 188).
5. The Role of the Moon, Rain and Wind in the Lyrical Frame of the Stories

In spite of nature’s presence as an integral part of the characters, some of the elements of the environment act as completely external factors that help the author to paint a meticulous description of the surroundings. Sometimes, in addition to these elements being essential features of the countryside, they also influence the life of the characters. The wind and the moon are certainly crucial features of the Sardinian countryside in *Reeds in the Wind*. The moon’s role is first and foremost that of a silent witness to anything that happens on earth, uncovering misdeeds and despicable actions. It is there to look upon Don Zame’s murder (“on the bridge, in the moonlight, Don Zame lay dead, lying in the dust with a swollen violet mark on the back of his neck like a bunch of grapes,” Deledda, 85), as she witnesses Giacinto’s decision to gamble his last money which he eventually loses: “he pulled out the usurer’s money. He lost. The quiet, bluish flame in the black lantern looked like the moon over the ruined tower” (Deledda, 94). However, as part of the beautiful landscape, she infuses the world with calmness - a symbol of life that hints to a bright future through Predu’s half-moon windows (Deledda, 92). Finally, albeit gleaming indifferently over men’s sorrows, she guides them through melancholic remembrances (“She seems to be a girl again, on the priest’s belvedere on a May evening. A great copper moon rises from the sea and the whole world seems made of gold and pearl” (Deledda, 30). Even towards death, it is the only companion on the most solitary of human journeys:

The moon was breaking through. Slowly it illuminated the whole mysterious landscape, and as though touched by a magical finger, everything disappeared. […] The clear cold autumn night, with great stars on the sky and distant fires on the earth, extended from the mountains to the sea. In the silence the river roared like the blood of the sleepy valley. Efix felt death approaching little by little, as though rising silently up the path accompanied by a procession of wandering spirits. (Deledda, 186)

The moon is not as ubiquitous in Hardy’s stories but its presence or absence alternatively helps to set the perfect stage for the characters’ actions. In “Fellow-Townsman” Hardy paints a vivid depiction of rural life where “the large clear moon which rose over the prominent hill flung its light upon the booths and standings that still
remained in the street, mixing its rays curiously with those from the flaring naphtha lamps” (Hardy, 92). The moon represents in this case an essential element of Hardy’s lyrical frame because it perfectly renders the odd atmosphere of dreams. Similarly to his moon, Hardy’s rain is simply presented as integral part of the English landscape and weather, especially in the shape of light drizzle and diffused dampness: “an increasing drizzle from the sea had prevailed since the afternoon, and now formed a gauze across the yellow lamps, and trickled with a gentle rattle down the heavy roofs of the stone tile” (Hardy, 73); “the following Thursday was changeable, damp and gloomy” (Hardy, 160); “we often have such storms as this” (Hardy, 173). In “The Three Strangers” the rain and the wind seem to be the only natural elements worth noting in the raw countryside: “though the wind up here blew unmistakably when it did blow, and the rain hit hard whenever it fell, the various weathers of the winter season were not quite so formidable on the down as they were imagined to be by dwellers on low ground. The raw rimes were not so pernicious as in the hollows, and the frosts were scarcely so severe” (Hardy, 3). Nevertheless, “while Hardy’s narratives often very purposefully bring modernity and traditional, cyclical rural life into conflict, the real narrative interest is always one of the imprints of place in the individual” (Wade, 43). Thus, as in Deledda, the moon also becomes a witness to secret events like the encounter between Lucy and Mr Barnett, when she shines placidly over the beach, as indifferent to what happens there in that moment as to what happened earlier to Mrs Downe in that same spot: “A tremulous pathway of moonshine now stretched over the water which had engulfed them, and not a living soul was near” (Hardy, 92). In “A Distracted Preacher”, however, the moon’s absence plays a bigger role than its presence. An entire chapter of the story is called “At the Time of the New Moon”, where “the night was mild and moonless,” in the only day of the month that offers the smugglers enough darkness for their illegal activities.

Besides its greater metaphorical meaning in Deledda’s homonymous novel, the wind also performs a more literal function in the novel on both a descriptive and active level. It is an integral part of the countryside in the accurate portraits of Sardinian rural life painted by Deledda, where the delicate “afternoon wind carried the smell of aromatic grasses and distant shouts and music” (Deledda, 160,) and the more vigorous Mistral leaves its trace on “wind-twisted woods” (Deledda, 162), responsible of one of
the most characteristic features of Sardinian countryside: the oaks that grow bend towards the South. When it comes to its active role, however, the wind holds both positive and negative connotations. It can carry news of misery and tribulation (“once the wind of misfortune blows, people disperse like little clouds around the moon when the wind blows off the mountains” Deledda 6), as well as symbolizing pleasure and joy: “A whirlwind of desire would envelope her, carrying off all sad thoughts like the passing wind strips a tree off its dead leaves” (Deledda, 96).
6. The Universality of a Fatalist Nature

The idea of fatalism is perhaps one of the predominant features of Thomas Hardy’s works, from his short tales to his more famous novels. In his stories, his characters’ actions are always predetermined by God or Fate and nothing they do can change their outcome. Accidents and chance, but also social expectations, are embodiments of Fate and they result either in passive characters who give in to pressure or ones who struggle against impositions but never manage to be truly free. Thus, the only escape becomes death. In the case of the Wessex Tales, the games of Fate are often played out by nature and its elements “to show the comparative insignificance of human beings. Sometimes nature seems to help mankind; sometimes nature seems to turn against us” (Flowers, 23). In “Fellow-Townsmen” Mr Barnet’s life is presented as a series of circumstances and events that are solely guided by Faith, from his lifeless marriage to that of Mr Downe and Lucy Savile. Hardy himself comments on them right after the death of Mrs Barnet thus: “the events that had, as it were, dashed themselves together into one half-hour of this day showed that curious refinement of cruelty in their arrangement which often proceeds from the bosom of the whimsical god at other times known as blind Circumstance” (Hardy, 103). However, Circumstance often takes the appearance of nature to actualize its plans. The best example offered by Hardy is the role of the sea in “Fellow-Townsmen”, perhaps the most fate-driven story among the Wessex tales. It is in fact the sea, accompanied by the wind, which decides the fate of Mrs Downe and indirectly that of Mr Barnet: “It was so fine, that, after walking about a little while, they had been tempted to go out for a short sail round the cliff. Just as they were putting into shore, the wind shifted with a sudden gust, the boat listed over, and it was thought they were both drowned. How it could have happened was beyond his mind to fathom” (Hardy, 86). Thus, Mrs Downe’s death – and therefore nature – ensures that Barnet and Lucy will never be together.

While Deledda seems to agree with Hardy when it comes to the role of nature in steering the lives of her characters, she chooses a different natural phenomenon to act it out: the wind. It is also crucial to note that while in the Wessex Tales the sea acts as a means through which Fate actualizes its plans, in Reeds in the Wind the wind is a symbol and an embodiment of Fate itself. A hint about its role is already given in the
title of the novel through a delicate metaphor. For Deledda, too, there is no answer to the question of providence: the only explanation given is that if God wants something, he will make it happen. Hence, fate (and consequently nature) cannot be fought: “As far as Efix was concerned, he didn’t want to tempt fate, and believed it is a sin to try to oppose providence. One needed to give oneself over to it, like a seed in the wind. God knows what He’s doing” (Deledda, 145). The individual has nothing else to do but adjust to the circumstances, making the best of them without trying to take control. Like fragile reeds, the characters are simply at the mercy of the wind, which plays with them and bends them at will:

[…] the wind is blowing and the reeds tremble and whisper: “Efix, remember? Remember? You went away, you came back, you’re with us again, like one of us. Some bend, some break, some hold out today, but will bend tomorrow and break the day after tomorrow.” (Deledda, 185)

It is worth noting that, in connection to the idea of the characters’ lives being guided only by fate, the particular seems to represent the universal in both Deledda and Hardy. As the pains and afflictions of the characters seem to be valid on a vaster level than the local one, the singular instance of the characters’ emotions stand for those of all humanity, just like fate and nature affect all individuals. As Hardy himself writes, his characters are “typically and essentially those of any and every place, beings in whose hearts and minds that which is apparently local should be really universal” (Irwin, XII).

It is easy to sympathize with Mr Barnet’s love for Lucy and his pain in finding out about her impending marriage to Mr Downe; similarly, Lizzy’s refusal to abandon her old passion (albeit illegal) simply for a man is not unknown to the modern woman. In *Reeds in the Wind*, this sense of universality is conveyed twice through vivid images of sadness and passion. Deledda presents the pain of Efix and Grixenda as parallel, juxtaposing it straight away to that of all those around them – the pain of all of us in looking at the past and hoping for the future: “[…] she too sang and wept. Their pain was mutual. And their pain together was the same as all those others there who like the servant remembered a past of shadows, and like the girl dreamed of a future of light” (Deledda, 62). Furthermore, the pain of Noemi, which tastes of lost love too, is that of
the whole world, and as she thinks of Giacinto, “[s]he could still taste his tears on her lips, and it was the taste of all human sadness, all human weakness” (Deledda, 95).

With religious penitence being a prominent concept in *Reeds in the Wind*, it is not surprising that Deledda often describes nature as sacred. In the eyes of Efix the only possible way to cleanse himself from guilt and sin is to escape town and live in solitude in the wild Sardinian countryside. Mount Orthobene, which stands stark on the horizon, seems to him the perfect place to hide and seek forgiveness, making amends by living in complete poverty. If Mount Orthobene is a place of redemption, the path from his village to Nuoro and to the mountains is the road of penitence towards freedom, with biblical visions of rocks, olive trees and raw plants of prickly pears (Deledda, 108). To be even more precise, the countryside outside town, in the heart of the Barbagia, is painted by Deledda as a sacred temple, with some of its features being juxtaposed to elements of the church. Thus, the moon “hung like a golden lamp from a temple vault”; the mountains around Oliena rise “from the white and vaporous darkness like a mass of incense”; the Orthobene seems like a granite altar; “the entire landscape has a holy aspect, and the Redeemer with his cross stops in flight on the highest rock, and flaps his black arms against the golden pallor of the heavens” (Deledda, 139). In this road of penitence through a terrestrial Purgatory even death seems terrifying and sad to Efix, as the wind screams and nature becomes monstrous: “Shadows thickened quickly. Every cloud passing over the horizon left a veil, the wind howled behind the church. The low scrub, a luminous and metallic green agitated by a convulsion of sadness and terror, leaned toward the valley trembling like it wanted to escape” (Deledda, 148). The troublesome atmosphere surrounding the death of his fellow beggar seems even more striking when compared to the death of Zia Pottoi, where the light of providence falls down on her leaving Efix completely alone in the darkness of his sin: “A golden ray was raining down on the bed from the hole in the roof, as from an upside down funnel, that illuminated her black body and necklaces, leaving the rest of the desolate room in darkness” (Deledda, 137).

In addition to being mirrored by nature in its calmness or agitation, death is also juxtaposed to nature through vaster metaphors that do not try to catch its specific instances but to describe it as a whole experience. Thus, Deledda pictures death as an endless road uphill that goes over a long sequence of mountains: “In fact, he always
seemed to be walking. He went up a mountain, crossed a tanca; but after reaching its boundary there was another mountain, another plain, and behind it the sea” (Deledda, 192). However, death reaches its highest poetic beauty through Deledda’s romantic description of the valleys, which paints a breath-taking contrast between life and afterlife that seems to belong to a dream. Efix finds himself standing on a low stone wall in his hallucinating state “and on one side he saw the women’s kitchen and on the other a foggy expanse like up there from Monte Gonare” (Deledda, 193). As the fog begins to clear he discerns the beauty and calmness of the valley of afterlife on one side, while on the other stands the constant interruption of the world of the living that he is about to leave:

And then the fog began to clear. Spots of golden woods appeared between rents in the blue, and on the ridge above him a pomegranate tree like the one the blind man talked about bent its heavy limbs of split red fruit letting the pearl globes fall. […]But the people beyond the wall did not leave him in peace to contemplate such good […] At times one of them got the courage to try to help him, to drag him down from the wall, without success” (Deledda, 193).

Finally, as a reminder of the afflictions of human life, the wind shakes the reeds on the living side of the wall before Efix falls into the valley of death.

It is undeniable that the role nature plays in the oeuvres of Grazia Deledda and Thomas Hardy is that of an indisputable protagonist. First and foremost, as an integral part of the environment, nature and its individual phenomena help the authors to put together accurate portraits of the local countryside. As part of the lyrical frame, elements such as the moon, the rain and the wind add poetry and romanticism to the depictions of the surroundings. However, they also cover a more active role as the hands of Fate, through which Circumstance actualizes its plans. The moon, the sea and the wind not only influence the characters, but actually guide them through their life journey, often deciding their fate. For both Hardy and Deledda “the natural world was not at all that the eye saw. It was what the imagination saw” (Paterson, 461). Thus, nature is not only a tangible part of the settings, but also an integral part of the characters, which often assume natural traits both from a physical and a psychological point of view. Furthermore, to enrich this relationship between personages and
environment, nature is also employed by both authors to mirror and awaken their characters’ emotions, dreams and memories, and to accompany them in experiences such as death. Hence, if on one hand the characters are part of Nature, on the other hand nature often assumes anthropomorphic features. In short, Deledda and Hardy not only set their characters in specific scenery, but they make them a permanent part of it – an environment to which they surrender completely, as nature guides them, influences them, and bends them with its poetic will.
Works Cited


