

# Identity, Place and ‘The Gaze’ in *The Woodlanders* by Thomas Hardy and *dream forest* by Dalene Matthee

Pat Louw

The unalienated lover of nature inhabits; the alienated  
lover of nature gazes (Kerridge 2001:134).

## Introduction

Thomas Hardy’s novel, *The Woodlanders* is set in Wessex, England, towards the end of the nineteenth century and Dalene Matthee’s novel, *dream forest* is set in the Knysna forest of South Africa some fifty years later. Both novels describe people who are closely associated with forests and who make their living from working with trees. Hardy, in his ‘Preface’ to the Wessex edition of *The Woodlanders*, published in 1912, wrote:

I have instituted inquiries to correct tricks of memory, and  
striven against temptations to exaggerate, in order to preserve  
for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life  
(1986:443).

Matthee could probably be said to have had a similar aim. She has written numerous novels which describe the lives of the woodcutters of the Knysna forest. *dream forest* was originally published in Afrikaans in 2003 (with the title *Toorbos*), while Hardy’s was first published in 1887. Placing these two novels in a comparative framework makes one immediately aware of the differences between them, but also of some surprising similarities. Their use of language is very different, but it is

interesting to compare the way each depicts the relationship between identity and place. The comparison illuminates the distinctive features of each novel and illustrates the narrative strategies used by each novelist.

## **Socio-Historical Context**

It is important to note that in England there used to be a distinction between woodland and forest. According to Richard Pogue Harrison, woodland in medieval times was an area which could be farmed by the people whereas a forest was an area which had been set apart for the use of the King:

A 'forest', then, was originally a juridical term referring to land that had been placed off limits by a royal decree. Once a region had been 'afforested', or declared a forest, it could not be cultivated, exploited, or encroached upon. It lay outside the public domain, reserved for the king's pleasure and recreation (Harrison 1992:69).

The King's recreation was of course the Royal Hunt, which also served certain political functions. Later, large sections of the King's forest were sold and a class of 'landed gentry' emerged, especially after the Enclosure Acts of 1750-1860. In Hardy's time, most of the Woodlands he refers to would have been privately owned:

Hardy's Woodlands—stretching South and East from Melbury Osmund (the original Great Hintock) would have mainly belonged to the Ilchester family of Melbury park (Great Hintock House) (Fincham 2008:3).

Under certain circumstances the common people were allowed to use or lease part of the woodlands to farm (Morgan 2008:4). This meant that woodlands were partly cultivated: they were pastoral rather than wild, indigenous trees being interspersed with apple orchards.

In comparison, the Knysna forest can be said to be mainly a wilderness area where 'an indigenous elephant population roams freely' (Cloete 2002:4). The felling of trees began in about 1788 in order to supply timber to the Cape and later for railway sleepers and wagon wheels:

With the beginning of the Great Trek in 1835 the demand for wagon wood and structural timber reached unprecedented heights (Von Breitenbach 1972:38).

The woodcutters did not lease the land but lived by selling wood to the timber merchants:

They were tough, independent, skilled men who, in spite of the pitiful living they derived from their labours, steadfastly refused the subservience, as they saw it of being in employment for a wage (Wilson 1971:37).

Although there were small patches of cultivation within the forest where the woodcutters grew sweet-potatoes as their subsistence crop, the trees were indigenous. Some replanting of indigenous trees was attempted in areas where much of the forest had been destroyed, but in general it was a wild, rather than a cultivated space. Thus we see that the woodland area in England was a pastoral space which was privately owned and was leased to the woodland people, while the African forest was a wilderness area, controlled to some degree by the State authorities.

## **Mapping Forest and Woodland**

The difference between Hardy's woodland and Matthee's forest is further suggested by the maps which are furnished at the beginning of each book. The map given in Matthee's novel shows only one town, Knysna, and a large blank area representing the forest. There are some names of places within the forest, but they are not towns or even villages. They serve as landmarks or gathering places within the wilderness area and are known mainly to the forest people, not the outside world. These people are clearly separated from the people in the town:

They had a fierce pride in their skills and independence, and because of their isolation as a community several words were coined and still survive in forestry today (Wilson 1971:38).

In the novel, there is a distance between the forest people and the town. They are linked by a train but socially kept apart by prejudice and poverty. Very few of the townspeople venture into the forest, though

tourists visit the area occasionally in order to see the forest people and the elephants.

The forested area in the map given in *The Woodlanders* is barely discernible from the surrounding towns and villages. It seems to occur in a densely populated area, as the map is crowded with names of places. Whereas people in the novel by Matthee live deep within the forest, the people in Hardy's novel live in Little Hintock, the village bordering on the woodlands. However, the inhabitants of this village are isolated from the larger towns in the vicinity and are regarded as being different. Rosemary Morgan points out that 'endogamy was practiced for so long in these villages, due to some vendetta between the two communities, that prolonged inbreeding led to homozygosity of the population' (2008:3). This was also true of the Knysna forest people: 'Forest people marry forest people. Only once in a while did it happen otherwise' (Matthee 2006:36). We therefore find that Hardy's and Matthee's communities have a good deal in common, in spite of the differences. Both are isolated from major towns and considered 'different' by the townspeople.

### **Identity, Place and 'The Gaze'**

The concept of community is generally linked to the notion of belonging. This is not always linked to a locality as there are examples of occupational communities which do not have place as a commonality. However in the case of Hardy's novel, the naming of the community simultaneously evokes the natural environment and defines the people as a community which is set apart from other communities that do not share or belong to the same environment.

Similarly in Matthee's novel, there are many references to the 'forest people' who are set apart from the people from the towns. Their identity is constructed in relation to the forest: they live in the forest and work and suffer there. However, the construction of this 'forest' identity is not fixed. The border between that particular place and the 'outside' world is a porous one. Border crossings by the inhabitants of woodland and forest test the resilience of that identity. The forest or woodland space is also penetrated by intruders who do not belong to that locality. This has repercussions for forest people as individuals and as members of a community.

My interest in these two novels is that I wish to compare the way in which the narratives construct identity in relation to place. My central focus is the role of the gaze; of looking and being looked at, in the construction of identity. The crucial idea is that the power derived from looking at the other is related to the extent to which the viewer belongs to the forest or woodland. In both texts the idea of belonging to place is highlighted by the way in which characters are allowed to see and be seen within the text. They are divided into two groups: insiders to the forest, and outsiders. The distinction between the insiders and the outsiders is revealed by means of 'the gaze'. Within these two extremes is a continuum of people who move in and out of the forest and belong at different times. Their identity in some cases is closely formed by the forest, which gives them a sense of belonging. However, this doesn't always give them power. At times their very closeness to the forest and to nature makes them vulnerable to outsiders. I argue that the narrative voice constructs power relations in the text by using the natural environment as a reference point and also by using 'the gaze' to enact these power relations. To go further, the gaze between different subjectivities within the text operates to alert the reader to divisions and barriers between different groups. These can be human or non-human groups.

### **Ecofeminist and Ecocritical Theory**

I will be combining a number of discourses in this analysis. In both feminist and ecocritical discourse, attention has been given to the power of vision and the way in which knowledge is gained by the 'disembodied' eye (Haraway 1991:189). To observe without being observed is to have power over the object of one's observation (Louw 2006:149). I will be using some aspects of spectatorship theory to demonstrate the complexity of the power relations of looking. In some cases the viewing relationship is gendered and voyeuristic where the man is the viewer and the woman is the object of his viewing pleasure without her being aware of it. For Donna Haraway, the notion of objectivity brings with it negative associations of racism and sexism, using 'the conquering gaze from nowhere' (1991:188). She describes this gaze thus:

The gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claims the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation (1991:188).

I am using this feminist perspective to describe power relations within the texts but also the power relations between text and reader. I will also be using some aspects of social-constructionist ecofeminist theory. This theory integrates the domination of nature with social conflicts, including but not limited to racial discrimination, gender oppression, and class hierarchies' (Ewing 2003:131). While the domination of nature is one aspect which is strongly evident in the two novels mentioned above, this is not the only way in which nature is represented in these narratives. The domination of nature implies that the power struggle between man and nature is being won by man. It focuses on the exploitation of nature. However, in both novels we also see a corresponding power in nature to overcome and destroy man.

By using an ecocritical perspective, I hope to go beyond the mode of literary criticism that reads setting only as metaphor. Bennett states:

If ecocriticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to view 'settings' not just as metaphors but as physical spaces that inform, shape, and are shaped by cultural productions (2001:197).

In a narrative there is an ongoing dialectical relationship between identity and place as the narrative voice allows certain subjectivities to be constructed and changed as the narrative unfolds. James Tyner, a cultural geographer, sees landscape functioning as a medium through which subjectivity can be constituted. He writes: 'It is a matter of *who we are* through a concern of *where we are*' (2005:261). Tyner is connecting the construction of identity with a territorial reference point. This is particularly relevant in the case of belonging to a group.

### **'The Gaze' in the Opening of *dream forest***

In *dream forest* there is a strong emphasis on being seen and being watched. In the opening sentence Matthee establishes an intimate relationship between her main character, Karoliena, and her

environment: 'As she walked through the forest she suddenly realized that there was an elephant watching her from the thicket' (2004:1). In one sentence Matthee evokes the wildness of the forest: a space with its thickets and deep undergrowth which is extensive enough to provide a habitat for elephants—a far cry from Hardy's Woodland. The girl is alert to the visual and auditory signals of the forest: she is able to distinguish the shape and colour of the elephant from the foliage of the bush and can recognize the call of the *lourie* which is meant to be a warning to the elephant of the approach of a human but which works conversely to warn the human of the presence of the elephant.

The watching of the human by the animal is a curious reversal of the more usual spectatorship sport of game-watching. Karoliena is the object of the animal's surveillance but she is familiar with this environment and knows what to watch for and when to wait. There is a reciprocity of seeing and being seen with regard to the elephant because she and the elephant are both aware of each other. They are equal opponents in the sense that they are each eyeing the other and taking care not to cross each other's paths. This could be an example of the type of encounter between a human and nature that Donna Haraway seems to promote:

Historically specific human relations with 'nature' must somehow—linguistically, ethically, scientifically, politically, technologically, and epistemologically—be imagined as genuinely social and actively relational; and yet the partners remain utterly inhomogeneous (2001:3).

Karoliena is completely, actively involved in sharing this environment with the animal and there is an awareness of each other on both sides. They are completely 'inhomogeneous', but yet relational. She does not have the advantage or the protection of a motor vehicle from which to survey the animals and is therefore denied the safety of the game-park tourist. In the case of looking at animals in a zoo or in a wild life film, there is an unequal power relationship as the human is the unseen voyeur, watching from a safe distance. John Berger points out that the capacity of the human eye is extended considerably by modern technology in photography which enables humans to see things about animals that they would not normally be able to see:

Animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are (1980:14).

His argument that the closer we come to the animal by intrusive camera techniques, the further away the animal is from us seems paradoxical, but it must be put into the context of the power relations inherent in the act of viewing. Karoliena has none of these advantages but also none of the alienation it brings. She gives and receives the practice of watching, thereby proclaiming her membership of this biotic community and demonstrating her inhabitation and sense of belonging in the forest. This can also be related to the notion of ‘anotherness’ which is a term used by Patrick Murphy to describe a way for a human to relate to the non-human world which is different from the ‘othering’ of the alienated watcher of nature. ‘Ecology and ecocriticism indicate that it is time to move towards a relational model of ‘anotherness’ and the conceptualization of difference in terms of ‘I’ and ‘another’, ‘one’ and ‘I-as-another’ (1998:40).

### **‘The Gaze’ in the Opening of *The Woodlanders***

Hardy’s novel opens with a man walking through the woodland but, unlike Karoliena, he is not familiar with the environment. He is an outsider who is bent on finding a particular woodland girl, Marty South. Hardy makes it clear that this man is a stranger by raising the question of belonging at the outset:

It could be seen by a glance at his rather finical style of dress that he did not belong to the country proper; and from his air, after a while, that though there might be a sombre beauty in the scenery, music in the breeze, and a wan procession of coaching ghosts in the sentiment of this old turnpike-road, he was mainly puzzled about the way (Hardy 1986:42).

He has neither the knowledge of the geography nor the history of the place. He does not ‘inhabit’ the forest in the sense that Gary Snyder uses the word ‘inhabitation’. Snyder’s idea of ‘inhabitory peoples’ (1977:59)



are people such as American Indians who have a sense of the sacred places in the land from a long association with its people and a deep and intimate connection with the local ecosystem.

Hardy uses the narrative technique of positioning the man as a spectator, looking in at the young woman as she works by the light of her evening lamp. This gives him a predatory aspect as he looks in through the open windows of people's houses without them knowing he is watching. He is a threatening presence because of the power of his secret watching and intruding on the girl's privacy. Donna Haraway writes, 'Vision is *always* a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices' (2001:192). In this case there is no equality in seeing as there was in the case of Karoliena and the elephant. Marty South is presented as an innocent victim—unsuspecting and open as she has her attention intently fixed on her work. Her association with nature at this point makes her vulnerable to the 'outsider'. The man is a barber and he wants to cut her hair in order to make a wig for a rich local woman. Marty's hair is described in terms of the richness of nature:

She had but little pretension to beauty, save in one prominent particular—her hair.

Its abundance made it almost unmanageable; its colour was, roughly speaking, and as seen here by firelight, brown; but careful notice, or an observation by day, would have revealed that its true shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut.

On this one bright gift of Time to the particular victim of his now before us the newcomer's eyes were fixed (Hardy 1986:48).

This encounter encapsulates the way in which nature and the people belonging to the forest are threatened by outsiders or newcomers who, because they have money, can force people like Marty to give up their natural treasures. It could perhaps be read in postcolonial terms as a metaphor for the colonial encounter and the commodification of natural resources. The beauty of the colour derives from the transition from the dull and neutral 'brown' to the rich lustre of 'chestnut', signifying both the texture and brightness of her hair and her close association with trees. Her hair symbolizes the force and vitality of nature as it has a life

of its own, being described as ‘unmanageable’. His project is to tame nature, manage it, bring it under his control but in the process turn it into something artificial and lifeless in order to enable someone with money to pretend that it belongs to her. Questions of belonging here become twisted and broken as what belongs to Marty is taken and given to someone else by people who do not belong. The fine balance of nature is broken because of the inequality of power relations, enacted by the gaze of the invisible onlooker.

### **‘Outsiders’ and ‘Insiders’ in *dream forest***

In *dream forest* there are also outsiders to the forest who come as tourists to ‘see’ not only the forest and the elephants, but also the forest people. They ask questions about whether the forest people are wild, and they seem to put them on an equal level with the animals. They are what Richard Kerridge calls ‘alienated observers’ (2001:134) of nature. They want to satisfy their curiosity about these hidden people and animals and the implication is that they themselves are superior, ‘civilized’ beings in comparison who are above scrutiny. When they come to the forest it is always in passing—they make it clear that they have a good life elsewhere. This can be seen when Karoliena sits near some strangers on a train journey to the forest:

When Karoliena sat down on the bench furthest away from them, the strangers stared at her curiously and one of the women whispered something to the village woman behind her hand.

‘One of the forest children’, the village woman said loudly, nose in the air. Then she added: ‘Poor whites. An enormous problem’.

‘How sad’, the strangers muttered sympathetically (Matthee 2006:7).

The writer employs a narrative technique of shifting positionality here, as the reader is shown how the ‘outsiders’ see Karoliena, and then we are told that she feels crushed by the term ‘poor white’ (2006:8). It is a label which is imposed on the forest community and which places them in an inferior position in relation to the townspeople. By changing the perspectives on Karoliena we are made aware of the way in which her ‘forest identity’ is threatened by the outside world.

Not only the tourists, but also visitors from the Carnegie Commission into poverty, come to the forest in search of the people who live there. The Carnegie people seem to be blind to the possibility that the label, 'poor whites' could be offensive and degrading to the forest people who are immediately placed in a situation of being 'othered' by them. They are also blind to the real problems confronting the people of the forest. Many of these people's problems are caused by the colonial Government and the buyers of the wood. The forest people explain that they are put under strain by the Government, who try to control the cutting of the wood by making the woodcutters register, involving a payment that is difficult for them to afford. They also restrict the trees that they allow the woodcutters to cut while at the same time demanding wood:

We're not even allowed to take a splinter from some of the sections because the forest has suddenly become a reserve that the government wants to conserve for people coming from outside to see what a forest looks like (1986:26).

The tyranny of being looked at is felt sharply by the forest people whose livelihoods are threatened by the action. The Carnegie Commissioners however refuse to 'see' and understand these problems, even when they are told about them by the forest people. The identity of a whole group of people is constructed through the way outsiders 'see' them.

### **Resistance to 'Outsiders' in *dream forest***

However, within the forest group there are voices of resistance. Karoliena Kapp, for instance, is aware of the tourists' belittling attitude but she exploits them by appearing to be 'wild' and pretending that she cannot understand English and then earning money or food by acting as a guide and taking them into the forest. She thus superficially accepts the way the tourists 'see' her and the identity that they impose upon her, but she turns it to her advantage and manages to retain her sense of self-worth in spite of this perception of the forest people as 'backward'—a perception that imposes a group identity on them. Once these 'outsiders' are in the forest they are in Karoliena's territory and she is empowered by her 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991:183) of the environment. At

one point the Earl and Countess of Clarendon visit the forest and their journey through the forest is blocked by an elephant, lying down in the road ahead of them. Karoliena helps the Countess to get out of the car and overcome her fear:

She stopped at the door on the Countess's side, put out her hand and carefully opened the door while looking into the Countess's eyes. They were like a doll's eyes and they were terrified .... She stood there, holding the woman's eyes with her own, telling them not to be afraid (Matthee 2006:217).

Here the power of the tourist's gaze is overturned and it is the forest girl whose gaze holds power over the tourist whose eyes become as artificial and lifeless as a doll's. Because of her familiarity with the forest, Karoliena is able to control the situation, while the royal couple is powerless in spite of their wealth.

### **Border Crossings in *dream forest***

The conflict between the town people and the forest people is reflected in the inner conflict which Karoliena experiences with regard to her identity. The writer conveys her perspective:

There was a bridge between the world of the forest and the outside world which was sometimes difficult to cross. It was like knowing you had to wake up but were reluctant to open your eyes (2006:2).

This relates to the title of the novel and suggests that the forest and the outside world represent different levels of reality for Karoliena.

There is enormous pressure on Karoliena to leave the forest when she has an opportunity after Johannes Stander from the town asks her to marry him. However, she fails to reconcile her forest identity with her town identity. One of the townswomen says that,

she always knew it was not going to be easy to get the forest out of the girl that Johannes Stander had landed her with (Matthee 2006:89).

Karoliena marries Johannes, but returns soon afterwards to the forest. We read:

It was like being released from a trap that was strangling her; escaping from it enabled her to breathe easily again (Matthee 2006:90).

Later, when Johannes goes to the forest to try to persuade her to come back, she says, 'In the forest I'm real. With you, I'm a lie' (Matthee 2006:203).

It is the power of Karoliena's attachment to the forest that results in her being unable to sustain her 'outsider' identity. She is given access to the secrets of the wildest and most mysterious parts of the forest. Again this experience is mediated through sight: she *sees* the mystical tree sprites emanating from a tree during a thunder storm. She is also bound to the forest community in terms of sight: she *sees* the plight of the forest people and is asked by the social worker nurse to 'keep an eye' on them. She belongs to the forest and its people and they in turn open their secrets to her. She is what Kerridge calls the 'unalienated lover of nature' (2001:134). It is only when it becomes clear that the forest people will have to leave the forest that she can take the decision to go back to the town.

### **Border Crossings in *The Woodlanders***

In Hardy's novel, Grace Melbury is a borderline or transition figure. Her father tries to get her to marry 'well' and to that end he sends her away to be educated. When she returns to her home, she seems to be like an outsider as the narrator tells us, 'she had fallen from the good old Hintock ways' (1986:84). Before entering her parents' house where they are waiting for her in the evening, she spends some time outside, watching them through the open window. 'Let us look at the dear place for a moment before we call them', she says (1986:85). In this way Hardy indicates that her identity is suspended between the insiders to the forest and the outsiders who are transient visitors to the place.

Grace marries the young doctor, Fitzpiers, who is a newcomer to Hintock. He first catches sight of her while she is passing and, later, he is able to identify her by seeing her in a lighted window one night as he passes her father's house. On both occasions she is unaware of his gaze

and appears vulnerable and exposed. When they eventually do meet they have a complex exchange of seeing and being seen. She goes to his rooms to run an errand for her father's old servant and she finds him asleep. For a few moments she has the opportunity to observe him without his being aware of her. The power relations are however not reversed because Hardy, in a diabolical twist, shows her seeing Fitzpiers' reflection in a mirror, and in that mirror his eyes are open. It is as if he is watching her even when he appears to be asleep. The result is that she seems more vulnerable than ever to him, and indeed this is borne out in the narrative, as he marries her and then cruelly deserts her for someone richer and better connected. In other words, the way in which Grace sees and is seen by Fitzpiers is a significant foreshadowing of the plot.

The permeability of the border between insiders and outsiders is shown on another occasion when Fitzpiers, the newcomer, goes into the forest with his book and watches the workers in the woods. The narrative constructs him as an outsider because he has the leisure to read 'except when he looked up to observe the scene and the actors' (1986:185). He is outside the action but nevertheless joins the men when they have their tea. Melbury arrives with his daughter in his gig, and again Fitzpiers has the opportunity to observe her while she is unaware of him: 'He looked out towards the gig wherein Grace sat, her face still turned sunward in the opposite direction' (1986:185). Unlike Marty South, who is in the centre of the work, described as being 'encaged amid the mass of twigs and buds like a great bird' (1986:184), Grace is literally and figuratively at a higher level as she sits in the carriage. When the horse becomes restless she is alarmed and is quickly helped down by Fitzpiers. Because she was unaware of his gaze before that moment, his actions destabilize her and distress her, 'producing in her an unaccountable tendency to tearfulness' (1986:187). This shows us that figures of transition such as Fitzpiers have the power to destabilize and disrupt the forest community.

### **Shifting Perspectives**

Insiders to the forest are not only made vulnerable to outsiders but are also liable to miss social opportunities because of their focus on the forest. Winterbourne, for instance, the forest man who hopes to marry Grace, fails to see her on the occasion mentioned above because his attention is so taken up by the surrounding woodlands. In fact he is observed by Grace and her father as they pass him in their carriage:

Under the blue the orchards were in a blaze of pink bloom, some of the richly flowered trees running almost up to where they drove along. At a gate, which opened down an incline, a man leant on his arms regarding this fair promise, so intently that he did not observe their passing (1986:188).

Hardy draws our sympathy for Winterbourne as it is his attachment to his work and to the place that occupies him, unlike the doctor who doesn't really believe in his occupation. Both Winterbourne and Marty South are defined in relation to the work they do in the woodland. Hardy enables us to 'see' them as being part of the surroundings. As they work together planting trees, we read:

Winterbourne's fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror's touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves out in their proper directions for growth (1986:106).

Marty, too, seems to have an extra-sensory perception with regard to the trees, as she says that she can hear them 'sighing' when they are put upright. This can be compared with Karoliena who helps Oldman Botha to grow little stinkwood trees to increase the supply in the forest. It is an activity which often fails, but they manage to coax the little seedlings to grow by talking to them (Matthee 2006:103).

These passages position us as readers in such a way as to have a favourable 'view' of the woodlanders and the forest people. However, this view is always changing. Kerridge maintains:

The special value of Hardy to ecocritics is precisely in the way he does not separate place and person. He will not allow anything, place or person, to stabilize in meaning; its meaning is always the product of a shifting set of relations and always seen in the act of generation by those relations (2001:141).

An example of this can be found at the end of Hardy's novel, where we meet the barber again, and his words reiterate the way in which the forest people are seen by outsiders. He refers back to the incident which opened the novel:

‘Ah—how’s Little Hintock folk by now!’ he cried before replying. ‘Never have I been over there since one winter night some three year ago—and then I lost myself finding it. How can ye live in such a one-eyed place? Great Hintock is bad enough—but Little Hintock—the bats and owls would drive me melancholy-mad! It took two days to raise my spirits to their true pitch again after that night I went there. Mr Melbury, sir, as a man that’s put by money, why not retire and live here, and see something of the world?’ (1986:432).

Hardy catches the tone of every urban dweller who feels out of place and superior to people living in a rural area. Without realizing it, the barber reveals his own inadequacies as he says, significantly, ‘I lost myself finding it’. Although he is referring to losing the way, there is on another level the sense of losing his urban identity for a while by being placed in a rural, forest environment. As he is a visitor for a short time, he cannot find a rural identity, and flounders in confusion and disorientation for some time before returning to his old self. Interestingly, he uses an image of sight in describing the backwardness of the woodland village: ‘a one-eyed place’. Also mentioned are bats, associated with blindness. Only his town, Sherton Abbas, is considered to be ‘the world’, which in itself is ironic as it is not a place of any great size either.

As the reader’s sympathies have been enlisted by the narrative in favour of the forest people, this perspective only focuses critical attention on the barber and other people like him. However, it also illustrates Hardy’s narrative technique of constantly changing perspective on the forest and its people. Kerridge refers to this technique as placing the reader in ‘multiple and shifting positions’ (2001:133).

Kerridge’s analysis of Hardy’s narrative technique can also be applied to Matthee’s. Although the dominant perspective in this novel is given by a focus on Karoliena, many different positions are taken up in relation to both insiders and outsiders to the forest. Some of the forest people are shown to be narrow-minded and mercenary, for example, Karoliena’s mother. Poverty and isolation sometimes leads to psychological breakdown, as in the case of the woman who becomes obsessed with a non-existent child. Outsiders are also sometimes shown in a positive light, for example, Mr Fourcade the botanist, who inspires



Karoliena and enables her to make a living in the forest by facilitating an arrangement whereby she sells ghost moths to a collector in town. In this way, Matthee avoids a simplistic moral association of goodness with the forest people and badness with the outside world. Karoliena's struggle to negotiate her identity is seen in relation to both positive and negative aspects of both worlds.

## Conclusion

Donna Haraway states:

Positioning is ... the key practice grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision, as so much Western scientific and philosophic discourse is organized. Positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices (2001:133).

The imagery of vision in these two novels provides a way of accessing the forest communities and gives a key to the dynamic process of identity formation in relation to place. With this knowledge, however, comes responsibility, as Haraway suggests. The shifts in narrative focus alert one to the power relations between insiders and outsiders within the text, but also cause us as readers to assess our own position. Kerridge maintains that

in Hardy's narrative it is the frequent shifting, in spatial and social terms, of the reader's perspective that brings to life such a sense of responsibility .... Each shift of the narrator's position asks us to reassess our own (2001:133, 134).

I would suggest that in both novels there is a shifting of the reader's perspective on the forest people. Kerridge writes:

as Hardy became more successful, he grew increasingly determined to confront his readers with their complicity in the sufferings of his characters (2001:127).

In both novels, we find forest people being positioned as objects of silent, unseen observers and they respond to this gaze in different ways. In Matthee's novel the question of the suffering of the forest community is particularly pertinent, as their problems are described from

many different perspectives and the reader cannot easily escape some sense of complicity.

The cultural geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, makes a humorous point as regards tourists: 'for there to be tourists there must also be colourful natives willing to be seen but not see' (2001:324). Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves as readers whether we are complicit in the sufferings of the forest people as well: do we, like the tourists want to 'look at' their secret lives by reading these novels? Do we share the tourists' gaze?

## References

- Adams, PC, S Hoelscher & KE Till (eds) 2001. *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Armbruster, K & K Wallace (eds) 2001. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Bennett, M 2001. *Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery*. In Armbruster, K & K Wallace (eds): *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Berger, J 1980. About Looking at Animals. In John Berger: *About Looking*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing.
- Cloete, WH 2002. Translating the 'Forest Ethos' in Dalene Matthee's *Kringe in 'n Bos* [*Circles in a Forest*] with Reference to *Unter dem Kalanderbaum*. MA thesis. University of Potchefstroom.
- Ewing, MC 2003. *South African Women's Literature and the Ecofeminist Perspective*. MA Thesis. Rhodes University.
- Fincham, T 2008. Woodlands in 'The Woodlanders.' *Hardy 1 Digest* 33,15: 1-5.
- Haraway, DJ 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hardy, T 1986 (1887). *The Woodlanders*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Harrison, RP 1992. *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kerridge, Richard & N Sammells (eds) 1998. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. London: Zed Books.

- Kerridge, R 2001. Ecological Hardy. In Armbruster, K & K Wallace (eds): *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Louw, P 2006. Nature Documentaries: Eco-tainment? *Current Writing* 18, 1: 146-162.
- Matthee, D 2006. *dream forest*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books.
- Morgan, R 2008. Woodlands in *the Woodlanders*. *Hardy-1 Digest* 33,15: 1-5.
- Murphy, P 1998. *Anotherness and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature*. In Kerridge, Richard & N Sammells (eds) *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. London: Zed Books.
- Snyder, G 1977. Re-Inhabitation. In Snyder, Gary: *The Old Ways*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Tyner, JA 2005. Landscape and the Mask of Self in George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant. *Area* 37,3:260-267.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu 2001. *Cosmos vs Hearth*. In Adams, PC, S Hoelscher & KE Till (eds) 2001. *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Von Breitenbach, F 1972. Indigenous Forests of the Southern Cape: History. *Looking Back* (Historical Society of Port Elizabeth) 13,2: 37-42.
- Wilson, A 1971. Knysna Woodcutters. *Looking Back* (Historical Society of Port Elizabeth) 11,3: 69-71.

Department of English  
University of Zululand