

“Devils in the Wilderness”: The Character of Wilderness in American Horror Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “wilderness” as a location and an idea has changed over time to fit different rhetorical purposes. This essay argues that while “wilderness” is used repeatedly throughout the American horror genre to explore cultural conceptions of marginal practices and ideologies, shifts in the implementation of “wilderness” in each text emphasize important changes in what concepts are considered marginal during that text’s period. This study examines how the concept of “wilderness” is utilized within the American horror story genre to explore the boundaries of society’s values by analyzing three texts through New Historicist, Marxist, and Ecocritical theories. These texts include the short story “The Devil and Tom Walker” by Washington Irving, the short story “The Dunwich Horror” by H. P. Lovecraft, and episode 22 of the contemporary podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*, titled “The Whispering Forest”. This study attempts to broaden our understanding of ecological descriptions, specifically within the horror genre, and to examine how studying these descriptions deepens our understanding of cultural attitudes towards social marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

As William Cronon states in his article, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, “[Wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation- indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (Cronon 1). Cronon was speaking of wilderness as a broad concept though, and tracked its general use throughout American history. As with any concept, however, “Wilderness” becomes even more complex when analyzed in specific uses. In the realm of American horror stories, for example, wilderness is a tool used by writers and authors in ways that deepen its use as a mirror for society. It is a marker for the culturally shunned, a playing field for experimentation with marginalized practices and beliefs, and a commentary on the mobility of society. To become such a multifaceted literary tool, “Wilderness” takes an active participation in the story. It does not act simply as a passive setting through which the plot runs its course. As Steven Greenblatt argues, culture functions as both “a structure of limits... [and] the regulator and guarantor of movement” (Greenblatt 439). Wilderness as a cultural symbol then must show both a shift in social understanding as well as mirror the constraints of that culture’s mentality.

Such landmark authors as Washington Irving and H.P. Lovecraft have exemplified this use, and it has evolved to suit the needs of authors in every time period to date. In such works, nature not only becomes a symbol for what is outside society, but it also takes on a persona exemplifying that as well. As Richard Hardack writes in his book *“Not Altogether Human”: Pantheism and the Dark Nature of the American Renaissance*, “In some linguistic, sociological, political, and Lacanian terms, nature is the racial Other... When the repressed ‘not me’ returns... it is often coded as dark or black” (Hardack 67).

“The Devil and Tom Walker”

In his short story “The Devil and Tom Walker”, Washington Irving pulled heavily from his surroundings. His story is filled with natural scenes and imagery, and the most intensely described portion of the tale is not the city life of the main character but his early ventures into the dark swamp near his old home. These descriptions are written in such a way as to produce a certain kind of wilderness specific to Irving’s purpose. Irving sets his story in two locations: the original home of Tom Walker, surrounded by forest and swamp and described as a “land of famine” (Irving 356), and Boston, where Tom eventually sets up as a money-lender. There is a definite contrast between the writing of these two locations. In the former, Irving takes greater effort to describe the landscape, using everything from geography to the purported history passed down by European Americans. The focus in the wilderness is on Tom Walker’s movement through the swamp to meet the Devil. Conversely, in Boston Irving emphasizes Tom’s actions, focusing on his damnation through the practices of usury and hypocrisy.

Irving does this not to point out the difference between the two locations, but to highlight their connection. In this American Faustian tale, Irving shows links of causation between actions in the city and choices in the wilderness. Tom Walker's deal with the Devil in the swamp leads to his actions in the city, which in consequence lead to his permanent return to the swamp. The temptation Tom is led to in the swamp drives his dubious actions in the city. In this way, by sending Tom on an ultimately damning exploration of the physical margins of society, Irving is able to explore its philosophical and psychological margins as well.

In his essay "The German Ideology", Karl Marx wrote on the dependence of ideas on their material settings. As he put it, "The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material processes... Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Rivkin and Ryan 656). In short, our ideas and concepts are created by our physical situations. Irving's "Wilderness" is no exception. It shows evidence of his physical and social reality even as it promotes his moral ideology. Taking a closer look at the descriptive details of the story, evidence of this exploration into the marginal appears very quickly. Tom himself lives on the outskirts of society, "in a forlorn-looking house that stood alone, and had an air of starvation" (Irving 355). Tom and his wife live in a location that mirrors their existence, for Irving later states that "The house and its inmates had altogether a bad name... Her [Tom's wife] voice was often heard in wordy warfare with her husband; and his face sometimes showed signs that their conflicts were not confined to words" (Irving 356). Here already we have an example of irregular behavior, wherein the wife is not only equally hostile towards her husband but is also habitually physically aggressive towards him, taking on what would appear to be a more equal role in the patriarchal society of early America. However, this equality comes through violence, and it is important to note that this couple doesn't live in the heart of urban America but on the outskirts of white society. The couple is not a happy one, and rather than being connected by love they are seemingly linked together by a shared "miserliness" and a desire to "cheat each other" out of whatever the other has (Irving 355). Theirs is a marriage of egoism, rather than union.

Tom later begins a journey which is to lead him to his critical meeting with the Devil. Irving specifies that he takes this route as "a short cut homeward", but that "like most short cuts, it was an ill-chosen route" (Irving 356). Tom's "short cut" ends up being more difficult than expected, "full of pits and quagmires, partly covered with weeds and mosses, where the green surface often betrayed the traveler into a gulf of black, smothering mud..." (Irving 356). This aversion to "short cuts" exemplifies Irving's cautionary attitude towards practices that focus on an individualistic mentality, practices which he depicts as dangerous and to be kept outside of society. Irving shapes wilderness in order to shape our perceptions of these practices and show their consequences. This is an act which Steven Greenblatt describes in his article "Culture", in which he states, "Works of art are themselves educational tools. They do not merely passively reflect the prevailing ratio of mobility and constraint; they help to shape, articulate, and reproduce it through their own improvisatory intelligence." (Greenblatt 439). With this understanding, Irving's Wilderness now takes on an active role in the story, forming our understanding of the characters and their actions.

Tom's short cut eventually leads him to "one of the strongholds of the Indians during their wars with the first colonists" (Irving 356). It is here that Tom meets "Old Scratch", the Devil who bargains him into a life of usury and even greater greed. The fact that they meet in an abandoned Indian fort is an important one. The fort, once a center of Native American society, is now "gradually sinking to the level of the surrounding earth, and already overgrown in part by oaks and other forest trees..." (Irving 356). This fort comes to symbolize the merger of Native American's into a wilderness mythology of pre-colonial America. As a marginalized people in relation to the European colonist population, the Native Americans in Irving's story become connected to a landscape on the edge of society. Since the European colonists had very little historical connection to the past of this new land, this place of native American history becomes marginalized as well into "the stories handed down from the time of the Indian wars; when it was asserted that the savages held incantations here, and made sacrifices to the evil spirit" (Irving 357). This racializing of nature as "the Other" was noted earlier by Hardack, and represents how Irving is mirroring the constraint of his society. Irving's devil phantoms are sublimates of his cultural understanding of his surroundings, just as Marx's mental phantoms are a production of material processes and concerns, and the wilderness takes on an identity to personify those devils.

This leads us to the description of Old Scratch. The land is said to have been his "long before one of your white-faced race put foot upon the soil" (Irving 358). Irving describes him as "a great black man... neither negro nor Indian... dressed in a rude half Indian garb, and had a red belt or sash swathed round his body..." (Irving 357). The Devil is not a stand in for one race, such as the Native or African American's. Instead, he represents an amalgamation of "the Other" covering races and labor practices that Irving identifies as on the margins of society. This is particularly apparent in the occupations of the people he patronizes. "I am the great patron and prompter of slave-dealers..." the Devil says at one point (Irving 362). Tom agrees soon sets up as a money-lender in Boston

during “a time of paper credit... [when] there had been a rage for speculating... run[ning] mad with schemes for new settlements; for building cities in the wilderness...” (Irving 363).

Washington Irving utilizes wilderness to exemplify the practices which he sees as marginal to society, and therefore dangerous. Money-lending, speculation, and even slave-trade are all shown to be damning practices that stem from the dark wilderness of one’s soul. All stem from the same sin in Irving’s story: an egoism and individualism which separates oneself from the rest of society. Wilderness in Washington Irving’s tale is not merely a representation of what was in the hearts of the men of his time, but also a playground with which to run through the possibilities and consequences of these practices. He created this “devil wilderness” to mobilize his culture and show how common practices should be marginalized. However, his use of Native American’s in connection with this wilderness shows the constraint of his social understanding.

“The Dunwich Horror”

H. P. Lovecraft provides us with another representation of wilderness used for his own purpose: to highlight the differences between social classes. In his story “The Dunwich Horror”, Lovecraft differentiates the supposedly half-educated farming class of rural Massachusetts from the learned men of the city of Arkham.

The story opens with a description of the village of Dunwich and the area surrounding it. Peter Cannon points out the importance of its name in his book *H.P. Lovecraft*, stating that “‘The Dunwich Horror’ opens with a naturalistic description of a sinister country landscape... Like its namesake, the ancient former capital of East Anglia eroded over centuries by the sea, Dunwich has long been in decline” (Cannon 86). Lovecraft is careful to state that one might see Dunwich if one were to take “the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury pike...” (Lovecraft 247), implying that few people would wish to visit this village. It is not shown to be a civilized place. Lovecraft writes, “The trees of the frequent forest belts seem too large, and the wild weeds... attain a luxuriance not often found in settled regions” (Lovecraft 247).

Lovecraft doesn’t focus on differences of skin color. Instead, his emphasis is on different manners of lifestyle and labor. The major opposition for this is the rural people of Dunwich against the urban professors at Miskatonic University in the city of Arkham. The people of Dunwich are not given an encouraging portrayal. They are said to be:

“repellently decadent, having gone far along that path of retrogression so common in many New England backwaters. They have come to form a race by themselves, with the well-defined mental and physical stigmata of degeneracy and inbreeding. The average of their intelligence is woefully low, whilst their annals reek of overt viciousness and of half-hidden murders, incests, and deeds of almost unnamable violence and perversity” (Lovecraft 248).

The most repellent and decadent of these country people, Whilbur Whateley, is described as animal-like and inhumanly mature for his age. As observed by a professor at Arkham, Whateley is “Almost eight feet tall... this dark and goatish gargoyle ...” (Lovecraft 258). In contrast, the learned professor is not physically described but rather described by his titles and accomplishments. He is introduced as “the... erudite Henry Armitage (A.M. Miskatonic, Ph. D. Princeton, Litt. D. Johns Hopkins)” (Lovecraft 259).

Lovecraft seems to be falling under an assumption which Karl Marx described in his essay “The German Ideology”, in which he discussed the divisions of class founded upon labor relations. Marx states:

“The division of labor... manifests itself also in the ruling class as the division of mental and material labor, so that inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class... while the others’ attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves.” (Rivkin and Ryan 656-7).

Marx goes on to explain how this illusory division can cause “certain opposition and hostility between the two parts, which... automatically comes to nothing, in which case there also vanishes the semblance that the ruling ideas were not the ideas of the ruling class and had a power distinct from the power of this class” (Rivkin and Ryan). According to this theory, the power of the urban learned elite over the “degeneracy” of the rural Dunwich residents rests on their connection with each other rather than an inherent superiority. This indeed seems to be the case, for in order to stop the horrible monster raised by Whilbur Whateley that overtakes Dunwich later in the story, Dr. Armitage and his associates must use knowledge gathered from Whilbur Whateley’s diary “delivered to Miskatonic University for translation” (Lovecraft 270). It is only by taking this knowledge from rural Dunwich that Dr. Armitage and his peers are able to stop the Dunwich Horror; and yet, it must be wondered whether these events would have occurred at all had the people of Dunwich been given access to the education allowed to Dr. Armitage and the people of Arkham. With such learning, the Whateley family might have been given a better appreciation for the horror which they

might have unleashed. However they are left to learn from “rotting ancient books and parts of books” (Lovecraft 253). Because the university is in the city, and no one seems to travel to Dunwich until the world is in peril, the people of this isolated village are granted only half-knowledge and partial understanding.

However, we must acknowledge the possibility that Lovecraft is doing more than just emphasize class differences accepted in his time. As Stephen Greenblatt argued in his essay “Culture”, texts work both as “a structure of limits” and as “a regulator and guarantor of movement” (Greenblatt 439). In any text, then, there can be found evidence of reinforcement of cultural beliefs as well as evidence of mobility of cultural ideas through time. Through this lens, Lovecraft might be using his “wilderness” both to support the illusory division between rural and city folk and to explore the dangers of limiting educational access to people who live outside the city. By this understanding, Lovecraft is utilizing Marxist literary strategies to exemplify the importance of greater connection between urban and rural peoples.

Welcome to Night Vale

Welcome to Night Vale, a podcast released online, is a great contemporary example of the use of wilderness to explore aspects of society that are considered eccentric and strange. The podcast takes the form of a radio broadcast hosted by a narrator, Cecil. It takes place in the fictional town of Night Vale, “A friendly desert community” located in the middle of a desert wilderness surrounded by “Scrub Lands and Sand Wastes” (Fink and Cranor, “Pilot”). What one comes to quickly realize, however, is that what constitutes “friendly”, and even what constitutes “normal”, in Night Vale is often very different from most communities. In the first episode, a dog park is introduced to the city that is off limits to people and dogs, and is inhabited by mysterious hooded figures. While even Cecil has a hard time accepting some occurrences in his home town, many of the odd and often frightening events throughout the podcast are brushed off with an air of normalcy. The show is able to get away with these shifts in cultural norms partially because of its situation. Night Vale is described as being in the middle of the desert, and yet it is often depicted as a bustling urban center with a mall, library, and business association (Fink and Cranor, “Pilot”; “Glow Cloud”).

However, what is most interesting about this is not the fact that black obelisks appearing out of nowhere in town are taken for granted (and even incorporated into the “sponsors” portion of the show in episode 24, “The Mayor”), but the fact that this offhand attitude towards practices, beliefs and events that are generally considered strange or unacceptable provides a great amount of leniency and mobility towards cultural norms. An example of this can be found in Cecil’s love interest with the scientist Carlos. This gay relationship, which in American society is often censured, is mentioned with as much normality as any other. There is never any mention of anything odd or unaccepted about the relationship between these two characters. The show goes even further by making Cecil neither wholly masculine nor feminine, as many modern depictions of homosexual characters do. Rather, Cecil shifts between statements and inflections in tone that would generally be considered masculine or feminine. In this way, he confuses our preconceived notions of gender roles.

The episode “The Whispering Forest” utilizes wilderness and nature to an even greater extent. In this episode, a mysterious forest appears on the edge of town and begins “encroaching quickly on our little town” (Fink and Cranor, “The Whispering Forest”). This is not the extent of the forest’s mystery, though. When people walk into the forest, it speaks to them and attempts to connect with them emotionally. Here is an excerpt from the episode, which describes the first interaction between the forest and a citizen of Night Vale:

“Larry Leroy... said that he went out to The Whispering Forest this morning, just to see what all the fuss was about, and said that as he neared the woods’ edge, he felt a terrible sense of fear, and began to tremble and sweat.

But then he heard a small, un-gendered voice whisper, ‘You look so nice today, Larry. I like what you have done with your beard. And just look at that belt! Is that new?’

...

So Larry said he entered the woods, and all his angst just melted away. He felt young and carefree in a way he’d never felt, and the woods told him they loved him.

‘We love you, Larry,’ The Whispering Forest reportedly whispered. ‘You are good, and you look good. Do you want to hang out more? Let’s hang out, and tell some jokes, and maybe play games! You are a good friend. Let us be friends.’

Larry said he wanted to stay, but that he remembered that he had cable TV, and didn’t want to miss anything just because there was some beautiful nature he’d never explored. So he went home to catch an Iron Chef America marathon.” (Fink and Cranor).

In this interaction, the active and passive roles that are generally associated with natural experiences are swapped. It is the forest that observes and attempts a connection with the human walking through it, and not the other way around. As William Cronon states, "In the wilderness the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, had always seemed less certain than elsewhere" (Cronon 3). This blurs our usual perception of nature as a passive place to be absorbed and "taken in" (in other words, to be consumed) while at the same time mocking the attitude towards nature that is common in American culture. Even when the forest is reaching out to him, Larry Leroy refuses to allow an emotional connection to the forest, preferring instead to "catch an Iron Chef America marathon" (Fink and Cranor).

Later, it is revealed that people who explore the woods eventually become part of the forest, growing roots and sharing a desire to remain in the woods. However, even though the forest appears threatening to Larry Leroy's, his reaction is not necessarily shown to be the appropriate one. Instead, the episode seems to take a more ambivalent attitude towards the Whispering Forest. Though the narrator Cecil warns listeners to "stay away from The Whispering Forest. Do not listen to its hollow compliments, its sappy flattery. Learn from Larry Leroy. Stay inside and watch television! There is no reason to go explore nature. No reason!" (Fink and Cranor), he later remarks on the positive nature of becoming one with the forest. As Cecil describes it:

"The Whispering Forest is a place where we can all plunge our feet and hands into the cool, soft soil, allowing our fingers and toes to grow and spiral into the earth, quickly and deeply intertwining with themselves, each other, snaking in and through a complex organic network to become one.

In The Whispering Forest, everyone is one. Everything. They share each other now." (Fink and Cranor).

He goes on to remark that he "thought that was a beautiful story, and it brought some meaning to the otherwise meaningless life of an intern." (Fink and Cranor). In this way, The Whispering Forest seems to become an ambiguous realm where unity with nature is both terrifying and meaningful.

A Deeper Study

William Cronon's article "The Trouble with Wilderness" provides an important foundation upon which to study how nature (and specifically wilderness) has been used in American literature throughout time. However, an analysis of the concept in a more specific setting like American horror fiction shows that it is only a beginning to an exciting and complex study of the many incarnations and uses of wilderness across the realm of literature. Taking a New Historical approach to the subject is a necessity, for as Cronon states, "The more one knows about its particular history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems" (Cronon 1). This specific study reveals the hidden labor relations that lie at the heart of these stories; relations which Marx predicted, and to which his works are an important key. Together, Marxist and New Historical studies reveal themselves to be fundamental to any understanding of ecological study.

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