

# Foreshadowing of Environmental Description on the Character's Fate in *The Acorn-Gatherer*

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Environment description can be used as a hint to foreshadow the plot development of a literary work. This article aims to analyze the inevitability of the boy's tragedy based on the description on natural and social environment. The author contrasts the beauty of life in nature with people's indifference to life in society, reflecting the value of life, the distortion and alienation of religion, the utilitarianism of the society, which creates dramatic tension for the reader and provokes deep thought.

*Keywords:* environment, tragedy, nature, religion, utilitarianism

## Introduction

Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) is best known for his impressive writing on the natural history, rural life, and landscape in late Victorian England. He is adept at intense study and accurate portrayal of 19th-century rural society in a simple and delicate writing style. In the natural, beautiful, and quiet sketch of the British countryside, Jeffries also outlines its backward and hidebound human nature and interpersonal relationships in the social change of rural life. What is more remarkable, Jeffries often chooses to present the grand historical context of the social change from some trivial aspects.

*The Acorn-Gatherer*, in the setting of the transformation from agriculture civilization to industrial civilization, depicts the wretched life of an illegitimate child in a backward village and earns successfully great sympathy for the main character, revealing the conflict between the natural harmony and the cruelty of the living environment. The story tells about the death of an illegitimate boy whose mother has died and father is a drunkard. The granny, mother of his dead mother takes the duty of bringing up the child. Humiliated by such a disgraceful daughter and a wicked boy in the neighbors' eyes, the granny mistreats the boy in such a way which she thinks is upright and responsible, as beating him habitually and forcing him to look at the Bible though the boy is illiterate. The story ends with the boy's drowning. The granny feels no pain and thinks she had done her duty. People are indifferent to the boy's death, which only serves as a warning to other people.

## The Foreshadowing of Environmental Description in Literary Works

Foreshadowing is a literary device that writers use as hints or clues to suggest readers what will happen later in a story, indicating a particular outcome for readers. Writers and storytellers utilize recurring symbols,

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settings, and other elements as foreshadowing to enhance the narrative of a literary work. Environmental description can be used to foreshadow the plot event and character development. A novel centers around characterization and reflects social life through complete plot and specific environmental description. Character, plot, and setting compose a novel's "Three Elements". Environmental description is the introduction of the natural and social background of the characters' activities in the literature. A good literary work can give readers immersive experience through vivid background knowledge. Normally, environmental description includes natural and social environment. The seemingly ordinary natural scenery and social background is not accidentally but specifically arranged for the development of the story. It can create an atmosphere, imply social background, foil characters, and develop the plot. Meanwhile, it can betoken the fate of main characters.

In *The Acorn-Gatherer*, Richard Jefferies takes a lot of words to describe the nature and the community the characters live in. The time, place, animal, and other natural environment of the story are used as foreshadowing to contrast the boy's tragedy and highlight the tension with the social environment. The social environment describes the social and religious background as well as indifferent interpersonal relationship. These also act as a hint at the development of the plot and the tragedy of the boy.

### **Natural Environment**

1. *The Acorn-Gatherer* tells about a boy's life and death in the glorious natural scenery, which makes a sharp contrast with the indifferent and cruel society.

At the first beginning of the story we can see a peaceful picture: "Black rooks, yellow oak leaves, and a boy asleep at the foot of the tree" (Yu, 2019, p. 192). Whereas, the serenity mingles with a flicker of unease, because the boy "In his slumber his forehead frowned—they were fixed lines". What is contrasted with his painful expression is "The happiest creatures in the world are the rooks at the acorns". The merry vigor of life is appealing to every reader: "fluttering up", "hopping", "sidling", "chuckling", "to the loudest of their voices", yet the boy is silent and forehead frowned.

"A thrush looked out from the hedge, and among the short grass there was still the hum of bees, constant sun-worshippers as they are. The sunshine gleamed on the rooks' black feathers overhead, and on the sward sparkled from hawkweed, some lotus and yellow weed, as from a faint ripple of water". What a nice and harmonious nature! But "a stern face" appears at the moment, "Thwack, thwack, bang, went the ash stick on the sleeping boy, heavily enough to bare broken his bones". "The faggot, brought a quarter of a mile for the purpose, enabled her, you see, to get two good chances at him". The boy suffers a beating-up; what's more, it's premeditated. We can imagine the boy live a hard life. Infected by the atmosphere from the natural environment description, we may foresee a tragedy is coming.

2. The effect the natural description creates is to make an analogy between the boy and crooks, which brings much grief to the readers

The story begins with "Black crooks", which thread through the whole story. Explicitly, crook symbolizes the freedom, merriness, and carefreeness of the nature; while in western culture, it also implies despair and death. So we can infer the description of the crook is to pave the way for the tragic fate of the boy.

The boy makes a life by gathering acorns as the crooks, though no better than crooks. Crooks are happy while the boy's "forehead frowned". The crooks can enjoy the acorns they have gathered, while the granny "locked him in the whole day without food". Nevertheless, one thing is common: Both the boy and crooks are

deemed as warning. "This was the end; nor was he even remembered. Does anyone sorrow for the rook, shot, and hung up as a scarecrow? The boy had been talked to, and held up as a scarecrow all his life: he was dead, and that is all". Their fate warns people to comply with the religion. Scarecrows, who scare birds, are bald nosed crook shot to death. They are regarded as typical examples of violations hung on the fence by villagers. Likewise, the drowned boy and the boys' parents are deemed as the warning "crooks". No one feels sorrow for their miserable experiences even their death, which reinforced tragic atmosphere of the story.

### **Social Environment**

The description of social environment includes the description of the living environment and social relations of the characters, specifically referring to social background, historical conditions, local customs, epoch, social relations, politics, religion and economy. The description of social environment plays a significant role in introducing the background of the story, implying the destiny of the characters, driving the development of the plot, and deepening the thematic understanding of the novel. Here we will analyze the functions of the foreshadowing of the boy's tragedy from the aspects of the living environment, religious belief, and social convention.

#### **Impoverished Living Environment**

The background of this novel is the late Victorian period in the late 19th century. Capitalist mode of production has penetrated into the remote and poor mountain villages in Scotland, leading to the disintegration of small-scale peasant economy, destroying the traditional social order, and bringing misfortune and bad luck to the class dominated by agricultural production. With the advancement of the industrial revolution, a large number of farmers went bankrupt, and farmers in remote and backward mountainous areas lived in dire straits. The protagonist in *The Acorn-Gatherer* just "belonged to a dozen hedge children" (Yu, 2019, p. 192).

From the description of the little boy's clothes, "mending" and "his clothes are little better than sacking", the readers have a preliminary understanding of their poor life. The little boy made a living by selling acorns. If he finds enough acorns, the money for the fruit can make him eat a full meal. Instead, it is only to endure hunger. Although the exact age of the boy is not known from the story, it is clear that he has reached the age of school, but he did not. It was poverty that deprived him of his right to go to school and receive education. "The faggot, brought a quarter of a mile" and "there was a small shed with a padlock, used to store produce or wood in", from these details, we can know the only economic source of the elderly grandmother is her physical labor, which she can maintain her and her grandson's life. The little boy's mother, the old woman's daughter, is said to have been starved to death, showing that the basic need; survival was still a big problem for them. This is not only a tragedy of a family, but also a true portrayal of the poor rural life in the late Victorian era. The process of industrialization will certainly bring great changes to the simple rural life, accelerating the deterioration of farmers' living conditions as well as the alienation of human relationships.

#### **Hypocritical Religious Belief**

The story happened in a small cottage of Scotland in the Victoria period, when religion became a powerful force and had great influence on the whole society and personal life. In the 19th century, the breakthrough of industrial revolution and the new emergence of scientific ideologies had a deep impact on the Anglican Church in Britain, bringing about the religious diversification in Victoria era. Among them the dominant sect was the Evangelicals, who represented the interests of the middle class and focused on the Gospel teachings rather than

ritual. Most clergymen and priests as well as ordinary Victorian are Evangelicals. In terms of morality, the evangelical reflects the moral seriousness of the middle class. It advocated proper behavior, frugality, and self-control, opposed to promiscuity, gambling and other behaviors, and widely carried out the prohibition movement. This serious moral concept determined not only the conduct of countless people in the society at that time, but also the customs that dominated Victorian society. To some extent, the Evangelism had improved people's morality at that time and promoted religious revival. However, it also led to its own distortion due to the excessive demands on moral life, order, and discipline, resulting in the indifference of the underclass and hypocrisy of the upper class (Li & Long, 2007). In addition, the Evangelism itself implied the popular philosophy at that time, namely utilitarianism, which influenced by Puritanism and determined by the nature of the middle class. All the social work of evangelists were accomplished for individual benefit rather than for the public's benefit.

The granny's severity and ignorance of kinship come from the power of her religious belief. She is "hard of feature, but superior in some scarcely defined way to most of her class", has frenzy loyalty about the religion which "lifted her above the rest" and "was perfectly genuine", and is one of the leading member of the religious community. But her superiority has been humiliated by her disgraceful family: a sluttish daughter and an illegitimate grandson. In order to show her loyalty to the God and get salvation for herself, she makes the boy look at the Bible even though "he could not read", which is quite ridiculous and hypocritical. We can see the granny's salvation is by nature a selfish "Geykul" in the name of "rescuing others" (actually punishing others) (Yao, 2012).

#### **Utilitarian Social Convention**

The story is told by an unreliable narrator presenting the rural value which is narrow, deterministic, and religion-orientated. In the eyes of the narrator, the boy was born bad. "A wickeder boy never lived: nothing could be done with the reprobate". His father drinks, her mother is not virtuous, and the boy is illegitimate. The boy deserves death, which not only gives warning to other children, but helps to get rid of the religious deviant. Yet, to the boy's death, the granny "felt no twinge: she had done her duty".

With the advent of industrial revolution, utilitarianism, popular in the late 19th century, has corroded traditional and harmonious cultural and moral values. Interpersonal relationship based on money-oriented values had been alienated. Just as In Carlyle (1999)'s fierce attack on utilitarianism and commercialism in the late Victorian era, he pointed out that the interpersonal relationship based on "cash connection" led to the alienation of human nature and the corruption of people's morality. People are indifferent towards the neighbors, friends, even kinsman with blood ties. In the story when the boy died, no one thought of tracking his footsteps, or following up the path he had to take. A dealer saw something in the water, but "did not want any trouble", thinking of buying a cow. A steerswoman "knew what it was", only to "go ashore and have a quart of ale" since "there was no reward" for picking it up. From these, we can see utilitarianism on the villagers since they just care about their own business and benefits, yet indifference to others and ignorant of lives. As for the boy's grandmother, she did not give a hand even when her daughter was starving to death, she beat the boy for humiliating her, and she felt no guilty and blame for the boy's death, reckoning "she had done her duty". She is more a persecutor than a caregiver. In such an absurd and hypocritical environment, the tragedy of the boy is inevitable. Social prejudice and so-called "right code of behavior" is the shooting gun to end the feeble life.

### Conclusion

The boy is a son of nature and innocent. The sharp contrast and analogy with the crooks in the nature leave the readers much sympathy for the boy's miserable fate. Through the description on social environment, the author reveals the cruelty of the religion and the mercy of people with religion-oriented and money-oriented value at that time. By analyzing the relationship of the characters and the living environment, we can have a better understanding of the living condition of the times, the granny's cruelty over the boy, villagers' indifference to others, and the tragedy of the boy.

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