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The idyllic chronotope in *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy

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Abstract:

The paper presents the idea of the chronotope in the novel Far from the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy, with special attention paid to idyllic time and space. The research is mainly based on the theory of chronotopes according to Mikhail Bakhtin, who distinguishes various types and motifs within this notion. The author presents here the features of an idyllic chronotope, among them vast descriptions of nature and its connection with human life, as well as the destruction of an idyll, unhappy love and the motif of a road or path, which seems to be one of the most significant motifs in the work. The paper also presents the importance of coincidence and the sudden decisions of characters in the process of constructing the whole story of Gabriel and Bathsheba.

The notion of the chronotope

The idea of time and space (chronotope) constitutes a very popular and versatile background for literary analysis. It enables an academic not only to have a wider look at the composition of a given literary work, but also to put it in a context that goes beyond literature itself; it employs geographical, historical or psychological perspectives. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes the role of the chronotope as a complex connection between time and space, which are adopted in literature in an artistic way (1974, p. 273). This formal-content literary category, according to Bakhtin, can be characterized by time which is compressed and compacted, and space which is intensified (1974, p. 273). Although the term chronotope seems rather opaque and ambiguous, it can be characterized by polysemy and polyvalency, which enable the idea to be interpreted multidirectionally (Ulicka, 2018, pp. 261, 267). As Bakhtin further states, the category of time and space provides numerous opportunities to do transdisciplinary research. According to Seweryna Wyśłouch, transdisciplinarity here means eliminating the borders between different ideas (such as the language of a literary work, the world depicted etc.), in contrast with

interdisciplinarity, which concentrates on boundary phenomena (2010, pp. 49, 50). The above conception of the chronotope appears to be ideal for analysing the chosen works of British literature.

In his research concerning the chronotope, Bakhtin concentrated on distinguishing different types of time-space relationships, among them the idyllic chronotope, which seems to be dominant in the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy. This literary work seems to match some characteristic features of a novel defined by Bakhtin as Prüfungsroman. These are: a beautiful girl and a handsome boy (Oak and Bathsheba), as well as the appearance of a feeling which encounters difficulties. An important element of this type of novel is also a great number of descriptions of nature (1974, pp. 274-275). This element enables perception of the novel from the perspective of an idyll. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which belongs to the group of *the Novels of Character and Environment*, became a great success, including financially (Diniejko, 2006, pp. 37, 49). It brought fame to the author, who started working on other novels concerning human life in the context of nature and beautiful landscapes.

The image of an idyll in *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Thomas Hardy includes in his work numerous references to the idyllic chronotope, which is dominant in comparison to other chronotopes in the novel, such as social, religious and historical time and space. These references include, among others, descriptions of landscapes and weather, and the coexistence of human beings with nature. Very detailed depictions of landscapes constitute a substantial part of the novel, becoming the background for events. The very titles of particular chapters construct a frame which presents the author's idea of employing nature and its beauty to serve as the basis for the whole story. For instance, one may notice the following titles: *Night – the Flock* (Chapter II), *Sunrise* (Chapter XIV), *The Sheep – Washing* (Chapter XIX), *The Fir Plantation* (Chapter XXIV), *Scene on the Verge of the Hay-Mead* (Chapter XXVI), *The Hollow Amid the Ferns* (Chapter XXVIII), and many others. The titles introduce readers to an atmosphere of peace and quiet and offer them a specific type of aesthetic experience – communing with nature. The elaborate descriptions in the novel concern particularly landscapes in the countryside and weather conditions, as in Chapter II:

Norcombe Hill — not far from lonely Toller-Down — was one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil — an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined producer-acnes of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion,

when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down. The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its arched curve against the sky, like a mane. To-night these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through it with a sound as of grumbling, or gushed over its crowning boughs in a weakened moan. The dry leaves in the ditch simmered and boiled in the same breezes, a tongue of air occasionally ferreting out a few, and sending them spinning across the grass.¹ (p. 5)

This manner of portraying landscapes is very frequently used by Thomas Hardy, and it serves as a preparation for the events that are to happen; the readers have a complete image of the place and situation. This atmosphere is characteristic of the countryside and cannot be applied to any industrialized city. It is a perfect place to observe the folklore of the British Isles, and Hardy is an author who contributed to its popularization. One of the examples of folklore in the novel is the description of the fair, in which the main character, Gabriel Oak, together with other farm workers, appears in order to find a job, after he lost his flock:

At one end of the street stood from two to three hundred blithe and hearty labourers waiting upon Chance — all men of the stamp to whom labour suggests nothing worse than a wrestle with gravitation, and pleasure nothing better than a renunciation of the same among these, carters and waggoners were distinguished by having a piece of whip-cord twisted round their hats; thatchers wore a fragment of woven straw; shepherds held their sheep-crooks in their hands; and thus the situation required was known to the hirers at a glance. (p. 23)

As presented above, life in the countryside is not completely free of sorrows; lack of work is one of the problems. Oak faces it and finally finds a job on the farm of a young beautiful girl, Bathsheba, but before that he delights the people present at the fair with his playing of the flute. He “could pipe with Arcadian sweetness” (p. 24), which met with the admiration of the people gathering around him. This aspect of folklore reminds us of the ancient land Arcadia, which became the symbol of eternal happiness, peace and harmony. It perfectly corresponds with the idyllic landscape pictured by Hardy while describing the events in which Oak participates. Here one may notice time and space are condensed: the reader gets to know both ancient and 19th-century worlds simultaneously. The idea that links these two chronotopes is that of the idyll and its common features such as quietness, rural traditions and nature. The combination of nature and human life take also the form of symbiosis. One of its examples is the portrayal of a harvest

¹ All the quotations come from the electronic version of the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy, published by Freeditorial: freeditorial.com

festival with accompanying weather phenomena. In August, one of the characters, Troy, the husband of Bathsheba, organizes “the harvest supper and dance” (p. 143). During the celebration Oak comes to the guests of the feast in order to warn them against the coming thunderstorm and heavy rain. It is he who saved Bathsheba’s crops and belongings, as the other men were too drunk to help. The thunderstorm not only accompanies the events on the farm, but also corresponds to the feelings of Oak and Bathsheba. The destruction the weather brings represents the approaching destruction of the marriage of Bathsheba and Troy: their relationship slowly falls apart. Oak’s help is the harbinger of his future happiness as Bathsheba’s husband. Nevertheless, before it happens, Gabriel felt ignored and depressed, as “in Juxtaposition with Troy, Oak had a melancholy tendency to look like a candle beside gas, and ill at ease, he went out again” (p. 144). So it is clear that the events connected with the season of the year, weather conditions are linked with the events of the plot, and human emotions are connected with events in the countryside (Butler, 1990, pp. 29- 30).

What is more, the power of nature constitutes a context for the fate of the characters (Diniejkó, 2006, p. 40). The celebration of the harvest festival is one of numerous examples of another characteristic feature of the idyllic chronotope – eating and drinking together. Bakhtin calls it one of the major facts of idyllic life. This life is characterized by an organic connection, a growing together of life and place with their landscapes, habits etc. An idyllic life cannot be separated from the particular space and place (1982, pp. 448- 449). The novel portrays numerous situations in which the characters feast, and their celebrations are connected with the rural space or nature. One of the examples is the above-mentioned celebration of the harvest festival; another is the meeting in Warren’s Malthouse, during which Gabriel Oak gets to know other men living near Bathsheba’s mansion. The description of the meeting contains numerous features of an idyll, for instance: loud conversations, invitations to drink and eat, and detailed presentations of meals and beverages. Gabriel is invited to dine with the following words: “Come, shepherd, and drink. ‘Tis gape and swallow with us — a drap of sommit, but not of much account” (p. 33).

The atmosphere becomes friendlier as one of the men encourages the shepherd to try some food: “And here’s a mouthful of bread and bacon that mis’ess have sent, shepherd. The cider will go down better with a bit of victuals. Don’t ye chaw quite close, shepherd, for I let the bacon fall in the road outside as I was bringing it along, and may be ‘tis rather gritty” (p. 34).

The above description presents the atmosphere of dining together and describes the products of the men’s work; it confirms the rural character of the celebration which would not

be possible in any other surroundings (e.g. in a city), only in the countryside. The idyll here concerns creating bonds with other people, limiting the area to the particular place and particular group of people (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 456). Gabriel is the epitome of a character who initially has no family, no wealth, but together with the dynamics of the novel, he finds himself in a tiny but safe place in which he gains his position and finds love.

The idyllic image of friendly celebration is frequently destroyed by problems and disturbances appearing in the novel. This is what Bakhtin calls the destruction of an idyll. It frequently refers to the development of technology, as well as to characters who loosen ties with others, become egoistic and only care about their own affairs (Bakhtin, 1982, pp. 457-458). In the novel such a situation appears in the context of romantic relationships. Bathsheba's husband, Troy, reveals his secret: he was in love with Fanny, one of Bathsheba's workers, who, pregnant, died in an asylum. Troy admits to his wife that he loved Fanny more than Bathsheba. It leads to other tragic events, among them to Troy's death. The situation takes place in an idyllic atmosphere – the party organized by Boldwood, who made Bathsheba promise to marry him within seven years' of Troy's disappearance. The perfect idyllic situation is interrupted by Troy who appears at the party in disguise and asks Bathsheba to leave with him. He dominates the whole situation, becomes its centre, breaking the happiness and easiness of the people present at the party:

Troy next advanced into the middle of the room, took off his cap, turned down his coat-collar, and looked Boldwood in the face. Even then Boldwood did not recognize that the impersonator of Heaven's persistent irony towards him, who had once before broken in upon his bliss, scourged him, and snatched his delight away, had come to do these things a second time. Troy began to laugh a mechanical laugh: Boldwood recognized him now. (p. 228)

The scene presents carefree people connected to one another by their work, who are in the middle of a celebration. Their idyll is broken by a stranger who destroys their peace and introduces destruction; it is a man who does not belong to the group and will never be a part of it, and while entering it he is not naturally accepted, but causes a crack within it. The situation has a tragic end: Boldwood kills Troy and goes to prison. This destruction of an idyll is temporary; it does not determine the concept of the whole novel: however, it is necessary in achieving a happy ending. The above tragic event may be defined as an example of the chronotope of crisis and turning point, which is related to the chronotope of a conflict. It can be usually observed in an open space (square, road, hall, etc.) as Bakhtin notes (1982, p. 476). In the case of Hardy's novel, it is a large room in which events are to decide the fate of the novel's

characters. This is the place where a fall, sudden flash and final resolution appear. After that, the motif of unhappy love gradually fades and the plot evolves in the direction of a happy ending, which in the case of an idyll means happy love and marriage. In Hardy's novel this is the final scene of the whole story; Oak at first decides to leave Bathsheba and look for happiness. She, on the other hand, is devastated, because she feels abandoned by everybody around her. Finally, Gabriel decides to stay and to administer her and Boldwood's wealth. They declare their love for each other and get married. One of the final descriptions in the novel, closing the story in a perfect way, shows their deep, mutual feeling:

They spoke very little of their mutual feeling; pretty phrases and warm expressions being probably unnecessary between such tried friends. Theirs was that substantial affection which arises (if any arises at all) when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship — CAMARADERIE — usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures merely. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death — that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (p.240)

The above situation takes place in the idyllic background of the countryside, accompanied by beautiful landscapes. Its characteristic feature is the unity of place, which creates a particular background for the events. The soothing sounds of nature complement the interaction between the main characters in the same way as violent phenomena (such as a thunderstorm and heavy rain causing destruction) become part of deteriorating human relationships (Troy's attitude towards his wife and possessions).

The construction of the novel is very well designed; the story leading to the happy ending has a clear starting point as well as endpoint. The former is the first meeting of two young people, and the latter is their wedding. These two events constitute a frame in which the whole story becomes clear and complete. The path leading to the final resolution is a typical feature of a time-space relationship. Bakhtin distinguishes the motif of a road or path as crucial to developing the story. It usually contains such elements as meetings, separations, losing and regaining, and searching and finding. The road where the protagonists meet is the central point; it is the place where the events start and are performed (1982, pp. 307-308). The relationship

of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak seems to meet all of the above conditions. The shepherd meets Bathsheba for the first time on the road:

The field he was in this morning sloped to a ridge called Norcombe Hill. Through a spur of this hill ran the highway between Minster and Chalk-Newton. Casually glancing over the hedge, Oak saw coming down the incline before him an ornamental spring wagon, painted yellow and gaily marked, drawn by two horses, a wagoner walking alongside bearing a whip perpendicularly. The wagon was laden with household goods and window plants, and on the apex of the whole sat a woman, "young" and attractive". (pp. 2-3)

When Gabriel finds out who the girl is, he immediately decides to propose to her but is rejected. After some time, after travelling, he is employed by Bathsheba to take care of her farm. The shepherd hopes Bathsheba will love him, but he loses her the moment Troy appears. There are moments when Oak tries to leave Bathsheba only to come back later on and help her in her work. Finally, he regains his beloved. Gabriel's fate is a constant journey in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Literally, he travels in search of employment, metaphorically he is looking for his place in the world. As far as his work is concerned, he is a perfectionist, but in the case of feelings and personal happiness, he wanders in order to find them. Bathsheba is also astray; she is not sure about her feelings and seems to be very gullible. She trusts Troy, who does not turn out to be a good husband and for a long time she does not notice Gabriel's true affection towards her. Fortunately, both characters' lives are connected during their literal and metaphorical travels. Changing places plays a crucial role in the novel; at the very moment of the meeting on the road Gabriel could observe Bathsheba who was looking in the mirror. The situation is described in the following way: "The change from the customary spot and necessary occasion of such an act — from the dressing hour in a bedroom to a time of travelling out of doors — lent to the idle deed a novelty it did not intrinsically possess" (p. 3).

The change of background enables the characters to notice the dynamism of life and makes them become subject to it. For a long time, Gabriel thinks of Bathsheba as a traveller before he learns her name. The idea of travel is central to the protagonists' relationship, then. It creates a chronotope which is dynamic due to its relocatable character. Travel means experiencing difficulties and unpredictable situations, as well as coping with them.

The idea of travelling is inseparably connected with the notions of distance and closeness. The character appears in a particular time in a specific place (Bakhtin, 1974, p. 283); the events could not have happened if Gabriel Oak had not walked in the fields near Norcombe Hill — this is the place he met Bathsheba for the first time and this is the moment constituting

the very beginning of their relationship. The distance between them is large in a metaphorical sense: although they work together, they cannot be together till the end of the novel. Finally, they get married after experiencing numerous situations, including disappointment, negligence and destruction. There is no doubt that these events contributed to reducing the distance between Gabriel and Bathsheba and to changing it into a close relationship.

Coincidence plays a crucial role in the novel, as well. The first meeting of Gabriel and Bathsheba is an example of an unplanned, random event; however, it is very powerful – it influences all the future events in the story, among others, Gabriel's employment on Bathsheba's farm and their wedding. Another event that is essential for the development of the story is the moment Bathsheba and Troy meet a woman who asks them about the asylum in Casterbridge. Troy immediately realized it was Fanny – the girl he was going to marry, and he tried to hide this information from Bathsheba, asking her simultaneously for some money he needed to help Fanny in secret. Unfortunately, Bathsheba learnt about Troy's relationship by chance, the moment she saw Fanny's hair:

"I must go, in spite of sentiment." Troy, as he spoke, looked at his watch, and, apparently actuated by NON LUCENDO principles, opened the case at the back, revealing, snugly stowed within it, a small coil of hair. Bathsheba's eyes had been accidentally lifted at that moment, and she saw the action and saw the hair. She flushed in pain and surprise, and some words escaped her before she had thought whether or not it was wise to utter them. "A woman's curl of hair!" she said. "O, Frank, whose is that?" (pp. 162- 163)

The above situation contributed to the gradual deterioration of the relationship between Bathsheba and Troy, leading to its complete destruction, which also takes the form of the destruction of an idyll. Here time seems to be superficial: the important aspects are: "exactly" and "suddenly" (Bakhtin, 1974, p. 278). Various events happen "suddenly", enabling the characters to act in a particular way. For instance, Gabriel, wanting to protect Bathsheba decides to hide the information about Fanny's pregnancy:

Oak imagined a terrible discovery resulting from this afternoon's work that might cast over Bathsheba's life a shade which the interposition of many lapsing years might but indifferently lighten, and which nothing at all might altogether remove. Suddenly, as in a last attempt to save Bathsheba from, at any rate, immediate anguish, he looked again, as he had looked before, at the chalk writing upon the coffin-lid. The scrawl was this simple one, "Fanny Robin and child." Gabriel took his handkerchief and carefully rubbed out the two latter words, leaving visible the inscription "Fanny Robin" only. He then left the room, and went out quietly by the front door. (pp. 174- 175)

The character had to do it in order to react properly to a given situation; Gabriel's intention is to help Bathsheba – that is why he decides to act quickly and spontaneously. Such actions constitute an important element of the novel's construction, in which time is relative. On one hand, the events happen quickly (sudden decisions of the characters, journeys and their changing perspective), on the other hand, it seems that the major figures of the novel do not get older. They seem to be of the same age both at the beginning and at the end of the story (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 277). Although both Gabriel and Bathsheba undergo numerous trials and experience many difficulties, the moment they get married they seem to be exactly as young as the moment they got to know each other. This time hiatus is a reflection of so-called adventure time (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 286). There is no indication that things and people change, that they become older; the most crucial thing is that they experience different types of adventures.

The major idea connecting the above-described elements of the novel is the idea of the idyllic chronotope: it is the time and space of a rural atmosphere, which is characterized by the beauty of the countryside, numerous descriptions of nature and people's work in the fields, the connection of natural processes with the lives of the protagonists, family celebrations, love, marriage, etc. However, the idyllic chronotope is also inseparably connected with the destruction of an idyll, represented by moments of crisis. Nevertheless, the novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a whole is the depiction of complex human relationships which are in harmony with their rural backdrop.

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