Technique and Style of Background Descriptions in the Novel

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The primitive type of story, in every country, always begins with "Once upon a time", with the place not definitely mentioned. What happens and what becomes of the hero are important to the audience, who do not expect detailed descriptions of the background or settings—nature, landscape, climate, weather, houses, etc. The adventures of a single character are told in the order of their occurrence without reference to where he was born or what his surroundings were.

Novelists in the eighteenth century have little regard for description of nature, their chief concern lying in portraying people and their lives. It is after the Romantic Revival that novelists' attitudes towards nature have changed. They begin to set their eyes on the landscape to see the beauty of nature, learning much from the painters of the time. Mrs. Radcliffe, one of those writers, greatly contributed to the history of the English novel in her descriptions of nature and supernatural atmosphere. The following is the opening passage of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

> On the pleasant banks of the Garronne, in the province Gasconny, stood, in the year 1584, the Château of Monsieur St. Aubert. From its windows were seen the pastoral landscapes of Guinne and Gascony stretching along the river, gay with luxuriant woods and vine, and plantations of olives. To the south, the view was bounded by the majestic Pyrenee whose summits veiled in clouds, or exhibiting awful forms, seen, and lost again, as the partial vapours rolled along, were sometimes frowned with forests of gloomy pine, that swept downward to their base. There tremendous precipices were contrasted by the soft green of the pastures and woods that hung upon their skirts; among whose flocks and herds and simple cottages, the eye, after having scaled the cliffs above, delighted to repose.[1]

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1) Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Vol. I, Everyman's Library, 1959, p. 1.

This is a beautiful landscape in France surveyed from the windows of the Château of M. St. Aubert, whose daughter, Emily, grows up to be an accomplished lady there. The adjectives modifying the scene are ***pleasant, pastoral, gay, luxuriant, majestic,*** *awful, gloomy, tremendous, soft,* etc., most of which are rather stereotyped epithets causing the pleasing atmosphere like the romantic paintings of the old school. There is a vague lyricism and mildly pleasant sensations in Mrs. Radcliffe's descriptions of the scenery but no realistic details such as can be found in those of Charles Dickens or George Eliot. It might be said that she prepared the way for a subtler, more complex delineations of nature in the later nineteenth century.

Jane Austen, who was born ten years later, satirizes Mrs. Radcliffe in her novel:

> Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, ...it was not in them perhaps that human nautre, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for... Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad.[2]

To Austen's mind, the incongruities caused by her people in actual life were of greater interest than any imagined adventures. Her work is the kind of realistic, ironical, humorous, social comedy which does not require descriptions of magnificent and foreign scenery or ancient castles.

The following is one of her few examples containing background description:

> ...she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abrutness wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills, —and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance.[3]

2) Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey,* Oxford, 1965, p. 200.

3) Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice,* Oxford, 1965, p. 245.

Elizabeth visits Pemberley woods with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and is impressed with their beauty. Her way of description, however, is quite different from that of Mrs. Radcliffe. It may be from the reaction to the gothic exaggeration of the horror novels that she restrains herself from using extraordinary or exaggerated words to portray the scenery. Every spot is just *remarkable* and the hill is only a *considerable* eminence; these adjectives do not inspire emotional response in the reader. Pemberley house is brusquely described as 'a *large*, *handsome*, stone building' and there is no knowing in what way it is '*handsome*.' Austen's houses are generally neat and simple, without much to be said about them. Pemberley is to some extent characterized, because it has a function in the plot; it makes Mr. Darcy more valued, not for his great possessions, but because Pemberley represents cultured and elegant wealth. Though not quoted here, the dining-parlour into which they are admitted is also depicted as 'a *large*, *well-proportioned* room, *handsomely* fitted up' and other rooms '*lofty* and *handsome*'. She seems to have little interest, as in the case of her character portrayal,[4] in presenting the background before our eyes with concreteness and vividness. And it is this strict economy in the use of descriptive details that most critics have put heavier stress on.

Charlotte Brontë, on the contrary, describes Mr. Rochester's house as follows:

> ...I looked at...a bronze lamp pendant from the ceiling, at a great clock whose case was of oak curiously carved, and ebon black with time and rubbing...It was a fine autumn morning...I looked up and surveyed the front of the mansion. It was three stories high, of proportions not vast, though considerable;...battlements round the top gave it a picturesque look. Its gray front stood out well from the background of a rookerey whose cawing tenants were now on the wing. They flew over the lawn and grounds to alight in a great meadow, from which these were separated by a sunk fence, and where an array of mighty old thorn trees, strong, knotty, and broad as oaks, at once explained the etymology of the mansion's designation. Farther off were hills...quiet and lonely hills enough, and seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion...[5]

Jane arrives at Thornfield from Lowood as a governess and looks at the inside and

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4) *Cf.* Eiko Suhama, *Technique of Characterization in English Novels*, Bulletin of Hiroshima Jogakuin College, Vol. 31, 1981.

5) Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Books, 1954, p. 246.

outside of the mansion. To represent a stately atmosphere of the house, she gives a vivid description of a great clock, the case of which is made of oak curiously carved, black as ebony with time and rubbing. The cawing of rooks, an array of strong and knotty thorn trees, etc. also suggest a quiet and secluded atmosphere of the place she is now going to dwell. The detailed description of furniture is seen when Jane, resisting her aunt, was put into the Red Room.

Next is the scene when Jane is walking in the orchard one beautiful evening and is suddenly proposed by Rochester:

> It was now the sweetest hour of the twenty-four: 'day its fervid fires had wasted', and the dew fell cool on panting plain and scorched summit. Where the sun had gone down in simple state—pure of the pomp of clouds—spread a solemn purple, burning with the light of red jewel and furnace flame at one point, on one hill-peak, and extending high and wide, soft and still softer, over half heaven. The east had its own charm of fine, deep blue, and its own modest gem, a rising and solitary star: soon it would boast the moon; but she was yet beneath the horizon.[6]

This is a poetic description with rhetorical devices; metaphorical and colorful expressions increase lyrical atmosphere of the scene and abundant alliterations of [f], [p], [s], [h] make the rhythm smoothly flowing and sweet to our ears.

When Jane is full of happiness and joy, accepting Rochester's proposal, the weather suddenly changes:

> But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? It writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us.[7]

The wind begins to roar and after they entered the house the chestnut tree was struck by lightning. On the day before their wedding the wind is again blowing violently, and Jane sees the wrecked chestnut tree which symbolizes their catastrophe.

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6) *Ibid.*, p. 246.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 254.

> It was not without a certain wild pleasure I ran before the wind, delivering my trouble of mind to the measureless air-torrent thundering through space. Descending the laurel walk, I faced the wreck of the chestnut-tree; it stood up, black and riven: the trunk, split down the center, gasped ghastly. The cloven halves were not broken from each other, for the firm base and strong roots kept them unsundered below; though community of vitality was destroyed—the sap could flow no more: their great boughs on each side were dead, and next winter's tempest would be sure to fell one or both to earth: as yet, however, they might be said to form one tree—a ruin, but an entire ruin.[8)]

Metaphors, especially personifications, are used to describe the chestnut-tree in detail. When the distance between the author and nature becomes close, the object is raised to a symbolic level. In the last chapter, Rochester, losing his eyesight, expresses himself as "I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard." Here the physical background plays an organic role in the plot.

While Charlotte Brontë is by nature a kind of poet brought up in the natural environment of Yorkshire and her expressions are subjectively and emotionally rhetorical, Charles Dickens is essentially a realist who observes the world where all sorts and conditions of people are alive, laughing and crying.

Dickens provides vast and symbolic settings for his dramas. The Thames in *Our Mutual Friends*, the marshes in *Great Expectations* are symbolic and picturesque. They prepare us to see what is going to happen in the story.

> The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed. On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered—like an uphooped cask upon a pole—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again.[9)]

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8) *Ibid.*, p. 274.

9) Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Oxford, 1965, pp. 4~5.

The marshes are the background of the first chapter of *Great Expectations* and at the same time they play an important role in the development of the story. The dreary extensiveness of the landscape is emphasized by the three repetitions of 'just a long (black) line' with slight variations. Everything is dark except red lines in the evening sky, and the dark image of the marshes is used as the keynote of the whole, suggesting the destiny of Magwitch who is compared to the pirate going back to hook himself up again.

Dickens is, however, more skilful in describing the streets, shops, furniture, etc. than nature itself:

> The poulterers' shops were still half open, and the fruiterers' were radiant in their glory. There were great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chestnuts, like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe. There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made, in the shopkeepers' benevolence, to dangle from conspicuous hooks, that people's mouths might water gratis as they passed;[10]

In spite of the gloomy sky, the people are merry and the shops are described with humour and liveliness. Chestnuts are compared to the waistcoats of jolly old gentleman, onions to Spanish Friars, and the jovial atmosphere of Christmas is effectively pictured with Dickens' warm-hearted talkativeness.

Next is the description of Murdstone and Grinbys' storehouse where David is going to work after his mother's death:

> It was a crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking and scuffling of the

10) C. Dickens, *Christmas, Books,* Everyman's Library, 1950, p. 45.

old grey rats in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness of the place; are things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant.[11]

The dirty and decaying atmosphere of the whole house is impressively delineated and the onomatopoeic gerunds 'squeaking and scuffling' are used with effect to increase David's wretched feeling there. Dickens usually selects scene-setting which is relevant to his story and characters.

George Eliot has realistic and intellectual eyes to construct landscape painting in her novels. The opening passage of *The Mill on the Floss* is a picture concretely particularized:

> A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships—laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal—are borne along to the town of St. Ogg's, which shows its aged fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river-brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures, and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn.[12]

Abundant colors—'*green* banks', '*black* ships', '*dark* glitter of coal', '*red* roof', 'the water with a soft *purple* hue', '*dark* earth', '*green* crops'—are used to visualize the landscape in which human life continuously breathes in perfect harmony with nature. Although the Floss 'hurries', 'rushes' and 'checks its passage with an impetuous embrace' the atmosphere is static when compared with that of Dickens. In this novel, 'water' plays an important role, and the words and phrases related to water have more than literal connotation. The river Floss itself is mentioned figuratively—the Floss, at Christmas 'flowed and moaned like an unresting sorrow'.

There is not so much nature descriptions in *Middlemarch* as in her earlier works,

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11) C. Dickens, *David Copperfield*, KenKyusha, 19 I. p. 190.

12) G. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, Collier Books, 1962, p. 19.

because Eliot gives priority to the complicated relationship between people. When she occasionally describes nautre, she puts subtle meaning into it.

> On a grey but dry November morning Dorothea drove to Lowick in company with her uncle and Celia. Mr. Casaubon's home was the manor-house. Close by, visible from some parts of the garden, was the little church, with the old parsonage opposite...It had a small park with a fine old oak here and there, and an avenue of limes towards the south-west front, with a sunk fence between park and pleasure-ground, so that from the drawing-room windows the glance swept uninterruptedly along a slope of greensward till the limes ended in a level of corn and pastures, which often seemed to melt into a lake under the setting sun. This was the happy side of the house, for the south and east looked rather melancholy even under the brightest morning. The grounds here were more confined, the flower beds showed no very careful tendance, and large clumps of trees, chiefly of sombre yews, had risen high, not ten yards from the windows. The building, of greenish stone, was in the old English style, not ugly, but small windowed and melancholy-looking: the sort of house that must have children, many flowers, open windows, and little vistas of bright things, to make it seem joyous home. In this latter end of autumn, with a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine, the house too had an air of autumnal decline, and Mr. Casaubon, when he presented himself, had bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background.[13]

Dorothea, visiting Lowick with her uncle and Celia, has a look for the first time at Casaubon's home. The melancholy atmosphere of the manor-house is described in detail, surroundings making for a gloomy background. The choice of season here is November, the latter end of autumn, and the house and Casaubon, too, have an air of decline; he is grey and dry like the November morning. 'The happy side of the house' stands for the life which Dorothea will renounce in her marriage in the future. When Dorothea and Casaubon are actually married and arrive at Lowick after their honeymoon in the middle of January, she receives quite a different impression about the scene; 'The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of

13) G. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Collier Books, 1962, p. 78.

polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books.[14] The contrast of her impressions in November and January represents the change of her inner feeling.

Influenced by Dutch painting, which is known for its detailed descriptions of common people and landscape, G. Eliot delineates the background using a minute and realistic stroke of the pen. Landscape painting affords Eliot great visual pleasure and spiritual refreshment. Her enjoyment and careful study of natural appearances find full expression in her novels.

Thomas Hardy is skilful in presenting the highly poetic atmosphere of background in the opening passages of his novels. In *The Return of the Native*, prior to the appearance of the characters, the minute description of nature for a background ov erwhelms the reader. Nature here is not a mere introduction or scenic accessory to the story but a determining force which acts upon characters:

> A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by monent. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor. The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting-line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the the heath wore the appearance of an instalment of night which had taken up its place before its astronomical hour was come: darkness had to a great extent arrived hereon, while day stood distinct in the sky. Looking upwards, a furze-cutter would have been inclined to continue work; looking down, he would have decided to finish his faggot and go home. The distant rims of the world and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter. The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread.[15]

The changing aspect of Egdon Heath in the gathering dusk is revealed metaphorically. Unlike G. Eliot's description in *The Mill on the Floss*, which abounds in colors,

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14) *Ibid.*, p. 261.

15) Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, Harper's Modern Classics, 1922, p. 3.

Hardy's nature in the quotation above is represented in a simple contrast of black and white; the heaven as the '*pallid* screen' and the earth as 'the *darkest* vegetation', etc.

Next is the scence where Tess is asleep after her wandering journey with Angel:

> The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.[16]

This is the last night for Tess who, having killed Alec, is now destined to be arrested. It is just before dawn and the Great Plain is described with the author's poetic eyes. The 'enormous landscape' showing 'reserve, taciturnity and hesitation', is a sympathetic personification of the background towards poor Tess. Hardy is a cool realist who inflicts punishment on Tess, but in describing the background, he seems to be unable to suppress his poetic impulse; the most pitiable reality is raised to a calm and symbolic background.

In some early works of Joseph Conrad, the landscape descriptions are vividly picturesue and impressive for their own sake:

> The sky was a miracle of purity, a miracle of azure. The sea was polished, was blue, was pellucid, was sparkling like a precious stone, extending on all sides, all round to the horizon—as if the whole terrestrial globe had been one jewel, one colosal sapphire, a single gem fashioned into a planet. And on the lustre of the great calm waters the Judea glided imperceptibly, enveloped in languid and unclean vapours, in a lazy cloud that drifted to leeward, light and slow; a pestiferous cloud defiling the splendour of sea and sky.[17]

He uses, in delineating the sea, the adjectives having jewel imagery—*polished, blue, pellucid, sparkling*—and compares the earth to a huge sapphire. There is an impressive contrast between the lustrous sea and a pestiferous cloud or languid and

16) Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Macmillan, 1952, p. 504.

17) Joseph Conrad, *Youth*, Doubleday, 1925, p. 20.

unclean vapours which envelop the ship.

In most cases, however, Conrad gives background description not for its own sake but for the unfolding of the story, forming the characters, and creating an atmosphere with symbolic touch which is peculiar to himself.

In *Heart of Darkness*, nature is described as a dark and incomprehensible force which is opposed to man. The following is the description of the coast seen from the ship:

> Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there greyish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flyig above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background.[18]

The atmosphere is of 'monotonous grimness' with the fierce sun and the glistening, dripping land. A jungle as huge as Colossus is dark-green (almost black) fringed white surf. An 'untouched expanse' of nature is described calmly with objective eyes here, but towards the end, Conrad delineates the forest rather symbolically:

> I had taken up my binoculars while we talked, and was looking at the shore, sweeping the limit of the forest at each side and at the back of the house. The consciousness of there being people in that bush, so silent, so quiet—as silent and quiet as the ruined house on the hill—made me uneasy.... The woods were unmoved, like a mask—heavy, like the closed door of a prison—they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence.[19]

The narrator looks at the shore and feels uneasy when he imagines there may be native

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18) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 19.
19) *Ibid.*, p. 81.

people in the bush. The woods are silent, unmoved, and unapproachable here, but the wilderness takes him (i. e. Kurtz) on a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. As the plot goes on, Nature in *Heart of Darknsss* threatens men with its power of darkness, the mystery of the primitive world, which is beyond human comprehension. The use of background in Conrad's novels is subjectively complex because his criticism of the civilized world is symbolically contained.

Virginia Woolf and other writers who have followed 'the stream of consciousness' technique have provided a swiftly changing background for their characters; they live in several worlds from past to present at the same time.

Jacob's Room, her first experimental novel published in 1922 after her two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, both of which were written in a traditional style. Woolf does not enter the inner world of the characters as she does in her later novels; she tries a new technique in her background descriptions:

> The Scilly Isles were turning bluish; and suddenly blue, purple, and green flushed the sea; left it grey; struck a stripe which vanished; but when Jacob had got his shirt over his head the whole floor of the waves was blue and white, rippling and crisp, though now and again a broad purple mark appeared, like a bruise; or there floated an entire emerald tinged with yellow. He plunged. He gulped in water, spat it out, struck with his right arm, struck with left, was towed by a rope, gasped, splashed, and was hauled on board.[20]

The description of light and color changing like a rainbow arises from a different attitude of novelists who, like the impressionistic painters, are free from the traditional way of handling the material. Woolf has borrowed the technique of impressionism from painting and, faithful to her sense perception, depicts the exact visual impression of a moment. But her scenes exist only for themselves in *Jacob's Room*. In spite of the vividness of detail, they are not relevant to the emotions of the characters.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, Woolf sets the scene of her action with precision. What part of London they are in is described. Streets and buildings are given real names, and are carefully particularized. But in *To the Light-house*, she reduces the details of the

20) Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, The Hogarth Press, 1976, p. 46.

setting to a minimum.

Realistic or naturalistic novelists describe the scenes as they are faithfully observed without adding their feelings but background in fiction need not be described like a picture, as a person is not drawn like an exact portrait. From the latter half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, the background of the novel moves from events that are visible and audible to mental events or inner reflection. The novelist represents the object which is caught with his perception.

It is important to consider whether the details of background are functional or not—whether they contribute to the unfolding of happenings, to the representation of character, and to the achievement of the work as a whole.