Weeds in the EcoGothic Gardens in Algernon Blackwood's "The Transfer" and Walter de la Mare's "The Tree"

Nida Tiranasawasdi
Faculty of Arts
Chulalongkorn University
Email: Nida.D@chula.ac.th

Received: June 21, 2025
Revised: September 2**,** 2025
Accepted: September 5, 2025

Abstract

Images of monstrous, carnivorous plants have often dominated Gothic fiction that explores the precarious relationship between humans and nature. Very few works have created horror from plants in their normalcy. Among these are Blackwood's "The Transfer" (1912) and de la Mare's "The Tree" (1922). The two short stories neither present weird species nor animate plants to appear like monsters that capture, kill and devour humans. Instead, they portray plants that naturally grow and die but also have a strong tendency to thrive by drawing lives from other organisms. Relying on ecocritical concepts of inter-relatedness and trans-corporeality, this paper examines such a property of plants found in representations of weeds in the gardens of Blackwood's and de la Mare's stories. While the garden is a space where humans cultivate and tend flowers and other kinds of plant, the tenacious and indelible weeds in the gardens in both stories show that humans are merely a component of and subject to their environmental surroundings. As bodies can decompose and lives can be transferred to circumjacent entities, weeds represent the power of nature that proves unrelenting and ecologically fitter to survive than humans.

Keywords: weeds, ecoGothic, plant horror, Algernon Blackwood, Walter de la Mare

Human beings have long regarded themselves as above non-human nature. In Christian thought, the medieval concept of the Great Chain of Being proposed the hierarchy of all lives and matters of the earth that position humans next to God and the angels while placing plants and minerals at the bottom since they are unable to move and lack emotional attributes that categorize them as superior among all creation. The nineteenth century, in particular, was a remarkable period that witnessed a significant change in human attitudes towards nature (Parker, 2020; Del Principe, 2014; Estok, 2009; Elliott et al., 2016). While industrialization took hold of British society, increasing land reclamation, along with the adoption

of new methods and technologies, proceeded to improve agricultural productivity and to ensure that there was enough food and produce for the growing population (Del Principe, 2014, pp. 1-2). Through the influence of the Scottish landscape designer, John Claudius Loudon, tree collection and the construction of public and private parks, as well as gardens for botanical study, known as arboretums, became popular from the early nineteenth century onwards. Such enthusiasm was "intimately connected to the rise of British imperial power, trade, industry and wealth" (Elliott et al., 2016, p. 12). Plants became objects for consumption furnished with economic and cultural value. A large number of exotic varieties were imported and cultivated, referred to as the practice of transculturation, for use in construction, industry and other forms of utility (Elliott et al., 2016, p. 31). Introduced species were also essential elements in modern gardening to display the owner's distinctive taste and wealth (Elliott et al., 2016, p. 12). The English nation's dominance over both domestic and exotic natures, according to Anne Helmreich (2002), was most apparent at the Crystal Palace, where "indigenous elms stood alongside imported palms" and the naturalization of foreign plants "emblematizes contemporaneous attitudes to Empire as a storehouse of desirable commodities" (p. 12).

Humanity's confidence in its superiority, however, was also undermined in the nineteenth century, especially after the diffusion of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proposes the idea of one common ancestor from which variations of species had evolved through time and through the process of natural selection. Plants, according to Darwin, are far from being "lifeless" and immobile, as he juxtaposes the lives of plants against those of animals, claiming that the plant could adapt itself in terms of structure and habits not only to suit the climate and topography in which it grows but also because it is related to "other organic beings with which it comes into competition for food or residence, or from which it has to escape, or on which it preys" (Darwin, 1859/2003, p. 74). The sentience and aliveness of plants is also what Darwin emphasizes in *The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants* (1875), as he divides climbing plants into separate categories: those of which the leaves and tendrils are endowed with the "power of spontaneously revolving and of grasping objects with which they come into contact" and those which move with the aid of their hooks and rootlets (Darwin, 1875/2002a, p. 189). In *Insectivorous Plants* (1875), Darwin conducted a number of experiments to investigate carnivorous plants' abilities to catch insects and to digest matter. In *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880), he assures that "there is always movement in progress, and its amplitude, or direction, or both, have only to be modified for the good of the plant in relation with internal or external stimuli" (1880/2002b, p. 4).

Darwin's works contribute to what critics see as evolutionary fears or fears of the collapse of a hierarchy such as the Great Chain of Being that places humans on the upper part of the ladder, dividing them from animals, plants and

minerals below (Punter, 2013; Alaimo, 2001; Miller, 2012; Keetley, 2021; Poland, 2017). Darwin's research into plants' vitality, their close association with and evolution alongside other living organisms, in other words, blurs the boundaries among all creatures on the earth. The fear of this lack of boundaries as well as human loss of the sense of control and superiority was largely delineated in Gothic fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is part of the literary genre that critics today call "ecoGothic" or fiction that combines representations of nature with the Gothic mode of creating unpleasant, horrific and frightful sensation. Central to an ecoGothic work, according to Tom J. Hillard (2009), is the kind of nature "inflicted with fear, horror, loathing, or disgust" (p. 688). It is the dark side of nature that reflects what Simon C. Estok (2009) terms "ecophobia," the fear and hatred "rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and specieism, on the ethical position that humanity is outside of and exempt from the laws of nature" (pp. 14-15). The ecoGothic, in this respect, appropriately serves as a space to explore the emerging disturbing and uncertain relationship between humans and nature.

It is not surprising, then, that the depiction of the monstrous, carnivorous plant would be popular in many late nineteenth-century literary works such as the giant Venus Flytrap in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The American Tale" (1879), the Punkah tree of Nubia in Phil Robinson's "The Man-Eating Tree" (1881) and the wondrous, South American tree in Frank Aubrey's *The Devil Tree of El Dorado* (1896). Exotic man-eating trees in many colonial hunting narratives are regarded by Cheryl Blake Price (2013) as doubles for the English whose exploration of newfound lands involved "mindless imperial consumption" of natural resources and environmental destruction (p. 314). Likewise, Elly McCausland (2021) argues that foreign plant species serve to "perform[…] a form of reverse colonization" upon English protagonists in many short stories (p. 483). Daisy Reid (2025) reinforces the same notion, suggesting that these monstrous plants were often exoticized and endowed with feminine seductiveness to illustrate Oriental excess that resonated with what Edward Said sees as the Western "distorted construction of the East" (p. 556). T. S. Miller's study (2012) of the proliferation of freakish trees and vegetation in early pulp magazines attests to the persistent evolutionary fears well into the twentieth century.

Another group of fiction, on the other hand, focuses on nature's vitality without resorting to its monstrosity and evil. What these works present corresponds with Dawn Keetley's (2016) notion of plants' "absolute alterity" (p. 6) or the otherness of nature. The idea of nature having its own agency or autonomy independent of human intervention is most notably exemplified by the fictional works of Algernon Blackwood. Blackwood's celebrated novella, *The Willows* (1907), according to David Punter (2013) and Greg Conley (2013), ushers the characters, who are on a canoe journey along the Danube, into an isolated, new entity filled with willows where signs such as the weird sound and

the conical prints on the ground and the dead body seek to operate and communicate beyond human comprehension. While the awareness of this other entity and strain of evolution can disorient human beings, Conley (2013) asserts that "trees are unlikely to want to end life" but, instead, "they wish to draw life to themselves" (p. 435). This concept is evident in Blackwood's well-known short story, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912), which is centered on Mr. Bittacy, a retiree who believes in nature's sentience, seeks communion with trees in the forest, gradually alienates himself from human society and eventually loses himself in the wilds. Unlike Blackwood, Walter de la Mare did not manifest any deep interest in the world of nature and his writings are more diverse encompassing poetry, children's literature and supernatural fiction. One of his poems, "All That's Past" (1914), however, is remarkable in its contrast between the everlasting cycle of nature and the short-lived existence of human life. The ending of the poem tells how humans "wake and whisper awhile" but as "the day gone by,/ Silence and sleep like fields/ Of amaranth lie" (de la Mare, 1914/1920, lines 21-24) Whereas humans become part of nature in death, de la Mare's reference to the grandeur and permanence of nature through "fields of amaranth" is worth noting since amaranth includes weed species that are invasive and enduring as they can grow and spread rapidly and also survive in various tough conditions. Weeds and the eternal cycle of nature are also crucially presented at the end of de la Mare's short story "The Tree," which will be discussed in the last part of this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the otherness of plants in post-Darwinian Gothic fiction that describes the increasingly precarious relationship between humans and nature. It will explicate the image of nature as sentient and autonomous in Blackwood's lesser- nown work, "The Transfer," and de la Mare's "The Tree." Following Neil Evernden's notion of inter-relatedness and Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, it will show how the two short stories engage with the materiality of the human body and nature so as to demonstrate how humans can be subject to or even "enmeshed with" other lives (Keetley, 2021, p. 25). While these narratives are set in the regulated and confined space of the garden, Blackwood's and de la Mare's gardens prove Gothic and unconventional since they are also places of wilderness invaded by weeds and beyond human control.

Theoretical and Contextual Frameworks

The botanical studies of Darwin paved the way for modern ecocritical research that reconceptualizes the roles and significance of nature. Trees, in particular, are no longer assumed to be static and controllable, for they are believed to have agency and the power to impact other lives and the environment in a way that makes them integral to our ecological systems. On the one hand, plants are independent—they are "autotrophs" or "self-feeders" because they

make their own food through photosynthesis (Tudge, 2005, p. 253). On the other hand, plants are social beings since they tend to cooperate among themselves and interact with other creatures that share their environment (Tudge, 2005, p. 319). Science writers today (Wohlleben, 2017; Gagliano et al., 2017) refer to the "language of trees" or the modes trees employ to communicate with other trees and animals such as producing strong scent through the leaves or sending chemical signals via the roots to protect themselves against danger (Wohlleben, 2017, pp. 7-10). Researches in the late twentieth century[1], headed by Dr. Suzanne Simard and her team, have also found that those chemical signals can be sent from the root tips of one tree, with the help of the fungi underground, to those of others—the fungi network, in Wohlleben's (2017) words, "operate[s] like fiber-optic Internet cables" (p. 10). In this sense, trees of the same or even different species, while seemingly standing immobile and apart from one another, can exchange resources and "information" through the community that Simard (as cited in Wohlleben, 2017, p. 11) calls the "wood wide web".

When discussing humans' relations to nature today, scholars in environmental studies have strongly emphasized the idea of interconnectedness. Neil Evernden (1996), for instance, proposes that the "basic premise" of ecology is founded upon "inter-relatedness" or "a genuine intermingling of parts of the ecosystem" (p. 93). For Evernden (1996), man is not a discrete entity and cannot exist out of his context (p. 95). Every individual organism, in other words, is attached to its environment and more or less develops a sense of "territoriality" or "a strong affinity to a particular place" (Evernden, 1996, p. 97). To elaborate, Evernden refers to the small fish called cichlid which is always ready to attack a much larger species whenever the latter intrudes into its periphery. The self, in this respect, is closely related to its setting: the fish "is no longer an organism bounded by skin—it is an organism-plus-environment" (Evernden, 1996, p. 97). Likewise, the humans' place is that of "the individual-in-environment" (Evernden, 1996, p. 97) as we are an element of, and defined by, our surroundings. To "counteract the prevailing attitude favoring only the consumption of landscape as a commodity," (Evernden, 1996, p. 102) Evernden (1996) advocates the value of connectivity and the needs for humans to develop a "sense of place," a feeling of "knowing and being a part of a particular place" (p. 100).

The idea of inter-relatedness is taken further, and more literally, by Stacy Alaimo. Similar to Evernden, Alaimo (2008) states that the human body is not an absolute entity and is "in constant interchange" with its surroundings (p. 255). She

[1] Examples are Simard, S. W., Perry, D. A., Jones, M. D., Myrold, D. D., Durall, D. M. & Molina, R. (1997). Net transfer of carbon between tree species with shared ecto-mycorrhizal fungi. *Nature, 388*, 579-582.; Perry, D. A. (1998). A moveable feast: The evolution of resource sharing in plant-fungus communities. *Trends in ecology & evolution, 13*, 432-434.; Wilkinson, D. M. (1998). The evolutionary ecology of mycorrhizal networks. *Oikos, 82*, 407-410. (see Wohlleben, 2017, p. 253)

calls this concept "trans-corporeality," the "time-space where human corporeality…is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'" (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). The most obvious example is the food, made from plants or animals, that we eat and which becomes part of our body—if the food contains toxins, our health and well-being will unavoidably be infected (Alaimo, 2010, pp. 12-18). Nature, as Alaimo (2008) puts it, is "as close as one own skin" (p. 238), referring to the author Ladelle McWhorter who was about to throw the crumbs of Doritos into her composting trench next to the tomato garden but stopped herself from doing so as she realized that bad substances from the junk food could actually go back into her body once she ate her tomatoes (Alaimo, 2008, p. 254). For Alaimo (2008), the word "trans" in "trans-corporeality" indicates "movement across different sites" (p. 238) or "material interchanges between bodies and the wider environment" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 16). Thinking in terms of trans-corporeality, therefore, helps redefine the natural environment as "a world of fleshy beings, with their own needs, claims, and actions" (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238).

While Blackwood and de la Mare might not specifically aim to raise environmental awareness and concern in "The Transfer" and "The Tree," both short stories evidently portray natural components as having their own agency and being inter-related. Central to these narratives are representations of weeds that persist in the gardens, reminding the readers in the end that humans are merely a tiny element in the wider sphere of ecosystems. Blackwood's and de la Mare's use of weeds is significant and worth exploring because weeds are rarely viewed by humans in a favorable light. Indeed, the tenacious and invasive nature of weeds has long been associated with evil, disruptive forces. As described in the Parable of the Tares, weeds or tares are a metaphor for children of the devil who live among the good seeds, the children of God, but they can be easily distinguished at harvest time and are finally burned and got rid of from the earth. (*King James Bible*, 1769/2025, Mat. 13: 24-43). The often quoted lines from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623) also compare the morally corrupted world to the image of an untended garden full of "[t]hings rank and gross in nature" (Shakespeare, 1623/1997, 1.2.136). Even in Andrew Marvell's famous poem, "To His Coy Mistress" (1681), the speaker's "vegetable love" can be read as a species of weeds that, though harmless, threateningly proliferates and expands as it can "grow/ vaster than empires and more slow" (Marvell, 1681/1994, lines 11-12).

Weeds are generally defined as the undesirable and lowest kind of plants. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a weed is an "herbaceous plant not valued for use or beauty, growing wild and rank, and regarded as cumbering the ground or hindering the growth of superior vegetation" (as cited in Zimdahl, 2013, p. 18). This meaning, for Robert Zimdahl, is unjustly given by humans who consider weeds harmful to their crops. From the ecological perspective, agriculture is in fact the most important factor that disrupts and modifies the natural world (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 7). Weeds, on the other hand, belong to the

dynamic ecosystem which evolves simultaneously with human intervention with indigenous, natural habitats (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 20). They are best known as the types of plant that have the ability to adapt to and survive well in various climatic conditions and poor environments (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 20). They act, as Zimdahl (2013) puts it, as "a kind of ecological Red Cross," seeking to repair the land disturbed by humans (p. 21). In terms of competition, weeds are vigorous contestants for nutrients, sunlight and water as well as "possession of the soil" (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 19). For months or years their seeds can live underground in "dormancy" and they germinate when the surrounding conditions are most suitable for their growth (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 22). When lands are taken possession by weeds for a long period of time, they have a tendency to reach the stage of a "climax community" where plants can grow naturally and steadily in the climate and soil conditions that best suit them (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 7).

In the context of inter-relatedness and trans-corporeality, weeds are a prime example that shows the striving for harmony and union with other natural components in their surroundings. From the beginning, weed seeds do not normally fall from their plants. They tend to be carried and dispersed by wind, water and animals such as cattle, horses and birds that eat weed seeds, many of which are still viable even after passing through the animals' digestive tract (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 90). The sticky and burr-like structure of the seeds also enables them to be easily attached to other matter as means of transport (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 82). Once they germinate in the soil, weeds' roots can penetrate deep and their rhizomes are able to develop quickly covering a large area underground (Zimdahl, 2013, p. 23). An effective skill for their survival is to produce the seed size, shape and color to be similar to those of the crops among which they live—a technique of mimicry (Zimdahl, 2013, pp. 92-93) that makes it difficult to distinguish between weeds and crops and when the use of herbicide can be troublesome. Some weed species, moreover, are parasites with roots or stems that branch out, twine or wrap around the host plant to extract its nutrients and water, hence a material interchange and bodily merging that can be seen as trans-corporeality. Representations of weeds that involve the above-mentioned aspects can be found in Blackwood's "The Transfer" and de la Mare's "The Tree."

Discussion

"The Transfer"

> Some men grow away from places, others grow into them.
>
> ---Algernon Blackwood, "The Temptation of Clay," *Pan's Garden*

The first sentence of Blackwood's "The Temptation of Clay" sets forth the notion of being "at one" with nature. As the story progresses, Mánya, who has come to live with her uncle in his small cottage near the forest, finds herself, like Mr. Bittacy in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," gradually assimilated into the

natural environment. In "The Transfer," published in the same short story collection as "The Temptation of Clay" and "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," Blackwood also creates a character who grows into a place, being "at one" with nature but in a more literal and appalling manner. To put it another way, it is nature that reaches out and draws other lives to it.

The story of "The Transfer" concerns Mr. Frene and his family, who live happily in a small country house. Their garden is a spacious one but it contains a small, dry, "ugly patch where nothing grew" called "the Forbidden Corner" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 345). Only Jamie, Mr. Frene's seven-year-old son, and Miss Gould, the governess and the narrator of the story, know that the patch is alive and hungers for food. When Uncle Frank visits the family, he accidentally falls on to the patch and all his energy seems to be drained away, leaving the man to become completely inert while the patch turns green and abundant with weeds.

Blackwood's description from the beginning leads the reader to be aware of certain peculiarities surrounding the ugly patch in Mr. Frene's garden. On the one hand, the practice of gardening is commonly believed to give a sense of order to what would be wild nature. The biblical metaphor of Eden has already suggested that the garden is "what God first created order out of chaos" (Marcus, 1995, p. 26). The Hebrew origin of the word garden is the letters "G N N" which shares the same root with the verb "to defend," connoting that the garden is a safe space that shelters one from the busy world as well as the danger of wild nature outside (Stein, 1995, p. 38). Blackwood's garden, on the other hand, is not an altogether orderly and conventional one. As the title of the collection suggests, it is the garden of the Greek god Pan who is associated with bestial desires and wild nature. At the far end of Mr. Frene's garden, in contrast to the greenery of lime trees and the "huge clumps of guelder roses" in the lawn (Blackwood, 1912, p. 345), lies the Forbidden Corner. As Miss Gould describes, it is "a bald, sore place, where the black earth showed uglily in winter, almost like a piece of dangerous bog, and in summer baked and cracked with fissures where green lizards shot their fire in passing" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 346). Without explaining what harm can be done by the ugly patch, Miss Gould makes certain that it is not merely an unsightly spot but also a place of danger, as she can feel "a faintness as of death" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 345) whenever Jamie is down by the patch and Mr. Frene himself usually calls his son in if the child happens to be around the Forbidden Corner.

The inclusion of a dry patch was in fact not uncommon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. William Robinson's publication of *The Wild Garden* in 1870 set a trend in English gardening to embrace features such as ditches, bogs and heath to imitate nature's wilderness and re-evaluate wasteland as part of the garden's aesthetic (Helmreich, 2002, pp. 42-44). In his work, Robinson referred to Francis Bacon's essay, "Of Gardens" (1625), which is somehow echoed in the structure of Mr. Frene's garden, as Bacon proposed that

an ideal garden should have "a green in the entrance; a heath or desert in the going forth; and the main garden in the midst" (as cited in Helmreich, 2002, p. 46). This heath, as Bacon asserted, is indispensable and it "should be framed, as much as may be, to a natural wildness" (as cited in Helmreich, 2002, p. 46). Robinson, however, did not intend his wild garden to be left unrestrained and chaotic. Every component in its space must be carefully calculated to yield the best visual and mental effects to a spectator (Helmreich, 2002, p. 46). The "dying, empty patch" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 348) in Blackwood's story is beyond Mr. Frene's control. Its hideousness is the first sign of nature's resistance, the first articulation from a nonhuman entity.

Located at the margin of the garden, the ugly patch, as Christopher Scott (2020) suggests, represents "spatial liminality," functioning as a "threshold" between two binary opposites of life and death, or abundance and barrenness (Scott, 2020, p. 70). Like Mr. Bittacy's garden in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," Mr. Frene's garden adjoins "the thick wood of silver birches" at the back (Blackwood, 1912, p. 346). The forest, according to Ruth Heholt (2020), embodies the threat of wilderness that could turn the garden adjacent to it into a space of "unease and dislocation" (p. 94). The "thick wood of silver birches" may represent the persistence of primitive, natural forces, but in "The Transfer" Blackwood makes it clear that the locus of unease is specifically the ugly patch while the rest of the garden comprises "wonderful flowers, which were Mr. Frene's delight" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 345). Mr. Frene even tries to improve the spot by asking for help from gardeners, all of whom agree that the case is rather hopeless since "the water all drained off it owing to the lie of the slopes immediately about" the patch (Blackwood, 1912, p. 346).

Blackwood's description of the ugly patch provides images of nature with its own agency and subjectivity. In contrast to the trees and the flowers, the patch, despite its barrenness, is the space that seems to be most alive in the garden. Jamie is the person most attached to the spot. He frequently goes there, "heard it crying in an earthy voice, swore that it shook its surface sometimes while he watched it, and secretly gave it food in the form of birds or mice or rabbits he found dead upon his wanderings" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 347). From the beginning, he complains to Miss Gould that the patch is "not fed" and it is "dying because it can't get the food it wants" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 347). At least two characters, Miss Gould and Jamie, can sense something distinctive about the ugly patch. While Jamie discerns its craving and feeds it, Miss Gould strongly feels that "there was something missing in that dying patch of garden; something lacking it ever searched for" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 348). Jamie is described as "a high-strung, ultra-sensitive child" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 344) and Miss Gould is regarded by her sister as "much too sensitive to make a good governess" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 343). Both possess a certain sensitivity that enables them to penetrate and understand nature's peculiarities; as Miss Gould tells Jamie that

"nothing in Nature is bad…only different from the rest sometimes" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 347). They are fully aware of their environment but have never really professed any emotional bond apart from dread and fear.

Life in the ugly patch, the dormant weeds, on the other hand, is the one that overpowers or is in charge of the garden space. Like weeds with rhizomes that expand underground, the patch has the ability to feel and distinguish what comes into its territory, though in a rather predatory fashion. Miss Gould remarks that while staying static, the dry earth can "scent […] her prey" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 352) and "stretch […] out a feeler, as it were, from its vast, potential strength" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 354). This image of the feeler corresponds with what Eva Hayward (2010) terms "fingereyes," the fingery, tentacular organs that many creatures use to engender sensory perceptions during their encounter with other species (p. 580). These corporeal and sensorial capacities of organisms are referred to by Hayward as "tentacularity" (Hayward, 2010, p. 593), a concept which is developed further by Donna Haraway (2016) to include "matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots, reaching and climbing tendrilled ones" (p. 32)—plants' body parts that also attest to their attempt to connect to other species. In this context of tentacularity and inter-relatedness, the dormant weeds can be seen to stretch out in search of other lives to help them survive and grow.

Uncle Frank's visit is significant, not only to the plot but also the ecological well-being of the Frenes' garden. Miss Gould believes that "this person who out of his abundant life could supply the lack" in the patch (Blackwood, 1912, p. 348). Uncle Frank is indeed an extraordinary figure who, according to Miss Gould, "grew vital in a crowd—because he used their vitality" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 349). He is "a great human sponge, crammed and soaked with the life, or proceeds of life, absorbed from others" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 350). To her, he is "a human vampire" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 350) who feeds on others, causing the weak ones to "shrink from his too near approach and hide away" for fear of an effect that amounts to death (Blackwood, 1912, p. 350). His habit of drawing from other people makes Miss Gould conjecture that "his 'life' was not really his own" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 350) since its liveliness comes from others and therefore could be transferred to others as well.

As Miss Gould remarks, Uncle Frank's visit brings together "two active 'centres'" or "emissaries of the two kingdoms, the human and the vegetable" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 353). Between these two forces, she is confident that nature is "a huge… 'attraction' engine" that will win over a human being, "a fly" that happens to come into its contact (Blackwood, 1912, p. 350). All this proves true when Uncle Frank is on the lawn and out of curiosity suddenly rushes over to inspect the weird, ugly patch. Miss Gould notices the change in his physical attributes as his face and body grow "wider, spread through the air, and downwards" like "those toys of green India-rubber that children pull"

(Blackwood, 1912, pp. 355-356). There, in the patch, Uncle Frank falls upon his face. His voice becomes thin and his eyes fade. The whole expression tells Miss Gould that he is "utterly destroyed" (Blackwood, 1912, p.356). A moment later, she catches a sound "like a gulp" and "a pungent smell of earth" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 356). The patch seems to undergo the process of digestion, just like a plant's roots that absorb nutrients from degraded organic material. The trans-corporeality is evident, as Uncle Frank becomes a part of, and inseparable from, the earth. a

In contrast to Uncle Frank, the ugly patch undergoes a positive and marvelous change. Without any help from the gardeners, it is "full of great luscious, driving weeds and creepers, very strong, full-fed, and bursting thick with life" (Blackwood, 1912, p. 357). Having received necessary and substantial nutrients, the dormant weeds in the patch can germinate and flourish. The trans-corporeality is completed with a movement across bodies, as Uncle Frank's vitality has passed to the patch and contributed to the growth of the weeds there. While all seems to end well, Blackwood's story still begs the question of a true harmonious relationship and interconnectedness between humans and nature. From the perspective of nature, specifically the patch, a sense of restoration and wholeness is eventually established in the garden. For the Frene family, particularly Uncle Frank, the garden seems to remain a threatening and mysterious space beyond human control and comprehension.

"The Tree"

The role of weeds in de la Mare's short story is more extensive than that in Blackwood's "The Transfer" since de la Mare includes both literal and metaphorical representations of weeds. Whereas Blackwood focuses on dormant weeds in the patch, de la Mare introduces parasitic weeds in his garden which points to the eternal cycle of nature that outlasts human life. De la Mare's depiction of inter-relatedness between humans and nature is also more reciprocal, at least in the eyes of one character in the story. However, the complexity of de la Mare's narrative makes most detail of his weeds and nature weird since it is related mainly from the limited perspective of the anthropocentric, utilitarian and money-oriented narrator who envisions the kind of weedy and unprofitable garden as a space of fear and hatred, hence an ecoGothic garden.

The narrative revolves around two completely opposite characters: the fruit merchant (the narrator) and his half-brother. The fruit merchant lives in the city. He is "the principal consignee" of cargoes of fruits delivered across the sea from all over the world comprising "exotic oranges and lemons, pineapples, boxed figs, and blushing pomegranates" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 149). In the nineteenth century, trade in fruit prospered along with the increasing number of orchards and the development of the railway network that enabled agricultural produce, including exotic species, to be transported, bought and sold throughout

the country (Burton, 2021, p.58). The fruit merchant's commercial profession allows him to be familiar with different kinds of trees and even boast that he can distinguish "a Jaffa orange from a mandarin" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). In this way, he displays a utilitarian attitude towards nature, advising his half-brother that he should earn a good living by "grow[ing]" something and he is "broad-minded enough to approve of rural enterprise" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). He lent an amount of money to his half-brother 12 years before and in the story he is travelling to see the latter for the second time.

The half-brother is a poor artist who lives in a small cottage in the remote countryside, hardly making ends meet by selling his drawings and woodcuts. The reason for the fruit merchant's second visit, however, is to congratulate his half-brother on his woodcut "Bird and Flower" that "had brought at Christie's ninety-seven guineas" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 150). On his way to the cottage, the fruit merchant reminisces about his last visit during summer. He remembers the garden, which was totally uncommon, with "the hedges untrimmed, a rank, lusty growth of weeds flaunted their flowers at the sun" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). It was an unruly garden where nothing was attractive except a curious tree—"a prodigious, spreading, ascendant cone, with its long, dark, green, pointed leaves. It stood, from first springing branch to apex, a motionless, somnolent fountain of flowers" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). The half-brother did not know the name of the tree and he seemed to have grown it from the seeds he got from some faraway country. Indeed, the tree looked spectacular and exotic as "it bore two distinct kinds and shapes of blossom": "[t]he one circular and full and milky in a dark cup-like calyx, with clusters of scarlet-tipped pistils; the other a pale-yellow oval, three-petalled, with a central splash of orange" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 156). The peculiar thing that the half-brother was most proud of was the change that the tree had brought to the garden's environment. It ushered to the realm bizarre green birds with "long and attenuated bills" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 157), "exotic butterflies," "spotted-blue, iridescent" beetles, strange kinds of cockchafer and "dappled black-and-yellow-mottled ladybird[s]" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 158). In short, the tree, though growing up alone in a foreign landscape, managed not only to survive but also to give rise to an ecologically rich and luxuriant natural atmosphere.

Throughout the narrative, the fruit merchant continually reveals his condescending attitude towards his half-brother and the garden. As a businessman, he disdains his half-brother's artistic inclination as pointless, calling him names from his initials P. P. as "[p]erfect pest, palsy poser, plaguy parasite!" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 150). The language used reflects his agricultural and mercantile mindset as he grades nature into categories of the useful and the useless, marginalizing his half-brother for his poverty and dependence on him for money as a pest, a parasite, no different from a kind of unwanted weed in one's garden. From the moment the fruit merchant arrives at the desolate countryside in

winter, he imagines that he "might as well be marooned in a foreign land…sterile, cold, vacant" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 153). This sense of estrangement is described in full when he relates his first impression of his half-brother's garden in the past. Built without order or any purpose for utility, the garden was to him "a waste" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). The tree, which seemed as if "sprung up out of the ground by sheer magic" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 156), was most of all, a "gaunt, prodigious weed" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 163) and an "eyesore to any practical gardener" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 155). If his half-brother had planted "potatoes and artichokes and scarlet runners," the garden would have looked much different but it was then "like a damn' waste of soil" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 158). Although naturalization of foreign plant species was a popular mode of gardening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was usually conducted under the scheme of cultivation and not on an individual tree. From an imperialist perspective, the preternatural tree evoked the fruit merchant's hatred and fear. He admits "the creeping realization" that he used to be "afraid of the tree" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 151) and refers to its "pungent sweetness that hung dense and sickly in the air" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 156) as if the tree would bring pollution or corrupt influence to its surroundings.

The tree's alienness, its being foreign and unfamiliar, serves to symbolize the half-brother's otherness as he chooses to live the life of a lone artist, away from society and the business world. While background about the half-brother is not provided, he told the fruit merchant that he had been "looking at trees" all his life and the eponymous tree struck him as uniquely different from others (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 156). He refused the fruit merchant's offer of a job, affirming that "he would hang himself from the topmost branches of the tree" rather than "sit on a stool in a counting-house writing invoices for crates of oranges and pineapples" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 160). Claiming that he had found his place in that rural cottage, he is resolute that he will stay and die there and would not mind if his neighbours "just dug a hole in the garden and shoveled his body in under the grass within reach of the rootlets" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 160). His vision is that of trans-corporeality, since he sees all organic lives as connected to one another and human beings, and their bodies, are merely a part of the larger natural world. Ironically, when the fruit merchant visits him for the second time, he finds his half-brother finally making a living by turning to make use of the only tree he has—making woodcuts from the bark of the tree and so causing it to wither and die. The half-brother probably thinks that all lives are similar and can be transferred from one to another. When the fruit merchant enters the cottage, he is stunned by "a litter of" art works, "everywhere, lovely and marvelous in all its guises, the tree" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 168). To the fruit merchant, they are works of "unearthly beauty" (p. 171) and it seems that all the vitality of the tree has been transmitted to the drawings and woodcuts. The "half-starved" brother, on the other hand, looks shockingly like "a scarecrow" as he sits at the table

"burning swiftly away" among his art objects (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 169). His "cadaverous visage" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 168) exhibits still, "speck-pupiled, greenish-grey eyes" within which the fruit merchant can only see "a tree" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 170). The horror of the scene lies in the insinuation that the human qualities seem to be taken away from his half-brother and he becomes instead like a dead tree, an uncanny transformation that dissolves the boundaries between human and nonhuman nature.

In addition to his half-brother, the cottage and the garden, upon the fruit merchant's second visit, have inexorably become "one" with nature. The place altogether represents the kind of gruesomeness that haunts the fruit merchant for the rest of his life. The house—"a small, tumbledown, lightless, huddling cottage" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 162)—looks deserted, "abject and disconsolate" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 166) without animation of the birds and insects that used to be around. The whole garden is left untended and full of weeds. The fruit merchant compares the "cheerless" surroundings overall to "the plains of Gomorrah" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 164), the city destroyed by God for its sinfulness, making him feel like "the human intruder in this inhuman wilderness" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 166). His fear and hatred of the natural environment here rest on a type of nature that is disorderly and beyond human control. The most ghastly element of the garden is the dead tree that shows its "lean, shrunken twigs" and its "massive vegetable bones" that remind him of "no less a depravity than the devil himself" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 164). His contempt towards the tree leads him to consider its destruction as "the act of God" or the divine punishment for its idle and gaudy uselessness (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 164).

The appearance of the dead tree is particularly terrifying as the fruit merchant notices a "shape hoisted midway among the boughs," which evokes his half-brother's earlier intention to hang himself from the branches, and realizes that it is only a "derelict parasite—withered mistletoe" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 164). In place of the tree bark that is cut away, he also discovers "a clear blank ring of darker colour, knobbed over, in and out, with tiny gaudy clusters of fungi" (de la Mare, 1922/2020, p. 165). De la Mare's last images of weeds, represented by the mistletoe and fungi upon the tree, intensify the fruit merchant's disapproval of his half-brother and the garden as worthless and unproductive. The horror caused by the plant even deceives him to perceive his half-brother and the tree as the same thing. In ecological context, the pervasion of weeds like mistletoe and fungi shows that the natural environment in the garden has entered a new phase of reparation. As a parasitic weed, mistletoe usually forms itself as a tangle of brown, yellowish or greenish stems and takes over a dead tree by living on the tree's branches, extracting the remaining nutrients and water. It is the new life that emerges to replace the half-brother's tree in the garden. The fungi on the trunk, on the other hand, help decompose the dead tree so that the nutrients that have been stored in it will return to the soil for the use of other living organisms. The rings

or clusters of fungi that the fruit merchant sees are probably bracket or shelf fungus that feeds on the wood cellulose—the dead wood itself, as Wohlleben (2017) observes, functions as "a nutrient recycler" necessary for the livelihood of a particular natural space (pp. 133-134). While the fruit merchant thinks that this dismal sight is the culmination of the "vile" (Wohlleben, 2017, p. 165) and useless life of the tree, the invasion of parasitic weeds reveals a tentacular effort of nature to engender a corporeal unity and to connect one life to another. The changing ecosystem in the garden may imply that a new kind of organic community has only just begun.

Conclusion

Among Gothic fictions that engage with relations between humans and nature, Blackwood's "The Transfer" and de la Mare's "The Tree" are notable for representing the interactions in which humans are not the ones who manipulate or destroy nature and nature does not assume the role of a monster that seeks to take revenge on humans for their ruthless consumption. Relying on the concepts of inter-relatedness and trans-corporeality, this paper's analyses of Blackwood's and de la Mare's short stories call attention to the human-nature connection that is subtler than the separate binary opposites of the exploiter and the exploited. Under humans' spatial management of nature, the existence of the ugly patch in the garden in "The Transfer" offers a dimension of nature that is not subject to human dominance. The patch's vitality and ability to draw "life" from Uncle Frank prove that humans are rather of use to the environment as a whole. In de la Mare's "The Tree," the account of plant horror derives from the capitalist and anthropocentric point of view of the fruit merchant who rejects, and thus alienates, weeds and the useless, exotic tree along with the unprofitable artistry of his half-brother. While human existence depends on the conditions of life and death, weeds in the two short stories illustrate nature's tendency to redress, restore and renew its life. Through their sentient roots, crawling creepers, dangling stems and protruding clusters, weeds represent nature's attempt to reach out and connect to other lives to incorporate and accumulate a wealth of organisms that make up the wider biosphere.

References

Alaimo, S. (2001). Discomforting creatures: Monstrous natures in recent films. In K. Armbruster & K. Wallace (Eds.), *Beyond nature writing* (pp. 279-296). University of Virginia Press.

Alaimo, S. (2008). Trans-corporeal feminisms and the ethical space of nature. In S. Alaimo & S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material feminisms* (pp. 237-264). Indiana University Press.

Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily natures: Science, environment, and the material self*. Indiana University Press.

Blackwood, A. (1912). The Transfer. In *Pan's garden: A volume of nature stories* (pp. 343-362). Macmillan.

Burton, A. (2021). *Trees in nineteenth-century English fiction: The silvicultural novel*. Routledge.

Conley, G. (2013). The uncrossable evolutionary gulfs of Algernon Blackwood. *Journal of the fantastic in the arts, 24*(3), 426-445.

Darwin, C. (2002a). *The movements and habits of climbing plants.* The complete work of Charles Darwin online. https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?pageseq=1&itemID=F836&viewtype=text (Original work published 1875)

Darwin, C. (2002b). *The power of movement in plants.* The complete work of Charles Darwin online. https://darwin-online.org.uk/EditorialIntroductions/Freeman_ThePowerofMovementinPlants.html (Original work published 1880)

Darwin, C. (2003). *On the origin of species*. Signet Classics. (Original work published 1859)

de la Mare, W. (1920). All that's past. In *Collected poems, 1901-1918* (Vol. 1., p. 128). H. Holt and Company. (Original work published 1914)

de la Mare, W. (2020). The tree. In J. Miller (Ed.), *Weird woods: Tales from the haunted forests of Britain* (pp. 147-171). The British Library. (Original work published 1922)

Del Principe, D. (2014). Introduction: The ecoGothic in the long nineteenth century. *Gothic studies, 16*(1), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.16.1.1

Elliott, P., Watkins, C., & Daniels, S. (2016). *The British arboretum: Trees, science and culture in the nineteenth century*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Estok, S. C. (2009). Theorizing in a space of ambivalent openness: Ecocriticism and ecophobia. *Interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment, 16*(2), 203-225.

Evernden, N. (1996). Beyond ecology: Self, place and the pathetic fallacy. In C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology* (pp. 92-104). University of Georgia Press.

Gagliano, M., Ryan, J. C., & Vieira, P. (Eds.). (2017). *The language of plants: Science, philosophy and literature*. University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene.* Duke University Press.

Hayward, E. (2010). Fingereyes: Impressions of cup corals. *Cultural anthropology. 25*(4), 577-599.

Heholt, R. (2020). "That which roars further out": Gardens and wilderness in "The man who went too far" by E. F. Benson and "The man whom the trees loved" by Algernon Blackwood. In S. Edney (Ed.), *EcoGothic gardens in the long nineteenth century: Phantoms, fantasy and uncanny flowers* (pp. 82-98). Manchester University Press.

Helmreich, A. (2002). *The English garden and national identity: The competing styles of garden design, 1870-1914*. Cambridge University Press.

Hillard, T. J. (2009). 'Deep into that darkness peering': An essay on gothic nature. *Interdisciplinary studies in literature and environment*. *16*(4), 685-695.

Keetley, D. (2016). Introduction: Six theses on plant horror; or, why are plants horrifying? In D. Keetley & A. Tenga (Eds.), *Plant horror: Approaches to the monstrous vegetal in fiction and film* (pp. 1-30). Palgrave Macmillan.

Keetley, D. (2021). Tentacular ecohorror and the agency of trees in Algernon Blackwood's "The man whom the trees loved" and Lorcan Finnegan's *Without Name*. In C. Tidwell & C. Soles (Eds.), *Fear and nature: Ecohorror studies in the anthropocene* (pp. 23-41). Penn State University Press.

King James Bible. (2025). King James Bible Online. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/ (Original work published 1769)

Marcus, C. C. (1995). The garden as metaphor. In M. Francis & R. T. Hester, Jr. (Eds.), *The meaning of gardens: Idea, place, and action* (pp. 26-33). The MIT Press.

Marvell, A. (1994). To his coy mistress. In R. DiYanni (Ed.), *Literature: Reading fiction, poetry, drama, and the essay* (3rd ed., pp. 558-559). McGraw-Hill. (Original work published 1681)

McCausland, E. (2021). From the plant of life to the threat of death: Freakish flora and masculine form in fin de siècle lost world novels. *Victorian literature and culture, 49*(3), 481-509.

Miller, T. S. (2012). Lives of the monster plants: The revenge of the vegetable in the age of animal studies. *Journal of the fantastic in the arts*, *23*(3), 460-479.

Parker, E. (2020) *The forest and the ecogothic: The deep dark woods in the popular imagination*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Poland, M. (2017). Walking with the goat-god: Gothic ecology in Algernon Blackwood's Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories. *Critical survey*, *29*(1), 53-69.

Price, C. B. (2013). Vegetable monsters: Man-eating trees in fin-de-siècle fiction. *Victorian literature and culture*, *41*, 311-327.

Punter, D. (2013). Algernon Blackwood: Nature and spirit. In A. Smith & W. Hughes (Eds.), *Ecogothic* (pp. 44-57). Manchester University Press.

Reid, D. (2025). Carnivorous plants and man-eating women: Vegetal (new) womanhood and the botanical gothic. *Victorian literature and culture*, *52*(3), 535-561.

Scott, C. (2020). Gothic Eden: Gardens, religious tradition and ecoGothic exegesis in Algernon Blackwood's "The lost valley" and "The transfer." In S. Edney (Ed.), *EcoGothic gardens in the long nineteenth century: Phantoms, fantasy and uncanny flowers* (pp. 65-81). Manchester University Press.

Shakespeare, W. (1997). Hamlet. In S. Greenblatt (Ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (pp. 1659-1760). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1623)

Stein, A. B. (1995). Thoughts occasioned by the Old Testament. In M. Francis & R. T. Hester, Jr. (Eds.), *The meaning of gardens: Idea, place, and action* (pp. 38-45). The MIT Press.

Tudge, C. (2005). *The secret life of trees: How they live and why they matter*. Penguin Books.

Wohlleben, P. (2017). *The hidden life of trees* (J. Billinghurst, Trans.). William Collins.

Zimdahl, R. (2013). *Fundamentals of weed science*. Elsevier.