

[London: Constable, 1938]). “Realism and Sensation Fiction” by Daniel Brown, for example, makes the case that the differences between the two genres can be “difficult to discern,” but notes that, while the subject matter may be the same (crime, infidelity, murder), the approach distinguishes the genres. The latter move, of course, structurally reasserts the binarism he earlier critiqued. Daniel Brown, “Realism and Sensation Fiction,” in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, 105.

3. Richard Nemesvari, *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
4. Emily Steinlight, “Why Novels Are Redundant: Sensation Fiction and the Overpopulation of Literature,” *ELH* 79, no. 2 (2012): 501–35, 504. She cleverly reads against the frame of W. R. Greg’s notion of redundancy and argues that “criticism itself relies on the conception of an overcrowded literary field in need of regulation.” See also Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).
5. Patrick Brantlinger, “What Is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel’?” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 1 (1982): 1–28, 2.
6. Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Thomas Nomination; Most in National Survey Say Judge Is the More Believable,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 1991.



## Sentience

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IN 1789, Jeremy Bentham entered a longstanding debate about sentience (the ability to perceive something physical like warmth or cold) by asserting that animals have rights because they can feel pain: “The question is not Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?”<sup>1</sup> Sentience refers to a baseline form of perception, less complex than cognition or consciousness. It implies the presence of senses, but not necessarily the specialized senses of sight, hearing, smell, or taste. While scholarship has fruitfully investigated how Victorian writers

distinguish human beings from other animals, this essay focuses on images of commonality across vegetal and human tissue. My goal is not to think about what rights plants have or whether trees suffer. Instead, focusing on moments in which bodies are harmed, I look at how writers explore the mystery of how matter either *loses* or *acquires* sentience.

Debates about sentience tend to reflect one of two worldviews. The first is based on dichotomies, on sharp distinctions between individuals, between species, between life and death, and between consciousness and reflex action. The second is a more porous worldview. It imagines sentience emerging gradually, in what Erasmus Darwin calls the “first specks of animated earth,” over the course of evolution.<sup>2</sup> Thinkers like the elder Darwin view sentience as a quality that matter can either lose or acquire.

As a category of beings considered incapable of feeling, plants become a focus of debates about the evolution of sentience and gradations of feeling. Mary Kuhn writes, “We tend to think that sentience divides animal existence from plant life, but the belief in shared sensibility actually connected plants, animals and humans in [the] early nineteenth century.”<sup>3</sup> The word sentience took on new significance in Victorian debates about the gradual evolution of biological life. Initially used to refer to individual *beings*, “sentience” also became a physiological term that attributed feeling to parts of bodies, such as muscle or tissue.<sup>4</sup> Theorizing animal and plant life as continuous reflected a desire to get beyond epistemologies that focused narrowly on human knowledge.

Gerard Manley Hopkins and Thomas Hardy exploit similarities between human tissue and plant life to confuse commonplace distinctions between sensate and insensate matter. In “Binsey Poplars,” Hopkins creates defenseless, vulnerable surfaces by comparing the “growing green” wood of the tree to “a sleek and seeing ball,” a human eyeball.<sup>5</sup> He depicts human beings as ignorant, not knowing “what we do” when we cut into the bodies of trees.

O if we but knew what we do  
 When we delve or hew —  
 Hack and rack the growing green!  
 Since country is so tender  
 To touch, her being so slender,  
 That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
 But a prick will make no eye at all.<sup>6</sup>

“Tender” can mean either physically vulnerable or being sensitive to pain. The line break after “tender” highlights that ambiguity by suggesting that “country” might feel pain. The comparison between the tree and the “seeing” eyeball without its protective socket—round, exposed, and “sleek”—depicts the eye’s surface as a zone of receptivity. Hopkins’s poem breaks down the reader’s certainty that trees are not sentient. Imagining that trees might have bodies as tender and vulnerable as a human eyeball breeds confusion and discomfort.

Hardy habitually uses language we usually reserve for animal bodies for plants and trees. He has a lifelong preoccupation with the idea that trees’ wood and bark are like flesh and skin.<sup>7</sup> In *Jude the Obscure*, Jude can “scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been a positive grief to him in his infancy.”<sup>8</sup> *The Return of the Native* includes a storm scene in which “wet young beeches were undergoing amputations, bruises, crippings, and harsh lacerations, from which the wasting sap would bleed.”<sup>9</sup> Describing the “shrivelled,” “dry,” and “papery” music of the “tiny trumpets” of heathbells, Hardy asks the reader to imagine stages that their vegetal bodies have undergone over the course of six months: “They were the mummied heathbells of the past summer, originally tender and purple, now washed colourless by Michaelmas rains, and dried to dead skins by October suns.”<sup>10</sup> This naming of plants as “mummied” and “dried to dead skins” calls attention to a visual and tactile similarity across plant and animal bodies. Cut a finger and it emits blood; cut a tree trunk and it bleeds sap. Wounds first bleed and then get covered over with scars.

Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* presents the reader with several instances in which animate matter hovers between possessing and suddenly losing sentience, as when a body dies just as it is about to be born. Gabriel Oak’s dog chases pregnant ewes off a cliff and they lie “dead and dying at its foot—a heap of two hundred mangled carcasses, representing in their condition just now at least two hundred more.”<sup>11</sup> Gabriel is filled with pity for “these gentle ewes and their unborn lambs,” and later Bathsheba discovers the dead bodies of Fanny Robin and the baby that she lived just long enough to give birth to.<sup>12</sup> The peculiar status of the dead unborn lambs and Fanny’s baby is that they possess a form of potential sentience that has been prematurely canceled out.

This scene contains a moment of visual analogy between animal and plant life. Gazing at Fanny’s coffin’s contents, Bathsheba likens the dead baby’s “cheeks” and “fists” to “mushrooms”:

By the dead girl's side, enclosed by one of her arms, was the object of the search:

A curious frame of Nature's work,  
A flow'ret crushed in the bud,  
A nameless piece of Babyhood,  
neatly apparelled in its first and last outfit for earth—a miniature wrapping of white linen—with a face so delicately small in contour and substance that its cheeks and the plump backs of its little fists irresistibly reminded her, excited as she was, of the soft convexity of mushrooms on a dewy morning.<sup>13</sup>

Mushrooms are among the most fleshlike of plants, and the baby's lack of exposure to the outside air makes the fists damp, plump, and soft to the touch, like mushrooms not quite uncurled. The strangeness of the comparison—the tonal oddity of comparing a dead baby's corpse to the flesh of mushroom—works by highlighting the weird status this body has. Its body has never been fully alive and exposed to the air. As Ivan Kreilkamp has shown, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is unusual in its preoccupation with animate matter that refuses to stay within ordinary boundaries.<sup>14</sup> This is most vivid in these scenes of dead mothers and baby bodies almost born and yet already dead. The ewes and their lambs have not yet been individuated into separate beings. In a grotesque form of being born—being exposed to the world when their mother's bodies are burst open—the dying lambs hover on the verge of sentience and a lack of sentience. Hardy's confusion between flowers, mushrooms, and dead bodies highlights that mysterious status between being and nonbeing. And indeed, writers often explore the porous model of sentience by attending to acts of injury, destruction, or moments of transition from nonlife to life, or from life to death.

#### NOTES

1. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: T. Payne, 1789), 309 (emphasis original).
2. Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature* (London: Jones and Company, 1825), 13.
3. Mary Kuhn, "Garden Variety: Botany and Multiplicity in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Abolitionism," *American Literature* 87, no. 3 (2015): 489–516, 500. See also Oliver Sacks, "Sentience: The Mental Lives of Plants and Worms," in *The River of Consciousness* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 61–77.
4. "Sentient, adj. and n.," OED Online, <http://oed.com> (accessed December 1, 2017).

5. Hopkins, "Binsey Poplars," in *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1985), 39.
6. Hopkins, "Binsey Poplars," 39.
7. See, for instance, Rachel Ablow on his "Wounded Trees" in *Victorian Pain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 114–21; Suzanne Keen, *Thomas Hardy's Brains: Psychology, Neurology, and Hardy's Imagination* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2014), 146; and William A. Cohen on Hardy's perpetual verbal confusions between people and trees in "Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy's Woodlanders," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 19 (2014): n. pag, doi:10.16995/ntn.690.
8. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Dennis Taylor and Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1998), 17.
9. Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Tony Slade and Penny Boumelha (London: Penguin, 1999), 207.
10. Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, 56.
11. Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, ed. Rosemarie Morgan and Shannon Russell (London: Penguin, 2000), 32.
12. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 33.
13. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 259.
14. Ivan Kreilkamp, "Pitying the Sheep in *Far from the Madding Crowd*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 3 (2009): 474–81, 478.



## Seriality

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THE Victorian serial form has been the subject of diverse scholarly explorations, most often engaging with print culture and book history, since the publishing industry in the mid-nineteenth century prompted an uptick in Victorian serial novels. The circulation of serials across national borders has also garnered excellent studies on the transatlantic circulations of serial novels.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars have focused on other genres besides the novel that appeared in serial format, such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* or Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, or even John Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, the overwhelming object of interest