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# The Portrayal Of Nature And Its Topography In Mary Stewart's The Hollow Hills

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### Abstract

Arthurian Literature refers to poems, plays, novels and prose written about the legendary hero King Arthur. Arthurian legends belonging to the Middle Ages revolved around the legendary tales of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. All of these tales focus only on the chivalry and muscularity of the male characters. However, these legendary stories do not give much importance to nature, and it has only been a backdrop in most Arthurian works, even in the retellings. The word nature has evolved with different meanings; thus, it meant something in the Middle Ages and something else. Though Arthurian texts did not portray nature and its importance, there are huge paragraphs describing the beautiful scenery and the wild landscapes. These illustrations bring about different emotions inside the reader. In Arthurian tales, the readers read about welcoming forests and birds, spring orchids, fountains, valleys, and contrasting images of the environment like the dense forests, deadly monsters and unsettling seas. Arthurian tales show how nature is adorable on the one hand and wild and untameable on the other. Man becomes the centre in all the Arthurian works, and nature is pushed aside. This article investigates the various landscapes portrayed in the novel, Mary Stewart's *The Hollow Hills*, and how nature has been just a setting with humans in the forefront.

**Keywords:** Arthurian legends, Mary Stewart, Landscapes, Nature, Symbiosis.

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## 1. Introduction

Arthurian Literature refers to poems, plays, novels and prose written about the legendary hero King Arthur. It is assumed that King Arthur ruled Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC and was a successful warrior in defeating the Saxons. Though the history of King Arthur and his knights of the round table is still a debated topic, the fascination and adoration for him have never faded; as Barron in "Arthurian Romance" stated that "Of all the evocative names of romance, none is more charismatic than Arthur – king, conqueror, liege, lord, lover, knight, fountain of nobility, Hope of Britons, England's Messiah, icon of evolving nationhood over many centuries" (4).

## 2. Review of Literature

Arthurian legends belonging to the Middle Ages revolved around the legendary tales of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. Though the tales about Arthur belong to the Middle Ages, many writers still are rewriting the legends in this modern period. One important reason why King Arthur has gained so much popularity is due to the thematic relevance of the stories that readers enjoy, which continues to be a source of inspiration. As Ferst and Bump say, “that Arthur and the chivalric culture he invokes remain relevant to our cultural lexicon is evidenced by his continued re-imagining in popular media” (5). Arthurian legends have become the heartthrob of video games, movies, television series, and music.

Arthurian legends do not belong to one particular period but span across centuries. Writers across the countries adorned Arthur and began to reveal this fascination in their writings. Many started to consider King Arthur a Messiah who would retain an ideal order in this fragmented and absurd society. The tales replicate the societal struggles that are prevalent in the modern period. As Alan Lupack says, “Arthur’s longevity is directly related to his unique ability to span the ages and suit the societal needs of the times. He’s a chameleon of sorts...They and he appeal to the common human psyche above and beyond cultural/societal differences related to the time of publication” (294).

All of these tales focus on the chivalry and muscularity of the male characters. Their valour in fighting a war and against demons, and the adventures they take up, depict the heroic deeds of not just Arthur but all of the knights, even if they are villainous. This same tradition has been carried forward generation after generation, and many writers still faithfully render the original version of the legends in their retellings. A slight deviation in the modern retellings gives importance to the female characters silenced in the ancient works. Many women started to look at Arthurian tales from a female perspective challenging the patriarchal structures of the society.

Not just women but even nature are silenced in the Arthurian tales. The modern-day retellings also did not focus on this much-needed standpoint. There are women writers to voice out the supremacy of male dominance upon them textually and in reality. However, there is no one to voice nature’s plight and the struggle they undergo. The modern-day retellings have been portraying the valorous adventure of Arthur and his Knights and the odd struggles of women characters who were considered to be the other in the ancient days. Nature, on the other hand, has only been a backdrop in most of the Arthurian works, even in the retellings.

People are not mindful of nature that does not harm them. Human beings are anthropocentric and try to utilise everything that nature renders. However, those of the past lived close to nature and never intended to harm like the ones in the modern day. This could be the reason why writers who were fascinated by King Arthur wrote only about his heroic deeds but nothing about nature or the environment. But few texts have brought in the closeness between man and nature and how nature has been an inevitable part of human life. Writers of the past tried to mimic the environment by bringing in vivid descriptions of the trees, landscapes and even about animals.

### **3. Portrayal of Nature in Arthurian Novels**

The word nature has evolved with different meanings; thus, it meant something in the Middle Ages and something else. Though Arthurian texts did not portray nature and its importance and threats, there are huge paragraphs describing the beautiful scenery and the wild landscapes, just like the Romantic works of art. These illustrations bring about different emotions inside the reader. In Arthurian tales, the readers read about welcoming forests and birds, spring orchids, fountains, valleys, and contrasting images of the environment like the dense forests, deadly monsters and unsettling seas.

These varied images are not just to evoke a sense of pleasure in the readers’ minds but to showcase the truest depiction of the pristine mother earth. Arthurian tales show how nature is adorable on the one hand and wild and untameable on the other. Writers brought out the minute detailing of the natural world but focussed on how man was able to overpower nature and assert a place for himself. For example, King Arthur is portrayed as a mighty warrior who can kill any kind of monster, defeat any battle and

tame wild nature. Man becomes the centre, and nature is pushed aside. So the writers and critics of the modern times look only at King Arthur, examining the texts through historical, archaeological, social, cultural and political points of view.

Yet the texts from the Middle Ages have been a rich source of nature and the natural sources of a particular period. Suppose a person living in India wants to know about England's different landscapes and natural resources during the eighteenth century. In that case, he or she has to read literature especially those written by the Romantic writers. He or she will come across different trees, animals, birds and insects that are rare and unknown to the rest of the world. Such type of writing can be classified under the broad category called Landscape Writing.

#### 4. Role of Landscape Writing

Landscape writing consists mostly of non-fiction works about the natural environment. It "tends to be preoccupied with finding ways to communicate the affective textures of lived experience in particular landscapes, of personal and more broadly cultural modes of engagement with the world" (Theologies of the Wild 5). The description about a landscape brings out all the information necessary about the place and the habitat. It describes about the land, trees, soil, animals, plants, insects and everything that belong there. According to few people landscape is a pictorial representation of a land but to Denis Cosgrove "Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world" (13).

Writings about landscape and natural environment can be seen in almost all type of works not just in non-fiction books. Robert Lawson says "Descriptions of the environment are never merely empirical. They are strategies which encode the interests and concerns of the writers as well as the physical nature of the terrain, the climate, and so on" (6). It implies the writer's interest in describing the place where the action takes and not just merely filling in pages. Writers who describe the natural scenery are really in love with nature and its minute details. They try to establish a connection between nature and culture so that the humans coexist with nature and try not to overpower it.

According to Macfarlane, the writers need to recover "a kind of language-magic" that is fast being lost to an overwhelmingly urbanised society and of the need to "keep enchantment alive in our descriptions of nature: to provide celebrations of not-quite-knowing, of wonder, of mystification" ("Phrasebook" 116, 125). This has been helping the readers from different eras understand the landscape and its habitat and has created knowledge about how mother earth was before and its condition at present. Trees and animals which were prevalent in one era are extinct now and could only be identified in writings like this. Thus writing about landscape is a much needed genre in a world with its natural resources depleting fast.

#### 5. Nature and the Natural Sceneries

Arthurian texts can be analysed as a source of landscape writing and how the supremacy of human kind has dominated nature. Mary Stewart's *The Hollow Hills* is an Arthurian novel discussing the boyhood days of Arthur who later became the High King of Britain. Mary Stewart, like most of the writers, also focuses on Arthur and his adventures but gives equal importance to Merlin the Magician. Nature is just the setting or the backdrop with man and his mighty actions in the forefront. But Stewart then and there vividly describes the beautiful landscape as "a high green upland studded with furze, with here and there stark, solitary trees thrust into strange shapes by the steady salt wind" (HH 16).

*The Hollow Hills* references to mysterious places like Avalon, Camelot, Tintagel and Bryn Myrddin. These places seem to be enchanted, wild and strange for the readers of the present times. The places mentioned in almost all of the Arthurian works are assumed to be real places found in Wales and England. Bryn Myrddin is one such place mentioned in the novel usually called Merlin's Hill. It is located near the Tywi Valley from Carmarthen in South Wales. It is this place that Merlin spent his life

which is considered to be sacred and scary as well. Merlin himself in the novel describes Bryn Myrddin as home “solace of simplicity and quiet” (HH 34).

Merlin in *The Hollow Hills* describes Myrddin that the woods in the lower reaches of the valley are thick with oaks, chestnut and sycamore crowded close. Slopes of grass, bracken, bluebell leaves and budding blackthorns covered the entire space. There is a small spring with “a trickle of pure water welling out of a ferny crack in the rock” (HH 35). The other side of the cave entrance is covered with a “tumble of grass-grown stones, where saplings of oak and mountain ash had seeded themselves, and grew in a thick tangle against the rocky face” (HH 35). This shows that Merlin lives very much close to nature and the place seem to be not much inhabited by the humans.

Since Merlin is the narrator of the novel, he often describes the beauty of nature. He encounters beautiful scenery when he travels to the inn at Camelford since the queen wanted to meet him alone without the knowledge of the High King. The Camel Valley is surrounded with trees and the path seems to be with thick moss and dark green brackens. There is a river beside that “wrangled its way down through granite boulders that glittered in the sun” (HH 65). Merlin says there are dense hangers of oak and beech above him while he was on his way to the Camelford. There were nuts all ripe with amber leaves trailing the willows and it was a beautiful sight to watch.

Merlin is not just an enchanter and a priest, but also makes medicine out of herbs and has helped many with his weird medicines. While he is in Camelford he goes around the woods surrounded by bracken and brambles. There are blackthorn bushes with fruits glinting and some of them are the little “sloe-plum” which were greenish and most were “black bloomed over pale blue with ripeness” (HH 66). Merlin gathered all these berries to make an extract sovereign for a flux of bowels. He collects more than a handful since they are ripe to perfection and has an idea to mix it with juniper-wine, making it powerful and rich.

Igraine hands the baby to be reared by Merlin as Uther is not happy about the birth of their baby thinking that the people would call it a bastard. Merlin takes the baby secretly without the king’s knowledge to grow up under his care. He does not take the road as the King’s troops and travels would easily identify them by the woods. Merlin along with Ralf, the baby and the wet nurse lodges wherever they could as they did not have inns to stay. Mother Nature has been gracious enough to accommodate them as they stayed in wood cutter’s cabins, sheep shelters even in the stack of bracken cut for bedding. Merlin says “blessed the mild weather” (HH 88) if not it would have been a great challenge to travel in a harsh weather with a newborn.

## 6. Arthurian Landscapes

According to Merlin in *The Hollow Hills* the path that they took seems to be wild as there were “high ridged stretches of moorland, where heather grows among the granite tors, and the land is good to feed nothing except the sheep and the wild deer” (HH 88). Here the man seems to be complaining about the land and its very nature. Before he thanks nature for the good weather, he immediately criticises the land that is useful for grazing farm animals alone. There is a sense of regret and selfishness since land is not productive to him. This tiny little thought of man has destroyed humpty number of forests and natural resources making it hard for the future generations to live on earth.

Merlin in *The Hollow Hills* describes the wild nature of the forest, saying that it is dense “of tress crowded and hugely grown, impassable with undergrowth as toughly woven as a fisherman’s net. Here and there, unnoticed until you stumble across them, are crags and bouldered screes of rock thickly clothed with thorn and creeper, invisible and deadly as a wolf trap” (HH 89). According to Merlin the place seems to be dangerous but it is not so. Nature is wild and wonderful but not harmful to any humans. It is man who is a threat to the mother earth. This wildness of the nature makes it much adorable and amusing which people understand only after decades of harmful destruction and urbanisation.

Contemporary landscape writings according to Macfarlane ranges “from wildness as a state of land through to wildness as a state of mind” (“Foreword” vii). Mary Stewart is trying to portray how nature could be hazardous if the man is not careful which is contradictory in the reality. It tries to conjugate the landscape of the exterior with that of the interior mind. This is evident in *The Hollow Hills* as Merlin describes about the harsh landscape calling it dangerous and full of threats to the humans. In reality it is not the wild land but his mind that is wild and evil. This attitude of humans in trying to inhabit a wild land has led to deforestation worldwide.

Dr. Suresh Fredrick says, “Human beings always knew that wild forests are inhabitable and that is why they looked down upon wild forests. That is why the forests are destroyed to make way for fields which would field grains. The animals are also left out” (Interspecific Relationship 13). Forests are the house of the animals and there is no reason why they have to be a pleasant place for the humans. Many could not accept this truth and thus they start refurbishing forests according to their needs, which is why the woods have disappeared and are still disappearing. As Merlin in *The Hollow Hills* says “Even more dangerous are the stretches of bog, some black and slimy, some innocent and green as meadow, where a man on horseback can sink from sight as easily and almost as quickly as a spoon sinking in to a bowl of gruel” (HH 89). He again reinstates that the wildness of nature as a life threat to the humans in every possible way.

Later in *The Hollow Hills*, it is decided that the King’s child is to be raised in the kingdom of Rheged under the care of Ector, Count of Galava. Galava lies in the north western corner of the kingdom with hills, water and wild forest. Uther wanted the child to be raised in some safe castle but Merlin believes that “In the north, in the heart of Rheged, where no one would look for him, where the Wild Forest itself would guard him, the boy could grow up as safely as God would allow, and as freely as a deer” (HH 114). Merlin feels that nature would protect the little child from the king’s enemies. He says that the forest would guard him from all the evil and that the boy can grow without any hassles just like a deer in the forest.

Merlin feels that the boy should live in the woods. Life with nature seems to be much better than life with humans and Merlin believes that nature will be a best teacher to the little boy. This also shows the usual tendency of human beings to change their thoughts and mind now and then. But this realisation is the need of the hour that coexisting with nature helps man to become a better person. Nature does not teach a man to be greedy, villainous, evil or to betray, kill and steal but man has done the worst damages to it.

Macfarlane observes two important ideas in landscape writing, they are wild places and wildness. According to him, wild places are “boreal, wintry, vast, isolated, elemental” and wildness he thinks, is found in “remote” landscapes, “where the evidence of human presence is minimal or absent” (Wild Places 8). Such type landscapes can also be found in the novel when Merlin describes the forests as dangerous. Those are the places less trodden by humans thus are wild. But there are other places too like Bryn Myddrin where Merlin lived, is close to nature and can only be called a wild place though it is isolated but has visitors then and there, which is not dangerous to humans.

According to Macfarlane, humans are complicating and darkening the wildness of the landscapes and that “Every islet and mountain-top, every secret valley or woodland, has been visited, dwelled in, worked, or marked at some point in the past five millennia. The human and the wild cannot be partitioned” (Wild Places 127). Such is the condition today, even the landscapes that are dangerous to humanity has been domesticated and inhabited. As portrayed in the novel, Arthur the undefeatable has trodden in all such wildness and has been a successful conqueror. The novel depicts how man has the supremacy over not just woman but the entire universe trying to bring the human centred approach in front.

The fearsome and robust nature of the humankind has been reiterated from the Middle Ages till now. Timothy Clark calls wildness “acultural” an inherent force that is “resistant to human control, prediction or understanding” (33, 34). This is the truest tendency of nature which many people fail to comprehend.

But in contrast, all such wild forests and landscapes have been easily trodden by not only Arthur but also his round table knights. The tales in the Arthurian legends then and there replenish the mightiness of man being able to subjugate the uncontrollable wildness, including forests and even the harsh seas which the knights travel.

In *The Hollow Hills*, Mary Stewart describes the wild forest in Galava and discusses another landscape which humans have domesticated. She says that the landscape is covered with trees and “there were boats out and men fishing where the river flowed deep and still through its sedgy flatlands. The green meadows at the water’s head were full of cattle, and there was a village crowded under the castle walls” (HH 115). This place is in total contrast to the one Merlin calls dangerous. Mary Stewart brings a stark contrast between the landscapes, that which is wild and untameable to that which is passive and pleasant.

The contrast does not lie like the landscape it is the human who has altered the land according to his need. Wildness does not yield to human and his tricks and thus remain wilder and untameable. But many other landscapes have been utilised and adapted according to a human’s will like the one in Galava. The nature of the landscape and its natural resources have been altered and dismantled for human greed and prosperity. But even then the human is not satisfied with what they have done to the mother earth. Human’s selfishness has been the only reason behind the depletion of the major natural resources. Human is not mindful of the chaos he has been and is still creating for the future generations.

In *The Hollow Hills* Merlin says, “It was strange, dead-looking landscape, and smelling of death. From Ralf’s silence I knew that he was afraid. But our guide, at my horse’s head, plodded on through the wandering mists and wisps of fire that were the souls of his fathers” (HH 93). The land is not dangerous to the marsh dwellers because he is the man of the soil and could connect with the land more easily than Merlin and Ralf. The fear in the minds of Merlin and Ralf makes them afraid to travel in the wild. Merlin says that the land holds the memory of the great grand fathers who lived there but the same place seems to be deadly to Merlin and Ralf. He says Ralf is afraid because of the wildness that prevailed in the landscape. This shows the human tendency to expect everything to be pleasant and convenient for him rather than accept it as it is.

Merlin in *The Hollow Hills* says “one saw the strange little blue-fleeced sheep that breed in Rheged, with some shepherd boy cheerfully braving the wolves and fierce hill foxes with the protection of a stick and a single dog” (HH 115). The sheep seems to be strange to him but it actually belongs to that particular landscape and thus cannot be seen anywhere else. He again talks of the land modified according to the human’s want. But here the shepherd tries to safe guard his sheep from the wolves by using harmful methods. Humans are trying to take control of the wolves with the help of sticks and eventually will be ready to kill if it tries to prey on a sheep. Once again Mary Stewart is reinforcing the supremacy of humans over the non-humans.

## **7. Culture and Landscape Interrelatedness**

Culture and landscape are two important aspects that the writers and critics most frequently discuss. Culture is synonymous with civilisation and “culture is (re)produced – it is not ‘natural’. Human kind is not born into static cultural groups that we cannot transcend. We hold culture to be socially constructed – a dynamic product of the individuals and groups, both past and present” (Landscapes 4). Culture has been socially constructed and varies accordingly, while landscapes are natural and not manmade. But according to Winchester, culture and landscape go hand in hand though they are two different entities. Every landscape has been modified and utilised by the human beings even the remotest and the uninhabitable spaces.

Thus, a landscape cannot be separated from the culture since it represents the people who live there. Cultural landscape includes various buildings, houses, factories and monuments that connect the place and culture through the people. Winchester says, “Places are much more than cultural landscapes; they include the people and their relations between them. Places also compromise the images of those people

and their landscapes; their sense of place and loyalties” (4). The conservationist has often recapitulated the interrelatedness between the land and the humans. The connection is to save the land and its resources but not to dominate and destroy.

Likewise in the novel *The Hollow Hills*, Merlin gets the help of marsh dwellers for food and lodging. These are people who are close to the land and thus know the land much better than others. So When Merlin faces hardship travelling through a harsh landscape, the forest dwellers helped him to reach safely. The landscape that has been dangerous to Merlin is not dangerous to the forest dwellers. Thus the landscape has a cultural connection with the people living there and will be hostile to the visitors like Merlin and Ralf. If the landscape is not dangerous to one group of people then it can never be a life threat to others. This shows that Merlin could not connect with the land since he does not belong there but at the same time he feels at ease while he was in his place, the Bryn Myrddin.

While Arthur in *The Hollow Hills* grows under the care of Ector in Galava, Merlin also reaches there to train the boy in the way he wanted to. Merlin taught him to make maps, read them and showed him the maps of the sky. Merlin says “He spent all his days now in the forest, often with me (though not so much as formerly), but most of the time” (HH 332). This shows that Merlin prefers to stay in forest close nature to enjoy the harmony and peace which other places populated by humans would not render. Even while he was in Brittany he prefers to stay in the cave all alone and peaceful. This, in turn, shows that being close with nature helps man to be in harmony with life.

Description about places “enables the viewer to construct landscape from physical terrain, but also allows the viewer to see beyond the physical limits of that terrain” (Literature and Landscape 3). In *The Hollow Hills*, the author also brings in descriptions about the natural scenery and gives a vivid outline of a stag that Merlin encounters in the forest. He says “He was white. In contrast the wide branches on his brow looked like polished bronze, and his eyes showed red as garnet. But he was real; there were stains of sweat on the white hide, and the thick hair of belly and neck was tagged with damp” (HH 334). The author tries to sculpt the beauty of white stag through such a description.

## 8. Human Centred Arthurian Works

Mary Stewart in *The Hollow Hills* reinstates the beauty of the wild helping the readers to look beyond the boundaries of a landscape. But just like every other Arthurian works, this novel also focuses on justifying King Arthur as the greatest. Though he is a very small boy, he rides on a valiant and stubborn horse at ease. When the people wanted Arthur to prove himself as the true heir to the British throne, he lifts the sword out of the flame without any struggle. “He put his hand through the white blaze of fire and the hilt slid cool onto the grip for which, a hundred years before, it had been made” (HH 450).

The sword Arthur takes belongs to the King Maximus, the powerful ruler of Rome. Everyone who contends to become the next high king of Britain feared to lift such a sword blazing with fire. People are afraid to put their hand on it because the sight of such a sword is deadly and terrifying. But Mary Stewart characterises Arthur in such a way that he is never afraid to touch the sword and lifts it without any strain. There is not even a sense of doubt or dismay in his face which make him the extraordinary and unconquerable of all mankind.

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other landscapes have been utilised and adapted according to a man's will like the one in Galava. The true nature of the landscape and its natural resources have been altered and dismantled for human's greed and prosperity. But even then the human is not satisfied with what they have done to the mother earth. Human's selfishness has been the only reason behind the depletion of the major natural resources. Human is not mindful of the chaos he has been and is still creating for the future generations.

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Arthurian stories belong to the very old period and nature has been pristine enough during those times. This is the reason why the writers belonging to the modern era do not neither discuss it from ecological point of view nor voice out for the voiceless nature. Industrial Revolution has been an important reason for the major eradication of the natural resources. Moreover, since Arthurian tales were written much before the industrial revolution, even the modern retellings do not voice out the importance of the natural environment. But nature has just been a backdrop in these legendary stories giving much attention only to the humans especially Arthur the Super Hero.

The Arthurian tales usually belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the landscape that the people have populated during that time would surely have been exhausted by now. The wild forests which were untameable would have also been used and spoiled by the humans in the present world. Man's quest for adventure and discovery will never leave any place to remain pristine and true to its tendency. There is no such place which is wild and untouched by humans - few are still treading even the wild forests that are prohibited from visitors though not all. Anthropocentrism has been a major threat to nature and its surroundings.

## 9. Conclusion

Humans and the landscape cannot be separated, and it is inevitable for humans to survive without nature and its surroundings. According to the first law of Ecology, "Everything is connected with everything else", so everything is connected to nature. Though the landscape has been modified and overused, a man gives life to the landscape. Likewise, it is land that culturally connects humans with mother earth making his life meaningful. Human has been a representation of a landscape, and this union brings joy to society. Every individual must understand this connection and strive to protect the bond as long as possible. As opposed to the glorious portrayal of King Arthur in *The Hollow Hills*, women and nature need to be given equal importance. Nature can be protected and preserved only if man coexists with it.

Most importantly, only when man's thirst for more quenches can the world and its natural resources be fortified. As Dr. Suresh Frederick says, "symbiosis keeps everything moving in the evolutionary direction. This is vital for the growth of the biosphere" (Striving for Symbiosis 12). Thus it is in the



hands of the writers to create awareness about the dying earth and the damages that are still being done to it. Instead of just writing about natural scenery and wildlife, the authors have to discuss the importance of nature and the vitality of coexisting with nature instead of overpowering it. Thus, understanding the union between humans and nature is vital for existence

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