

THE FOREST IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POPULAR FICTION

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Abstract

'Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?' isn't merely a painting by Paul Gauguin but a question that people have often asked themselves. This paper analyses these very questions in the popular film, 'Avatar'. Although the film is known for its huge popularity and blockbuster status, it also uncovers several truths about the human condition which is made relevant by the symbolic juxtaposition of characters and settings, which shall be analyzed under the Freudian aspects of the human psyche; the contrasts between Oriental and Occidental cultures; the Nietzschean theory of Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of man; the tussle between 'Christian' behaviour and 'Pagan' belief; and the Postcolonial aspects of race and identity.

Keywords: *Cinema, Race, Identity, Postcolonial*

Forest as a Setting

In literature, especially in American Literature one sees various instances of the quieting of the conscience, the awakening of "The horror!" in men who are otherwise civilised, christian and chaste. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Young Goodman Brown, Scarlett Letter* and *The Emperor Jones* are wonderful examples of the overpowering dark will of the forest which casts a demon-like spell on people.

Avatar is set in a far-off imaginary planet called Pandora, and similar to the classical myth, Pandora is a place where all the metaphorical evils of the box manifest themselves. At least this is what the audience is made to believe as they undertake this other-worldly journey with Jake. It turns out however, that the scenes and settings were not as other-worldly as they seem to be: in an interview, James Cameron states how inspired by the Earth's own flora and fauna he was. Personally having been on a deep sea diving expedition, he explored regions of the ocean that are too difficult to record on camera. The forests as seen in both *Avatar* and *Twilight* (a recent Gothic Romance trilogy, also made into films) seem immeasurable and formidable and this is the kind of environment that deep sea divers actually encounter, the point being that vast untamed regions of green are catalysts to the imagination, not only of the movie maker but that of the viewer or reader. Being taken into a place where the foliage is thick and in abundance gives one a romantic inclination to accept the supernatural and alien elements, developing a suitable environment for "the willing suspension of disbelief".

But not just the deep sea, one notes that the 'Hallelujah Mountains' in the movie *Avatar* bear a great similarity to the Chinese Huang Shan mountains. The forests of the planet are thick with foliage similar

to tropical regions on Earth and even the Na'avis' skin colour, which is blue, is inspired by the popular depiction of the Hindu God Krishna, who's several incarnations are called his 'Avatars'. This gives us a great insight into the way in which the film distinctively separates the Pandora population as significantly the 'other', as, much inspiration is drawn from the East or the Orient. Even *Twilight* bases the Vampire and Native American populations in parts of the forests surrounding Forks city. Most of the scenes depicting the vampires happen in the forest. The idea of the forest being hostile is further intensified by the fact that its density does not allow much penetration by vehicles (a symbol of civilisation), people visiting the woods have to travel on foot.

Forest as a Symbol

The forest, which is the home to evil incarnates and primitive humanoids seems to be a daunting dark character which brings out primitive instincts in man. While Jake finds himself ruthlessly killing a predator, he falls in love with a Na'avi and the couple give into their passions. So it seems that the forest is a region where the Id gains precedence. Even in the *Scarlet Letter*, the little girl, Pearl, is connected to the forest not only by her illegitimate and therefore, sinful origin, but also by her name, 'Pearl' being formed in the deep recesses of the ocean like the deep dark unconscious of the human mind.

Hawthorne dwells a lot on Puritan America, it is where American literature roughly begins chronologically: at the European settler coming to inhabit a vast land, very different from the one they have known. America unlike Europe did not have clear cut divisions or kingdoms; it did not have any set rules or values. The immigrants had to lay the foundations to what would later become a nation. A culture had to be set up, because the ones that already existed (Native American) were considered barbaric. The forest which then seemed indomitable was home to Native Americans who had a very different way of life. Years were spent destroying forests and the people who thrived within them. Unfortunately, the Natives were prone to be portrayed as evil doers, witches and people who indulged in black magic, such images inspire *Scarlet Letter* and *Young Goodman Brown*.

This furthers the idea (later dwelled upon in the sub point 'Capitalism') that only one way of life is acceptable. Though America is a nation founded upon the principles of Liberty and Equality, one knows that the terms are at times conditional, allowing people to be free as long as they do the things that the established institutions declare as correct, therefore, exercising a paranoid control over the public that almost seems Communist in nature, such ideas are also reflected in Pinter's, *The Birthday Party*.

Darwin says the forest, is the place of origin of all species; the manner of living in the world depends on the environment. And therefore, it seems quite easy to accept that man does find a sort of home in the forest. The way the human species had done for centuries before man could build houses. If Jake turned out alright at the end of the film it was because of his unbreakable will and verve to survive. Nature connects with human beings because human beings are a part of nature. The connection may be difficult to see, but it is never-the-less, always present.

Jake, The Protagonist

Eve wanders in the garden of Eden and finds, perchance the Tree of Knowledge and is tempted by the devil incarnate into eating the fruit. This is why Stephanie Meyer, the author of the novel *Twilight*

included the lines:

*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it:
for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

In the beginning of the text to symbolise Bella's choice to pick a dangerous lover, who is seen in the movie as offering her an apple at their school lunch room. It also symbolises teenage struggles with sexuality and Bella's fight to balance the Dionysian side of her love for a boy who knows he can break all the rules, "...since I'm going to hell."

Christabel, Coleridge's famous tragic heroine goes to the forest to pray for a lover and having found a woman (probably abducted or raped) helps an evil enchantress into her home, and even carries her over the door posts like a groom, his bride. She chooses to sin out of curiosity and the thrill of a feeling she hasn't felt before and therefore cannot understand.

Young Goodman Brown in the short story of the same name by Hawthorne, also walks into the forest to meet with the Devil himself only to test his 'Faith'. His doubt and curiosity being the reason for his downfall.

Jake is the narrator (and protagonist) and ushers us onto a new planet. He is has retired from the United States Army and handicapped, he comes onto the planet and begins to study and then spy on the Na'avi, in the beginning it is an easy task, for he has spent time in the army killing terrorists in the Middle East; but this proves to be difficult once he develops a bond with the Natives. Formerly he kept his job because it was liberating to live in his avatar form because it wasn't handicapped like his human body, he was rational and treated his job in a business like manner, recording and analysing his observations and data, but the Apollonian side soon diminishes as he begins to enjoy the boisterous thrill of living in the forest. It is this marriage of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the characters, like the bonding of the Avatar and human forms of Jake, that completes the plot and the whole creative process.

They Becoming We

Differences among peoples can be physical: hair colour or texture, skin colour, or body structure. that is what has given rise to disputes among different cultures. Cultural differences like differences of language, accent, religion, also exist.

The Na'avis are tremendously different from homo sapiens, they even inhabit a different planet but Jake embodies both species and cultures in one soul. He takes the form of the 'other' just as a job at first. The humanoid form of himself, however, is liberating, as his humanoid form is perfect, unlike his human body which is handicapped. He is thrown into the path of danger, and unintentionally finds himself accepted by the locals who would otherwise regard the 'avatars' as intrusive outsiders. Then unfolds his exciting journey into the Pandora landscape and his slow bonding with his teacher Nayi'tri, (whom he falls in love with) and the rest of the tribe.

The Na'avis however, live in a tree, called 'Hometree', which has grown since time immemorial and provides shelter to the whole tribe. The ground under the tree however, is rich in 'Unobtanium', a valuable energy resource for Earth. Jake's main job is to blend in with the locals, gain their trust and then

to spy on them. Later, he is told to try and coax them out of Hometree so that the Neo-Colonisers from Earth could begin mining. Jake however realises, that nothing could tempt them away from the life they lived. In the violent clash that ensues between the peoples, Jake supports the tribals and chooses to wholly embody the 'avatar' and give up his white man form. The white American man embodies the other, and unites them. He chooses to be Blue. Becomes the other: therefore, 'They' becomes 'we'.

Capitalism

It is also interesting to note the various political and economic trends that are reflected in films. The most literal ones being about the World Wars, but there are several subtler references and depictions of the world in some popular films, one of them being the *Star Wars* series, the older films being Space Adventure versions of the Cold War.

Avatar too indirectly critiques capitalism. As mentioned above, traders have come to Pandora to mine a very useful mineral because Earth's over consumption has led to an energy crisis. Jake desperately tries to find a means to convince the people to leave Hometree and be compensated by the gifts of Capitalism, that is, limitless products, the temptation of technology, the English language and all other things that could make them more 'civilised'. However, Jake realises that all his efforts are in vain, nothing can tempt them away from their traditional home. Life on Pandora gives them everything they need, they not only realise this but are also grateful and thankful to 'Eywa', the mother goddess who has blessed them with the gifts of nature upon which they survive. This comes as a clear lesson to the Capitalists who constantly teach people to be dissatisfied with what they already have, through advertisements. Mass production and huge sales have probably led to the energy crisis in this fictitious world which bears daunting similarities to the real world. The modern America has diverged greatly from the restrictive, simple and stoic Puritan ways of the past. But the method of destroying the set ways of the other and trying to install ones own ideology has not changed either in the fictitious world of Pandora or in the real one. However, the view of the forest has changed over time, it began as a space from which evil incarnates emerge and witches conducted their demonic rituals, and now, is represented as a place with equal positive and negative implications. Both daunting and amazing, it still remains a massive space where the imagination of the artist runs wild. However, being our common place of origin, according to Darwin, it is also the place where the so-called diverse peoples may become one.

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