

Natural Elements and Spaces in A.S. Byatt's Short Stories

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Abstract: “Once upon a time, in a kingdom between the sea and the mountains, between the forest and the desert, there lived a King and Queen with three daughters. [...] When the eldest Princess was born, the sky was a speedwell blue, covered with very large, lazy, sheep-curly white clouds” (Byatt, *Djinn* 41). This opening passage of A.S. Byatt's “The Story of the Eldest Princess”, from *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), conflates the fairy tale conventions with the centrality of nature. After introducing the main characters through the description of natural elements, the action of the story moves to a Forest with “green sky [...] green branches [...] mossy floor [...] soft and tempting” (Byatt, *Djinn* 53), which points to the crucial role played by natural spaces in the story. Such relevance, however, is not restricted to Byatt's rewriting of fairy tale conventions in this narrative, but her interest in nature pervades all her short fiction, from the first volume *Sugar & Other Stories* (1987) and up to her latest collection, *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003). Moreover, the pre-eminence of nature in Byatt's short fiction, so my contention goes, is often accompanied by the exploration of different aspects of women's lives, articulating a correlation between female experience, on the one hand, and natural elements and spaces, on the other.

If “The Dried Witch”, from *Sugar & Other Stories*, portrays ageing as dryness associated with the exotic setting, “A Stone Woman”, from *Little Black Book of Stories*, projects that same process onto an extraordinary geological metamorphosis. From the female protagonists' perspectives, natural and biological processes merge as “[the] diminishing [of] the body [turns] it into part of the air, of the surrounding sky”, in “The Dried Witch”, or as “[s]lowly, slowly, day by quick day, her torso was wrapped in a

stonely incrustation, like a corselet”, in “A Stone Woman” (Byatt, *Little* 139). In this same line, the exploration of the artist’s aesthetic quest in two stories of *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), “A Lamia in the Cévennes” and “Cold”, is mediated by the correlation between gender relations and natural elements, whereas the natural space of the forest emerges again as the setting of “The Thing in the Forest”, from *Little Black Book of Stories*.

In the light of this, the present contribution to the roundtable will examine the centrality of nature in Byatt’s short fiction, tracing the presence of natural elements and spaces in some of her short stories, and their association with female characters and experiences. In the course of this examination, special attention will be paid to the recurrent setting of the forest, analysing the implications of this natural space for the configuration, structure and meaning of “The Story of the Eldest Princess” and “The Thing in the Forest”.

WORKS CITED

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--- *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye. Five Fairy Stories*. London: Vintage, 1995 (1994).

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--- *Little Black Book of Stories*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003.