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Reinventing the Rural Idyll

A Study on the Impacts of 19th-Century England on the Cottagecore Aesthetic

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Abstract

With new technologies, climate change, and consumerism, people find themselves between the choice of embracing the change or escaping from it. By trying to live a simpler life, being one with nature, avoid the superfluous, comes the necessity for something else: the bucolic, the idyllic. “Cottagecore” is the new term to define this trend that not only focuses on appearance and a specific aesthetic but also a lifestyle.

This research analyses the longing towards past times; in particular, rural life in 19th century England, focusing on the countryside and the ideal of a life in line with nature. This bucolic imagery is found both in modern and Victorian writers, such as Louisa May Alcott, Thomas Hardy, and others. Furthermore, with film adaptations of both Victorian and modern novels, more visual and practical examples are given. With the guidance of scientific sources of the 21st century, awareness, and knowledge that people now have, this study tries to analyse whether returning to old times can be a solution or a disillusion; in particular, by considering crucial themes such as human rights and environmental issues such as sustainability.

To my family and friends
precious to me like wildflowers in a cottage garden

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Introduction

> I am excessively fond of a cottage; there is always so much comfort, so much elegance about them. And I protest, if I had any money to spare, I should buy a little land and build one myself, within a short distance of London, where I might drive myself down at any time, and collect a few friends about me and be happy. I advise everybody who is going to build, to build a cottage.[1]

It is in this quote from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) that the very subject of this thesis is displayed: the dichotomy between country and city, rural and urban. When thinking of "rurality" the first thing that comes to mind is a peaceful countryside landscape surrounded by trees and meadows, perhaps with a small cottage covered in moss and ivy.[2] It is thanks to the Picturesque movement and Romantic and Victorian literature that this idealised vision of the countryside gained popularity, first in the 19th century to then come back in our days. However, as the Romantics praised nature and privileged the countryside over the city primarily for "moral and mystic" reasons – as well as the source of poetic inspiration – they opened the path to a deep-rooted criticism against urbanisation and industrialisation;[3] indeed, a criticism that has grown into an act of rebellion in the 21st century.

The first chapter of this thesis displays the distinctive features of the English countryside. Firstly, some definitions are given to better understand how rurality is perceived in the age of technology and capitalism, focusing on the internet-based "Cottagecore aesthetic", which is basically a revival of the 19th-century rural life, focusing on romanticising life in the countryside with particular care for the environment and sustainability. Secondly, coming back to the roots of the idealisation of rurality, we ought to understand the first instances of "retreat" to the countryside during the years of the Industrial Revolution. It is important to remember that while terms such as "idyll", "rural", and "pastoral" are used almost interchangeably when referring to the countryside, the three refer to different things in different contexts; thus, this research provides three sections for each of these terms, exploring their etymologies, meanings

[1] J. Austen. *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811. London: Macmillan and Co., 1896, pp. 220-221.
[2] See W. Irving. "Rural Life in England". *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1873, pp. 82-97.
[3] See J. Burchardt. *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800*. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.

and how they can be utilised. The last section of this chapter discusses how ruralism is perceived in the 21st Century, with examples of people choosing to embrace a cottagecore lifestyle and reviving those old rural traditions to obtain self-sufficiency and detach from the capitalistic society. Furthermore, this chapter closes with some pieces of evidence that show how environmental awareness and sustainability can be the direct consequences of living a "slow life".

The second chapter focuses on literature, especially Victorian – both English and American – 19th-century literature. With a brief introduction of the literary and artistic genres that were interested in the countryside and nature, this chapter explores how rurality was perceived by the novelists of that time. Three novels are taken into account; *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott is the first, telling the story of four sisters of a humble family living in the countryside in America. Permeated by a cosy atmosphere, the novel focuses on the personal experiences of the girls and follows their paths from adolescence to adulthood. In choosing this novel, the aim is to show how a family of economic disadvantage still manages to find happiness in little things and be grateful for what they are given. Following, two novels by Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *The Woodlanders* (1887), are set in the English countryside, revolving around shepherds and farmers. Despite being both set in Hardy's beloved Wessex and both having a female lead character, these novels give two different views on the countryside: the first is a more "optimistic and romantic" one while the second has a darker and more pessimistic tone, in reflection to the characters' struggles.[4] Nevertheless, these novels function as a search for rustic elements that were once romanticised and now rediscovered. Lastly, a few modern novels are mentioned, keeping in mind that the idealisation of the countryside intensified over the centuries, only to become what is now called "cottagecore".

Finally, the last chapter provides some visual examples of cinematic adaptations of *Little Women* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, analysed in the previous chapter. These adaptations are crucial in understanding how the novels are perceived in a modern way, not simply following the storyline, but also conveying that "rural idyll"[5] through the use of colours, scenography, and costumes. In addition, the Canadian TV

[4] See R. P. Draper, (ed.). *Thomas Hardy: Three Pastoral Novels*. London: Macmillan Education, 1987.
[5] A. Bracke. *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 49.

series *Anne with an E*, adapted from Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* is taken into account, considered to be cardinal in understanding the cottagecore aesthetic. The last section provides a couple of examples of people calling themselves "cottagecore enthusiasts" on the internet, with images from their social profiles showing how they romanticise simple activities of their lives, such as baking or sewing.

This section aims to expose the phenomenon of cottagecore, which is still unknown to many. Although it might seem merely an aesthetic trend, this thesis shows the deep and ancient roots that generated it, not forgetting the impact of influences and resources of our century. To understand it, it is necessary to look back at the pre-industrial period; only after an analysis of rurality and the old countryside, we can consider the new one.

Chapter 1. The dreamlike life of the English Countryside

1.1 The English Countryside: Definitions and Subdivisions

Cottagecore refers to an internet-based lifestyle trend born in 2018 but emerged in 2020 as a reaction to COVID-19, lockdown and technology. Few are the accurate definitions of the term; it is not present in the dictionaries and can be mostly found in blogs. The term is not defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, however, the only dictionary that provides a brief definition is Collins, which describes Cottagecore as "a lifestyle revolving around rural living and pursuits; a style of clothes appropriate to the lifestyle".[6] On the other hand, the Urban Dictionary, which deals with slang words and everyday language, says that "Cottagecore, also known as Farmcore and Countrycore, is inspired by a romanticised interpretation of Western agricultural life. It is centred on ideas of simple living and harmony with nature. Themes associated with Cottagecore include self-sufficiency, baking, and caring for people".[7] The word itself is composed of "cottage", a small house in the countryside, and "core" which the *OED* defines as "the second element in various compounds"[8] in relation to music, while the *Cambridge Dictionary* says that it can be "used in newspapers and magazines, and on social media to form words describing a particular type of style in clothes, music, furniture, etc.".[9] It could be said that to be cottagecore simply means to own a cottage in the countryside; however, it is deeper than that. According to the blog *The Good Trade* "Cottagecore is an aesthetic that celebrates simple living, particularly in the countryside. It encourages a lifestyle rooted in traditional skills—like baking bread, gardening, and sewing your own clothes".[10]

It is a nostalgic trend, looking back to a life that has already been lived in a different century. Although we are constantly evolving, technology is extremely improving, and we have access to whatever we want, some people still feel the urge to

[6] "Cottagecore". *Collins Dictionary,* Harper Collins, 2020.
[7] "Cottagecore". *Urban Dictionary*, 2022.
[8] "-core, *Comb. form*". *Oxford English Dictionray*. Oxford UP, Jul. 2023.
[9] "-core, *Suffix*". *Cambridge Dictionary*. Cambridge University Press.
[10] C. J. Higgins. "A Beginner's Guide to Cottagecore". *The Good Trade*, 2021. https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/what-is-cottagecore/. Accessed 12 Sep. 2023.

"go back" to a much simpler life. Some do not feel the need to be drowned in technology and luxury and just want to reach nature.

Among the broad sources of information that are available nowadays, if one truly wants to understand what Cottagecore is, all one needs to do is open Instagram or YouTube; many 'reels'[11] or 'vlogs'[12] promoting this lifestyle will pop up.

Aesthetically speaking, the first thing to notice is the use of colours, "it's a Holly Hobbie illustration come to life"[13] says *The New York Times*. The influencers who post this kind of video will prefer warm tones and earthy colours such as brown, dark green, orange and yellow. The choice of music would be relaxing, often instrumental, tracks, like a piano or a guitar slowly playing in the background. Everything in these frames has to be cosy (a keyword in this research) and inviting. As far as the content is concerned, there is a display of everyday life, usually led by the person who posts it: a simple, slow and happy life, surrounded by nature and the warmth of the small things. An everyday action like baking is romanticised as if it were a celebration of what Mother Nature gave to us humans. To wake up at dawn and have time to do all the chores, cooking and cleaning for our loved ones is no longer an effort but a pleasure. As Stewart Dick said in *The Cottage Homes of England*:

> [The cottage] relies not on codes of rules, but on tradition—on the old local methods of overcoming the local difficulties. And so it is self-sufficient, self-reliant and sincere. And so with village life. It is full of a beautiful broad simplicity and directness. It deals more with essentials than refinements. One finds the genuinely human there, with less disguise than in the cities, where men conceal their individualities under a mask of uniformity. In the village, people are frankly natural. This simplicity is far removed from the ignoble for its sincerity gives it dignity. The world is so small there, that every one has his distinct place in it.[14]

Therefore, Cottagecore promotes a life devoted to simplicity, self-sufficiency and traditional skills, all things that are often forgotten nowadays, especially by the younger

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[11] Video posts under 15 minutes on the social network Instagram.
[12] "A vlog is a set of videos that someone regularly posts on the internet in which they record their thoughts or experiences or talk about a subject".
(https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/vlog)
[13] I. Slone. "Escape Into Cottagecore, Calming Ethos for Our Febrile Moment". *The New York Times*, Mar. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/style/cottagecore.html.
[14] H. Allingham, and S. Dick. *The Cottage Homes of England*. London, Edward Arnold, 1909, p. 238.

generations. It is easy in a world that keeps evolving so fast to forget our roots and how to do basic things such as baking bread, growing our food, and making our clothes; now that everything is pretty accessible to anyone, anywhere, at any moment. Cottagecore encourages people to avoid unnecessary distractions, to give up the convenience of having everything ready for them and to start caring about the little things that make us happy and at peace with our surroundings, as maintained by Stewart Dick in the passage quoted above.

The next section provides other definitions and subdivisions crucial to track the roots of this trend that is nowadays called Cottagecore, but once called "Pastoralism" or "Ruralism".

1.1.1 Living a Slow Life

When we talk about Cottagecore, we essentially talk about "slow life", respecting our and nature's rhythms.

> Slow living is a way of life that is centred around taking your time and enjoying the moment. It's about slowing down your pace and appreciating the little things in life. Slow living is all about disconnecting from the world and reconnecting with yourself.
>
> Slow living isn't about depriving yourself of what you want or need. It's about finding a healthy balance between doing and being. It's about taking the time to enjoy life's simple pleasures and living at your own pace. The concept of slow living is based on four main principles: mindfulness, gratitude, simplicity and generosity.[15]

A typical day of a person embracing the "cottagecore life" would be waking up early, usually at sunrise to benefit from the daylight hours. Much can be done in one day, so it is best to wake up early and be productive as soon as possible, though remembering to take the time we need to accomplish things. After a substantial breakfast with their family, they would go out and check on their garden where they grow fruits and vegetables for their household. They presumably have some animals such as dogs, cats, chickens and why not a cow or a pig, so they would also check on

[15] "The Art of Slow Living: Discover How to Live a Happier Life". *The Plain Simple Life*. 2022. https://www.theplainsimplelife.com/the-art-of-slow-living/.

them and ensure they are healthy and happy: the mindful person who respects nature is more likely to be vegetarian or vegan.

As already mentioned before, an important point is to live in harmony with nature; foraging and cooking from scratch, for instance, are the perfect examples of this lifestyle. By harvesting what can naturally be found – or grown – people can feel a connection with the earth that cannot be bought in a supermarket. But self-sufficiency also demands spending time in the kitchen, so the Cottagecore enthusiasts have to make their own sourdough bread, bake and cook every meal from scratch using their garden products, to can their food and also be comfortable with fermentation techniques. The refusal of industrial-produced and heavily processed food is a choice that not only has to do with self-sufficiency but also with a healthy diet. Everyone knows the effects that processed foods have on the body, so choosing not to buy them and not to be part of the capitalistic system helps their health as well as their mind.

Aside from cooking and homesteading skills, another ancient practice has come back in style, that is hand-making garments. Knitting, crocheting, sewing and embroidery, may be considered "old" activities by the younger generations; however, it is not unusual to see many people in their mid-20s approaching these techniques. Again, the wish to reject modernity and industrialisation is strong here, as people prefer spending hours and hours making a sweater or a pair of socks that can easily be bought in a shop. The crafting community is pretty clear about it:

> As makers we love the tradition of our crafts and embracing those elements is *very* cottagecore! Knitting a cosy jumper, sewing your floaty floral dress, embroidering your napkins for a picnic in the meadow – all of these wonderful little things we do to romanticise the simple pleasures of life – that's cottagecore![16]

Furthermore, by hand-making clothes and items people can choose how to make them to perfectly fit a specific style, which, in this context, is the cottagecore style:

> To get the cottagecore look you'll need floaty dresses in florals and fresh neutrals or earthy tones, snuggly jumpers and dreamy cardigans to waft around the house in. If you're a cottagecore lover you'll want to embrace the whimsical, cute toadstool

[16] H. Butteriss. "How to nail the cottagecore aesthetic". *Lovecrafts*, Nov. 2021, https://www.lovecrafts.com/en-gb/c/article/how-to-nail-the-cottagecore-aesthetic.

> decorations and kitsch homewares all inspired by the beauty of nature. What better way to embrace the cottagecore life than to make everything you need by hand?[17]

Living a slow life may include all kinds of craftsmanship, but in this case, the crucial point is how someone approaches it. The central element of a slow life is, as the name suggests, serenity, peacefulness, and tranquillity. To live in harmony with our surroundings, to be kind to the people we meet, to take things slowly and with a positive approach, and to live "a calm, sweet and healthy life"[18], are all attitudes to embrace when conducting a slow life.

1.2 The 19th-century English Countryside

Of happiness, and thoughts arise
With home-bred pictures many a one,
Green lanes that shut out burning skies
And old crocked stiles to rest upon;
Above them hangs the maple tree,
Below grass swells a velvet hill,
And little footpaths sweet to see
Go seeking sweeter places still,[19]

(*The Flitting*, John Clare)

This section opens with a poem by the English writer John Clare (1793-1864), mentioned in Malcolm Andrews's *A Sweet View* and considered by William Howard the "quintessential Romantic poet".[20] *The Flitting* (1841) is found in *The Rural Muse* – a collection of poetry, songs, and sonnets, originally published in 1835. Composed of 27 stanzas, this poem deals with homesickness and the longing for Clare's beloved familiar scenes. Labelled as the "peasant poet" by Frederick Martin in the biography *The Life of*

[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Allingham, and Stewart. *op. cit.* London, Edward Arnold, 1909, pp. 21-22.
[19] J. Clare. "The Flitting". *The Rural Muse*, 1841, lines 33-40.
[20] W. Howard. "John Clare". *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *British Romantic Poets, 1789-1832*, edited by M. J. Bruccoli, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1991, vol. 109, pp. 68-86, p. 68.

John Clare (1865), Clare with his poetry embodies the essence of rural life and emphasises the beauty of the English countryside. John Clare came from a humble family who suffered economic disadvantage; thus, he did not have a proper formal education. Nonetheless, his love for nature and interest in the countryside gave him way to become one of the most important rural poets of his time, focusing on the beauty of simplicity and nature.[21]

The nineteenth century was a period of crucial transformations for England and the agricultural system. Though depicted as a rural idyllic period through both visual and written resources, it underwent significant changes which date back to the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). While the rest of the world simply followed, Britain started its industrialisation process from the late 18th century to the half of the 19th century. It was the first country to shift from an agrarian-based economy to one dominated by machinery and industries. The economy was changing, and the population increasing, therefore there were some priorities that small landowners could not fulfil: old agricultural methods employed in small communities could not meet the demands of a growing population, which led to the use of innovative machinery.[22] Consequently, workers who used to be craftsmen necessarily had to become "machine operators, subject to factory discipline".[23]

Further crucial changes were a consequence of The Enclosure Acts which abolished the open-field system in agriculture, a system that was cardinal in rural England. The advent of industrialisation, improvement and expansion of the railway system – which by 1850 covered the whole country –[24] and the need for different purposes of the land led to the resettlement of the land usage. Therefore, small landowners lost rights on their farming lands and had to adapt to innovation. All these changes led to inevitable divisions: "those in favour of this change insisted that it was necessary and not optional for the growth and development of the economy. Those against this change claimed that it deprived the poor people of making a good living, which will lead them to live unsustainable lives. The Enclosure Acts took away the

[21] See "John Clare", *Poetry Foundation*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-clare.
[22] See H. Blamires. *The Victorian Age of Literature*. Beirut; Harlow: York Press, Longman, 1988.
[23] "Industrial Revolution". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/Industrial-Revolution. Accessed 8 Nov. 2023.
[24] See Blamires, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

rights the local people had to the rural land during prior generations".[25] As a result, the locals were almost forced to move from the countryside to the city and those who decided to stay had to struggle to sustain their families.

The tendency to idealise life in nineteenth-century English countryside is partly due to how it has been perceived in the Victorian period; to written and visual representations that tend to romanticise or omit the 'bad' parts, resulting in a historical distortion. Indeed, new literary movements arose which, as Astrid Bracke states, "distorts or mystifies 'social and environmental history".[26] For instance, when thinking of the English countryside, it may appear as a bucolic place where everything is greener, and everyone is happy. One can imagine a cottage with a beautiful, lush garden surrounded by flourishing flowery fields. The life there would be slow and easy, without all the rush of the city. The happy couple who lives there has found a perfect nest where they can be self-sufficient; the husband works the land and provides for the family, while the wife, being a handmaid, takes care of the house and raises the kids. Everything sounds perfect, except that this life is an idealised and not reliable one. As far as the visual representations of the cottages are concerned, in her article *The English Cottage Garden*, Ethne Clarke says that:

> Artists and illustrators soon entered the lists and the 'cottage garden' genre of English painting was created. […] These artists and others provided highly romanticised visual images of traditional cottage gardens idealising the rural cottager's life and circumstances at a time when the cloud of agricultural depression was just lifting. This popularisation of cottage gardening led to it becoming the fashionable style and by the 1880s the distinction between a farm labourer's cottage garden and the garden of a small country house was hard to discern. The middle classes adopted the cottage style garden, not just to follow the fashion, but because it also allowed them to express their aesthetic values while not putting too great a strain on finances, since it did not require the expensive, hard landscaping, heated glasshouses and teams of gardeners which were the mainstays of more exotically planted gardens.[27]

[25] "The Enclosure Acts". *British Literature Wiki*, https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/the-enclosure-acts/. Accessed 8 Nov. 2023.
[26] A. Bracke, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.
[27] E. Clarke. "The English Cottage Garden". *Australian Garden History Society*, vol. 5, no. 5, 1994, pp. 5-9, p. 8.

Although Clarke's article is mainly about English gardens, it maintains that even 200 years ago there was a distorted idea about what it meant to live in the countryside. The main problem is that the most promoted image is the wealthy one: in the case of the 19th century, it would be the middle class and the bourgeoisie. According to Francesco Vallerani, 19th-century European society developed a *"romantic creativity*"[28] (*creatività romantica*) as a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, thus wrote their poetry against the modern, urbanised society that was growing in the big cities, emphasising nature and the rural landscape.[29] For this reason, according to Malcolm Andrews,

> [T]hat idyll defines the spirit of the English countryside that will dominate Victorian sensibilities. The countryside becomes the out-of-doors experience of 'sweet home-feeling'. It externalizes the snug home into little rural scenes where the natural and the cultivated, the high and low in class, all blend harmoniously in relationships that were apparently established generations ago and continue still.[30]

While once the English countryside was a place for poor peasant people and their small, thatched cottages, in the mid-nineteenth century and now "England has become a land of small, 'natural gardens', havens of softly hedged seclusion",[31] "a 'cottage system'" and an "obsession with comfort [that] was very marked in the early nineteenth century".[32] It also happens now, where rural enthusiasts are seen living a perfect life in the countryside but with all the comforts that money can buy, but this is an issue that will be discussed in the following chapters.

It is not that people do not want to see the truth, but that the truth is hidden behind expensive dresses, long walks in the park under a parasol, and afternoon tea under the porch. The "real" cottagers "lived in rudimentary dwellings, typically little more than mud and thatch shelters, and often were as much of a commodity as the land they worked—buy an acre and get a peasant in the price. They rarely owned any and outright".[33] What is left outside the heavenly image of the countryside life is the fact

[28] F. Vallerani. *I piaceri della villa*: *Vivere e raccontare la campagna tra abbandoni e ritorn*i. Firenze: Le Monnier Università, 2021, p. 58.
[29] See Vallerani, *op. cit.*
[30] M. Andrews. *A Sweet View: The Making of an English Idyll*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021, p. 167.
[31] *Ivi,* p. 180.
[32] *Ivi*, p. 176.
[33] Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

that the people who actually lived in the countryside were basically poor and had to struggle for a living.

1.2.1 Idyll

"Idyll means free from dissatisfaction. […] In it we have always a charmed atmosphere, some suggestion of satisfying happiness. An Idyll is a picture of life as the human spirit wishes it to be, a presentation of the chosen moments of earthly content".[34]

It is a common mistake to consider "idyll", "pastoral", and "rural" as interchangeable synonyms. In certain cases, one can function to describe the others, but it is important to stress the differences between them. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 'Idyll' comes from the Greek word *eidyllion*, which means "little picture", and it refers to "a short poem of a pastoral or rural character in which something of the element of landscape is depicted or suggested"; furthermore, the birth of the term is found in "Greco-Roman antiquity to designate a variety of brief poems on simple subjects in which the description of natural objects was introduced. […] The *Idylls* of Theocritus are the source of the popular idea of this type of poem".[35] Also, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a short poem or other piece of writing that describes a peaceful and happy scene", especially "one connected with the countryside".[36] For these definitions, it is easy to confuse the three different terms. However, Shackford is quite critical about this, and says that:

> Because the best of the idylls of Theocritus are concerned with the life of herdsmen (*pastores*) many students have come to confuse *idyll* with *pastoral*, and have used the terms interchangeably. This confusion has been further increased by critics who care little for nice distinctions. These men give the word pastoral as wide a signification as possible and let it stand for anything rural and unconventional. The idyll means to them a presentation of life simple, quiet, and serene, as it follows normal law in a realm far from fashion and from fortune, open to all the influences

[34] M. Shackford. "A Definition of the Pastoral Idyll". *PMLA*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1904, pp. 583-592, p. 586.
[35]. "Idyll". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 Mar. 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/idyll. Accessed 4 Nov. 2023.
[36] "Idyll", *Oxford English Dictionary.* 2023.

> of nature […] But to the scientist such looseness of terms is not permissible in a just appreciation of values.[37]

An idyll is, first, an artistic work, a poem, that in fact represents rural and pastoral life. It describes these lifestyles romanticising them and evoking a sense of peacefulness and tranquillity in everyday life. The Greek origin of the word – little picture – opens a series of images in the mind: a "little picture" of a cottage surrounded by endless fields of colourful wildflowers, the smell of freshly baked bread, the children playing around the garden with the animals and singing happy songs; an idealised view of life.

"Idyll" is used nowadays to describe something perfect, and this leads us to consider "pastoral" and "rural" life as idyllic, which is not inherently wrong. However, it might be extreme to consider rural life as idyllic for the many reasons already discussed in the previous section. So, what is really idyllic is this, sometimes distorted, idea that people have about rural life, not rural life itself. Therefore, we can say that the 'idyll' functions as an adjective referring to the idealised concept that people on the internet have towards rural life, in this case, towards Cottagecore.

1.2.2 Rural Life

> You may see the cottage from the sunk fence over yonder. I've seen the ladies draw it in their books, a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I've heerd say; but there an't weather in picters, and maybe 'tis fitter for that, than for a place to live in. Well! I lived there. How hard – how bitter hard, I lived there, I won't say.[38]

This passage, taken from the short story *The Chimes* by Charles Dickens, perfectly represents the primary issue of rural life, that is to say, identifying what is real and what is idealised.

Having clarified the first concept, the idyll, now let us focus on what evokes it: rural life. Firstly, 'rural' is a broad term used as an adjective referring to "connected with or like the countryside";[39] so, anywhere far from a big city can be considered rural.

[37] Shackford, *Op. cit.,* p. 585.
[38] C. Dickens. *The Chimes*. 1844, p. 119.
[39] "Rural". *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023.

As already said, the people who lived in rural areas in the 19th century were not as lucky as our generation is; while we idealise rural life, in the 19th century countryside "poverty, ignorance and squalor were the lot of many cottage dwellers".[40] They lived in poverty, strived to provide for their family and oftentimes lived in houses that were "little more than mud and thatch shelters".[41] So, why are there people considering rural life an idyllic one? The reason is that 19th-century artists

> provided highly romanticised visual images of traditional cottage garden idealising the rural cottager's life and circumstances at a time when the cloud of agricultural depression led to it becoming the fashionable style and by the 1880s the distinction between a farm labourer's cottage garden and the garden of a small country house was hard to discern.[42]

Along with visual images, literature also played a crucial role in misrepresenting rural life, as William J. Keith says in his chapter in *The Victorian Countryside*:

> [Thus] readers of Matthew Arnold's 'Thyrsis' or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* would be unwise to assume that scholar gipsies might be seen on the Cumnor Hills in the nineteenth century or that Heathcliffs habitually roamed the Yorkshire moors.[43]

"Understandably", continues Keith, "most urban Victorian readers turned to rural literature for the same reasons that they sought the countryside itself – for refreshment and renewal, as a haven from the wearying pace of city life".[44]

Finally, what was rural life in the 1800s, is now extremely different. Living in the countryside nowadays generally means owning a portion of land, a big homestead and, more importantly, not being poor. By overcoming the financial obstacle, the charm of the countryside is reachable. The oneiric landscapes by artists like Turner, Millais or Friedrich come to life, what was once hard work and fatigue are now small pleasures and steps towards self-sufficiency: living a slow life surrounded by nature. What

[40] E. Clarke. *Op. cit.*, p. 7.
[41] *Ivi*, p. 5.
[42] *Ivi*, p. 8.
[43] G. E. Mingay, and W. J. Keith. "The Land in Victorian Literature". *The Victorian Countryside*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p.136.
[44] *Ivi,* p. 138.

contributes to making England the idyllic charm of rural living are its bucolic landscapes covered in wildflowers and rich in woodlands, the abundance of old and small villages with cobblestone streets and cottages and – finally – its communities with their traditions. For instance, an important tradition that is still celebrated nowadays is the harvest festival, where communities gather to celebrate the harvest of the year and say thanks to the land. This involves music, dance, food and an occasion to strengthen the relationships in the neighbourhood.

1.2.3 Pastoral Life

The last term that goes along with the two already discussed – idyll and rural – is 'pastoral', which can have different meanings depending on the context. Other than being an adjective concerning the church, school or music, the appropriate definition here is that concerning literary works: "showing country life or the countryside, especially in a romantic way".[45] In a broad sense, pastoral might be used to describe life in the countryside, tranquillity, and simplicity, associated with the rural setting. In particular, and historically speaking, it refers to shepherds living in the countryside; indeed, as Bracke states, "describing pastoral as a narrative, for instance, entails a foregrounding of certain elements that have become familiar in descriptions of the countryside, such as the idea of nature as a retreat, or of nature as idyllic and separate from the city".[46]

Some examples of pastoral works are found in the works of George Eliot, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872)*, Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and, even though controversial, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891).[47] However, the first examples of pastoral and "idealized countryside" date way back to Theocritus's *Idylls* (3rd century BCE), or the *Eclogues* (or "Bucolics") by Virgil (37-29 BCE); according to Bracke, these texts "established pastoral […] by explicitly framing the idealization in terms of a necessary return, either

[45] "Pastoral", *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023.
[46] Bracke, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.
[47] See R. Crennen, "The Danger of Nostalgia". *The Hardy Society Journal*, Thomas Hardy Society, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 29-50.

literal or metaphorical".[48] This is the confirmation that as the latest generation created Cottagecore to revive 19th-century rural England, so the 19th-century Victorian society created an idealised and romanticised version of the rurality to revive older times. In fact, as Shackford put it "in literature the pastoral has never really faded away but has come back again and again with persistent appeal. It seems, therefore, that there must be in some inherent beauty, some elemental greatness which deserves investigation and acknowledgement".[49] To understand 19th-century novels as "pastoral", Bracke defines a sort of rules that it has to follow, and that is: "in order to be truly pastoral a space has to be neither too wild not to civilized, safe from the possible dangers of nature, as well as the corruption of the city".[50] In the case of a novel written in the 20th or the 21st-century, "in a contemporary setting", continues Bracke, "awareness of nature is necessarily shaped by climate crisis, [where] the pastoral narrative also functions as a middle space in between problematic idealization and despair";[51] this precisely introduces the following section, dealing with environmental consciousness and the possibility of a return to the rurality in the 21st Century.

1.3 Rural Life in the 21st Century

The countryside in the 19th century meant for some (country people) both home and hardworking, while for others (city dwellers) meant a recreational place where they could escape from the city or court life and hide in their villas. In some way, this also happens in the 21st century, where city dwellers retreat in the countryside to "play", as Vallerani states,

> una sorta di gioco di ruolo con cui praticare arcaiche liturgie ruraliste come accendere il caminetto, utilizzare la cucina economica, organizzare la cantina per il vino genuine prodotto in proprio o comprato sfuso dal vicino, imparare ad

[48] Bracke, *op. cit.,* p 50.
[49] Shackford, *op. cit.,* p. 583.
[50] Bracke*, op. cit.,* p. 77.
[51] *Ibid.*

> accatastare la legna, socializzare attorno ad un vecchio tavolo d'osteria con le sedie impagliate.[52]

Literally meaning that they can roleplay and practice ruralism by lighting the fireplace, stocking the woods, and so on. We already have seen how the environmental factor has an impact on the choice of living in the countryside and how embracing old rural traditions can lead to a more sustainable life; however, without new resources and technology, some things cannot be the same. In many cases, people who are able to return to the countryside and live a slower life tend to be more environmentally aware and take measures to reduce their impact as much as they can.

While Cottagecore draws inspiration from the idealised view of nineteenth-century England's rural life, it is still an internet-based trend influenced by newer perspectives and values. For this, it does embrace ancient traditions and lifestyle, but cutting out aspects that would not suit 21st-century mentality anymore, the patriarchal society is a prime example. When talking about rural life in the 21st century there are several important factors to keep in mind: things have changed in the course of 200 years, and we gained a new kind of consciousness that was not there before. Along with the advent of science and technology, we also became environmentally conscious and preoccupied with human rights, two elements that are crucial to understanding how rural life is perceived and how it can be experienced by those who choose to separate from the capitalistic society.

1.3.1 Environmental Awareness

We have discussed how rurality was perceived in the 19th century "when the countryside was not 'environment' and nature was not 'ecology'".[53] It is precisely this differentiation and terminology that marks the shift from seeing the countryside as a place in which to spend time, to a place to preserve. As the years passed, we increasingly became aware of the consequences that the Industrial Revolution brought; however, these consequences were seen also in the very first years after the

[52] Vallerani, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
[53] T. Gifford. "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral" in L. Westling (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 17-30, p. 17.

industrialisation, where the writers of the time focused on the countryside as a critic to the cities that the industrial revolution left "black" and degraded.[54] Therefore, now ruralism and the countryside must be seen through an ecological lens.

As the political philosopher de-Shalit argues in his article *Ruralism or Environmentalism?* to embrace the old rural tradition in the 21st century stands as "rebellion" in a society based on consumerism and capitalism. De-Shalit tells the story of Van de Weyer, a lecturer at Cambridge University and the vicar of four rural parishes. Although his reasons are to search the values – spiritual in particular – of the past, embracing the old relationship with nature and the soil, his "rebellion" is, nonetheless, "an attack on industry and modernisation [which] represents a yearning for the *pre*-industrial period".[55] However, as the article continues, de-Shalit explains his thought: "By environmentalism, on the other hand, I mean a philosophy based on anti-speciesism and respect for all organisms, for life, for ecosystems, and so forth",[56] which is precisely what the "new rurality" is about.

Returning once again to the Cottagecore issue, as claimed on the websites or articles, this trend is highly preoccupied with sustainability and environmental issues and reiterates the fact that a rural and simpler lifestyle can lead to a more sustainable life. In fact, in going against industrialisation and capitalism, rural life embraces those old traditions and love for the natural rather than the synthetic and ready-made. It is by supporting small businesses rather than big companies, buying "'real' – often local and/or organic – food"[57] or growing products in our gardens, and choosing to repair and recycle rather than buy things brand new, that rural enthusiasts make the difference in respecting the environment. Other than being focused on the aesthetic side of romanticising rural life, Cottagecore is also about environmental consciousness, a crucial point during this climate crisis era. Thus, even if it is not the Cottagecore aesthetic – with its idealising and romanticising – itself that the environment demands, certainly enough it demands more responsibility and awareness towards what is causing the climate crisis and what we, as humans, can do to prevent the situation from getting worse.

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[54] See Vallerani, *op. cit.*, p.58.
[55] A. de-Shalit. "Ruralism or Environmentalism?". *Environmental Values*, Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1996, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 47-58, pp. 50-51.
[56] *Ivi*, p. 51.
[57] Bracke, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

Chapter 2. The Idealised Rural Life in Literature

Nineteenth-century artistic movements depicted rural life in a way that ultimately romanticised it, leading 21st-century people to idealise this lifestyle and the countryside itself. Just as it happened in the 19th century, when people drew inspiration from the Middle Ages or Theocritus and Virgil's times, also Cottagecore looks back to the past, precisely to the Victorian period. Considering different genres, this chapter aims to investigate those elements of the idealised rural and pastoral life depicted by 19th-century writers.

2.1 Ruralism, Pastoral, and the Picturesque

Since one of the purposes of Cottagecore is to borrow rural elements from the past centuries, especially the 19th century, we ought to understand the way in which people lived and the society they lived in. But before analysing the novels of some of the most relevant Victorian writers, a brief introduction to the predominant nineteenth-century artistic movements is necessary.

The Industrial Revolution not only brought enormous changes in British society (see Chapter 1), but it also heavily influenced the writers of the time. In the Victorian age, one of the predominant themes in literature is the revival of the Pastoral tradition and the influences of Romanticism.[58] Although the term "Pastoral" underwent many changes in the course of the centuries, it gained a slightly different meaning in the Victorian age. It arose from the 18th-century Romanticism, taking that "awareness of nature", characteristic of William Wordsworth, and resulting in "privileging [of] the countryside over the city, in a far more serious way than the pastoral tradition had ever aspired to".[59] Thus, facing the "new" urban – with all the consequences of industrialisation – compared to the peaceful countryside "the development of the pastoral tradition had by this time created a firmly established poetic convention, in

[58] See Burchardt, *op. cit*., p. 26.
[59] *Ivi*, p. 29.

which very positive values were accorded to the countryside, in implicit or often indeed explicit contrast to the negative values attributed to urban life", as Burchardt states.[60]

One movement parallel to ruralism, rusticity and pastoralism is the Picturesque. Since pastoral, in literary terms, was, as Andrews says "a means of escaping imaginatively from the pressures of urban or courtly life into a simpler world"[61] it focuses on the countryside, and, with it, on the relations between humans and nature. Almost interpreted as a characteristic of the rural landscape, the cottage gained importance in the 18th century, with the function of the "emblem of rural tranquillity" which "represented a happy blend of pastoral and Horatian aspirations"; in fact, "the old, irregular, thatched cottage is, for the modern tourist as for his eighteenth-century predecessor, the *ne plus ultra* of Picturesque delight",[62] according to Andrews. As happened with Romanticism, the same applied to the Picturesque, which took a new meaning and adapted to satisfy the Victorian taste.[63]

This section examines three novels from one American and one English 19th-century author, while seeing rurality and pastoral through an aesthetic point of view, where the "country cottage is one of the most potent picturesque motifs in the 'sweet view' of the idealized Victorian landscape".[64]

2.2 Rurality Represented in Victorian Novels

Rural life was a life devoted to sacrifices, struggles, hard work and most of the time, a life imposed by social status. Whilst living in the countryside in the 21st century probably means financial self-sufficiency, back in the 19th century meant the very opposite. The following authors gave voice to the countryside people, trying to represent them as truthfully as possible, including both sides of the coin: the romanticised "idyllic" and the less attractive – real – one.

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[60] *Ivi*, p. 27.
[61] M. Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aestheticism and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989, p. 5.
[62] *Ivi*, pp. 7-8.
[63] See D. Townsend. "The Picturesque". *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1997, pp. 365-376.
[64] Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque*, cit., p 428.

2.3 Louisa May Alcott

The choice of inserting an American author among English ones and the history of rural England is because, in this particular case, fits perfectly. To be more specific, *Little Women* (1868) is one of the 19th-century most-loved novels by the Cottagecore community[65], for its dealing with themes of "sisterhood, family, happiness and gratitude".[66]

Louisa May Alcott was an American author best known for her masterpiece *Little Women*. Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania (US) in 1832, but spent most of her life between Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. Her father, a transcendentalist, heavily influenced Alcott's education. However, after realising that he could not provide for his wife and four daughters, Alcott began to worry about the welfare of the family; hence, after a brief working experience, she began to write, while suffering the consequences that mercury poisoning has brought her.[67] While volunteering as a nurse after the American Civil War, she contracted typhoid fever from which she never fully recovered. In need of money, Alcott wrote her autobiographical children's book *Little Women*, published in two parts in 1868 and 1869, which was a success from the beginning and granted her not only financial stability but also worldwide success, especially after she died in 1888. *Little Women's* popularity allowed Alcott to write two sequels: *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys*, published in 1871, and *Jo's Boys and How They Turned Out*, published in 1886. Nevertheless, her first novel remains her masterpiece, which also inspired the production of numerous film adaptations which will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.3.1 Little Women

[65] See T. Matheson. "10 Cottagecore Books to Add to Your Fiction". *Cottagecore Girl*, 2022. https://cottagecoregirl.com/10-cottagecore-books/.
[66] "25 Enchanting Cottagecore Books You Can't Miss", *Rainbow Reading Nook*, 2023. https://rainbowreadingnook.com/enchanting-cottagecore-books/.
[67] See M. Saxton. *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

Little Women is a Bildungsroman telling the story of four sisters living in an unidentified town in New England (probably Concord, though never directly specified). It is also considered an autobiographical novel since the characters and their story reflect those of Alcott's life.[68] The unfolding of the novel goes along with the ageing and emotional development of the characters.

Four are the central characters of the novel: the sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March, raised by humble parents, loving Marmee – their mother – and their father, who works as a chaplain in the American Civil War. There is also the sister's childhood friend Theodore – referred to as "Laurie" or "Teddy" – Laurence, who falls in love with Jo but, when rejected, marries Amy instead. The March family is far from wealthy, as clarified in the first chapter:

> "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.
> "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.
> "We've got Father and Mother, and each other," said Beth contentedly from her corner. [69]

However, despite being poor, the four sisters always find a way to be grateful for what they have and find beauty and happiness in other little things; for instance, when Marmee proposes giving their Christmas breakfast to their poor neighbours, they all agree without complaining, on the contrary:

> And when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning. [70]

This is the perfect representation of how selflessness may sometimes be a direct consequence of poverty. It is known that most of the time people who own less tend to give more; that, however, could not be said of upper-class people. Important to bear in mind is – as Strickland maintains – that while Alcott tends to stress how poverty is a

[68] See *Ivi*.
[69] L. M. Alcott. *Little Women*. 1868, London: Penguin Group, 2014, p. 1.
[70] *Ivi*, p. 24.

virtue that creates a special bond in families, that "comforting thought is plausible only in one remembers that for Alcott poor families usually meant those of modest circumstances"; in fact, "Although the March girls complain frequently of their poverty, the fact is that the family can afford a housekeeper and they are able to fill their stomachs and dress decently if not fashionably".[71]

Before continuing with the analysis of this novel, a clarification is needed. *Little Women* has been classified as Cottagecore in this thesis not only for its somewhat rural setting but primarily for the characters' view on life. The novel does not provide extensive descriptions of places and their surroundings, but it is rich in descriptions of the characters' behaviour, which shows the contrast between the middle and lower classes. It emphasises the humbleness that is typical of rural people. Furthermore, despite the lack of long descriptions, while reading this novel one can see the setting crystal clear. Thanks to the descriptions of the characters' clothes, the contrast between the March family and other people (for instance, their neighbours or the people at the ball), and other small yet significant hints, the reader's mind can create a picture of both characters and the setting. Finally, although the various cottagecore elements are far more distinguishable in the film adaptations rather than in the book, it is crucial to analyse why and how the films paint such a strong cottagecore atmosphere. For this reason, the novel should be thoroughly examined first.

As previously said, the novel does not provide detailed descriptions of the places, however, it gives a wide scope for the imagination. For instance, the reader can assume the March sisters' clothing by the way in which some of them long for more fashionable ones:

> "Where's the use of looking nice, when no one sees me but those cross midgets, and no one cares whether I'm pretty or not?" she muttered, shutting her drawer with a jerk. "I shall have to toil and moil all my days, with only little bits of fun now and then, and get old and ugly and sour, because I'm poor, and can't enjoy life as other girls do. It's a shame!"[72]
> […]

[71] C. Strickland. *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985, p. 153.
[72] Alcott, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

> Poor Meg seldom complained, but a sense of injustice made her feel bitter toward everyone sometimes, for she had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy.[73]

In this passage, the personality of Meg, the elder sister, is displayed. She is a young woman preoccupied with pretty things and fashionable dresses, who tends to let her desires prevail. Meg believes that happiness could be a direct consequence of being rich and tends to forget Marmee's teaching, that is, happiness can be achieved in other ways; by the end of the novel, with the characters ageing, they would have to face reality and eventually change their minds.

Clearly, since they do not have much money, the family cannot afford to spend it on frivolous things such as "dainty ball dresses and bouquets",[74] so it is necessary to adjust to what they already have:

> "What's the use of asking that, when you know we shall wear our poplins, because we haven't got anything else?" Answered Jo with her mouth full.
> "If only I had a silk!" sighed Meg. […]
> "I'm sure our pops look like silk, and they are nice enough for us. Yours is as good as new, but I forgot the burn and the tear in mine. Whatever shall I do? The burn shows badly, and I can't take any out."
> "You must sit still all you can and keep your back out of sight. The front is all right. […] and my gloves will do, though they aren't as nice as I'd like."
> "Mine are spoiled with lemonade, and I can't get any new ones, so I shall have to go without," said Jo, who never troubled herself about dress.
> […]
> "I can hold them crunched up in my hand, so no one will know how stained they are. That's all I can do. No! I'll tell you how we can manage, each wear one good one and carry a bad one. Don't you see?"[75]

Here, the sisters try to dress nicely as girls of their age do, but they have to manage with the little they have. Stained and worn-out clothes are all they own but, despite wishing they had more and better ones, they try to find ways to make them work anyway. Also, the sisters would not ask their mother to buy new ones, since they know

[73] *Ivi*, p. 56.
[74] *Ibid*.
[75] *Ivi,* pp. 35-37.

their financial situation perfectly; instead, they use tricks to hide the defects such as wearing a good glove each while they hide the old lemonade-stained ones in their hands. These selected passages show some of the characteristics of the March family: poverty and the consequent humbleness.

The March family might be economically poor, but rich in other resources, probably far more important. Jo is indeed well aware of that and for example noticed that "Laurie was sick and lonely; and, feeling how rich she was in home-love and happiness, she gladly tried to share it with him."[76] Also, Beth, the most humble and caring of the sisters, cares little about materialistic things, for "she was a housewifely little creature, and helped Hannah keep home neat and comfortable for the workers, never thinking of any reward but to be loved."[77] On the other hand, Meg is the last one to realise what she could not see before when she was blinded by teenage longings and materialistic desires, that while "sitting alone with tears dropping often on her work, felt how rich she had been in things more precious than any luxuries money could buy; in love, protection, peace and health, the real blessings of life."[78] With time and being surrounded by caring people, the sisters – even the most materialistic of them – will treasure their mother's teaching, find their own place in the world and be grateful for the "real blessings of life".[79] These changes take place as the novel unfolds and the years pass by, not without some obstacles and hard times. Indeed, taking once again Meg as an example, for her the "household happiness did not come all at once, but John and Meg had found the key to it, and each year of married life taught them how to use it, unlocking the treasuries of real home-love and mutual helpfulness, which the poorest may possess, and the richest cannot buy."[80]

Returning once again to the primary issue of this thesis, which is turning our backs on society to return to a countryside life, the fact that money cannot buy happiness is a strong principle. This ethic poses happiness and mental health as a priority – against the "priorities" imposed by a capitalistic society –[81] and if richness cannot grant it, so what could? It is probably in *Little Women* that one may find a partial

[76] *Ivi*, p. 76.
[77] *Ivi*, p. 58.
[78] *Ivi*, p. 287.
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Ivi*, p. 633.
[81] See B. Harvey. "Cottagecore and the Ethics of Retreat". *Prindle Post*, 2020, https://www.prindleinstitute.org/2020/08/cottagecore-and-the-ethics-of-retreat/.

answer, where less is more. Nowadays resources are to be discussed in the last chapter of this thesis, but something should be said, to maintain the connection between these two centuries. Whilst people can now have access to almost anything they wish for, a few of them choose not to be part of a society based on capitalism and consumerism; to go against the grain now means to go back in time and revive those ways of life that were thought lost. Many people in our century – especially Western and white people – have the privilege to choose how and where to live, and some of them choose to go back to their roots. It is when a modern mind embraces old traditions that this school of thought emerges, not only as an aesthetic but also as an improved approach towards life. Learning to be grateful for every little thing we have, just as Meg learned as she grew up, is something precious and a cardinal principle to rural life.

Chapter 11 emphasises the importance of working, house-working in this case. Marmee intends to show her daughters how idleness and non-collaboration lead to dissatisfaction but leaving them home alone and letting them take care of the various household chores; however, the days did not go as they planned, though in the end an important lesson is learned. At the end of the day, when the sisters tried to organise a dinner all by themselves, she came back home and saw what she expected, that is that everyone only cared for themselves instead of helping one another:

> "Mother! did you go away and let everything be, just to see how we'd get on?" cried Meg, who had had suspicions all day.
> "Yes; I wanted you to see how the comfort of all depends on each doing their share faithfully. While Hannah and I did your work you got on pretty well, though I don't think you were happy or amiable; so I thought, as a little lesson, I would show you what happens when every one thinks only of herself. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear and forbear, that home may be comfortable and lovely to us all?"
> "We do, mother, we do!" cried the girls.[82]

And then she gives some precious advice, probably the most important of them all:

[82] Alcott, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

> "[…] take up your little burdens again; for though they seem heavy sometime, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them. Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for every one; it keeps us from *ennui* and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion."
> […]
> "Have regular hours for work and play; make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well. The youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty."[83]

Living in the countryside or, in this case, in a meek way, means that idleness is not allowed and that there are things to be taken care of in order to maintain a peaceful home. After a couple of days of doing nothing, the girls felt that they should have been more productive and decided to take care of things; little did they know that without mutual cooperation they would have made things harder instead of easier. That experience taught them that by doing the things one is good at, without stepping on each other's feet, work could be pleasant and satisfactory.

One principle that plays an important role in rural life is precisely that the passion for work pays effort and sacrifices. Living in the countryside can be hard when there is no one helping to do the chores, and since this humble lifestyle does not allow to pay someone else to do them for you, the cottager must take care of everything. Nevertheless, the one who deliberately chose to live according to these principles is supposedly more than happy to take care of their household, which includes cleaning and learning basic activities such as sewing, repairing broken things and – perhaps the most important of them all – "[…] learn plain cooking; that's a useful accomplishment, which no woman [or, in this case, person] should be without".[84]

As the last point in this novel, although it was said earlier that Alcott does not provide many descriptions of the setting, and few of them encapsulate the newfound passion for idyllic ruralism, that is, Cottagecore. The first one to be found is indeed an idyllic vision, recounted through Laurie's thoughts:

[83] *Ivi*, p. 185.
[84] *Ivi*, p. 183.

> "Here's a landscape!" thought Laurie, peeping through the bushes, and looking wide awake and good-natured already.
> It *was* rather a pretty little picture; for the sisters sat together in the shady nook, with sun and shadow flickering over them, – the aromatic wind lifting their hair and cooling their hot cheeks, – and all the little wood-people going on with their affairs as if these were no strangers, but old friends. Meg sat upon her cushion, sewing daintily with her white hands, and looking as fresh and sweet as a rose, in her pink dress, among the green. Beth was sorting the cones that lay thick under the hemlock near by, for she made pretty things of them. Amy was sketching a group of ferns, and Jo was knitting as she read aloud.[85]

This kind of picture, where people sitting on the grass, surrounded by nature while sewing or knitting or drawing (all of which are now considered cottagecore) can be easily found on the internet under the tag 'Cottagecore'. While the previous passages were mostly about the characters' behaviour and approach to life, this one is representative and evocative in a strong way. It is important to notice that this scene, as with every other description in the novel is not seen through the narrator's eye, but the characters themselves. As Laurie approaches the sisters they provide other descriptions of the landscape, but in direct speech this time:

> "We call this hill the 'Delectable Mountain', for we can look far away and see the country where we hope to live some time."
> […] through an opening wood one could look across the wide, blue river, – the meadows on the other side, – far over the outskirts of the great city, to the green hills that rose to meet the sky. The sun was low, and the heavens glowed with the splendor of an autumn sunset. Gold and purple clouds lay on the hill-tops; and rising high into the ruddy light were silvery white peaks, that shone like the airy spires of some Celestial City.
> […]
> "Jo talks about the country where we hope to live some time; the real country, she means, with pigs and chickens, and haymaking. It would be nice, but I wish the beautiful country up there was real, and we could ever go to it," said Beth musingly.[86]

[85] *Ivi*, pp. 218-219.
[86] *Ivi*, pp. 221-222.

This tells the reader that the March family does not actually live in "the real country"[87] the sisters long for. Unfortunately for them, in the end, none of the sisters will fulfil this shared dream.

The setting of *Little Women,* a fictional town is to be intended in America. But since this thesis focuses on the English countryside, the last chosen passage contains Amy's thoughts and description of England:

> The trip was like riding through a long picture-gallery, full of lovely landscapes. The farm-houses were my delight; with thatched roofs, ivy up to the eaves, latticed windows, and stout women with rosy children at the doors. The very cattle looked more tranquil than ours, as they stood knee-deep in clover, and then hens had a contented cluck, as if they never got nervous, like Yankee biddies. Such perfect color I never saw – the grass so green, sky so blue, grain so yellow, woods so dark – I was in a rapture all the way.[88]

2.4 Thomas Hardy

Perhaps the most evocative of these two Victorian authors when talking about rurality, Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 at Higher Bockhampton, in a "thatched cottage built by his great-grandfather".[89] Growing up surrounded by a rural environment, woods and a close-knit community, Hardy could later apply his knowledge and memories of his beloved Wessex to his works. After his studies in Dorchester, he went under the protection of a local architect, John Hicks, in 1856. He worked as an architect in various offices, one of which was in London, until his return to Dorset was forced by his fragile and ill health, in 1867.[90]

During his years in London, Hardy started to write, and when he came back to Dorset, he wrote his first novel *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which eventually got rejected for publication. In 1870, Hardy was sent to work in Cornwall on the dilapidated

[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ivi*, pp. 492-493.
[89] T. Fincham. "Life of Thomas Hardy". *The Thomas Hardy Society*, 3 Feb. 2019. https://www.hardysociety.org/life/. Accessed 29 Dec. 2023.
[90] T. Hardy. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy.* Edited by Michael Millgate, London, The Macmillan Press LTD, 1984.

church of St. Juliot, where he met his future wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford. Emma's push for Hardy to leave architecture and become a full-time writer resulted in the publication of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873). Hardy owes his first success to the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874 – a year after the last unsuccess – which "introduced Wessex for the first time and made Hardy famous by its agricultural settings".[91] As Hardy continued his writing career he published novels such as *The Return of the Native* (1878), and *The Woodlanders* (1887), but it was only in his last period as a novelist that Thomas Hardy wrote those that are considered his masterpieces: *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Both underwent harsh criticism for their unconventional style; the novels deal with themes of morality, and show the events in the protagonists' life that eventually led them to death. Due to the hostile reviews of these novels that Hardy had to face, he decided to turn to poetry, in which he found success.

In 1912 an event would change Hardy's life, the death of his beloved wife Emma; this would give birth to some of his most heartfelt poems. Two years later Hardy married Florence Emily Dugdale, who took care of him in his last years and inspired him for his last works. Thomas Hardy died in 1928 and his ashes were buried in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.[92]

2.4.1 Far from the Madding Crowd

> This picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which is implied by the contrast of date. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen's *Then* is the rustic's *Now*. […] in Weatherbury three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smock-frock, by the breadth of a hair. Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old; his old times are still new; his present is futurity.[93]

[91] M. Millgate. "Thomas Hardy". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 3 Dec. 2023.
[92] Biography note in Penguin Classics' *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 1994.
[93] T. Hardy. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. 1874. London, Penguin Classics, 1994, p. 140.

This passage is a perfect representation of how the author saw 'his' Wessex, immutable, frozen in time. *Far from the Madding Crowd* – originally published serially and anonymously – is set mainly in the fictional village of Weatherbury, and deals with pastoral and rural themes, related to the main themes of marriage and love. The first central character introduced is the novel's hero Gabriel Oak, a humble shepherd and later farmer, who falls in love with Bathsheba Everdene, a stubborn and independent young girl.

E. W. Martin points out that "the two most important qualities in Hardy's work [which] are his treatment of country types, and his delicate evocation of the true spirit of place",[94] which is why it is to be considered rural in the first place. Certainly, the fact that this novel deals with farmers and shepherds should be enough to identify the rural traits in it; however, Hardy's evocative style and descriptive ability enable the reader to fully experience Wessex and the English countryside.

The first description is of Gabriel Oak's clothes, and it is perhaps the most detailed since it is one of the few clothing descriptions in this novel:

> He wore a low-crowned felt hat, spread out at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security in high winds, and a coat like Dr. Johnson's; his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing of damp – their maker being a conscientious man who endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity.[95]

In this novel the real rural life emerges, as Thomas Hardy's aim is to represent "both of backgrounds and personages, [that] might have been traced easily enough"[96] in real life. Another description that allows the reader to dive into the rural world is the inside of Gabriel's house, or "hut" as the narrator calls it; here Gabriel is bringing home a new-born lamb:

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[94] E. W. Martin. "Thomas Hardy & The Rural Tradition". *Blackfriars*, Wiley, vol. 30, no. 351, Jun. 1949, pp. 252-256, p. 253.
[95] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., p. 14.
[96] *Id*, "Preface", p. vi.

> The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove, where a can of milk was simmering. Oak extinguished the lantern by blowing into it and then pinching the snuff, the cot being lighted by a candle suspended by a twisted wire. A rather hard couch, formed of a few corn sacks thrown carelessly down, covered half the floor of this little habitation, and here the young man stretched himself along, loosened his woollen cravat, and closed his eyes.[97]

And continues with the inside of the hut:

> cosy and alluring, and the scarlet handful of fire in addition to the candle, reflecting its own genial colour upon whatever it could reach, flung associations of enjoyment even over utensils and tools. In the corner stood the sheep-crook, and physic; spirits of wine, turpentine, tar, magnesia, ginger, and castor-oil being the chief. On a triangular shelf across the corner stood bread, bacon, cheese, and a cup for ale or cider, which was supplied from a flagon beneath. Beside the provisions lay the flute, whose notes had lately been called forth by the lonely watcher to beguile a tedious hour. The house was ventilated by two round holes, like the lights of a ship's cabin, with wood slides.[98]

Important to note are the words chosen before the description of Gabriel's hut, "cosy and alluring"[99]. Hardy chose to picture a humble shepherd's hut as cosy and alluring, which seems to voice his fascination for cottages. According to Martin, this romanticised vision is due to Hardy's "patrician inclination", for him "Hardy was not classless, neither was he without class-consciousness". "Therefore", continues Martin, "because of the conditions under which he lived he underestimated the labourer and attached little value to manual work"[100]. Hardy may not have represented, in this case, a shepherd's hut in its truthfulness, but he gave it that romantic touch that readers in the Victorian period longed for, "insisting on its being snug and comfortable".[101] In the novel, and especially in the years it was written, this was a type of housing in which only the poor could live; however "the idea of the home as a snug hook", as a comfortable place where people can hide from the loud society, "transferred itself to the

[97] *Id*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., p. 21.
[98] *Ivi*, p. 22.
[99] *Ibid.*
[100] Martin, *op. cit.,* p. 254.
[101] Andrews, *A Sweet View,* cit., p. 173.

idealized countryside".[102] Whilst in the true representations of the countryside houses, or as they call them, dwellings, the aim is to highlight the poverty and struggling conditions of their inhabitants, the idealised rural life emphasizes the furniture and items that were once considered shabby.

Gabriel arrives in Weatherbury after he lost his flock due to a tragic incident, and here we find the description of Warren's Malthouse, the inn in which Gabriel meets with other labourers:

> Warren's Malthouse was enclosed by an old wall inwrapped with ivy […]. From the walls an overhanging thatched roof sloped up to a point in the centre, upon which rose a small wooden lantern, fitted with louvre-boards on all the four sides, and from these openings a mist was dimly perceived to be escaping into the night air. There was no window in front; but a square hole in the door was glazed with a single pane, through which red, comfortable rays now stretched out upon the ivied wall in front.
> […]
> The room inside was lighted only by the ruddy glow from the kiln mouth, which shone over the floor with the streaming horizontality of the setting sun, and threw upwards the shadows of all facial irregularities in those assembled around. The stone-flag floor was worn into a path from the doorway to the kiln, and into undulations everywhere. A curved settle of unplaned oak stretched along one side, and in a remote corner was a small bed and bedstead, the owner and frequent occupier of which was the maltster.[103]

Everything, from the ivy that wraps the wall to the furniture and the interiors, has a somewhat decadent taste. Warren's Malthouse is the indoor place described the most in this novel, and thanks to that, habits and traditions are also shown:

> The scarlet and orange light outside the malthouse did not penetrate to its interior, which was, as usual, lighted by a rival glow of similar hue, radiating from the hearth.
> The maltster, after having lain down in his clothes for a few hours, was now sitting beside a three-legged table, breakfasting off bread and bacon. This was eaten on the plateless system, which is performed by placing a slice of bread upon the table, the meat flat upon the bread, a mustard plaster upon the meat, and a pinch of salt upon

[102] *Ivi*, p. 178.
[103] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., p. 58.

> the whole, then cutting them vertically downwards with a large pocket-knife till wood is reached, when the severed lump is impaled on the knife, elevated, and sent the proper way of food.
> […]
> In the ashpit was a heap of potatoes roasting, and a boiling pipkin of charred bread, called 'coffee,' for the benefit of whomsoever should call, for Warren's was a sort of clubhouse, used as an alternative to the inn.[104]

Despite Hardy's social class, there is still a deep and thorough research of the countryside, in fact "in trying to create the atmosphere of a place […] Hardy gave much time to the study of records and the study of characters. He was interested in all the things that happened to the peasants and farmers who lived near him".[105]

Another important connection in the novel is what Gabriel Oak has with his surroundings and with nature. Clearly, by being a shepherd, Gabriel's bond with animals is strong; nevertheless, his bond with natural forces is somehow stronger, yet complicated, than other people's. When a calamity occurred, he was the first ready to know how not to fight against it, but to control it. For instance, when the rick-yard caught on fire (Chapter 6), he healed Bathsheba's flock (Chapter 21), and again, when he saved the barn when a bad storm threatened to ruin the crops (Chapters 36 and 37). Gabriel is in total harmony with nature, and he seems to be acknowledging it:

> Being a man not without frequent consciousness that there was some charm in this life he led, he stood still after looking at the sky as a useful instrument, and regarded it in an appreciative spirit, as a work of art superlatively beautiful. For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself; he could fancy them all gone round to the sunny side.[106]

Farmer Oak is at peace knowing that although he finds himself alone in a scene that speaks of loneliness he is surrounded by "a work of art superlatively beautiful."[107]

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[104] *Ivi*, p. 103.
[105] Martin. *Op. cit.,* p. 254.
[106] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., pp. 22-23.
[107] *Ibid.*

However, it is important not to forget that while humans can try and be one with nature, they will always pertain to something different, in fact, he "is not a part of Nature. He may be a countryman, but he is always a human being […] always ready to modify, to deflect, to improve, Nature's workings"[108] as this passage reminds us: "suddenly an unexpected series of sounds began to be heard in this place up against the sky. They had a clearness which was to be found nowhere in the wind, and a sequence which was to be found nowhere in nature. They were the notes of Farmer Oak's flute."[109] This example underlines the differences between humans and nature and Gabriel Oak is proof that the two can cooperate since "Nature is one of Gabriel's resources; but he is never controlled by her. […] He neither evades it nor resigns himself to it; he makes something out of it".[110]

Finally, to talk about every passage that deals with nature's presence in Thomas Hardy's novels would mean analysing almost every single page in them. This novel is filled with long beautiful descriptions of nature and the landscape, often personifying it, as if it were one of the characters, perhaps the most important of them all:

> The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its arched curve against the sky, like a mane. […] The thin grasses, more or less coating the hill, were touched by the wind in breezes of differing powers, and almost of differing natures. […] The instinctive act of humankind was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir; how hedges and other shapes to leeward then caught the note, lowering it to the tenderest sob; and how the hurrying gust then plunged into the south, to be heard no more.[111]

Humans shall stay still and listen to the chanting of the trees and the wind, while Gabriel Oak, with his flute, plays a different music; different but still following nature's, as it should be.

To conclude, in the next and last passage we can find precisely what Washington Irving said when describing the English countryside, where "every antique farm-house

[108] R. Morrell. "A Novel as an Introduction to Hardy's Novels" in R. P. Draper (ed.), *op. cit*., pp. 116-128, p.118.
[109] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., p. 20.
[110] Morrell, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
[111] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., pp. 18-19.

and moss-grown cottage is a picture; and as the roads are continually winding, and the view is shut in by groves and hedges, the eye is delighted by a continual succession of small landscapes of captivating loveliness".[112] It is the description of Bathsheba's house's bower:

> Fluted pilasters, worked from the solid stone, decorated its front, and above the roof the chimneys were panelled or columnar, some coped gables with finials and like features still retaining traces of their Gothic extraction. Soft brown mosses, like faded velveteen, formed cushions upon the stone tiling, and tufts of the houseleek or sengreen sprouted from the eaves of the low surrounding buildings. A gravel walk leading from the door to the road in front was encrusted at the sides with more moss – here it was a silver-green variety, the nut-brown of the gravel being visible to the width of only a foot or two in the centre.[113]

2.4.2 The Woodlanders

Thirteen years after the great success of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy published another novel dealing with his beloved theme of rural life. *The Woodlanders* too focuses on topics such as marriage, unrequited love, and social class; however, importantly enough, rusticity and rurality are the pivotal themes for the choice of both setting and characters. The characters of this novel are neither shepherds nor farmers, but – as the title suggests – timbermen and timber merchants. It is set in the fictional village of Little Hintock hidden among "trees, timber or fruit-bearing", where "the leaves lie so thick in autumn as to completely bury the track."[114] It might seem like an idyllic setting, confirmed more than once by the characters themselves; however, as the story progresses, it displays how a place like Hintock can show hostility to those who do not belong there.

Once again, nature covers a crucial role in the novel, perhaps the most important of them all, with personifications and voices given by the author. The main character is Grace Melbury, the daughter of the timber merchant George Melbury who devoted his life and money to his daughter's expensive education. Mr Melbury also wishes his daughter to marry Giles Winterborne a childhood friend of Grace. But when Giles loses

[112] W. Irving, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
[113] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, cit., pp. 74-75.
[114] *Id*. *The Woodlanders*. 1887. London, Wordsworth Classics, 1996, p. 5.

his house and a small fortune, Melbury changes his mind and decides that Grace should marry the new physician in the village – Dr. Edgar Fitzpiers – instead. The plot of the novel revolves around the matrimonial issues between Grace, Fitzpiers and the poor Giles, who never renounced loving Grace. Almost every character is in complete harmony with nature or has something to do with it, except for Fitzpiers and his lover Felice Charmond. There is a clear division of the characters: Giles Winterborne stands for nature and rural life[115], whereas Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers are the complete opposite and it seems that nature acts against them. At last, the position that Grace Melbury occupies is rather a liminal one: between nature and humans, rural life and city life, given her education and manners. She knows how to behave outside the small village, but she is also part of the rural community, being born in it.

Throughout the novel there are different descriptions of the houses, cottages, and other buildings; again, covered in ivy, or vegetation of other kinds, and surrounded by blooming gardens. However, while more focus was given on the exterior of the houses in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in *The Woodlanders* the focus shifts to the relationship between man and nature.

There is no thorough description of the character's clothing or physical appearance; instead, there are long descriptions of how the characters are in line – or contrast – with their surroundings, whether it is a house or nature itself. The very first example is given at the beginning of the book, where Marty South is introduced.

> In the room from which this cheerful blaze proceeded he beheld a girl seated on a willow chair, and busily working by the light of the fire, which was ample and of wood. With a billhook in one hand and a leather glove, much too large for her, on the other, she was making spars, such as are used by the thatchers, with great rapidity. She wore a leather apron for this purpose, which was also much too large for her figure. On her left hand lay a bindle of the straight, smooth hazel rods called spar-gads – the raw material of her manufacture; on her right, a heap of chips and ends – the refuse – with which the fire was maintained; in front, a pile of the finished articles. To produce them she took up each gad, looked critically at it from end to end, cut it to length, split it into four, and sharpened each of the quarters with

[115] See M. Williams. "A Post-Darwinian Viewpoint of Nature 1972" in R. P. Draper (ed.). *op. cit.,* pp. 170-179.

> dexterous blows, which brought it to a triangular point precisely resembling that of a bayonet.[116]

This passage shows something present throughout the entire novel: the people in the village busily working. Marty South is a young girl who takes care of her sick father and does his manual hard work for him. Here, is what the villagers do on a daily basis to sustain their families, and although it is hard, especially for a young girl, Marty seems to be in an environment that fits her perfectly. The sense of a close-knit community is very important in the novel, and there is a passage that shows how the villagers are coordinated in their routines:

> The woodlanders everywhere had already bestirred themselves, rising this month of the year at the far less dreary time of absolute darkness. It had been above an hour earlier, before a single bird had untucked his head, that twenty lights were struck in as many bedrooms, twenty pairs of shutters opened, and twenty pairs of eyes stretched to the sky to forecast the weather of the day.[117]

As the villagers reflect one another's habits, so do the animals that leave the outside world to humans:

> Owls that had been catching mice in the outhouses, rabbits that had been eating the winter-greens in the gardens, and stoats that had been sucking the blood of the rabbits, discerning that their human neighbours were on the move, discreetly withdrew from publicity, and were seen and heard no more till nightfall.[118]

In Little Hintock, the villagers seem to be perfectly aligned with nature's rhythms and depend on them. In fact, "the country man, who is obliged to judge the time of day from changing in external nature, sees a thousand successive tints and traits in the landscape which are never discerned by him who hears the regular chime of a clock"[119]; in other words, the countryman's eyes can somehow see more and deeper than those of townsfolk. Nature can be both an ally or an enemy, it decides the harvest's fate, the blossoming of flowers, and other crucial things which a countryman is

[116] Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, cit., p. 9.
[117] *Ivi*. p. 20.
[118] *Ivi*. pp. 20-21.
[119] *Ivi*. p. 90.

inevitably bound to. The perfect example of this bond between humans and nature is, as previously said, by Giles Winterborne; a man who not only is in total harmony with earth but sometimes seems also to merge with it and become one. This is first revealed when he encounters Marty South on his way home, who reminds him he promised to plant the trees since it seems he is the only one to do it successfully:

> [What he had forgotten was that] there were a thousand young fir trees to be planted in a neighbouring spot which had been cleared by the woodcutters, and that he had arranged to plant them with his own hands. He had a marvellous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on; so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days.[120]

Giles's connection to nature is stronger than anyone else's in the village; this also happens, as previously seen, with Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, who had a special connection with everything related to farming and sheep caring. Thomas Hardy chose fictional characters who are strictly connected with nature to be his novel's protagonists, giving them the power to communicate and cooperate with their environment that might seem unknown – almost mystical – to humans. In doing so, Hardy created round and complete characters, with aspects drawn from real countrymen, and according to Martin "he was able to present the slow-moving peasants in the true pattern of their environment; and he was able to do this because he understood something of the natural wisdom of the unlettered countryman whose life in close contact with nature had given him a mind full of a simple and worshipful love for the soil."[121] Winterborne's special bond with natural forces is also known by the villagers themselves, so much so that Grace often sees Giles not as human anymore, but as a men-nature hybrid:

> He looked and smelt like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as cornflowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about his that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season

[120] *Ivi*, p. 54.
[121] E. W. Martin. *Op. cit.,* p. 253.

> has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards.[122]

Furthermore, when Giles' image turns up in Grace's mind, she thinks of him "as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation: sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen, […] sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips."[123] While Winterborne is pictured as a "faun-like figure under the green canopy and over the brown floor" [124]through Grace's eyes, she can only run after him, almost being a mere accessory to nature. Standing between human and nature, Grace finds a place where she coexists with the latter and sometimes embellishes it, where "she looked so lovely in the green world about her; her pink cheeks, her simple light dress, and the delicate flexibility of her movements acquired such rarity from their wild-wood setting"[125]; however, the "green world" that is embodied by Winterborne, is not embodied by Grace, she can only be an ornament and let it surround her in its landscape function. Despite this dichotomy, Grace still belongs to the village of Little Hintock, where she has found all the happiness that she knows of and "suffered many a heartache at being sent away […] and left [her family] all here in the wood so happy!"[126]

At the end of the novel Grace acknowledges the difference between her and Winterborne and, referring to him and Marty, openly states what before was only in her thoughts, that Marty "and he could speak in a tongue that nobody else knew – not even [her] father, though he came nearest knowing – the tongue of the trees and fruits and flowers themselves."[127]

Anti-nature, on the other hand, is represented by Dr. Fitzpiers, Grace's husband. Fitzpiers was not born in the village and does not belong there, as explicitly said in chapter 17: "Winter in a solitary house in the country, without society, is tolerable, nay, even enjoyable and delightful, given certain conditions; but these are not the conditions which attach to the life of a professional man who drops into such a place by mere accident. They were present to the lives of Winterborne, Melbury and Grace; but not to

[122] T. Hardy. *The Woodlanders*, cit., pp. 171-172.
[123] *Ivi*, p. 230.
[124] *Ivi*, p. 239.
[125] *Ivi*, p. 141.
[126] *Ivi*, p. 185.
[127] *Ivi*, p. 274.

the doctor's."[128] When Fitzpiers first sees Grace, he does not believe that such a lovely and well-mannered lady might be born and bred in the village of Little Hintock; however, when the two marry and he moves to the Melbury's cottage, the doctor starts feeling uncomfortable and finds himself in a forbidden relationship with the other anti-nature character in the novel. When his actions are uncovered by Grace and other mischief happens, he is forced to leave the village, wishing not to come back ever again. In the end, when he and Grace decide to give a second opportunity to their marriage, it is as if Grace abandoned the "nature" part of her and Fitzpiers the "city" part of him. The last pages of the novel contain a beautiful metaphor to represent this: "Boughs bearing such leaves hung low around, and completely enclosed them, so that it was as if they were in a great green vase, which had moss for its bottom and leaf sides. Here they sat down."[129] The last passage shows how Grace and Fitzpiers, by choosing to stay together, also chose to live in a terrarium-like environment; surrounded by moss and leaves which inescapably enclose them in.

2.5 Rurality Represented in Modern Novels

This small section is dedicated to some of the most evocative novels of the 20th century, as far as cottagecore is concerned. However, unlike the previous sections, this one will lack a deep and thorough analysis of them; the main purpose is to acknowledge them and give them proper space since they are worth mentioning. Since this research focuses on the Victorian age – considered the birth of cottagecore as it is now – more modern novels will not occupy that much space. Despite this premise, it does not mean that modern novels are to be deemed less valuable in creating cottagecore aesthetic; on the contrary, they play a crucial role since they are the first example of how cottagecore works. They take 19th-century elements, which can be seen in the previously analysed novels, and romanticise and embellish them.

[128] *Ivi*, p. 103.
[129] *Ivi*, p. 297.

Fig. 1 Illustration by Anna Bond for the cover of the Penguin Puffin in Bloom edition of Anne of Green Gables, 2014.

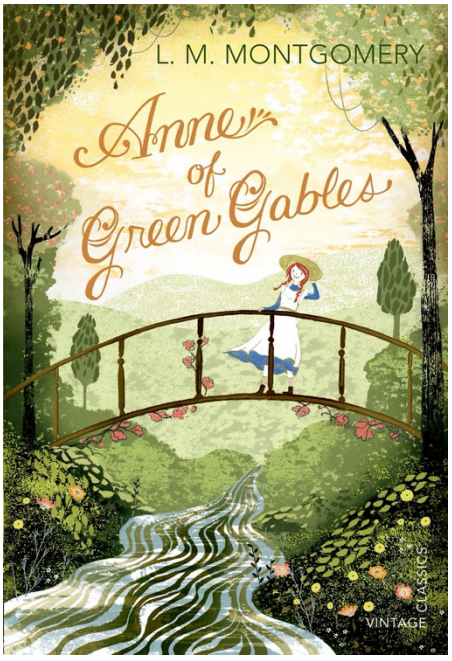

Fig. 2 Illustration for the cover of the Penguin Vintage Classics edition of Anne of Green Gables, 2013.

The first, and arguably the clearest, example of this phenomenon is shown in *Anne of Green Gables*, published in 1908 by the Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery. As often happens with "cottagecore" novels, also *Anne of Green Gables* is considered a children's novel. The story, set in the late 19th century, revolves around the protagonist Anne Shirley, an orphan who was mistakenly adopted by two middle-aged siblings: Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, who asked the orphanage for a boy who would help them work on their farm. Despite this mistake, Anne's loving and caring personality helps her in her mission of being loved and accepted first by their adoptive parents and after by everyone in the fictional town of Avonlea (Prince Edward Island, Canada)[130]. The cottagecore aesthetic is present throughout the whole novel and can be seen as the first thing in the covers themselves (fig. 1-2). It can be seen how in both covers Anne is pictured with her signature straw hat, a long and simple dress and surrounded by blooming flowery fields. It is indeed an idyllic representation, which is quite loyal to the book.

[130] C. Lowne. "Anne of Green Gables". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 7 Dec. 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anne-of-Green-Gables. Accessed 20 January 2024.

Another 20th-century "idyllic" novel is *The Secret Garden* (1911), written three years after *Anne of Green Gables*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett and considered to be "the book that embodies those [cottagecore] vibes"[131].

Other novels that are worth mentioning are *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and *Cider with Rosie* (1959). To conclude, cottagecore is not only a novel's prerogative, but proper guides and manuals can be found; for instance, *The Little Book of Cottagecore* (2021) by Emily Kent, or *The Little Book of Hygge* (2017) by Meik Wiking can be considered the handbooks for those who want to know everything about cottagecore and life their lives according to it.

[131] A. Rosenfeldt. "The Epitome of Cottagecore – A Re-view of The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett". *Amy Rosenfeldt Otherworldly Author*, 22 Apr. 2022, https://amy-rosenfeldt.com/the-secret-garden/. Accessed 20 Jan. 2024.

Chapter 3. Visual Representations of the Rural and Cottagecore Aesthetic

3.1 General notions of the Rural and Cottagecore aesthetic in films and TV series

With so many opportunities and options that the 21st century provides, those feelings of cosiness and tranquillity that could once be found only in books can now be in everyone's daily activities, simply by turning on the television or navigating the internet. Nowadays resources are accessible to pretty much everyone, and if people want to draw inspiration from someone on the internet, or simply to find some comforting film after a long day, they will just have to go online. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, and others, give people the opportunity to choose from an infinite selection of films and TV series that evoke 'rurality' and that visual 'idyll'.

Although they are not specific genres, Rural, Pastoral and Cottagecore can be found as categories of films and TV series (as well as books) in plenty of blogs, reviews, or lists. Across the internet people often agree when defining a certain film as "Cottagecore"; in fact, every film that depicts cosiness, comfort and slow life could be defined as Cottagecore. However, the internet agreed on imposing nonwritten rules that a film must follow to be "labelled" as cottagecore. The most prominent could be the palette choice as happens with content creators,[132] the tones would be warm and visually relaxing. There would be brown, white, yellow, orange, and also green nuances that, unlike colder tones such as blue or grey, convey cosiness, warmth, and comfort. The same applies to the choice of the soundtrack, as previously said.

The majority of "cottagecore films" are adaptations based on famous Victorian novels; *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992), based on Emily Brontë's masterpiece, Roman Polański's *Tess* (1979) adapted from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) to mention some. Certainly, many others are not adaptations but still deliver those cosy vibes that people long for.

[132] See Chapter 1, p. 4.

Another key point is for the film to involve scenery of simplicity, preferably the rural life of a small farm-owner, or a coming-of-age story set in the countryside. With little regard to the plot itself, what matters is that it is not too intricate; it has to be linear and simple. The selected films, and TV series, are all adaptations of famous novels already discussed or mentioned before. The purpose of this choice is to display the similarities – or differences – between the novel and the screen adaptation and to confirm the aforesaid sensations and images that the novels evoke. Important to bear in mind is that being relatively new, these screen adaptations tend to exaggerate, or even make up, certain points of the original novels. This might be for the sole purpose of visual enjoyment, to create an inviting a pleasing atmosphere.

3.1.1 Armstrong's *Little Women* and Gerwig's *Little Women*

L. M. Alcott's masterpiece *Little Women* inspired numerous screen adaptations, starting from 1917 up to the present day. Whether in a TV series, musical, film, or even anime,[133] the story of *Little Women* is always comforting and enjoyable to watch. In this section two out of the many adaptations are considered; the most famous and – according to criticism – the most successful.[134] Although, as seen, the novel does not provide long and detailed descriptions of the places – both inside and outside – thanks to cinematic adaptations this absence is filled with beautiful images of the inside of the houses and the landscapes that evoke the rurality.

The first of these two adaptations came out in 1994, directed by Gillian Armstrong and distributed by Columbia Pictures. The Academy Award nominee film sees Winona Ryder as the headstrong tomboy protagonist Jo March as well as other famous actors such as Kirsten Dust in the role of Amy March, a young Christian Bale as Laurie, Susan Sarandon as Marmee and Gabriel Byrne as Professor Bhaer. What differentiates this film from the more recent one is the general cosy atmosphere that permeates the scenes of everyday life, marked by warmer colours, tiny details of the house and, on the whole, the representation of the characters' domesticity and caring.[135]

[133] Japanese cartoons.
[134] L. D'Onofrio. "The 'Little Women' Project". *The Michigan Daily*, 20 Mar. 2023.
[135] J. Maslin. "The Gold Standard For Girlhood Across America". *The New York Times*. 1994.

Greta Gerwig's Academy Award Winner *Little Women*, on the other hand, owes part of its great success to the famous actors covering the principal roles, and the costumes which granted the award for "Best Costume Design". Released in 2019 by Sony Pictures, the film includes actors such as Saoirse Ronan (as the protagonist Jo March), Emma Watson (Meg), Florence Pugh (Amy), and Timothée Chalamet (Laurie). Also, Marmee is interpreted by Laura Dern and Aunt March by none other than the brilliant Meryl Streep. Despite not being identical to the novel, the skilled performances of the actors and Gerwig's direction granted positive reactions and appreciation from the audience.

The first thing to notice when making a comparison between the two adaptations is that while in Armstrong's *Little Women,* the story opens linearly following the novel, in Gerwig's the story is a non-linear one, employing flashbacks and fast-forwards. For instance, while the opening scene of Armstrong's adaptation shows the four sisters and Marmee reading their father's letter, Gerwig chooses to begin with Jo selling her writings, seven years after the beginning of the story. Despite this and other differences, certain central scenes look pretty much the same, and not only are true to the novel but also portray the essence of cosiness. The famous scene where Marmee and her daughters are snuggled on a chair reading their father's letter looks quite the same in both adaptations (fig. 3 and 4).

Fig. 3 Amy reading father's letter with Meg, Jo, Beth and Marmee. From Gillian Armstrong's Little Women*, 1994.*

Fig. 4 Marmee reading father's letter with Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. From Greta Gerwig's Little Women*, 2019.*

Although slightly different, these two intimate images depict affection, – both for their father and for each other as well – domesticity and snugness. To sit all together by the fireside on a cold Winter Day, with stockings hanging on the fireplace (despite the absence of the father) might sound quite idyllic to people who never experienced the pleasure of relaxing and enjoying the bliss moments with their family.

A thing to notice, when it comes to the March family's house, is that in the novel it is described as "an old, brown house, looking rather bare and shabby"[136] which suggests the poorness of its owners, stressed again by comparison to Mr. Laurence's "stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury, from the big coach house and well-kept grounds to the conservatory and the glimpses of lovely things one caught between the rich curtains".[137] On the other hand, the adaptations do not particularly capture the poverty of the household. On the contrary – and especially in Gerwig's adaptation – the March's looks more like a mansion rather than a simple and small house (fig. 6). Armstrong's adaptation looks more similar to the one described in the novel instead, made with hardwood, with a small garden on the side, bordered by a wooden fence enclosed by and surrounded by the woods; everything of this house is evoking cottagecore (fig. 5).

[136] Alcott. *Little Women*, p. 71.
[137] *Ibid*.

Fig. 5 March family's house in Gillian Armstrong's Little Women.

In Gerwig's *Little Women*, the house is of dark grey nuances and seems rather bare compared to the other version. The shape of the two houses is quite the same, and they are both limited by the woods; however, while Armstrong's conveys warmth and snugness, Gerwig's choice of colour and lack of small details that make the difference make the house colder.

Fig. 6 March family's house in Greta Gerwig's Little Women.

Nevertheless, the inside of both houses perfectly reflects the cosiness and warmth of the novel, and thanks to small but important details also reflect the cottagecore ideal house. For instance, in the famous scene of the hair styling where Jo accidentally burns Meg's hair (fig. 7), or in the sisters' playroom where they dress up and act Jo's screenplays (fig. 8). Not minding the scenes themselves but rather searching for tiny details in the furniture and trinkets is where the rusticity can be seen.

In Armstrong's adaptation, the hair styling scene is set in the kitchen, with Hannah (March family's servant) busily working and the sisters doing their activities while Jo tries to curl Meg's hair. It is a happy scene of domesticity (despite the aforesaid consequences) where five people are reunited in a small kitchen, adorned with dried flowers hanging upside down on the upper-left corner, iron pots on the stove on the right and cleaning supplies in a wooden basket.

Fig. 7 The March sisters and Hannah in the kitchen, while Jo styles Meg's hair. Gillian Armstrong's Litte Women.

The same atmosphere can be found in the playroom scene from Gerwig's adaptation. The sisters are dressed up to practice Jo's screenplay as this is their favourite game to play together. The rustic snugness is conveyed through the small paper butterfly hanging from the ceiling, the old rocking chair where Amy is sitting, the rack of costumes in the back, but most importantly by the wooden planks in which the room is covered and the warm lights that come through the window and from the small

lanterns hung here and there. Other trinkets and ornaments that can be found throughout the whole scene contribute to giving it an intimate atmosphere, typical of the novel.

Fig. 8 The March sisters practicing in their playroom in Greta Gerwig's adaptation.

It is important to remember, however, that while the common idea of rural England might be an idealised one, it has been publicised so much that Victorian people believed it to be true, as Andrews states "the idea of the home as a snug nook, the nursery of virtue, protected from the noisy, public world, transferred itself to the idealized countryside. 'Little home scenes, composed the dominant character of English rural scenery […]".[138]

The last analysed scene is that of Meg and Mr. Brooke's marriage. In both adaptations this scene is beautifully represented: set in the March's garden, the sisters are wearing their flowy and colourful Summer dresses, while dancing and celebrating the small intimate wedding. The people are surrounded by green colours and adorned with the wildflowers of the garden, carefully picked up by them (fig. 9). They are dancing in circles, singing, and having fun, not caring for a moment about their financial situation; they appreciate and celebrate the little things and perfectly blend in with the flowers and blossoming trees (fig. 10). This is perhaps the epitome of cottagecore: to be surrounded, almost to blend, with nature, to find happiness in the

[138] M. Andrews. *A Sweet View*, cit., p. 178.

little things that life can give and celebrate every small victory achieved – as well as picking flowers and using them as decoration.

Fig. 9 Beth and Amy picking up and arranging flowers for Meg's wedding, in Greta Gerwig's Little Women.

Fig. 10 Older Amy dancing and singing at Meg's wedding, in Gillian Armstrong's Little Women.

3.1.2 Far from the Madding Crowd

Directed by Thomas Vinterberg, with the screenplay written by David Nicholls, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is an adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel, released in the United Kingdom in 2015. The film sees Carey Mulligan as Bathsheba Everdene and Matthias Schoenaerts as Gabriel Oak. Other minor characters are respectively interpreted by Michael Sheen (Boldwood), Tom Sturridge (Sergeant Troy), Juno Temple (Fanny Robbin) and Jessica Barden (Liddy). This film, as often happens with adaptations of Victorian novels, comprehends every event occurring in the novel with a result of total reliability. In contrast to the previously discussed films, *Far from the Madding Crowd* lacks that domesticity and cosiness typical of *Little Women* and therefore of cottagecore itself. However, this film portrays something not yet seen, that is the rural countryside, the importance of a close-knit community and the daily activities of country people. The film, like in the novel, does not need its character to wear skirts adorned with trims and laces and petticoats, or exaggerated dresses, nor to show the richness of Victorian mansions; it is a portrayal of simple and mindful life that revolves around seasonality and the cycles of nature.

The film opens with a short frame where Bathsheba is presented; it is important to bear in mind that while the novel opens with Gabriel Oak's perspective, Vinterberg chose to give space to Bathsheba consequently displaying her perspective of the story. The novel indeed revolves around the three suitors (Gabriel, Boldwood and Troy) fighting for Bathsheba's love, but unfortunately, this overshadowed Gabriel's plot. In the film, Bathsheba's internal monologue is immediately followed by the line "Dorset, England 1870. 200 Miles outside London",[139] to stress the – not only physical – distance between the country world and the city world. The first peek of the landscape that is given is one fully immersed in nature (fig. 11), with sheep grazing and the sky coloured in tones of red, pink, and purple, to show that when the sun rises so does the shepherd, in the countryside.

[139] T. Vinterberg, director. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Fox Searchlight Pictures and BBC Films, 2015.

Fig. 11 Landscape opening scene in Far from the Madding Crowd.

This image is an idyllic one in the eye of the city dweller and, according to Andrews, "that idyll defines the spirit of the English countryside that will dominate Victorian sensibilities. The countryside becomes the out-of-doors experience of 'sweet home-feeling'. It externalizes the snug home into little rural scenes where the natural and the cultivated, the high and low in class, all blend harmoniously […]".[140] Hence, the romanticisation of the countryside is not a new phenomenon that appeared with cottagecore but has existed since Victorian Age and was "apparently established generations ago and continue still".[141] What is often forgotten is that living in the countryside – in this case, being a shepherd – does not only mean waking up in a stunning place surrounded by nature, taking walks on "Sunday afternoons when the weather is fine",[142] and breathing fresh air. It also means waking up early on cold winter days to take care of the flock, checking on the fields and starting working as soon as the light comes up.[143] In the film, as in the novel, this hard life is portrayed by Gabriel Oak, although he does not seem to particularly despise it; on the contrary, as said Gabriel Oak is in total harmony with nature and perhaps for this reason everything that has to do with nature and natural phenomena does not bother him at all.

[140] Andrews, *A Sweet View*, cit., p. 167.
[141] *Ibid*.
[142] J. W. Beach. "The Technique of Thomas Hardy" in R. P Draper (ed.). *op. cit.*, pp. 64-82, p. 73.
[143] See *Ibid.*

The scene in which Gabriel Oak formally meets Bathsheba is useful to further show this connection that he has with the countryside and consequently with its inhabitants. In chapter four Gabriel Oak seeks an excuse to introduce himself to Bathsheba. By chance one of his sheep had died leaving him with a new-born lamb that he decides to give to Bathsheba as a gift. In the film this scene is first set on the outside,

Fig. 12 Gabriel giving the new-born lamb to Bathsheba in Bathsheba's aunt's house.

in Bathsheba's aunt's garden, to then move to the inside of the house (fig. 12), which briefly shows how a small countryside cottage can be.

This short frame slightly reveals the naked inside of a cottage; unlike in *Little Women* where the rooms would be filled with trinkets or utensils (e.g. fig. 7, 8) in this cottage the walls are bare, and the only visible ornament is a bouquet of dried flower hanging from the ceiling. The house is simple and unpretentious, with a couple of rattan chairs and a decorated oil lamp. The choice of gifting a lamb instead of some flowers or homemade food is rather peculiar: while on one hand might be understandable for the reader since Gabriel is a shepherd, on the other, a lamb is not something one usually gives or receives; this underlines the gap between countryside and city, where in the first this kind of gift can be appreciated.

Talking again about sheep and the importance they are given in the story, there is a scene in the novel that is beautifully portrayed in the film: the sheep-washing scene. In the novel:

> The sheep-washing pool was a perfectly circular basin of brickwork in the meadows, full of the clearest water. To birds on the wing its glassy surface, reflecting the light sky, must have been visible for miles around as a glistening Cyclops' eye in a green face. The grass about the margin at this season was a sight to remember long – in a minor sort of way. Its activity in sucking the moisture from the rich damp sod was almost a process observable by the eye. […]
>
> Shepherd Oak, Jan Coggan, Moon, Poorgrass, Cain Ball, and several others were assembled here, all dripping wet to the very roots of their hair, and Bathsheba was standing by in a new riding-habit – the most elegant she had ever worn – the reins of her horse being looped over her arm. Flagons of cider were rolling about upon the green. The meek sheep were pushed into the pool by Coggan and Matthew Moon, who stood by the lower hatch, immersed to their waists; then Gabriel, who stood on the brink, thrust them under as they swam along, with an instrument like a crutch, formed for the purpose, and also for assisting the exhausted animals when the wool became saturated and they began to sink. They were let out against the stream, and through the upper opening, all impurities flowing away below.[144]

Fig. 13 Gabriel and Bathsheba washing the sheep.

This description is followed by Boldwood's marriage proposal after having received the infamous valentine from Bathsheba; little space is given, both in the novel and the film, to the sheep-washing scene. However, it is a powerful one, in the film Bathsheba actually joins the men in the pool (which is not "perfectly circular" but a large rectangular one, fig. 13). In the adaptation this duty is displayed as a joyful and playful

[144] Hardy. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, pp. 122-123.

moment where people splash each other with the water, the characters laugh and enjoy this moment of recollection and mutual help.

Another evidence of how a close-knit community such as the rural one is, is found during the harvest; a particular scene where the community gathers to pick up and split the crop. This is a scene of great impact since it shows the large number of people needed to do the job (fig. 14).

Fig. 14 The community of Weatherbury harvesting hay.

Mutual help in this story is crucial and it has been seen in different occasions, such as the fire in Gabriel's hut (chapter 3), Gabriel helping extinguish the fire (chapter 6), Gabriel saving Bathsheba's sheep (chapter 21), and so on. Furthermore, collaboration is also another key point in cottagecore philosophy; to help one another and be kind not only improve other people's life quality but also the self. Looking at it from the point of view of mere aesthetics, this scene – with its warm and earthy tones – reflects that idyll associated with pastoral. The way people are dressed, the open-field landscape and nature all around give comfort and a wish to join the countrymen in their hard work.

To close this section with another aesthetic note for what concerns buildings and clothing, two scenes of the film are particularly useful. The first one is the description of the front of Bathsheba's inherited mansion that was previously examined, with its "soft brown mosses [which] formed cushions upon the stone tiling" and "encrusted at the

sides with more moss [of a] silver-green variety".[145] In this short frame where Bathsheba is going inside her mansion, the moss-covered walls are shown as well (fig. 15).

Fig. 15 The front of Bathsheba's mansion covered in ivy and moss.

There is another subculture that is often associated with Cottagecore, Farmcore, etc., which is Dark Academia. Mainly focused on the aesthetic rather than – unlike Cottagecore – being a lifestyle, Dark Academia is based on Classical culture, gothic architecture, earthy dark colours, and a love for the decadent; hence, ivy or moss-covered walls are significant in both Cottagecore and Dark Academia.

The last one portrays Fanny Robbins on her way to marry Sergeant Troy (fig. 16) not knowing she is headed to the wrong church; this scene is the equivalent of chapter 16 of the novel. However, while in the novel the only perspective that is given is Sergeant Troy's, who is impatiently waiting on the altar, in the film the director added some scenes where Fanny walks on the streets of the town going to the other church. As it happened – again – in *Little Women* at Meg and Mr. Brooke's wedding in which women wore a flower crown, it also happens here, where Fanny is shown wearing a flower crown and holding a bouquet of daisies and lavender. It would be uncommon to see a bride wearing a dress such as Fanny's or holding a bouquet of hand-picked wildflowers in 2024, apart from non-Christian weddings perhaps; it could be more of a Pagan or New Age tradition, although this will not be further examined.

[145] *Ivi*, pp. 74-75.

Fig. 16 Fanny Robbins on her way to her wedding, wearing a flower crown and holding wildflowers.

Fig. 16 Fanny Robbins on her way to her wedding, wearing a flower crown and holding wildflowers.

To be concise, it would not be odd for people embracing cottagecore in the 21st century to also embrace pantheism or some kind of faith revolving around nature and natural phenomena, which results in unconventional wedding ceremonies not set in Christian churches but rather in the open air, in the woods or at the seashore. For instance, when searching for "cottagecore wedding" pictures on the internet, what catches one's eye is the significant presence of wildflowers, whether they are in the bride's bouquet, on her head, and, most importantly, all around.

3.1.3 Anne with an E

Adapted from *Anne of Green Gables*, Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery's masterpiece written in 1908, *Anne with an E* is only one of the many adaptations, released between 2017 and 2019 by CBC. As in the novel, the adaptation tells the story of Anne Shirley (played by Amybeth McNulty), an 11-year-old redhaired girl with a huge imagination who is mistakenly sent to live in Prince Edward Island, Canada with the middle-aged siblings Marilla (Geraldine James) and Matthew Cuthbert (Robert H. Thomson), who wanted a boy to help to work in their farm. However, the Cuthberts decide to adopt her anyway, so the story revolves around the vicissitudes and adventures of Anne Shirley Cuthbert, now living in Green Gables. Throughout the three

seasons of the TV series, we see Anne's growth in a place that she can finally call home where she makes friends, goes to school, learns, and gets in contact with nature, her most beloved friend. Although there are some differences between the original novel by Lucy Maud Montgomery and Moira Walley-Beckett's adaptation – starting with the chosen title – *Anne with an E* is still a comforting series to watch thanks to the beautiful images and cosy and romantic plot.[146]

Fig. 17 CBC's original poster of Anne.

Fig. 18 Netflix's poster of Anne with an E.

The comfort in this adaptation resides in the representation of that "idyll" typically related to rurality and rusticity. Every scene – even the saddest ones – shows a green background of the trees, the inviting and cosy country house, or other comforting settings with calming colours which makes the whole extremely pleasing. The posters (fig. 17, fig. 18) themselves are proof of the beautiful and inviting pictures of the series; showing Anne adorned with flowers and immersed in nature. This representation is present throughout the whole series as Anne expresses herself through nature and wants it to be part of her daily life.

[146]See Pearson, Vivienne. "Anne with an E: scope for the imagination in Netflix's reworking of LM Montgomery classic". *The Guardian*, 13 Sep. 2021.

In the very first episode of the first season, Anne puts on a poorly made flower crown and picks flowers from a tree (fig. 19); Marilla looks disappointed and tells Anne not to clutter her room or her person with flowers and that she should have left them on the tree, to which Anne replies that she should not have since this would shorten the flowers' life and if she was a blossom she would not want to be picked up either.[147]

Fig. 19 Marilla scolding Anne for having picked up flowers and wanting to bring them to her room. Episode 1, season 1.

Anne is extremely intelligent and well-read, since – as explained in the series – she spent all her time in the orphanage with her nose buried in books, to escape from the bullying and the abuse. She knows the difference between good and bad and has the gift to appreciate the little things that life can give, such as flowers in this case. Despite her sharpness, she can sometimes be naïve; perhaps this is a consequence of years of abuse and violence which led to her fervid imagination to grow and to consider every slightly kind gesture from others to be a blessing.

[147]"Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny". *Anne with an E*, created by Moira Walley-Beckett, season 1, episode 1, CBC Television, 2017.

She eventually will learn who to trust and will make friends at her school in Avonlea, not before being bullied for her unusual, often eccentric, personality. For instance, on her first day of school, she shows up wearing a woven hat decorated with wildflowers on top of her red braids (fig. 20) because she "wanted to make a good impression" and her hat was "so plain"[148] without decoration.

Fig. 20 Anne's first day of school in Avonlea, showing up with flowers in her hat. Season 1, episode 3.

She has already made friends with Diana (portrayed by Dalila Bela) who introduces Anne to her friends at school. Unfortunately, the girls do not accept her right away given their social status and the fact that Anne is an orphan, thus an easy target to bully by middle-class people.

Anne is a kind-hearted young girl who loves to read and write fantastical stories about the imaginary Princess Cordelia, and soon enough she is accepted into the girls' friend circle. One day she discovers an abandoned little house in the woods where she brings her friends and creates the "Avonlea Story Club" where they can write stories and read them to each other (fig. 21).

[148] "But What Is So Headstrong as Youth?". *Op. cit.*, *id.*, season 1, episode 3, 2017.

Fig. 21 Anne, Diana and Ruby create the "Avonlea Story Club" in the little house in the woods. Season 1, episode 4.

When Anne first finds the little house, it presents itself wrecked and ruined, but thanks to her imagination and care she makes it a cosy place where she can hide from the sometimes harsh, outside world. She creates a place for her imagination to freely flow, without adults and preoccupations; she would use it as a sanctuary for reading, as a place to hide when skipping school, and in season 2 a place where her friend Cole can hide to create his art and escape from the bullies. She also decorates it with many flowers and trinkets that she found, she places books to read and later with Cole's sculptures and drawings.

Anne's kind personality makes her take care of everyone around her, nature and animals included. She also befriends a fox while staying in her cosy hut, and tries to communicate with her and as a result, it seems that the fox understands what Anne says and feels-. The presence of the fox is important, she is a sort of familiar to Anne, and the two create a bond and can communicate. This bond with nature is shown throughout the series; Anne is always grateful to be surrounded by the small creatures of the countryside (fig. 22) and the blooming nature.

Fig. 22 Anne in a flowery field, smiling at the butterflies for choosing her as a rest point. Season 2, episode 1.

She also does not mind the changing of seasons as other characters do (e.g. Bash dreads Winter and the cold weather[149]), on the contrary, she embraces everything that is nature-related. At some point, she even befriends a big old tree (fig. 23) and is shown hugging and talking to it, as if it was an old friend.

Fig. 23 Anne hugging a tree before climbing and talking to it. Season 2, episode 1.

[149] See "I Protest Against Any Absolute Conclusion". *Op. cit., id.,* season 2, episode 6, 2018.

As far as domesticity is concerned, *Anne with an E* depicts all the sides of living in the countryside, from the excitement of being surrounded by nature to the struggles of poverty and social class-related issues. Anne is a very humble character, grateful for all the things that are given to her, starting from when the Cuthberts give her their surname. However, she is still a teenager and is normal for her to want cute "cute dresses with puff sleeves".[150] When she learns that cute dresses are expensive, and the Cuthberts are having financial troubles, she is ready to give up the dress she received as a gift and others of her belongings. Despite being the boy that the Cuthberts initially wanted, Anne proves to them that she can be helpful in housework as well; she collects eggs from the hen house, helps cleaning and, although not very good at it in the beginning, cooking, and baking. There are numerous scenes in which the characters are engaged in cooking, which seems to be an important part of the rural community. The girls cook for their schoolmate Gilbert when they hear that his father died (fig. 24),[151] Marilla is either shown cooking or sewing clothes, Anne bakes a cake for the village fair,[152] and so on.

Fig. 24 Ruby and Anne cooking for Gilbert. Season 1, episode 6.

[150] "Tightly Knotted to a Similar String". *Op. cit., id.,* season 1, episode 5, 2017.
[151] "Remorse Is the Poison of Life". *Op. cit., id.,* season 1, episode 6, 2017.
[152] "The Summit of My Desires". *Op. cit., id.*, season 3, episode 6, 2019.

Housework is a key point here, and cooking is one of those skills that all members (especially nineteenth-century women) of the families in a rural community should have.

Anne with an E promotes important values and beliefs typical of a rural community and country people; humbleness, sense of duty, kindness, and gratitude are only a few of them.

3.2 The aesthetic of Slow Life in other media

Considering the premises given in Chapter 1, the, sometimes overwhelming, rapid growth of technologies and consumerism culture led some people to detach from it and search for a more calm and slow life in the countryside.[153] That "disease of modern life"[154] that Andrews talks about regarding the Victorian period is spreading again in the 21st century. This phenomenon, referred to as 'Cottagecore', is simply the story repeating itself; as it happened in the 19th century when people "retreated"[155] to the countryside as a reaction towards the Industrial Revolution, it is happening now with people escaping from the climate crisis towards a more ecologically mindful lifestyle. There are plenty of people across the internet sharing their journey to a more sustainable and environmentally conscious life, quitting their jobs to dedicate their lives to taking care of their families and going against urban modern society. These people's lifestyles are often addressed to – also by themselves – as "rural", "idyllic", "rustic", and specifically "cottagecore".

It is through pictures or short videos that these people show their world; the inside of their houses (typically cottages), their gardens, their handmade crafts, the food they make, etc. Strictly aesthetically speaking, colours and lights play an important role in what these pictures want to convey; as said, soft and earthy tones, are often put in contrast to the bright greens of nature (fig. 25, fig. 26). Some also decide to choose a darker palette, such as brown, forest green, etc.

[153] See Bracke, "Pastoral", *op. cit.,* pp. 49-78.
[154] See Andrews, *A Sweet View,* cit., p. 204.
[155] Bracke. *Op. cit.,* p. 50.

Fig. 25 Cottagecore kitchen, post by @momentsbyjemma.

FIg. 26 Baking with sourdough, post by @momentsbyjemma.

By reading these people's blogs we can understand that there is deep research on how to live in a more sustainable and rustic way, preferring second-hand and trying not to buy things that are deemed "essential" according to the capitalistic society. However, the aesthetic part is crucial in Cottagecore aesthetic, and this can be seen in what is posted on the profiles of this community. Whether it is a photo of their outfits (fig. 27) or their houses (fig. 28), every detail and items are carefully selected, to obtain an aesthetically pleasing and evoking image.

Fig. 27 Cottagecore outfit, post by @the.owl.and.her.bluebell.

Fig. 28 Sewing station, post by @julia.hollene.

Conclusions

Considering ruralism as a "condition" of life in the 19th century, and ruralism as a reaction towards climate change, this thesis tried to display the differences and similarities between the two. If movements such as Cottagecore only appear as an aesthetic roleplay to some, the sustainability and ecological issues might help in rethinking Cottagecore as a reactionary movement, trying to fight consumerism, capitalism and, consequently, the climate crisis. As artistic movements such as Romanticism and the Picturesque praised the beauty of nature, so does Cottagecore, by idolising nature and romanticising every aspect of rural life. Cottagecore enthusiasts created a mystical world revolving around flowery summer dresses and picnics in the meadows; however, this research showed how this seemingly "escapism" is, in fact, a deeply rooted act of rebellion.

In analysing the three novels, the "rural idyll" that Bracke talks about emerged, which served as an inspiration for those who want to move to the countryside and live a rural life. *Little Women* taught the values of domesticity, caring and gratitude in a context of economic disadvantage. *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*, thanks to the long, picturesque descriptions, stand as both an idealised vision of rurality and as a representation of true rustic people.[156] These, along with other Victorian and modern novels concerning rurality, contributed to creating the "countryside of the mind",[157] a concept that is still in our minds when thinking of rural life.

Furthermore, visual representations such as cinematic adaptations, images, or even internet videos, help to enhance the "countryside of the mind", that is, to idealise the countryside even more. Cottagecore would not exist without the vast amount of information that the internet provides, and without visual examples, whether it is an image, a painting, or a film.

It might seem hypocritical to yearn for a reality long gone 200 years ago when we are demanding for everything to be rapidly improved. In the 19th century, there were not as many resources that the Western society have at present, from technology to human rights and the privilege of choice – in most cases. There was, on the other hand,

[156] See Draper, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
[157] See Andrews, *op. cit*., p. 321.

a different mentality with different priorities. For instance, modern "frivolous" problems were not contemplated (to be intended in the countryside) since there were other preoccupations to take care of; in George Eliot's words "We pay for greater emotional susceptibility too often by nervous diseases of which peasant knows nothing. To him headache is the least of physical evils, because he thinks headwork the easiest and least indispensable of all labour".[158] Being able to provide for the family, making sure that there was enough food or money for the winter. In our society this does not exist since we have the "privilege" to choose our jobs, going to the supermarket whenever we need, and so on. However, since we are privileged to choose, we can choose a different path, and by praising rurality we also praise those values that were thought lost.

To conclude, by combining old rural values and traditions with the open-mindedness we gained over the course of the centuries, we actually can do something to try and live a more sustainable and mindful life. We can choose to acquire a piece of land in the country, build a traditional English cottage and manage it responsibly, for instance, preferring renewable sources and sustainable materials. Growing products in the garden, or even a small farm, choosing to reuse rather than buy and, in general, keeping in mind that everything we do has an impact on the environment, so, therefore, we must try and make the best choice available.

[158] G. Eliot. "The Natural History of German Life". *Westminster Review*, vol. LXVI, 1856, pp. 51-79, p. 63.

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