# Trees, Woods and Literature – 32

**Planting Trees**
*Our last connection with the mythic.*
*My mother remembers the day as a girl*
*she jumped across a little spruce*
*that now overtops the sandstone house*
*where still she lives; her face delights*
*at the thought of her years translated*
*into wood so tall, into so mighty*
*a peer of the birds and the wind.*

*Too, the old farmer still stout of step*
*treads through the orchard he has outlasted*
*but for some hollow-trunked much-lopped*
*apples and Bartlett pears. The dogwood*
*planted to mark my birth flowers each April,*
*a soundless explosion. We tell its story*
*time after time: the drizzling day,*
*the fragile sapling that had to be staked.*

*At the back of our acre here, my wife and I,*
*freshly moved in, freshly together,*
*transplanted two hemlocks that guarded our door*
*gloomily, green gnomes a meter high.*
*One died, gray as sagebrush next spring.*
*The other lives on and some day will dominate*
*this view no longer mine, its great*
*lazy feathery hemlock limbs down-drooping,*
*its tent-shaped caverns resinous and deep.*
*Then may I return, an old man, a trespasser,*
*and remember and marvel to see*
*our small deed, that hurried day,*
*so amplified, like a story through layers of air*
*told over and over, spreading.*

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John Hoyer Updike was an American novelist, poet, short story writer and critic. He was born in 1932 in the small town of Shillington, in eastern Pennsylvania. When he was 13 years old the family moved to his mother's birthplace, the Hoyer farm in nearby Plowville. After completing his secondary education at Shillington High

School, he received a scholarship to Harvard, where he studied English, graduating in 1954.

As an undergraduate he edited the Harvard *Lampoon*, as well as contributing a string of articles and cartoons in his own right. His artistic talents drew him towards a career in graphic arts, and on graduation he attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford University for a year. While at Oxford, Updike met E.B. White and his wife Katharine, editors at *The New Yorker*, who encouraged him to take up a writing position at the magazine. He wrote for *The New Yorker* for two years, leaving to concentrate on his novels and other writing. He settled in Massachusetts, where he lived at various locations for the remainder of his life. He died in early 2009.

Updike is best known for the four Rabbit novels, two of which, *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest*, received the Pulitzer Prize. Apart from the four novels, his overall output was prolific – almost thirty novels in all, as well as short story collections, ten books of poetry, and a huge corpus of criticism, articles and other pieces.

Although Updike's primary medium was the novel, he was also an accomplished poet. In fact, his first book, *The Carpentered Hen*, published in 1958, was a collection of verse.

*Planting Trees* is an exploration of family myths, and how the planting and longevity of trees marks and keeps them alive. Tree planting to mark events works best with individual trees. One recalls the controversy surrounding the Millennium Forest, planted in 2000, when every household received a certificate to say it had its own "special tree" in the forest. Naturally, some went in search of their special tree, but they found it hard to find (*Irish Times, Letters to Editor*, 22 April 2003, and passim). The silvicultural reality is, of course, that all planted trees do not survive, and those that do compete vigorously with one another, with some being shaded-out by early juvenile stage.

The poem also has a deeper meaning: nothing stays the same and all things pass. Each stanza marks a moment in time, from the childhood of Updike's mother, Linda Grace Hoyer, to the poet's birth, before concluding with his marriage and thoughts on his mortality. Each verse recalls a particular day, and the tree associated with the day and person – trees in growing and remaining (for a time) provide the "connection to mythic".

In the opening verse his mother recalls the day "she jumped across a little spruce", the metre conveying the movement of the child. The tree "now overtops the sandstone house". The house is the family home at Plowville, where Updike spent his teenage years.

The second verse opens with the "old farmer still stout of step", which may be a reference to Updike's maternal grandfather, John Hoyer, who was the original owner of the farm at Plowville, and who lived with the Updike family. His grandfather, on a rainy day, set "the dogwood planted to mark my birth". Updike said in later life that he "learned quite early [the dogwood] was exactly my age, was, in a sense, me." This statement, and the fact that he was a sickly child, marks "the fragile sapling" as Updike himself.

The allegorical connection of trees with people continues into the final verse, where Updike recalls the day he and his new wife transplanted two hemlocks, when they were "freshly moved in, freshly together"… "One died, gray as sagebrush next spring", but another survived, "lazy feathery hemlock limbs down-drooping/its tent-shaped caverns resinous and deep". Updike was grey of hair, his wife fair of limb.

Like many another, Updike was not averse to reusing a good metaphor or motif, albeit with some changes to meaning and context. Hemlock is a good example; where, over a long number of years, he used the tree's architecture as a mood/scene setter. In *Rabbit Run* (published in 1960, and wherein begins the angst-ridden odyssey of Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom), a scene develops among the rhododendrons, which were "Planted all along the edges of the towering droop-limbed hemlocks that sheltered the place…" Thirty two years later, in 1992, in the novel *Seek My Face*, Updike resurrects and adds to the image: "She had loved living there when so small, but after her parents moved to Ardmore visits back felt strange, the huge droopy-limbed hemlock having grown sinister…" In one of his final pieces, a short story *The Full Glass*, published in *The New Yorker* in 2008, the image surfaces again: "With a sort of birdy animation he would faithfully lead me to the spring, down a path of boards slippery with moss from being in the perpetual damp shade of the droopy limbs of a great hemlock there. In my memory, beyond the shadows of the hemlock the spring was always in a ray of sunlight. Spidery water striders walked on its surface, and the dimples around their feet threw interlocking golden-brown rings onto the sandy bottom."

Updike was originally from Pennsylvania (Penn's woods), where eastern hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis* - is the state tree. Its crushed foliage is supposed to have a similar smell to the poisonous perennial hemlock (*Conium* spp), hence the tree's generic name. The range is from Quebec to Nova Scotia (*canadensis*), and south along the Appalachians, as far as northern Georgia and Alabama.

Eastern hemlock is under severe threat from the hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*), a sap-sucking insect accidentally introduced to the US from Asia in 1924. The adelgid has now spread across the southern parts of the species range, but its northward expansion is much slower, possibly due to the colder climate. Most of the hemlocks in the southern Appalachian Mountains have seen infestations of the insect within the last five to seven years, with many "thousands of hectares dying out within the last two to three years". Asian species of *Tsuga* are resistant to the pest, more than likely a reflection of coevolution, while western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) is moderately resistant.

*Tsuga canadensis* is rarely planted in Ireland; it does not grow well here. The late Tom Clear, Professor of Forestry at UCD, to illustrate the importance of proper species selection, was fond of telling the story of visiting an estate to offer advice to the owner who was puzzled by the slow growth of his hemlock (he had christened it "bush hemlock"). It turned out the owner had planted eastern hemlock, mistaking it for the western species.

Western hemlock is a productive species under Irish conditions, but it has never achieved major prominence; it has been largely overshadowed by Sitka spruce,

which has similar site requirements. There are number of fine productive stands, however, notably at Avondale: "Douglas fir, coast redwood, Lawson cypress, western hemlock and western red cedar have all done well…" (Carey, M. 2004. Avondale - a national forest resource. *Irish Forestry* 61(2): 20-37).

(Selection and note by *Lia coille*)