

Voice of an Angry Tree: *Trees Hate Us* on the Arkansas Radio Theatre

David Eshelman

MAYA, a little girl

I always liked trees. Climbing trees. Pressing their leaves into books.
Swinging on ropes from their branches. And I guessed that trees liked
us, too. But . . . maybe they don't like us at all. Maybe instead —

OTHER PERFORMERS

(Shouting)
TREES HATE US!

Trees Hate Us is a family comedy/horror spoof with ecological repercussions. I wrote it for the Arkansas Radio Theatre, a university community-based performance troupe operating out of rural Arkansas. The plot of *Trees Hate Us* can be summarized simply. An old red oak wants to destroy the human race. At first, it tries to hurt humans by dropping heavy limbs on them. However, when an old man chances to die against the oak's trunk, the tree moves its spirit into the man's body in an attempt to wreak havoc in human form. However, because the tree-man cannot deal adequately with the troubles that it faces—for instance, quick movement and the emotional impact of the omnipresence of wood—its attempts at mayhem are ineffective. The oak-person tries to terrorize a family, but ends up hurting his hip. As an ambulance comes to take the old man's body away, the spirit of the tree suddenly becomes afraid of leaving its trunk behind and being trapped in the human world. It pleads for help from a little girl, a member of the family that it has tried to terrorize. With her assistance, the spirit returns to the trunk; and life continues as before, with the oak still hungry for violence.

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Trees Hate Us was recorded by the Arkansas Radio Theatre, which operates on the campus of Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas. The Arkansas Radio Theatre produces recorded performances of original audio plays and audio adaptations from classic literature. These broadcasts air on the local radio station, which plays primarily jazz and easy listening music for senior citizens. The radio shows are also made available on the internet to visually impaired Arkansans through the Arkansas Information Reading Service (AIRS).¹ *Trees Hate Us* was recorded in March 2012, with first broadcast in Spring 2013.² Its cast is comprised of students, ranging in age from late teens to forties.

This play mixes familiar elements with the unexpected. *Trees Hate Us* follows familiar dramaturgical structures—specifically, the horror and family dramedy plots—but skews them. While setting off to focus on human concerns, the play instead puts a tree at the forefront. The familiar storylines and characters allow for moments of strangeness that speak of environmental concerns in ways accessible to most listeners and, specifically, to the local community.

The Plot: The Arboreal Overtakes the Human

The plot of *Trees Hate Us* adheres to Aristotelian dramaturgical structure with a beginning, middle, and end. Like most Western plays, it is structured around the resolution of a conflict. Its characters are accessible to a general audience. It employs language that is clear, with few indications of being polyvalent. In other words, audiences will find its structure familiar and comfortable. The only exceptions concern the oak as unlikely protagonist who takes over the play; and the seeming inability of the oak as a character to change as a result of events.

Trees Hate Us masquerades—sometimes alternately and sometimes simultaneously—as two different kinds of plays: it partakes of the traditions of the dramedy plot (like a *Hallmark Hall of Fame* movie) and the horror plot. On one level, *Trees Hate Us* appears to be about a broken human family: Maya, a young girl, lives with her father,

¹ It has always been the intention of the Arkansas Radio Theatre to make its broadcasts available to the wider audience through podcasts on the web, as soon as arrangements can be made with Arkansas Tech University. Plans are currently in the works to make podcasts available soon.

² *Trees Hate Us* debuted in Spring 2013 on KXRJ 91.9 FM, out of Russellville, Arkansas. The all-student cast was comprised of the following performers:

Maya . . .	Grace Quay
The Announcer . . .	Katie Jackson
Mr. Benedetti / The Old Oak . . .	Cameron Foster
Lula Dean (the grandmother) . . .	Gina Swai
Geoffrey (the father) . . .	William Vorster
The Magnolia . . .	Kerri Threlkeld
Mrs. Harold Tweet . . .	Natasha Rackley

Geoffrey, and her paternal grandmother, Lula Dean. Both Maya's mother and paternal grandfather are dead; and their absence is felt throughout the play. Geoffrey mourns his deceased wife: he sees her reflected in Maya, which causes him to worry excessively about the girl's safety. The play makes frequent references to Geoffrey's "too-expensive car," suggesting that he is trying to fill a void in his life. He is portrayed as benevolently tyrannical, stubbornly insisting that the old oak be cut down as soon as it starts dropping limbs.

Lula Dean, Maya's grandmother, exhibits even more sadness. Since the loss of her husband, she has been dating dying men from the retirement home. As Geoffrey puts it to her, "You can't keep confusing your romantic life with a hospice." However, Lula Dean insists that her willingness to befriend the dying is a strength:

Geoffrey, death scares people. *Most* people, I should say. But not me. I realized that with your father. Yes, it was no more rosebuds and jolly days, but there was still something—something beautiful—right up to the end. Most people can't appreciate that. But I have this *gift*.

It is this "gift" that causes Lula Dean to bring home Mr. Benedetti, the old man who dies against the tree trunk, allowing the oak to take human form.

According to most dramaturgical expectations, this sad little family should be the focus of the play. *Trees Hate Us* could easily have conformed to the dramedy mold, with Geoffrey at the center: by conquering threats to his young daughter, a father learns to let go of irrational fear and come to terms with his wife's death. In fact, this *is* the plot of *Trees Hate Us*—though, I would argue, not the primary plot. Geoffrey does, in truth, undergo a change—easing up on his overprotective nature as evidenced by his decision at the end to allow the tree to remain standing. His transformation can be seen in the following lines:

GEOFFREY: But . . . But trees hate us.
 MAYA: Yes, they do. But that doesn't mean we have to hate them.
 GEOFFREY: But . . . I want to protect you . . .
 MAYA: You do. But you can't save me from everything.
 GEOFFREY: Falling branches . . . strange old men . . .
 MAYA: Trees have caused a lot of trouble, Daddy; but that's why we should love them, not hate them.

This snippet of dialogue shows Geoffrey's transformation: his faltering lines suggest the evils overcome during the play ("Falling branches . . . strange old men . . .") and his realization that he cannot save his daughter from everything.

If this dialogue were truly the crux of the play, though, *Trees Hate Us* would be far less interesting from an ecological standpoint. In fact, this snippet of dialogue *uses* trees—not as a natural resource to make a house or a piece of furniture, but as a natu-

ral resource to make a play. In this section of dialogue, the tree's function is limited to bringing about a reversal on the human plane.

However, this is not the only way in which trees are portrayed. If we heard only the scenes that take place in the human world—especially those scenes where the oak's spirit has possessed the body of the old man—then the oak would come across as merely a villain. Indeed, since a horror storyline is the other subject for plot masquerade, the text makes ample use of the tropes of villainy. These moments of horror are emphasized especially by the announcer, who moves the story along in this audio play. Consider the scene where the old man's body is overtaken by the spirit of the tree. To highlight villainy in parodic fashion, the description of the scene of transformation is over-exaggerated. It partakes of conventions of horror, taking place at night in the rain. The reanimation sequence is as follows:

ANNOUNCER: And a flash appears in Mr. Benedetti's eyes . . . And the old man, reanimated, rises and throws down his hat.

OAK/BENEDETTI: Now we'll see who does the chopping!

The villainy is made comic because of exaggeration.

Instead of inspiring fear, the oak's malevolent plans provide means for comedy. Though monstrous and marked by otherness from humanity, the oak is not good at being a villain. Its speech is strange and silly. Comedy ensues around the difficulties that the oak, a rooted entity, encounters when suddenly mobile. The following sequence makes clear how the tree's attempt at villainy is used for comic effect:

MAYA: [With the old man, making their way through the rain to the house] Mr. Benedetti, did you hurt your leg?

OAK/BENEDETTI: I merely move with the gait of a biped. See me moving, one appendage before the other. I am not rooted—see—and my appendages move of their own accord.

MAYA: Move your appendages faster then. We're getting soaked.

Even though the oak professes to want to “decimate the [human] species,” its abilities fail even to frighten a little girl. The tree's efforts result in nothing more serious than scratching Maya, causing Geoffrey to bleed a little (“I have caused your limb to ooze sap”), and, generally, frightening the family a bit.

Trees Hate Us, then, appears to be about human concerns—a human family healing their wounds, a human family battling comic villainy. This plot, though, is troubled by the presence of the tree. It is especially marred by the scenes of *only trees* and—even more so—by the oak's special relationship with the magnolia. Alongside the scenes of human/tree interaction, other scenes—taking place in the tree world—are heard. These scenes set *Trees Hate Us* apart from other performance texts. Tema Milstein laments the tendency in communication studies to view “nature as mute ob-

ject” (175). *Trees Hate Us*, though, gives the audience access to arboreal characters in a separate world and with a separate plot of their own.

The world of the trees is described as “another dimension—where arboreal spirits drift like spills in a pool.” In these scenes, the audience hears the voices of the oak and the magnolia. Having spent decades near each other, the trees have a relationship like an old married couple. The oak complains of the magnolia’s “smelly flowers and evergreenery.” The magnolia calls the oak a “deciduous drip.” Nonetheless, the magnolia is very concerned that the oak is causing itself injury by dropping too many limbs.

Trees Hate Us depicts four conversations between the oak and the magnolia. When we first hear them, the oak reveals its plan to enter the body of a human being. In the second scene, the oak realizes that Mr. Benedetti has died against its drunk and enlists the help of the magnolia to push it into the human realm. The third encounter is the most unusual because it involves inter-kingdom communication. The oak, in Mr. Benedetti’s body, awaits the ambulance. As it waits, it hears the magnolia tapping against the window. Mysteriously, communication takes place:

He grabs the branch and—impulsively—brings it to his mouth in a half kiss. Somehow, in that action, he manages to hear his old friend from the tree world.

The magnolia’s message is one of grave concern. It urges the oak to give up trying to hurt humankind and to return to its trunk:

SOUND CUE: Ambulance

MAGNOLIA: And, Oak, I’m afraid if you don’t hurry, you may *never* come back.

OAK/BENEDETTI: You don’t think—?

MAGNOLIA: Your trunk is here, with no spirit.

OAK/BENEDETTI: But—

MAGNOLIA: I miss you. Come back!

OAK/BENEDETTI: You miss me?

MAGNOLIA: You’re all I have. Hurry!

It is the magnolia’s revelation of affection and fear of loss that causes the oak to overcome its pride and enlist the little girl’s help back to its trunk. Because of Maya’s assistance, the spirit of the oak returns to the tree world. In the last scene, the oak and the magnolia are again depicted side by side, with emphasis on the returned stasis. The magnolia has the last line before the announcer wraps up the play: “I’m glad you’re back, you silly old oak. Let’s make this next century a good one.”

The four scenes among the trees shift the plot’s overall focus from the humans to the trees. While the dramedy and horror plotlines have their individual climaxes—for instance, Maya learns the true nature of monsters by helping the strange old man

and Geoffrey learns to release his irrational fears through encounters with arboreal oddness—the true high point of the play is the love scene between the oak and the magnolia, when the magnolia convinces the oaks that, above all else, it wants to remain a tree. This climactic scene precipitates the other plots' resolutions. Without the oak's decision to rejoin the magnolia, Maya could never help it out. Without the return of the spirit to the trunk, Geoffrey would not be free to release his fears. Because of this scene, the oak's plot overtakes the play; and the oak, therefore, becomes the main character. This twist is significant because it moves nature to the center of an otherwise human play.

The Oak, Unchanging and Unpleasant Protagonist

Scholars have drawn attention to the difficulties of staging nature. Theresa J. May urges us to beware of what she calls “eco-minstrelsy,” where non-human depictions become merely “a reflection of human power and privilege, [where] the Other [is] transformed in a performance of human desire” (96). In other words, there is a tendency to dramatize nature in such a way that the performance's focus remains on human beings. There can be no doubt that *Trees Hate Us* anthropomorphizes nature—something which some, like Shelly R. Scott, would argue is often a dangerous strategy (114-15). But, as Baz Kershaw notes, it is notoriously difficult to write about nature within culture (quoted in Cless, 8-9). I hope that, in giving human traits to nonhuman entities, I have avoided some pitfalls through the centrality and complexity of the oak as a character. Kershaw laments that the environment can be used as “a very minor player” in some ecological performance (125). By making the oak the protagonist, I hope that I have sidestepped that charge.

The oak is unquestionably human-like in some ways, especially in its ability to engage in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Since *Trees Hate Us* is an audio play performed by human actors, the voices used for the characters come from and bear the traits of gendered performers. Since the same performer plays both Mr. Benedetti and the oak, these characters are represented by a male voice. For the magnolia, I chose to cast a female performer and, in so doing, marked the oak's and magnolia's relationship as heterosexual. Though actual trees are not gendered as humans are, it is highly likely that listeners will hear the oak as masculine and the magnolia as feminine. And, since they act like a heterosexual couple in a longstanding relationship, it is hard not to hear the oak as a grumpy old man and the magnolia as his suffering but indulgent wife. Such an understanding borrows from Greek mythology, which similarly constructs parallels between the lives of trees and the long-lastingness of some human love. Famously, in the myth of Baucis and Philemon, an old married couple is rewarded for their faithfulness when Jupiter turns them into an oak and a linden (Hamilton 113). In this mythological case, as in *Trees Hate Us*, tree images are used to suggest an enduring and comfortable love.

It is perilous territory to have the oak and magnolia so easily equated with a human married couple. Such an equation means that certain human traits are imposed

on trees simply because their stillness and longevity remind people of a potential within themselves. Una Chaudhuri highlights the difficulties of dramatic portrayals of the non-human world by discussing the presence or absence of faces. Describing the representation of animals, she writes: “To make them speak is not to write their faces; it is usually to write ours, to indulge that anthropomorphic reflex that is all too often rooted in an anthropocentric outlook” (15). A listener might well come away from *Trees Hate Us* with notions of human superiority (anthropocentricity) reinforced if s/he hears suggestions that trees are worthy of consideration only inasmuch as they resemble people. Then, because real trees are unlike their theatrical portrayals, they might be seen as fair game for destruction. Kristin Dombek suggests a similar phenomenon with regard to depictions of animal “cuteness.” She argues that “the cute animal might exist precisely in order to cover over—and even cleanse us from—the ways in which we put real animals to use” (147). In truth, trees are not like human married couples. Specifically in the case of *Trees Hate Us*, an oak and a magnolia—as different species—cannot have any sexual interaction. Clearly, a real oak and a real magnolia would have little in common with a married couple; and thinking of them this way risks a casual denigration of real trees’ innate nonhuman-ness.

While the romance of the trees is potentially troubling, I believe that it functions as part of the strategies, already alluded to, which allow the environmental message of *Trees Hate Us* to be more accessible to its audience. The relationship makes the trees likable. And, while the likability of the trees allows for circumscribed sympathy—an affinity *for humankind as reflected in trees*, rather than an affinity *for trees themselves*—this likability is counteracted elsewhere in the script. Chaudhuri, following Deleuze and Guattari, advocates writing the “facelessness” of non-human entities (15). In other words, she urges artists to consider how other-than-humanness can be portrayed in representations created by humans. Although her idea is interesting, it is difficult to write about natural entities without writing faces—especially when the goal is to make them protagonists in an Aristotelian drama. Ultimately, I chose to give the oak human-like characteristics; through its voice, it has a face. But I hope that it has a face that differs from what audiences usually encounter.

The oak is not a kind character. Unlike Grandmother Willow, the “wise old talking tree” that Shelly R. Scott describes at Disney’s Animal Kingdom (116), the oak in *Trees Hate Us* is neither wise, nor grandparently. It does not exist to give sage advice to humankind. Instead, it is rather mean. Although portrayed as humorous and—ultimately—innocuous, it is also unforgiving. The oak maintains its ability to hate people even after the script presents it with a dramaturgical opportunity to forgive and to change. It is given the chance to show virtue within the human realm, but aggressively refuses to do so.

First, let us consider why the oak hates human beings. Apparently, the oak is simply full of rage, claiming to “hate the world,” and listing among its objects of hatred “the wind,” “flowers,” “butterflies and hummingbirds.” The tree hates readily and does not feel any special affinity for the natural world. However, it reserves its chief hatred for human beings: “With every fiber of my xylem and phloem, I hate

them.” The oak’s reasons for hating are largely unexpressed, but most likely have to do with humankind’s penchant for destroying and using treekind. The oak does not say this directly, but makes frequent allusions to its disgust with how wood is used. For example, when—in the body of Mr. Benedetti—the oak is invited by Maya to come into the house, it responds: “You expect me to enter that horror-show of wood! Ah, the stench of my brethren!” Though the oak does not articulate precisely the causes for its hatred, reasons are suggested elsewhere. Mr. Benedetti, before he dies, provides the best rationale for why “trees hate us.” In a debate with the grandmother Lula Dean, he points out that trees’ dislike is justified because of humankind’s abuse of the plant world: “Well, we keep chopping them down and mowing over saplings.”

As indicated by the title, *Trees Hate Us* takes it as a given that trees hate humanity. The plot bears out this statement, especially in how the oak refuses to change its attitude, even when given the opportunity. Near the end of the play, when the spirit of the oak is in Mr. Benedetti’s body, it requires Maya’s help to return it to the trunk so that it can leave the human body and re-enter the tree world. Maya obliges. As they hurry through the backyard, the following conversation ensues:

OAK/BENEDETTI: This is where I belong. I almost gave it up. Little girl, set me down on these soft grasses. Lean me against this old trunk, my old friend.

MAYA: Mr. Benedetti?

OAK/BENEDETTI: He is gone. Don’t let that surprise you.

MAYA: You’re a tree. I heard you talking. You’re a tree.

OAK/BENEDETTI: What can I say?

MAYA: Do trees really hate us?

OAK/BENEDETTI: What do you think?

MAYA: (Thinks) I think trees see that we people are good. That we try to be good.

In this exchange, there is some tenderness between the old oak and the young human. The tree warns the little girl that Mr. Benedetti is dead and that, in a moment, his body will again be without spirit. The little girl, having witnessed Oak/Benedetti’s conversation with the magnolia described in the previous section, asserts with child-like certainty that Mr. Benedetti is, in fact, a tree. The oak does not assent, nor does it dissemble. Finally, the big question comes: do trees hate people? The oak invites Maya to answer her own question; and, with Anne Frank-like faith, she claims that humanity is generally “good.” At this point, the oak is given the opportunity to affirm what human audiences are eager to hear: that decency is so innate in the human species that even the natural world can see it. After all, such a message seems logically to follow the plot’s depiction of a young girl selflessly helping a strange tree-man. Dramaturgically, Maya’s speech about human goodness provides a perfect place for the oak to agree—to let go of its hatred, to see the kindness in humanity, and to re-affirm the little girl’s hope. Instead, it answers as follows:

Trees hate you with a hatred that you cannot begin to conceive. They wish you so much ill that your spirit should shriek within you. Hatred, hatred, undyingly red and drippy. Only your deaths will bring us final joy. And, now, if you'll excuse me . . .

With this line, the oak abandons Mr. Benedetti's body and returns to its trunk.

The oak's continued hatred of humanity, despite the hopeful humanist dramaturgy, is significant because it redeems the play as an environmental statement; it enlarges the play's scope beyond the particular problems of a few individuals and, instead, puts focus on larger concerns. While it is true that the oak remains relatively untroubled as an individual tree dealing with individual humans, *Trees Hate Us* does not let the larger struggle of all/most trees versus all/most humans to be squelched by a smallness in scope. While plays—because of the presence of individual performers—must always to some degree deal with individuals, it is not necessary to negate the importance of larger social or environmental struggles in the face of individual exceptionalism. As the title insists, *Trees Hate Us* is about many trees hating many humans, even if we hear the voices of only a few.

Additionally, Mr. Benedetti correctly claims that trees are justified in their hatred. Though the oak is undoubtedly eccentric, it shows good sense by refusing to reverse its defensible distrust on the grounds of a few small kindnesses—kindnesses whose continuation is by no means guaranteed. Ultimately, the tree learns nothing. Nor should it.

In the final scene, the magnolia—seemingly the wiser of the two trees portrayed—specifically asks if the oak has learned a lesson. It responds irritably:

I learned not to move my spirit into a *dead* man, yes. But that just reinforces my mission. I will drop, drop these limbs until I crush many a human skull.

Although *Trees Hate Us* finds ways to make the oak a likable curmudgeonly protagonist—through some fleeting moments of tenderness toward Maya, through its comic ineffectualness, and through its human-like romance with another tree—the script avoids relegating the tree to a ventriloquist's dummy for human perspectives. Ultimately, trees *should* hate us; and that, like the oak, will not change.

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