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AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THOMAS HARDY'S *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

Abstract: Jude the Obscure (1895) is traditionally interpreted as Thomas Hardy's bleakest and most pessimistic novel. From the perspective of ecocriticism, it may be viewed as the author's endeavour to challenge the dominant anthropocentric attitude of the nineteenth century. Relying on Darwin's theory of the common origin of species, Hardy believed that people should recognise their connectedness and dependence on the whole living world. The novel implies that man should abandon his self-centeredness and embrace other perspectives. This, however, does not mean that Hardy does not see people as valuable and important. In a world where religion loses its power we should rely on other people. The implication of Jude the Obscure is that the way we treat each other is linked to the way we treat nature. Hardy's pessimism is the consequence of his realisation that ideas of Darwin were manipulated and (mal)adjusted to society. The character of Jude Fawley is doomed to tragedy due to his hypersensitivity, which is incorrectly perceived as a flaw in the society which promotes autonomy and separateness instead of connectedness and mutual dependence.

Key words: *ecology, anthropocentrism, Hardy, social Darwinism, biophilia.*

1. Bioethics as opposed to anthropocentrism

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary movement which is “concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature” (Tošić 2006: 44). The hypothesis of this paper is that Thomas Hardy's literary oeuvre is permeated with ecological thinking. This article is attempting to demonstrate that Hardy's fiction, most notably his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, aims at redefining man's position

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in the world he belongs to, pointing at the relationship of man with both the natural and the social environment. Hardy's endeavour is to represent the "nature of the relationship between man, the community and the environment" (Birch 1981: 158). This novel contains an implicit critique of anthropocentrism, which became the dominant belief of Western society during the course of the nineteenth century. Although the ultimate goal of anthropocentrism is care and respect for humankind and non-human living organisms, it puts an emphasis on man and his needs. As David Pepper suggests, anthropocentrism defines "human value as the source of all value" (1996: 19). Moreover, this belief propounds that man is separate from nature and views nature as a set of resources to be exploited by men. One of the principal postulates of anthropocentrism is that culture is more powerful than nature due to its power to transform/cultivate nature. On the other hand, ecology, similarly to Hardy's fiction, advocates the position that nature has an intrinsic value regardless of its use value, that nothing exists in isolation, and that everything is connected and dependent. As Timothy Morton (2010) asserts: "Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island" (6). Similarly, Richard Kerridge (2001) maintains that the aim of ecological studies is to point out that the species and non-living forms live in interconnectedness and interdependence – not in isolation (131). According to Hardy, the only way to find meaning is by connecting to other people and other species. Only interconnectedness of humans to other humans and all other forms of life will lead to a meaningful life. Hardy, who lived in an era when ecology was in the process of formation, was deeply aware of man's responsibility to the human race and other species: "What are my books but a long plea against 'man's inhumanity to man' – to woman – and to the lower animals" (qtd. in Millgate 2004: 379).

As Morton explains, ecological thinking has a huge scope. It is not only concerned with the potential threat of the degradation of nature. Ecological thinking, according to him, "includes all the ways we imagine how to live together" (2010: 4). This kind of thinking is present in Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, in which he attempts to redefine man's place in the world. He implies that we should not view ourselves as separate from nature. Man is an intimate part of nature, but he should not forget that non-human organisms are equally important and deserve equal care and respect. However, "human beings need each other as much as they need an environment" (Morton 2010: 4). *Jude the Obscure* may be interpreted as a plea against selfish and aggressive behaviour, both towards people and non-human entities. Aggressive and exploitative attitudes exist not only towards the environment, but also towards people who are perceived as weak and sensitive.

Pepper makes a distinction between “shallow” and “deep” ecology. He induces that although anthropocentrism may be ecologically sound, it has to be rejected due to its human centeredness (1996: 23). On the other hand, deep ecologists² take the position that all living and non-living forms are of equal importance and deserve respect and care. As Pepper propounds, there is an idea of bioethics in deep ecology. Bioethics stems from the belief that nature has an intrinsic value, that it does not acquire its value from its relation to humankind (15). Although Hardy lived a long time before the notions of deep ecology and bioethics came into use, it may be argued that his last novel reflects some important ecological concerns. Obviously, he did not view man as superior to nature. For him, man should not put himself in the centre of the world. He is an intimate part of nature – therefore, he has to live in rhythm with nature.

In the view of deep ecologists, a metaphor for nature is an organism (Pepper 1996: 35). This way of understanding nature is similar to Erich Fromm's concept of biophilia. Fromm defines biophilia as a total orientation towards life, growth and development. Biophilous entities are those who tend to integrate with other entities, to live in harmony and fusion (Fromm 2010: 35). What we have in *Jude the Obscure* is a biophilous representation of nature. Nature is represented as a living organism that is teeming with vitality and abundance. Therefore, Wessex is not just a background in Hardy's novels – it is much more than just a landscape:

Every inch of ground had been the site first or last of energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickerings, weariness. Groups of gleaners had squatted in the sun on every square yard. Love-matches that had populated the adjoining hamlet had been made up there between reaping and carrying. Under the hedge which divided the field from a distant plantation girls had given themselves to lovers who would not turn their heads to look at them by the next harvest, and in that ancient cornfield many a man had made love-promises to a woman at whose voice he had trembled by the next seed-time after fulfilling them in the church adjoining. (Hardy 2002: 8–9)

A biophilous creature tends to “influence by love, reason, by his example, not by force” (Fromm 2010: 37). Jude Fawley, just like other Hardy's characters, acts in accordance with bioethics. He endeavours to live in rhythm with nature and

²As Pepper explains, deep ecologists view nature as possessing an intrinsic value. Therefore, in contrast with shallow ecologists, who see nature as valuable due to its benefits for humans, deep ecologists understand that nature is a “self-regulating organism” that we must respect and take care of. One of the main postulates of deep ecology is that it would be possible for nature to exist without humans, but not vice versa (Pepper 1996: 15, 35).

in harmony with people. Similarly to Tess, he longs for intensity of experience. Although they occasionally experience moments of intensity, their long-term “aspiration to fullness is frustrated” (Levine 2017: 38). This frustration is the consequence of his society’s negative influence on his bioethics. Fromm explains that there are a number of factors which may positively or negatively influence a biophilous person. According to him, it is extremely significant that a biophilous person is surrounded with people who love life and who stimulate the person to view the world with affection and warmth (2010: 40–41). As the novel implies, Jude does not have stimulating surroundings. From early childhood, he is looked after by an aunt who does not show any feelings for him. He is expected to do things mechanically, not taking care of creatures he may hurt, which is diametrically opposed to bioethics. As Cohn suggests, Jude’s social environment treats his hypersensitivity as a flaw. As an extremely sensitive person, Jude is very much affected by the opinion of people he gets in contact with. Over time, he adopts the view that oversensitivity is a fault, which “tends to collapse Jude’s intensity of care into unintended indifference” (Cohn 2010: 519).

Although most of Hardy’s characters encounter enormous obstacles and are forced to give up their aspirations, this is an essential part of their maturation. During their fierce struggle to realise their dreams, Hardy’s characters come to a revelation that they are small, insignificant parts of a vast system called the cosmos. Such a realisation calls into question anthropocentric attitudes. Hardy’s intent is to remind us that we are not the centre of the universe, that there is nothing unimportant in our environment, and that everything matters and everything is connected. However, though Hardy attaches great importance to nature, he views humans as valuable too. As Levine argues, this is supported by the fact that the author, well-known as an animal lover, “fought for the right of vivisection and gave priority to human life over animal life” (2017: 43). Paradoxically, Hardy conceptualised humans as both insignificant parts of the vast cosmos and worthy of respect. His way to show appreciation of humans, according to Gillian Beer, is “by adopting the single life span as his scale”. His novels tend to end before or when the protagonist dies, which is Hardy’s way to pay respect to the hero (Beer 2000: 223).

2. Jude’s social environment

In view of ecocriticism, there is nothing fixed and stable in the world we live in –everything is in progress and in a continuous process of creation. There is a similar tendency in Hardy’s literary oeuvre. As Kerridge (2001) notices, Hardy

does not “allow anything, place or person, to stabilise in meaning” (139). He sees a character as a singular being which has particular thoughts and sensations. However, Hardy suggests that the environment shapes an individual. It is important to note that the environment is not only natural in Hardy's fiction. Social environment is also important since it exerts a great influence on an individual. His characters are depicted as bold and strong-minded. Nevertheless, in moments of despair and disappointment, his characters partially internalise the negative self-image that society imposes on them. As Kerridge explains, Hardy implies that each public event has private consequences, so that an individual is at the same time a separate consciousness and a product of his/her social environment (2001: 133).

Hardy was acquainted with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The emergence of this theory implied that the whole world needed to be understood in a different way. For Hardy, Darwin's hypothesis that people and animals have common origin has serious implications. It means that people should not conceive themselves as superior to animals, but as beings connected with and responsible for the whole planet. Herbert Spencer, one of the key scholars who influenced Hardy, was propagating the attitude that the survival of the fittest was the law that ruled not only in nature, but also in society. Spencer wrote about the adjusting of the law of survival to society. He is best known for his doctrine of social Darwinism. Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest”. His doctrine introduced the attitude that competition and rivalry that prevail in nature are also desirable in society. In Spencer's view, society benefits from the endeavours of businessmen to do their best and win the rivals. Desired perfection was equated with the ability of adaptation (qtd. in Zhang 2010: 77). Still, Thomas Henry Huxley, another influence on Hardy, warned that scholars should not use the words “best” and “fittest” as synonyms. “The only good guaranteed by evolution is the survival of whatever makes for survival”, which suggests that the courses of conduct that include what is “best” and “fittest” might be diametrically opposed (qtd. in Ebbatson 1982: 39). Hardy implied that due to such an interpretation, nature and society were perceived as cruel and stood for the places where the weak were the prey of the strong. In *Jude the Obscure*, his last and most pessimistic novel, “Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would” (Hardy 2002: 307). The world is depicted as a hostile, pitiless place. Most of the characters are either attempting to set traps for others or to get out of the traps that someone made for them (Fischler 1981: 264).

Hardy classified his opus in 1896 into three categories: Novels of Character and Environment, Romances and Fantasies, and Novels of Ingenuity. According to

this classification, his last novel falls into the first group, along with Hardy's most celebrated novels (Bate 1999: 550). These novels explore the relationship between the character and the natural and the social environment. Natural and social laws are perceived as hostile to people, especially to the most energetic and talented ones. However, tragedy is the consequence not only of the severity and inflexibility of the laws and customs, but also of the protagonist's poverty and the weakness of his character. The tragic destiny of Jude Fawley symbolises failed dreams of an intelligent and kind man due to his humble background. As the novel implies, higher education was open only to rich people. Jude, who was of humble origin, could not enter a university based on his knowledge alone. Moreover, Jude's great flaw was his excessive kindness. His sensitivity and kindness were considered as a fault in the culture that put an emphasis on aggressive and selfish individualism. Jude is weak because he cannot hurt anyone/anything. In contrast to him, most of the characters are portrayed as self-centered, manipulative and deceptive. Those are the qualities that are desired in a society which values adaptability the most. From the very beginning of the novel Jude is represented as hypersensitive, which is his greatest fault:

. . . he was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything. . . . He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up, and the tree bled profusely, had been a positive grief to him in his infancy. This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. He carefully picked his way on tiptoe among the earthworms, without killing a single one. (Hardy 2002: 11)

Jude's hypersensitivity is perceived as a flaw in society that viewed human nature as dualistic. Namely, the development of science and technology in XIX century led to excessive emphasis on the rational part of human nature. Characteristics that were regarded as positive included competitiveness, aggressiveness, analyticity (most often associated with men), whereas features such as responsiveness, sensitivity, intuitiveness, and cooperation (usually associated with women) were considered negative. The character of Jude Fawley does not comply with these gender stereotypes. His behaviour is responsive and sensitive, similarly to the character of Sue Bridehead. Both of them are perceived as weak, unable to cope in an environment that is harsh and rigid. The implication of the novel is that only radical change of attitudes in each individual will lead to change of ethics in the

society. A desired path is from the ethics of justice and rights towards the ethics of care.³ According to Hardy, a conception of self as separated from others is the cause of men's recklessness and cruelty both towards his fellow people and towards the non-human entities.

3. Concern for animals in *Jude the Obscure*

Hardy often compares Jude to animals. Although the author was not an animal rights activist, his care for animals is well-known and recognised by critics. Laurence Estanove (2016) interprets Hardy's attention to animals, herbs and the cosmos as his implicit criticism of anthropocentrism. This critic concludes that Hardy's shifting focus to other parts of the universe suggests that man should "relinquish his self-centeredness and embrace other perspectives" (6). Hardy often uses the word "creature"⁴ to denote both people and animals. Jude himself identifies with animals that are often abused and victimised by people, such as birds, pigs, horses, rabbits. Indeed, distinctions between man and animal are blurred and vague. For example, both Jude and Sue are compared to birds: Jude identifies with crows because he feels unwanted, whereas Sue symbolises a bird due to her "flighty", inconsistent behaviour. Arabella is compared to a nightingale, but generally she is envisioned as a symbol of a predatory animal. When the narrator depicts her as a "complete and substantial female animal – no more, no less" (Hardy 2002: 33), he underlines her ability to "hunt down" Jude, to set a trap for him.⁵ The novel indicates that the law of the stronger is present both in nature and in society. Therefore, Jude sympathises with weak animals who become the prey of stronger animals and humans. As Elisha Cohn (2010) suggests, Hardy's sympathy for animals springs from altruism. The revelation that all organic creatures have the same ancestors is an indicator that the

³Feminist Carol Gilligan in her influential book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* made a distinction between the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. The first is usually associated with men, who are brought up and taught to consider themselves as autonomous beings, separate from others. On the other hand, according to Gilligan, women tend to make their choices taking care of others and their feelings and needs (1985: 275). However, such an explanation of moral maturation is questioned in *Jude the Obscure*. In this novel Jude and Sue act in accordance with the ethics of care, whereas Arabella takes into consideration only herself and her own needs and goals.

⁴This word is used in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to depict Tess' brothers and sisters. Hardy implies that the position of Tess and her siblings is not far away from the position of exploited animals. Children of weak and poor parents are more susceptible to suffering, similarly to animals that become the prey of stronger animals and man.

⁵Whereas characters are animalised, animals seem to possess feelings and therefore tend to be humanised. For example, Jude discerns the feelings of rage and despair in the shrieks of the pig Arabella and he is preparing to butcher.

scope of altruism should be extended to include not only humans, but the whole environment. The implication of Hardy's fiction is that people should use their power to "prevent the suffering of animals" (494, 499).

Animals appear frequently in *Jude the Obscure*. In Fischler's (1981) opinion, animals in this novel symbolise either "scarcely noticed witnesses of human activity ... or provide a symbolic extension of the character" (252). Jude, who is sensitive from early childhood, compares himself with the birds he is supposed to drive out of the field:

They seemed, like himself, to be living in a world which did not want them. Why should he frighten them away? They took upon them more and more the aspect of gentle friends and pensioners – the only friends he could claim as being in the least degree interested in him, for his aunt had often told him that she was not. (Hardy 2002: 9)

Jude often demonstrates sympathy and kindness to animals, but other characters are not represented as sympathetic and careful, with the exception of Sue Bridehead. There is a memorable scene when Jude and Arabella are forced to slaughter a pig themselves since the butcher failed to come. Jude is desperate and angry with himself that he has to kill the animal he used to feed and take care of. On the other hand, Arabella does not see anything stressful and problematic in the pig-slaughter. Although Jude lived with her out of a sense of duty, he is disgusted with her complete lack of compassion for the poor animal. Soon after this event the couple separates. This scene was very much discussed after the publication of the novel. Although Hardy's intention was to represent the exploitation of animals, some critics found the scene too explicit and horrible. However, despite some severe attacks, Hardy offered the scene to the Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals, which published it in the Society's periodical. The Society obviously understood Hardy's intention far better than critics: "though described in that particular place for the purely artistic reason of bringing out A.'s [Arabella's] character, it might serve a humane end in showing people the cruelty that goes on unheeded under the barbarous *régime* we call civilisation" (Hardy 1980: 94).

In another scene Jude cannot fall asleep because he hears the shrieks of a rabbit whose leg got pinned by a trap. Jude and Sue (another sensitive and sympathetic character) force themselves to find the rabbit and shorten its torments. There is a similar scene in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Tess meets a group of wounded pheasants. She is astonished by the sight of these birds who were hunted and killed for sport. The scene indicates the severe exploitation of animals and the parallels between the suffering of animals and the suffering of Tess. She chooses to wring the pheasants'

necks in order to alleviate their pain. After a while Tess herself is hanged and sacrificed, but her death may also be viewed as an ending to a life of troubles and torments.

One of the most significant implications of Hardy's fiction from the aspect of ecocriticism is that despite man's claim that his activity is what mostly shapes the environment (Miller 2020: 150), he rarely uses this activity to take care of those weaker and less powerful than he is. As Danlami and Bertin (2021) propound, "we need environmentally oriented literature more than ever" (29). The aim of this research is to demonstrate that *Jude the Obscure* is a novel with a noticeable ecological impulse, a novel that suggests that man is only an integral part of the ecosystem that is not more important than other parts, in the first place animals.

As Fischler (1981) notes, there is an analogy between birds and two major female characters in *Jude the Obscure*. He depicts Arabella and Sue as fickle, as coquettes who "from the start flirt and flit" (255). He compares Arabella to a nightingale, a colloquial symbol of a whore (1981: 255). Sue is similar to birds both in appearance and behaviour. Her pattern of behaviour recalls a bird's – she loves her freedom best, but after a period of aimless wandering, she is eager to find a refuge (256). Fischler finds so many parallels between Sue and birds that he even calls her a bird-bride (255). Although the narrator compares female characters with animals, this is not done with the purpose of representing them in a positive light. It is important to note that Hardy's view of animals and nature is not at all simplistic and idealistic. Life in rural communities is presented realistically. Animals, just like people, are not always innocent and peaceful. There is brutality both among animals and humans. As Cohn correctly notes, Hardy is well aware that "evolution makes struggle and suffering universal" (2010: 494). In Hardy's view, the main cause of suffering and hostility among people is the adaptation of the law of the stronger that exists among animals. George Levine correctly notes that ideas of Charles Darwin were manipulated and abused by a number of theorists who call themselves Darwinists (2017: 34). Namely, although Darwin recognised that humans and animals were closely related, he indicated that the crucial distinction between them is man's consciousness. Man is provided with the ability to notice the relentlessness of the struggle for survival among animals, and it is exactly this ability which obliges humankind to express mercy, which is non-existent in the animal world.

4. Conclusion

In his last novel Hardy deals with the question of what it means to be human: “I think it turns out to be a novel which makes for humanity – more than any other I have written” (Hardy 1980: 94). Hardy, along with George Eliot, was one of the representatives of meliorism – a theory which advocates the position that each individual should make an effort to be the best version of himself, which will lead to the progress of the whole society. The moral perspective of these authors implies a shift from egoism to altruism. This shift for Hardy has two important implications. The first is that man has to consider himself as an integral part of his natural and social environment. The second implication is that, as a result of Darwin’s discovery that all humans and non-human entities share a common origin, altruism should include not only humans, but the whole living world. In order to inspire his readers to reconsider the question of what it means to be human, Hardy underlines numerous acts of inhumanity. Doing so, he does not only emphasise the problematic treatment of animals, which results in acts of cruelty and exploitation. As Adrian Tait (2016) notes, Hardy compares and connects “the sufferings of non-humans to the sufferings of humans” (par. 19).

The implication of *Jude the Obscure* is that the law of the stronger and more powerful rules both in nature and in society. Such a situation is the consequence of the manipulation and maladjustment of Darwin’s ideas by social Darwinism. This maladjustment is evident in the application of the law of the stronger to the social environment. People and animals can be divided into weak and strong. Weak animals become the prey of strong animals and man, whereas weak men become the prey of the strong/powerful ones. Nature and society are perceived as ruthless, hostile places. Hardy suggests that the ethics of justice greatly contributes to such a perception since this ethics assumes that man conceptualises other people as rivals, not as his fellows. The author argues for a wholly different ethics – the ethics of care (bioethics). According to Hardy, people should use their ability to change the environment so as to take care of all living forms. Being a rational being does not mean that man is the ruthless master of the world, but that we as the human race have a great responsibility to the world we depend on.

Jude the Obscure is arguably Hardy’s most serious and mature novel. Hardy implies that man should redefine his concept of the world and his place in it. Despite the opinion of many critics that his vision was bleak and pessimistic, the ecocritical dimension of his novels implies that he was a passionate observer of the whole living world whose vision was large and far ahead of his time. The novel implies that man

should not forget that he is an integral part of the nature that surrounds him, but that other parts of nature are equally important and deserve respect and care. As Jude's acts directed towards alleviating the pain of animals indicate, animals and the whole natural world are not a set of resources to be exploited by people. People should realise their mutual interconnectedness and interdependence, and strive to live in rhythm with nature. Although Hardy's pessimism is often emphasised as a distinctive feature of his fiction, this research has attempted to demonstrate that he also was a passionate observer of the natural world, in love with life, which is often represented as hard, but contains some moments of intense experience.

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ЕКОКРИТИЧКО ТУМАЧЕЊЕ ХАРДИЈЕВОГ РОМАНА

НЕЗНАНИ ЦУД

Резиме

Незнани Цуд (1895) традиционално се тумачи као Хардијев најсуморнији и најпесимистичнији роман. Из перспективе екокритике, овај роман може се посматрати као настојање аутора да доведе у питање доминантно антропоцентрично уверење у 19. веку. Ослањајући се на Дарвинову теорију о заједничком пореклу врста, Харди је веровао да би људи требало да препознају своју повезаност и зависност од читавог живог света. Роман имплицира да би човек требало да одбаци уверење да је центар света и да уместо тога пригради друге перспективе. Ово, међутим, не значи да Харди не посматра људе као вредне и значајне.

У свету у којем религија губи моћ, док у природи влада закон јачег, морамо се ослонити једни на друге. Импликација *Незнаног Цуда* је да је начин на који се односимо једни према другима повезан са начином на који се односимо према природи. Хардијев песимизам последица је спознаје да су постеволуционисти манипулисали Дарвиновим идејама и (лоше) их прилагодили друштву. Лик Цуда Фолеја осуђен је на трагичан крај због своје преосетљивости, која се нетачно перципира као мана у друштву коју промовише аутономију и издвојеност уместо повезаности и међусобне зависности.

► **Кључне речи:** екологија, антропоцентризам, Харди, социјални дарвинизам, биофилија.

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