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# An Ecocritical Reading of Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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**Keywords:** Ecological Consciousness, Ecocriticism, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy, Wessex

**Abstract.** This article aims to analyze Thomas Hardy's novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, from the perspective of ecocriticism and study where Hardy's ecological consciousness originates from and how it is represented and interwoven in the characters, setting and plot of the novel. It also focuses on such questions as how Gabriel Oak can be the voice of harmony in nature and what does the portrayal of this character tell us about today's ecological crises? Ecocriticism, a newly found theoretical framework, explores the ways in which how the environment is illustrated in literature and, by so doing, examines and proposes possible solutions concerning our contemporary environmental situation. In an era where a long-established rustic order is giving way to the giants of technology and industrial capitalism, there remains no more appealing vision than that of England's pastoral and green land. In his Wessex, a part real and a part dream country which is the setting for most of his works, Hardy vividly and skillfully describes his vision and longs for the rustic nature of England. He lays stress to the intrinsic values of nature where men establish a harmonious relationship with their environments.

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), one of the well-known Victorian realistic writers, was born in Dorset, England, and found himself confronted with poverty and life's cruelties. He started his literary career with poetry but gained fame as a novelist. Hardy has always been praised for his descriptive, local language and his depiction and regard of natural surroundings he artfully employed in his works, especially in his major novels. His portrayal of class struggles, love, marriage, friendship, the problem of time, and the question of human existence are themes implied from his novels and mostly dealt with when critics discuss his works. Previous studies have undertaken the task analyzing Hardy's oeuvres in light of ecocriticism and mainly focused on *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, among his other novels or they illustrated the idea of ecological holism in the relationship between two of his novels. For instance, ecocritics in *The Return of the Native* observed that man is in conflict with nature and each character reacts differently toward it. They, further, examined the ways in which nature portrayed and humanized in the novel in a way that how its inherent values contribute to ecological thinking. In a different vein, this paper aims to carry out a close analysis of *Far from the Madding Crowd* by itself on the basis of ecocritical principles. Before delving into the main discussion, a brief history and application of ecocriticism school of thought along with Hardy's Wessex and ecological consciousness are provided for better understanding and proving our claim.

## 2. A Brief History of Ecocriticism

In a world with modern sophisticated technologies where the advancement of industrial, agricultural and factory machinery have changed the face and atmosphere of earth, the need for an ideology or movement to support and preserve nature is of high importance. To better understand the traces of this temerity that human beings have to exploit and mistreat their natural environments, the sources of ecological crises should be taken into account.

M. John Britto (2012) outlines the sources of ecological crises into four groups. The first group is based on the notion of classical Greek Humanism considering man to be a rational animal

and therefore superior to other species. The second group goes back to the Descartes philosophy and Cartesian dualism of soul and body. In this dualism, unlike humans, animals lack soul and therefore this deficiency makes them inferior to humans. The third group showing the superiority of human beings over other species is the concept of the Great Chain of Being which creates a hierarchy of importance starting with God at the top and reaching to animals and inanimate objects at the lowest point. Moreover, human beings in the middle of this hierarchy are superior to animals and natural, inanimate world. The fourth group is the anthropocentric view that regards man as the central element of the world [1, p.721-722]. These ideas have compelled human beings to be superior and egotistic with little care to the preservation of nature or the rights of other species. Green studies, environmentalism, and ecocriticism are all related schools that, more or less, protect the environment from men's exploitations and struggle to make people aware of the ecological crises and create a harmonious relationship between nature and human society. Grey Garrard (2004) in his book *Ecocriticism* states that:

The notion of ecocriticism has proceeded from, and fed back into, related belief systems derived from Eastern religions, such as Taoism and Buddhism, from heterodox figures in Christianity such as St Francis of Assisi (1182–1286) and Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), and from modern reconstructions of American Indian, pre-Christian Wiccan, shamanistic and other 'primal' religions [2, p. 22].

Having had such a rooted history, the term ecocriticism is first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 and defined as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" [3, 1996, p. 107]. Furthermore, Glotfelty (1996), in his introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" [3, p. XVIII].

Ecocriticism has a close affinity with the science of Ecology. Based on the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* Ecology is "the relation of plants and living creatures to each other and to their environment" [4]. In other words, ecology explains the interconnectedness of human beings and natural environment. Likewise, critics show great interests between the relationship of the men and their environments and the ways this relationship illustrate in literature.

First defined by Joseph W. Meeker (1997), the term literary ecology refers to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species" [5, p. 9]. Human beings depend on nature for such basic needs as air, food, and water as much as nature depends on them. Hence, this symbiotic relationship between man and nature, along with everything else in it, flourishes and secures when man identifies the environmental issues and strives to amend them for the sake of nature. In a world of environmental crises, the only solution is to make people consciously aware of ecological predicaments. In other words, the higher people's level of environmental awareness becomes, the less ecological crises occur.

In analyzing a piece of literary work, ecocritics delve into the ways literature treats nature and are in search of answers to such questions as how nature is represented in literature regarding the physical setting of the work, how literature affects man's relationship to natural environment or are the values inherent in that work of art consistent with ecological thoughts? Richard Kerridge (2001) claims that "ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" [6, as cited in Garrard, 2004, p. 4]. Consequently, the attempt, here, is to peruse *Far from the Madding Crowd* and dissect such elements of nature that Hardy consciously selected in writing this novel and see, as mentioned by Kerridge, how he can help environmental crises.

### 3. Hardy's Wessex and Ecological Consciousness

In categorizing his novels into groups, Hardy puts his own novels into three groups: the first group is *Novels of Character and Environment*, the second *Romances and Fantasies*, and the third *Novels of Ingenuity* [7, 2003, p. 57]. The first group, as the name suggests, deals with the

relationship between human beings and their natural settings. While Hardy's major novels including *Far from the Madding Crowd* fall into the first group, he defines the second group as "sufficiently descriptive" [7, 2003, p. 57] namely such novels as *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *the Well-Beloved*. Hardy describes his third group of novels in the following terms:

The third class — 'Novels of Ingenuity'—show a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events, and depend for their interest, mainly on the incidents themselves. They might also be characterized as 'Experimental', and were written for the nonce simply; though despite their artificiality of their fable some of the scenes are not without fidelity to life [7, 2003, p. 57].

With the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874, Hardy revived the term 'Wessex' and wrapped it in new clothes since its use in Saxon times. As Hardy later explained in his preface to the novel:

I first ventured to adopt the word "Wessex" from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom. The series of novels I projected being mainly of the kind called local, they seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, and that there were objections to an invented name, I disinterred the old one [8, p. 10].

The term Wessex was first taken to refer to the Old Saxon Kingdom, located in the south of England, after the Norman Conquest. Nevertheless, for Hardy, Wessex is an imaginary place based on the real places which he observed and knew well. In other words, Hardy created his own Wessex names for the actual names of the places. For example Weatherbury, the name of the village in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is inspired by Puddletown, the real town Hardy knew [9, 2007, p.53].

Regarding Hardy's Wessex, Richard Nemesvari (2004) emphasizes that "Hardy's eventual position as the grand old man of English literature generated a powerful sense of nostalgia for the agrarian, pre-industrial world of Wessex that was increasingly seen as the focus of his writings; and, as that world retreated even further into the past, its attraction increased" [10, p. 41]. As mentioned by Nemesvari, Hardy's "pre-industrial world of Wessex" is a return to past and that shows Hardy's disapproval and criticism of society and industry which awfully changed the face of nature. By creating Wessex, Hardy takes shelter in the bosom of nature and rural countries. While he is not ignorant of his society, Hardy's topographical approach in his writing reinforces his reputation as a regional writer who is lost in the middle of dilemma and unreliability of modern world. Cuddon (1977) defines a regional writer as "one who concentrates much attention on a particular area and uses it and the people who inhabit it as the basis for his or her stories. Such a locale is likely to be rural and/or provincial" [11, p.737]. Thus, since Hardy's attention is on the imaginary Wessex countries along with their people, language, and customs, he is regarded as a regional writer.

In her collected essays, *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf (1953) describes Hardy as follows:

"He already proves himself a minute and skilled observer of Nature; the rain, he knows, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable; he knows that the wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is aware in a larger sense of Nature as a force; he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes" [12, p. 246].

As Woolf puts it, Hardy is an "observer" who feels sympathy with nature and sees it as a "force", accordingly, to be ecologically conscious is to be aware of the environment and show concern for it or in Christopher Uhl (2005) words, it is "to experience Earth as a living system" [13, p. 33].

What is absorbing about Hardy is that he bridges the gap between Victorian Era and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century while many of his novels and poems are heavily influenced by the Romanticism especially "Wordsworth and Wordsworthian tradition" [14, 1986, p. 1]. Hence, Hardy's interest in

Romanticism; the 18<sup>th</sup>-century movement which was partly a reaction to the industrial revolution in favor of nature and natural sciences, is one reason for his ecological consciousness. There are also other elements such as animal welfare, biocentrism, and ecocentrism which show the consciousness of ecology [15, 2015, p.582]. Animal welfare, as the name suggests, concerns with the protection and rights of animals. Biocentrism “extends inherent value to all living things, including plants as well as animals” [16, 2003. p. XIX] and finally ecocentrism rejects the division between human and nonhuman nature and ethically claims for the equality of their intrinsic values. In a related vein, the second reason concerning Hardy’s ecological consciousness is biocentrism and ecocentrism or his concern about the natural world as is evident in his naturalistic writing style. Hardy (1985) also confesses in his biography that “as a young man he had been among the earliest acclaimers of the Origin of Species” [17, p. 158]. Therefore, that makes Hardy an admirer of Darwin and his theories, another reason for his sharp ecological mind.

#### 4. Analysis

Hardy took the title, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, from Thomas Gray’s poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* published in 1751. The related stanza starts in this way:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;  
Along the cool sequestered vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way [18, 2015, p. 111].

Gray’s poem is a comfort in reflecting on the lives of the unnoticed rustics buried in the country churchyard. Similarly, by alluding to Gray’s poem, Hardy evokes the rustic culture that by his time had been endangered by industrialization. Hardy called *Far from the Madding Crowd* a “pastoral tale” and according to Geoffrey Harvey (2003) “the elements of pastoral are rooted with compelling realism in the rituals of the farming calendar, such as sheep shearing and harvesting, and in the social events that structure and give meaning to the life of the agricultural community” [7, p. 61].

Since the attempt, here, is to pinpoint the traces of Hardy’s ecological thoughts in the plot of the novel, it is redundant to have a detailed summary of the novel. In a brief account, the plot of the novel revolves around four main characters, Gabriel Oak, Farmer Boldwood, Sergeant Troy, and Bathsheba Everdene. The men’s quest over winning Bathsheba’s heart is the main concern of the novel. In this love square, Troy wins Bathsheba’s love for a short time, then dies in the hands of Boldwood and Boldwood spends his remaining life in jail. The two remaining characters, Bathsheba and Gabriel, have the “most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have” [8, 2012, p. 467].

The novel is set in the village of Weatherbury, the rural England and one of the Hardy’s Wessex country. Morgan (2007) explains that “Hardy’s rural representation is of England’s golden age — so called for its preindustrial state of carefree happiness and harmonious interaction of man and nature” [9, p. 53]. In chapter two Hardy (2012) describes Norcombe Hill as:

One of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil — an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion... [8, p.22].

According to Garrard “wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility” [2, p.59]. Hardy’s description of the landscape is in line with the concept of Garrard’s wilderness, an undisturbed wild environment where Gabriel Oak proposes and later marries Bathsheba. This serenity and “sacramental value” of wilderness preserve up to the point where Gabriel’s flock of sheep fall down the precipice and meet their death. With that in mind, Bertens (2007) notes that wilderness “is often represented as a place

with a special significance, a place of healing and redemption, or evil and danger where the individual's moral resolve is severely tested" [19, p.201] following this definition Norcombe Hill, as a wilderness, is more attuned with Bertens' view in which Hardy skilfully describes and puts Gabriel Oak to the test with himself.

For Bate (2000) , Hardy "values a world—for him vanishing, for us long vanished—in which people live in rhythm with nature" [20, p. 3]. This rhythm is quite felt when Hardy expresses his ecological ideas on the representation of Norcombe Hill saying "The instinctive act of human-kind 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" [8, 2012, p. 23]. Moreover, Bennett (2001) claims "if ecocriticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to view 'settings' not just as metaphors but as physical spaces that inform, shape, and are shaped by cultural productions" [21, p. 197].

The names that Hardy has chosen for the title, characters, as well as places in the novel, from an ecological perspective, makes Hardy an advocate and lover of nature and the natural world. For instance, the title of the novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, literally, is a call for returning to the bosom of nature, an escape from the madding crowd to the idyllic countryside, a description of life in pastoral mode, and a depiction of human's happiness in line with nature. Furthermore, the names of the characters like Mr. Oak, Boldwood, Poorgrass and Mrs. Hurst as well as the names of the places such as Weatherbury, the name of the village, and Greenhill Fair, among others, are related to nature and reveals Hardy's concern with nature.

In the novel, Gabriel Oak, the protagonist, and Sergeant Troy, the antagonist, are the embodiments of the two sides of life; the rural and the urban. In the beginning of the novel Oak is a farmer, then becomes a shepherd and bailiff. Oak is the only character in the novel whose actions, experiences, and his lifestyle are so much interwoven in his environment that he is considered as a traditional man and this traditionalistic behavior, as Hardy shows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a call for returning to the peace once man had with nature. "Oak's character has no hard boundaries but is always in flux, always a product of relations with whatever surrounds him" [6, 2001, p. 130]. His exceptional skill in shearing, his fair, humane treatment of the animals along with his knowledge of the weather makes him the lover, supporter, and symbol of nature. Oak is so much endowed with nature that he mistakes an artificial light for a "star low down behind the outskirts of the plantation" [8, 2012, p. 27].

In chapter thirty-six after Bathsheba and Troy publicly celebrated their marriage and the harvest and invited all to dance, drink and carouse at their house, Gabriel steps outside and sees signs of an upcoming storm:

Gabriel proceeded towards his home. In approaching the door, his toe kicked something which felt and sounded soft, leathery, and distended, like a boxing glove. It was a large toad humbly travelling across the path. Oak took it up, thinking it might be better to kill the creature to save it from pain; but finding it uninjured, he placed it again among the grass. He knew what this direct message from the Great Mother meant. And soon came another... Oak sat down meditating for nearly an hour. During this time two black spiders, of the kind common in thatched houses, promenaded the ceiling, ultimately dropping to the floor. This reminded him that if there was one class of manifestation on this matter that he thoroughly understood, it was the instincts of sheep [8, 2012, p. 289-290].

The first thing comes to mind upon reading this paragraph is Oak's strange and deep knowledge of animals; that how a traveling toad can be a sign of bad weather or how promenading spiders remind him of the sheep. The second thing is why Oak pays attention to such minute details of his surroundings and care about them? The logical answer would be that these things are all a part of Oak's instinct, in other words, nature is perceived in his personality. Oak is so much resonated with nature that he can predict slight impending changes in the weather. He is the one that creates such a harmonious relationship with animals and his environment, therefore, he is a part of nature. Throughout the novel, Oak is the symbol of peace and harmony. From an ecological perspective

human beings are to create a symbiotic relation with nature so that it benefits all sides, that is to say, man is a member but not a ruler, his existence depends on all parts of ecosystem, the same thing Oak does toward animals, humans and nature.

On the other hand, there is Sergeant Troy who has no knowledge of farming and his surroundings. He exploits the rural environment to provide him with income. He is only “feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes” [8, 2012, p. 202] and his role in the novel is that of violator of ecosystem either in the sense of creating discord between Boldwood and Bathsheba which caused his own death or between Oak as a representative of nature and himself as a voice of civilization. According to Geoffrey Harvey (2003) “one of the Troy’s functions in the narrative is to upset the ordered pattern of rural life” [7, p. 62].

From another viewpoint, as Michael Squires notes “the novel's tension between city and country is exemplified most pointedly in Bathsheba” [22, p.310]. Although she is an educated and proud woman who inherited Weatherbury Upper Farm, she is still “a simple country nature, fed on old-fashioned principles” [8, 2012, p. 348], from an ecocritical point of view, while Bathsheba has characteristics pertaining to civilization and city, she is “a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind” [8, p. 19]. Her dual, capricious nature is in accord with the city of Bath, where she married Troy, and the rural county of Weatherbury, where she inherited.

When the narrator vividly describes that “Liddy, like a little brook, though shallow, was always rippling” [8, p.119] he compares Liddy to a natural, inanimate object. By using the explicit simile between human and nature the narrator shares the characteristics of Liddy with “a little brook” or when Boldwood engrosses in the letter Bathsheba impulsively has sent him, the narrator shows the degrees of Boldwood’s astonishment and confusion with the phase of the moon: “The moon shone to-night, and its light was not of a customary kind. His [Boldwood’s] window admitted only a reflection of its rays...” [8, p. 126]. Rosemarie Morgan, in this regard, states that Hardy mirrors “the inner world of his characters in external forms in nature” [9, p. 38]. Another example of this kind is when Troy gets the workmen drunk, the summer storm strikes and ruins the crops. Hardy’s use of personification and imagery throughout the novel, again, make the relationship between man and nature more vivid and to the point. For instance:

The night had a sinister aspect. A heated breeze from the south slowly fanned the summits of lofty objects, and in the sky dashes of buoyant cloud were sailing in course at right angles to that of another stratum, neither of them in the direction of the breeze below (286)... It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a scarlet glow the crimson jacket she [Bathsheba] wore, and painted a soft lustre upon her bright face and dark hair [8, p. 18].

The clouds sailing like a ship or the sun painting “a soft luster” upon Bathsheba’s face as well as the sensory imageries make the descriptions of the non-human objects evocative and help the reader better understand, react, and sympathize with those objects.

As was stated with regard to the idea of wilderness, despite the relation of man and nature, there are two sides of nature itself in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the first one is peaceful, calm and serene and the second is harsh, vicious and cruel like the coming of the storm or the scene where Oak’s ewes fall down out of a cliff. These two sides complement each other as do the two good and bad sides of human beings. A perfect example of relationship between human beings and animals takes place when Fanny Robin weakly stumbles in the night then falls down and loses her consciousness:

From the stripe of shadow on the opposite side of the bridge a portion of shade seemed to detach itself and move into isolation upon the pale white of the road. It glided noiselessly towards the recumbent woman. She became conscious of something touching her hand; it was softness and it was warmth. She opened her eyes, and the substance touched her face. A dog was licking her cheek...The animal, who was as homeless as she, respectfully withdrew a step or two when the woman moved, and, seeing that she did not repulse him, he licked her hand again [8, 2012, p. 317].

This connection between Fanny and the dog reinforces the claim concerning Hardy's ecological consciousness and that how Hardy draws our attention toward the sympathy and loyalty of animals as if they are human.

In chapter twenty-two, *The Great Barn and the Sheep-Shearers*, Hardy refers to the country as a place protected by God and the town as a representative of devil when he says "God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town" [8, p.174]. Hardy's purpose in putting so much emphasis on natural world and human life as well as placing characters with such contradictory features beside each other is to give each its identity and significance. His overriding concern is to put human life and nature at the same level, each with its own characteristics which works in concord and unity. Rather than describing, Hardy accentuates the intrinsic values and attributes inherent in real rural life and nature. As the critic, Raymond Forsyth (1976), says "we find Hardy being praised, not for re-creating in durable form an idealized existence in the countryside. But rather for interpreting nature, the countryman, country dialects and country ways to the townsman who knew so little of these things" [23, p. 24].

Hardy creates such landscapes that unobserved and obscure objects stand out and the purpose is to remind the reader of the neglected nonhuman views and inspire him or her toward the environmental literacy. The values that ecocritics set for Hardy is that "he shows the possibility of a nature writing not always in search of stability, not simply hostile to change and incursion" [6, 2001, p. 138], in other words, Hardy does not separate nature and man and the relationship between the two is always fluid and shifting. Unlike his contemporary writers who had chosen a natural setting for their novels through which human actions took place, Hardy elevates the role of nature to the level equal to human beings. As is the case with ecocriticism, by illustrating the relationship between man and nature and setting his characters in line and sometimes to the test with their environments, Hardy urged the readers to attain a need to identify the values ingrained in nature and deal with the environmental problems and it is the job of ecocritics to show, evidently, how these values like language, meaning, imagination etc. are transmitted in literature in better understanding our environment and reminding of our duty toward nature.

## Conclusions

In a world with deep ecological and environmental crises, novels of such great authors as Thomas Hardy remind readers of rural, idyllic life where man lived in harmony and accord with his environment. Hardy's interest in Romanticism, his support of Darwin's theories, and his concern and involvement in the sympathetic relationship between man and nature, man and animal, and man with man are the manifestations of his ecological consciousness. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, apart from its love story, the larger portion of the novel concerns the description of nature and rural customs. Hardy's eloquent and elegant emphasis on the values inherent in nature and his Wessex draws a distinction between a pastoral world of Weatherbury and the urban society of Bath. Characters like Gabriel Oak along with others are living in a local ecosystem in which nature plays a major part in their happiness. Upon reflecting on such a harmonious relationship between man and nature in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, readers would be ecologically informed of the values Hardy inspired in them and therefore better contribute to their ecological thinking in the hope of respecting and preserving nature.

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