

An Analysis of Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd* from Ecocriticism

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Abstract: Oak is one of the central characters in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He is the quintessential representative of the community. He is the son of the nature, because he lives in natural harmony, the harmony between man and nature, and his inner harmony. This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of Oak from Ecocriticism. In this paper, this character will be analyzed his view of natural harmony, harmony between man and nature, and his inner harmony from Ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

Hardy established his reputation with the publication of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874. It was the first one of his so-called "Wessex novels," set in fictitious English county closely resembling Hardy's native Dorsetshire. The novel, whose title was borrowed from Thomas Gray's famous "Elegy in a Country Churchyard", initially appeared in magazine serial form and was the first Hardy work to be widely reviewed. Variations of its rustic characters and settings were to be repeated in several future novels.

Gabriel Oak is one of the central characters in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He is the quintessential representative of the community. After he failed to propose marriage to Bathsheba and he lost his herd, he comes to Weatherbury and becomes Bathsheba's faithful shepherd. He still cares about Bathsheba and other people, such as Mr. Boldwood, and Fanny Robin. Finally, he not only marries Bathsheba, but also he gets his own fortune. He has a comic end because he is the son of the nature. He lives in the natural harmony, harmony between man and nature and his inner harmony.

This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of Oak from Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism stresses natural harmony, harmony between man and nature, and human beings psychological harmony. In this paper, this character will be analyzed his view of natural harmony, harmony between man and nature and his inner harmony from Ecocriticism.

2. Theoretical Framework-Ecocriticism

In the context of global environmental deterioration or ecological degradation, Ecocriticism, as a tide of "green" criticism, is set off in the field of literary criticism. Ecocriticism opens up a new field in literary studies. It rises in 1990s. As it is newly born, there are various opinions on how to define the term "ecocriticism". Up till now the definition preferred to quote by most scholars is that giving by Cheryl Glotfelty, the first professor of literature and environment in America: "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii). The definition of Ecocriticism that Bate gives includes two aspects. First, it refers to the influence of literature or culture on nature, in other words, human attitudes toward nature influenced by literature or culture leads to the change of nature or ecological degradation. The second aspect of the definition of Ecocriticism given by Bate is that ecocriticism is to explore the relations between humans and nature by analyzing literary works from the ecological perspective. William Rueckert suggests that ecocriticism is to apply ecology and the concepts relevant to ecology in literary studies. He advocates that literary critics should have the ecological vision. Ecocriticism is to "the broad

rethinking of the relations between humans and nature” (Heise, 1997). As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. Ecocriticism is “the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it” (Cokinos, 1994).[1]

3. An Analysis of Oak’s Ecological View

3.1 An Analysis of Oak’s View of Harmonious Nature

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, nature is a harmonious, peace and vivid ecological system. “To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement.” [p.7] Oak thinks that harmonious nature should not be affected by exterior culture. As a representative, Weatherbury is a place where people live by their own law. “In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen’s Then is the rustic’s now. In London, twenty or thirty years ago are old times: in Paris ten years of five. In Weatherbury three of four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone....In these Wessex nooks the busy outsider’s ancient times are only old, his old times are still new; his present is futurity.”[2] [P122]

The harmony among animals is an important part of harmonious nature. Oak had two dogs. George is the elder. “In substance it had originally been hair, but long contact with sheep seemed to be turning it by degrees into wool of a poor quality and staple.” [2] [P28] Because George gets well along with sheep, it becomes Oak’s lifetime friend. On the contrary, if animals violate the harmonious rule, they will be punished. The young dog is George’s son. “So earnest and yet so wrong-headed was this young dog.” [2] [P28] It collected all the ewes into a corner, driven the timid creatures through the hedge, across the upper field, and by main force of worrying had given them momentum enough to break down a portion of the rotten railing, and so hurled them over the edge. Finally, it is taken and tragically shot at twelve o’clock that same day.

“The grass about the margin at this season was a sight to remember long-in a minor sort of way. Its activity in sucking the moisture from the rich damp sod was almost a process observable by the eye. The outskirts of this level water-meadow were diversified by rounded and hollow pastured where, just now, every flower that was not a buttercup was a daisy. The river slid along noiselessly as a shade-the swelling reeds and sedge forming a flexible palisade upon into moist brink. To the north of the mead were trees, the leaves of which were new, soft, and moist, not yet having stiffened and darkened under summer sun and drought, their color being yellow beside a green, green beside a yellow. From the recesses of this knot of foliage the loud notes of three cuckoos were resounding through the still air.” [2] [P105]

Oak lives in harmonious nature, and he enjoys harmonious nature.

3.2 An Analysis of Oak’s View of the Harmony between Human Being and Nature

Oak is the son of the nature, because he lives in the harmony between man and nature.

Oak can judge time according to stars in the sky. “After placing the little creature with its mother he stood and carefully examined the sky to ascertain the time of night from the altitudes of the stars.” [2] The Dog-star and Aldebaran, pointing to the restless Pleiades, were halfway up the southern sky, and between them hung Orion, which gorgeous constellation never burnt more vividly than now, as it soared forth above the rim of the landscape. Castor and Pollux with their quiet shine were almost on the meridian; the barren and gloomy Square of Pegasus was creeping round to the north-west; far away through the plantation Vega sparkled like a lamp suspended amid the leafless trees; and Cassiopeia’s Chair stood daintily poised on the uppermost boughs. ‘one o’clock,’ said Gabriel.” [2]

Oak cares about animals. “Oak returned to the hut, bringing in his arms a new-born lamb. The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove. The lamb, revived by the warmth, began to bleat.” [2] Bathsheba’s sheep have broke fence and got into a field of young clover. They are getting blasted and will all die as dead as nits, if they got out and cured. “Gabriel

was already among the turgid, prostrate forms. He had flung off his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and taken from his pocket the instrument of salvation. It was a small tube or trochar, with a lance passing down the inside, and Gabriel began to use it with a dexterity that would have graced a hospital surgeon. Passing his hand over the sheep's left flank, and selecting the proper point, he punctured the skin and rumen with the lance as it stood in the place. A current of air rushed up the tube, forcible enough to have extinguished a candle held at the orifice. [2] [P119]

Human beings are also a part of the global system. Their normal actions for living should not be criticized by some radical ecocritics. Human have their own inherent values in the immensely complex ecosystem. So human beings should live harmoniously with animals.

3.3 An Analysis of Oak's View of Human being's Inner Harmony

As a part of ecosystem, human beings should keep inner harmony, because human beings' inner harmony directly affects harmony of ecosystem.

Oak is a son of nature because he keeps inner harmony. Human beings' inner harmony means the simplest material and the richest spirit. In Oak's room, "A rather hard couch, formed by a few corn-sacks thrown carelessly down, covered half the floor of this little habitation." [2] [P9] Oak's appearance in his working clothes was most peculiarly his own-the mental picture formed by his neighbors in imaging him beings always dressed in that way. "He wore a low crowned felt hat, spread out at the vase by tight jamming upon the head for security in high winds, and a coat like Doctor Johnson's, his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings, and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing of damp-their maker being a conscientious man who endeavored to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity." [2] [P1] Oak has a small silver clock. "This instrument, being several years older than Oak's grandfather, had the peculiarity of going either to fast or not at all." [2] [p.2] Even his marriage ceremony is so simple.

Oak is an optimistic man. "When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun. [2] [P1]

Oak has a rich spirit. When he takes part in fair in the county-town of Casterbridge, he fails to find work. "He drew out his flute and began to play "Jockey to the Fair" in the style of a man who had never known a moment's sorrow. Oak could pipe with Arcadian sweetness, and the sound of the well-know notes cheered his own heart as well as those of the loungers." [2] [P33]

Good virtue is a good embodiment of inner harmony. After Bathsheba refused his proposition of marriage, he still helps Bathsheba to extinguish fire. At night of storm, Oak thatchs on the rick under the lights and thunder in order to protect rick from wetting. "he had stuck his ricking rod, or poniard, as it was indifferently called-a long iron lance, polished by handling-into the stack, used to support the sheaves instead of the support called a groom used on houses. A blue light appeared in the zenith, and in some indescribable manner flickered down near the top of the rod. It was the fourth of the larger flashes." [2] [P214] When Boldwood is refused by Bathsheba and became crazy, Oak comfort him. When he meets Robin, he gives her a shilling that is his all money. "Since you are not very well off, perhaps you would accept this trifle from me. It is only a shilling, but it is all I have to spare." [2] [P42]

Only a person who is an inner harmony can live happily. On the contrast, Boldwood is not a person of inner harmony. "The phases of Boldwood's life were ordinary enough, but his was not an ordinary nature. That stillness, which struck casual observers more than anything else in his character and habit, and seemed so precisely like the rest of inanition, may have been the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces-positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed; he was in extremity at once." [2] [P101] Finally, he kills distraughtly Troy and he is tried and found insane. Troy is not a person of inner harmony. His reason and his propensities had seldom any reciprocating influence, having separated by mutual consent long ago; thence it

sometimes happened that, while his intention were as honourable as could be wished, any particular deed formed a dark background which threw them into fine relief. The sergeant's vicious phases being the offspring of impulse, and his virtuous phases of cool meditation, the latter had a modest tendency to be oftener heard of than seen." [2] Finally, he is killed by Boldwood. Boldwood and Troy both have a tragic end because they are not persons with inner harmony.

Oak is a person of inner harmony, so he has a comic end. Finally, he not only marries Bathsheba, but also he gets his own fortune.

4. Conclusion

Oak is one of the central characters in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He is the quintessential representative of the community. He is the son of the nature, because he lives in natural harmony, the harmony between man and nature, and his inner harmony. This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of Oak from Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism stresses natural harmony, harmony between man and nature, and human beings psychological harmony. He has a comic end because he is the son of the nature. He lives in the natural harmony, harmony between man and nature and his inner harmony.

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