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Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*: Blurring the Lines of Fact and Fiction

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Abstract

In an era of ecological crisis, startled by disturbances to the environment, either facilitated by human interference or by the aggravated climate change, it is crucial to direct the attention towards the agenda of forming meaningful connections with nature. Both fictional and non-fictional literary works have quite an impact on the field of ecocritical studies. French author Jean Giono's The Man Who Planted Trees (L'Homme quis plantait des arbres), published in 1954, has claimed critical appreciation by the scholars in the field. As a short work of fiction, it has gathered attention to the conservative and restorative acts on degraded landscapes. Even though the novella is considered as a fictional work, it has plausible impacts on real life by forming the initiative of environmental restoration practices on the land. The fluidity between the genres of fiction and nonfiction allows the interpretation of the text as stepping beyond the borders of the fictional world, and ground on the actual world. In this sense, Giono's fictional work projects the emergence of hands-on practices on nature in addition to carrying factual and autobiographical notes within. Restoration ecocriticism requires the literary text to induce active human engagement with the environment, since there is an urgent "need for 'contact' with the physical world". Considered within the perspective of restoration ecocriticism, Giono's work reflects how fictionality can extend beyond and make a change in the actual world through forming a hands-on involvement with the environment. Within an intermingled line between fact and fiction, this study examines the emergence of new factualities arousing from Giono's text and their final landing on the "communal truth," enhanced by environmentally restorative and conservative practices.

Keywords: Jean Giono, restoration, ecocriticism, environment, conservation

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1. Introduction

In an age of environmental disturbances and human interferences which overturn the health of natural spaces, it is pivotal to reside into environmental studies and grow an ecocritical perspective to literary works. To mention briefly, Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," in that the field of study "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (p. xix). Greg Garrard (2004) extends the definition to be more inclusive and suggests that it can be defined as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (p. 5). In fact, one of the challenges that ecocriticism faces is "the difficulty of developing constructive relations between the green humanities and the environmental sciences" (Garrard, 2004, p. 178). Thus, it is of utmost importance for the humankind to engage with their surrounding environment. Stemming from the inclusion of human and human experience in the subject area, Scott Slovic (1994) proposes another perspective to ecocritical studies, in his "Ecocriticism: Storytelling, Values, Communication, Contact." He suggests that "those of us who work at universities might be able to contribute to society's understanding of nature if we remember to pay attention to nature itself, if we don't lose ourselves in lectures, theories, texts, laboratories … [E]cocritics need contact not just with literature and not just with each other, but with the physical world" (1994, n.p.).

The underlying motive behind the emphasized human contact is that it is "essential for ecocritics to keep in mind, essential to the vitality and meaningfulness of what we're doing" (n.p.). This is to say that ecocritics are being removed from their space, in which they sustain a literary and scholarly distance, to be relocated into nature itself. Nancy Easterlin (2012), in her *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* highlights the importance of this specific goal of ecocritical perspective. She suggests that ecocritics can "illuminate values, relationships, social networks" through literature, which is "a profound resource, showing that the capacity to trust and love … makes it possible to love the world" (p. 151). Matthew M. Low (2020) sums Easterlin's vision as "taking lessons learned through ecocritical analysis of literary texts and putting them in practice in actual world scenarios of ecological restoration and reconstruction" (p. 149). It highlights the fact that being in natural surroundings would intensify the importance of the initial purpose of ecocriticism. Thus, it

can be said that there is an urgent "need for 'contact' with the physical world" by the humankind, which will penetrate future efforts to "think globally" and "act locally" (Özdağ, 2009, p. 139).

In the light of the progression of the field of ecocriticism, the Sixth World Wilderness Congress concluded that "the 21st century [is to] be declared 'the Century of Restoring the Earth'" (Özdağ, 2009, pp. 139-140). Consecutively, the span of 2021 and 2030 is termed as "the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration" (Özdağ, 2024, p. 125). In accordance with the advancements, Ufuk Özdağ underpins the acknowledgement of "a restoration ecocriticism," which eventually "will give rise to not only conserving lands but also restoring damaged lands" (2009, p. 140). This is based on the fact that, as Stated by Scott Russel Sanders (2009), "[c]onservation means not only protecting the relatively unscathed natural areas that survive, but also mending, so far as possible, what has been damaged" (p. 211). Özdağ (2022) defines this newly emerging field of ecocriticism as following, "Restoration ecocriticism is the ecocritical study of literary and cultural texts that explore or inspire individual or collaborative community restoration efforts in the degraded lands/waters/marine environments, most often caused by anthropogenic activities" (p. 126). In accordance, restoration ecocriticism makes use of "narratives of human impacted devastation to repair and bring back the land's vital processes" (Özdağ, 2024, p. 128).

Considered within the perspectives of restoration ecocriticism and conservative concerns, Jean Giono's (1895-1970), *The Man Who Planted Trees (L'Homme quis plantait des arbres)* (1954) is a groundwork which delves into human interaction with physical nature and a hands-on level of involvement. This work has achieved a critical and scholar standpoint, which acted in favor of the improvement of the ecological movement at the time of its publication (O'Connell, 2007, p. 24). Woodward and Lemmer (2019) pinpoint that "At a time of ongoing drought in many parts of southern Africa, at a time when the burning of the Amazon forest has reached crisis proportions, paying attention to representations of plants and human-plant inter-connectedness in literature is timeous" (p. 23). Thus, in a century of ecological crisis, startled by disturbances to the environment, either facilitated by human interference or the aggravated climate change, it is crucial to direct the attention towards meaningful connections with nature. In accordance, as it is stated on the website of United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, "There has never been a more urgent need to

revive damaged ecosystems than now" (n.d., n.p.). This study, therefore, will look into Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* through the lens of restoration ecocriticism.

In addition to its analysis within the scope of restoration ecocriticism, this novella can also be considered as a work that challenges the borders between fact and fiction. It is originally intended to be published as a work of non-fiction. However, after its composition, it is found out by the editors that this work does not present a real life figure. Therefore, it results in the initial rejection of Giono's work, until it is published in the *Vogue* magazine as an extensive story. This instance shows that there is a clash between the genres of fiction and non-fiction, which are thought to be severely separated from one another as black and white. However, contemporary theories on the genre of fiction present the field as a "variable category," since "the semantic composition or stylistic properties of a given texts are less essential in determining fictionality than the readers' generic expectations" (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 291). This is to say that there is no overruling quality within the genre that would lead it to be considered as fictional. Rather, there are variables within the text, which produce "different determinants in time and in regard to different frames of reference" (p. 291). After all, as it is suggested by Mikkonen (2006), "all discourses about the material world, be they factual or fictional, are circumscribed by the texts we construe in relation to the world" (p. 295).

Daniel Lehman (1997) focuses on the issue, suggesting that the line between fiction and nonfiction is "never absolute" (p. 27). It extends beyond the "authorial intention or readerly cognition" (Heyne, 2001, p. 326). Rather than a direct association with either the reader or the writer, a text's fictionality or nonfictionality depends on the degree of the given text, which is "linked to outside experience" (Lehman, 1997, p. 35). Mikkonen (2006) describes fiction "*as a genre* of representation that is interpreted and socially used in a certain way and that carries with it specific expectations concerning, for instance, the referential dimension of the discourse" (p. 292). It is also stated that fictional works can switch to become nonfictional works. As Ruth Ronen (1994) suggests, "at a later point in cultural history," the text transforms and its "fictionality and actuality can be relativized to a cultural perspective" (p. 76). Thus, putting the text in a cultural context would create a change in the nature of the text, opening up new ways of interpretation. Accordingly, Marie-Laure Ryan also inserts that both the writer and the reader may infer different outcomes from the text in terms of relating the work to "the actual world and the fictional world" (Mikkonen, 2006, p.

291). Thus, as Mikkonen (2006) concludes, a literary "text meant as nonfiction therefore may be received as fiction, or vice versa" (pp. 291-2). The co-merge of the two genres is obviously not to be mistaken as casually reading a fictional work as a nonfiction or vice versa. It is to be kept in mind that, in that form of reading, there would be no underlying meaning in the emergence of these two genres (Ronen, 1994, p. 76). As Mikkonen (2006) suggests, "[t]he idea of defictionalization involves the possibility of the reader's movement between different interpretative communities and contexts" (p. 292). Thus, it relies on the audience to remove the fiction from the realm of fictionality and place it in a desired context within a designated scope.

Towards the end of 1980s to the first half of 1990s, certain literary scholars introduce a "possible-worlds model," in the discussions about fiction and nonfiction (Heyne, 2001, p. 328). Amongst them were names such as Thomas Pavel, Marie-Laure Ryan, Ruth Ronen, Jerome Bruner and Nelson Goodman (p. 328). According to the conclusion that they arrive, literary texts could also be analyzed through the lens in which "the human brain models reality and organizes experience" (p. 328). Thus, these worlds that are created through the text rely on the human experience and on the understanding of the real world. Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) takes this approach to assert that "Once we become immersed in a fiction, the characters become real for us, and the world they live in takes place of the actual world" (p. 21). This depends on the experience that is created through the text and the reflections of the text on the real world. Henrik Skov Nielsen et al. (2011) refers to the new perspective to be employed on the theory of fiction. In accordance, it is suggested that "fictive discourse is not ultimately a means of constructing scenarios that are cut off from the actual world but rather a means for negotiating an engagement with that world" (2011, p. 63). Stemming from this conclusion, new studies on fictionality question the "degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction; and fictionality as a double exposure of the imagined and real" (Dawson, 2015, p. 83). Thus, fiction, as a genre, can be said to have been removed from its traditional definitions and is considered to be a mixture of the imaginary and the factual. In that regard, Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* fits well within the scope of this genre and leads the way for its interpretation in that perspective since the imagined and the real are intertwined within the text. Through directing the attention towards positive involvement with the land, Giono's work steps up from the fictional realm and enter into an area that reflect real efforts for conservation and restoration in the world.

2. An Analysis of Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1954)

Jean Giono (1895-1970) is known to be an author, who pursued a direct touch with the physical environment around his vicinity during his life time. His connection to the environment stems from the fact that he is known to be a man "of the outdoors … [who] received this love through intimate contact with outdoor life" (Starr, 1940, p. 121). His works are mostly set in Provence, which is also where *The Man Who Planted Trees* (1954) is set. This novella is about the story of a shepherd who devotes his life to planting trees in southern France. The solitary shepherd's efforts help restore the overall life in the deserted region by enhancing the water sources and vegetation. *The Man Who Planted Trees* is a work of fiction and its protagonist Elzéard Bouffier is a fictional character, as later approved by Jean Giono (Chawla, 1989, p. 56). However, it is originally written as a story in 1953 to the request of American editors, who wants Giono to prepare a short account about a real person with unforgettable and remarkable characteristics. As an answer to this request, Giono writes about Elzéard Bouffier, whom he assumes to have a powerful personality to create a physical change in the world. However, this account is rejected because it is proven that there is no person with this name, who died in Banon. The following year, after the initial rejection, his story gets accepted by *Vogue* magazine. It is first published in *Vogue* magazine under the title "The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness" in 1954. It is to be noted that "Hope" and "Happiness" are transformed into "Trees" as it can be deduced from the established title of this work (Chawla, 1989, p. 56). With its publication, the story of Elzéard Bouffier, who is a significant figure as Giono believes, has been shared with the world without any demand from the author for the distribution and translation of it. In accordance, in one of his letters in 1957, Giono writes "I freely give away my rights, for all to publish. An American has come to me recently, to ask my permission to make 100000 copies which he would distribute freely in America (which of course, I granted)" (as cited in Nowak, 2015, p. 74). Giono desires to let his story spread around the world, just as his protagonist Bouffier spreads the trees covering the whole region in the story. His main aim, as stated in the Afterword of the story, is "to make people love the tree, or more precisely, to make them *love planting trees*" (Giono, as cited in Goodrich, 2005, p. 39). Following its publication, the work has been translated into more than thirty languages, produced with numerous editions with unique illustrations. It is adapted into numerous genres, ranging from movies to puppet shows. As a ground work, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, has become the center of scholarly interest, which "is required

reading in university level environmental studies programs around the United States" (Comfort, 2011, p. 404).

The work, with its setting in the French Alps in 1913, centers on a shepherd, Elzéard Bouffier, who plants acorns in a desolate valley. The story begins with the unnamed narrator recalling the story that happened around forty years ago, during his hike in the Alps. Near an abandoned village where life has vanished, the narrator comes across Bouffier when he was about to get dehydrated because he could not find any source of water. Bouffier offers the narrator some water and shelter in his shack. After spending the night there, he learns that Bouffier has lost his family and came to this desolate land that "was dying for want of trees" (Giono, 2005, p. 14). To the arid sight of the land, Bouffier decides to reforest this barren field. He pursues a solitary mission and tends the landscape with his bare hands. To be more specific, one by one, he plants acorns into the holes he carves with his fingers (Giono, 2005, p. 13). The narrator comes back to visit him after five years of serving in the war of 1914, and he sees small trees "spreading out as far as the eye could reach … Creation seemed to have come about in a sort of chain reaction" and recites that he "saw water flowing in brooks that had been dry since the memory of man" (Giono, 2005, p. 21). The land, which was once barren, turns into a healthy habitat, with running water down the streams and with winds bringing seeds. Gradually, the trees grow to be taller and the environment starts to heal itself. With the ecosystem of the region restored, when the narrator comes back to visit years later, he finds out that a new community has emerged with new people who have moved there. Thus, the social life has improved in the town, which was once deserted and desolate. As the narrator states,

> Everything was changed. Even the air. Instead of the harsh dry winds that used to attack me, a gentle breeze was blowing, laden with scents … Ruins had been cleared away, dilapidated walls torn down and five houses restored. People from the plains, where land is costly, have settled here … It was now a village where one would like to live … Little by little the villages have been rebuilt … More than ten thousand people owe their happiness to Elzéard Bouffier. (Giono, 2005, pp. 30-4)

In a similar manner, as Aldo Leopold (1987) suggests in *A Sand County Almanac*, "[a]cts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets;" however, "[t]o plant a pine, for example, one need be neither god nor poet; one need only own a shovel" (p. 81). As it can be inferred from this passage, planting a tree is as effortless and simplistic, as it can be. It does not necessarily require a higher power or an artistic or intellectual abstract thought for the

creation to be accomplished. The simple nature of the act is linked to having a single shovel to undertake the task. In the case of Bouffier, his endeavor is quite similar to what Leopold offers in terms of simplicity. Bouffier only has an "iron rod," which he uses in the process by "thrusting his iron rod into the earth, making a hole in which he planted an acorn" (Giono, 2005, p. 13). He uses a simple tool to achieve a grand act, which helps in the environmental revival of a region. With his tool and acorns, he plants a hundred thousand trees, of which only twenty thousand has grown. From that twenty thousand, he expects only half of it will survive due to ongoing natural processes. This leaves him only to ten thousand of trees, which will thrive over the years to count up to thousands (p. 14). Numbers seem not to matter to Bouffier since he does not expect to receive any material income from the trees. What is of utmost importance is the survival of these trees and the outcome shows that he has become successful in his endeavor. As Leopold (1987) puts it, "It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist [a restorationist] is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land" (p. 68). As Oelschlaeger (2007) states, "Leopold is claiming that in acting upon the land we define ourselves" through putting our signature on nature (p. 153). Similarly, Giono's fictional character Bouffier becomes successful in leaving his mark on nature through the green space he has created.

As mentioned above, the book was first published under the title "The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness" in 1954. As the original title suggests, Bouffier's actions arouse belief and hope in the revival of a once desperate land. The previous inhabitants of the land which Bouffier restores were charcoal burners and they pursued living in extremely hard conditions. The industrialization of the region and the insensible practices such as the use of charcoal have caused the land and the natural environment to degrade. The absence of trees and the presence of bare land have resulted in environmental complications. The climate of the vicinity was very harsh both in summer and winter, with its strong winds that touch on the nerves of the inhabitants of the area (Giono, 2005, p. 9). This atmosphere has also affected and shaped their personalities in an undesirable manner. Instead of being fellow townsmen sharing the same neighborhood, they have become almost like enemies. There was no peace and tranquility in that region amongst the inhabitants. In a situation where the land is sterile, not even their belief systems and religious bonds helped enhance their bond. Even in the church, where they are supposed to have a peaceful gathering, they used to fight (p. 9). It also went to such an extent that there were suicide attempts and even homicidal behaviors towards

their own neighbors. There seems to be no hope left for that barren land and its people, as it is stated that "their [the inhabitants'] condition had been beyond hope. For them, nothing but to await death - a situation which rarely predisposes to virtue" (Giono, 2005, p. 30). Even though the novella presents an atmosphere of climate crisis which affects both the environment and the inhabitants of the area; still, it cannot be considered as a work which "move[s] irrevocably towards calamity" (Kevra, 2023, p. 63). Rather, as the title suggests, it illuminates hope, redemption and faith in humanity in terms of what can be done to overturn the exhaustive effects of climate change. This is one of the concerns of restoration ecocriticism, which parallels to Giono's work, in the sense that "hope will replace despair in ecocritical scholarship in the rush to reverse the fate of degraded local lands" (Özdağ, 2024, p. 126). To highlight this facet, it is stated that "When you remembered that all this had sprung from the hands and the soul of this one man, without technical resources, you understand that men could be as effectual as God in other realms than that of destruction" (Giono, 2005, p. 21).

Comfort (2011) suggests that Giono's work is a "deceptively simple short story;" which reflects a more complex and elaborate narrative than it is assumed to be by the mainstream literary perspectives (p. 404). Even though scholars have not paid much attention to Giono's work in terms of literary and critical analysis through the years due to its short form, this novella can be considered as one of the influential works in the age of environmental crisis, pivoted by climate change. This work holds a great importance in terms of ecological restoration movement since it portrays the free willed acts of men on nature, in the form of planting trees. It arouses hope for the future of the environment through presenting a groundbreaking interactivity with the earth itself. As Scott Freeman (2018) states in *Saving Tarboo Creek*, "In restoration is the preservation of the world," highlighting the importance of this hands-on involvement with the environment (p. 97).

3. Discussion

The main purpose of this research is to point out to the factuality, or the possibility of real action, that is hidden behind the fictionality of Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*, by analyzing the work through the perspectives of restoration ecocriticism. The characterization of a shift from fiction to nonfiction in this matter is possible through "a continuum of hybrid forms and … the possibility of constant fluctuation between the two" (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 295). After Giono's passing, even though the work is claimed to be a fictional account,

Giono's daughter states that this work is based on an old family story. As stated by Trout and Visser (2006), Giono employs "mythe autobiographie," which allows the writer to include autobiographical parts and facts to the story (p. 8). The choice of the setting of the novella is a real place in the southeastern France, where Giono himself is also familiar with. The region witnessed real reforestation efforts which date back to the nineteenth century (Kevra, 2023, p. 62). Additionally, Jean Giono is known to include familiar names, along with events and settings in his literary productions, which proves the existence of autobiographical notes in his works. The fact that the story includes the two wars in the story line also refers to include certain autobiographical context within. Giono himself lived through the years covering both of the World Wars. He serves as a soldier in the battle of Verdun, "where so many of his buddies died in their own urine and excrement, under a deluge of iron and fire," which leaves a traumatizing impact on Giono (Kevra, 2023, p. 77). In return, he rejects to join the Second World War, which causes him to spend some time behind bars (Kevra, 2023, p. 78; O'Connell, 2007, p. 23). Similarly, the unnamed narrator of *The Man Who Planted Trees* is also relocated to the same region and "had been fighting at Verdun" in 1915 (Giono, 2005, p. 21). He fights in the war which started in 1914, marking the beginning of the First World War. In the following five years, he serves there as an infantryman (p. 17). As Kevra proposes Giono "must have envied his protagonist [Bouffier]," as did the narrator, since he accomplished "peacefully continuing his work, ignoring the war of '39 as he had ignored that of '14" (Kevra, 2023, p. 77; Giono, 2005, p. 28). This double ground found both in the fictional and the factual side of the text is its "defictionalization" which is achieved through the "movement between different interpretative communities and contexts" (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 292). The inclusion of factual details in a work of fiction, such in the case of this example, highlights the nature of fictionality "as a double exposure of the imagined and real" (Dawson, 2015, p. 83).

To set on another real base for the Giono's work, a further research around Vaucluse, France, made by Rengenier Rittersma, suggests that the story might actually be inspired by a real person, named Durand Saint Amand. Amand pursued a similar type of reforestation activity around the region of Vaucluse in 1875. For this effort, he called for every inhabitant of the region to join in the act of planting (Nowak, 2015, pp. 74-6). Oak trees were planted around a sixth of the region's land with the initiative of Amand, who was not a shepherd as Bouffier, but a governor. The two stories bear great resemblance to one another in terms of the fact that both characters pursue active participation for the health of the land. Even though

the claim has been made on Giono's inspiration, it is not proven that Giono actually heard about Amand's call for action and the reforestation efforts, since it happened much earlier than even Giono was born. Therefore, it is not possible to prove whether he was actually inspired by him or he only heard about that forest, which, as he may have believed, came into being on its own. Regardless, resembling to the protagonist Bouffier, Amand himself also stands out as a man who planted trees (Nowak, 2015, pp. 74-6). Giono himself was also an enthusiast of vegetal life. As it is stated, he "always loved trees. When he was little, he would take walks with his father. The two of them carried in their pockets the acorns they planted in the earth using a cane, hoping they would become superb oaks"[2] (Kevra, 2023, p. 71; Clavel, 1996, p. 17). His use of cane in his childhood creates a parallelism with his character Bouffier's use of "iron rod," which he uses to bury his acorns deep in the soil (Giono, 2005, p. 13). Giono, therefore, can be considered as an enthusiastic environmentalist who treasured an act as simple as depositing an acorn in earth, just as Bouffier does (Kevra, 2023, p. 71).

There are also some other aspects of Giono's work, which makes the work step up from the world of fictionality. Butler (1992) pinpoints that "[i]n Giono's prose there is a merging of realism and poetry" (p. 40). Thus, it can be asserted that, as a fictional work, this novella also remains truthful and realistic. Giono's work was written even before the terms "climate change" or "global warming" were coined (Kevra, 2023, p. 62). Originally, the term global warming was coined by Wallace Broecker, a geochemist, in 1979, while Giono's work was published in early nineteen fifties. Yet, as a fictional work, *The Man Who Planted Trees* has made a ground change and affected the real life, by encouraging attempts of ecological restoration. The former inhabitants of the deserted region in the novella are charcoal makers, which leads the way for the landscape to deteriorate by the unreasonable deforestation efforts. The issue that lights the reason behind the desolation of the land stems from Giono's foresightful awareness that "the modern world was already blindly pursuing a path that could lead to an eco-apocalypse" (Moser, 2018, p. 114). Tamsin Kerr, in her dissertation, has explained the importance of metaphor, story and the natural environment borrowing the term "trustori," which means true story. The term, referring mostly to metaphor and giving less space to facts, is used by Paddy Roe who is an aboriginal storyteller. Kerr (2007), in his *Conversations with the Bunyip*, defines it as "Trustori relies upon creative imagination that

[2] The given quote is translated from French to English language by Susan Kevra. The original quote is from "Giono ou le Refus de Tuer" by Bernard Clavel, a novelist and a friend of Giono. The translation genuinely belongs to Kevra.

uses story to get to the heart of an issue, only borrowing facts when they reinforce the message" (p. 8). Thus, as Kerr suggests, Giono's story is an example of "trustori" because it has encouraged reforestation efforts throughout the world. In that regard, Giono as an author and his work carry an utmost importance. As it is discussed by Paol Ricoeur in his "Can Fictional Narratives Be True?," fictional works signal towards the understanding of what is "important in the actual world of action" (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 295). Therefore, highlighting the moral action in the world, Giono can be said to encourage future endeavors to be accomplished for the protection and the sustainability of the environment. In accordance, Giono's daughter states that "Elzéard Bouffier has had a posthumous existence as remarkable as his imaginary life. He has gone and planted his acorns and grown his forest all over the world, from New Zealand to Kenya, from Finland to the United States. Whenever his story has been published, people have believed in it" (as cited in Kerr, 2007, p. 8). Even though the work was initially perceived with distrust upon its publication because of the fact that it does not harbor truth in it, the story has had such a great impact that it touched many places around the world. These forms of texts are said to be rare to come across, since many of the literature critics argue that they "make only minimal gestures in the direction" of leaving an impact (Heyne, 1987, p. 488). As Ralph Rader (1968) suggests, if a text "has the capacity to produce an effect, it will have raised human fact out of contingency and made it concretely present as a striking but inherently probable manifestation of complete and morally determinate human thought, character, or action, individual or collective" (p. 38). In the light of this account, Giono's work is one of the rare kinds that materializes as an exemplary moral and environmentally aware human character.

The fictional character Elzéard Bouffier's efforts for saving the landscape is found inspiring and has its echoes even after the novella's publication. Canadian illustrator Frédéric Back produced an animated short film in 1987 with the same title, which is an adaptation of Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Back himself is also an activist, who follows the steps of Bouffier by actively participating in the reforestation efforts. He associates himself with Bouffier, who "courageously, accomplished this reparative gesture … so that beauty, life and the happiness of others might remain a reality"[3] (Kevra, 2023, p. 63). Back believes in the importance of turning the thought into action; therefore, similar to Bouffier, he has planted

[3] The given quote is translated from French to English language by Susan Kevra. The original quote is from Jean-Claude Raspiengeas' "Frédéric Back, Le Noé du Québec," published in *La Croix* in 2012. The translation genuinely belongs to Kevra.

30.000 trees (p. 66). He pursued such endeavors, which extends to initiate numerous groups of people in Canada for the same cause. With his individual efforts, he encouraged further practices of tree planting. He visited schools in Quebec and worked with young children in order to educate and involve them in such practices. Not only his physical act on nature has influenced others, but also his animated adaptation of *The Man Who Planted Trees* also has helped inspire reforestation practices. In 1989, in a region around southeastern France, which is quite close to the setting of the novella, children from a local elementary school planted trees in a vast area, which is potentially expected to turn into a forest. They named this rehabilitated area as "Jean Giono Forest" and invited "Back to join them for the official opening" of the forest (Kevra, 2023, p. 66). The materialization of Giono's work in this way proves that this text has created "morally determinate … action" which can be either "individual or collective" (Rader, 1968, p. 38). Thus, in the light of restoration ecocriticism, as Özdağ (2024) puts it, this outcome can be perceived as being facilitated by the emergence of "thinking communities" (p. 128). These communities or individuals are actively participating in the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded landscapes.

Behind the background of reforestation and rehabilitation of the Provence region, the main issue that the novella reflects is the "destructive effects of reckless human exploitation of the environment" (Kevra, 2023, p. 62). In the transformation of a fictional work to be reinstated as a fiction or belonging to the real world, "the lack of examples concerning fiction becoming factual" is a setback (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 292). However, this work, by the abundancy of factuality and possibility within, manages to "actualize fiction," in as much as "assess[ing] the relationship between the actual world and the textual world" (p. 292). The work carries facts that are common in today's world. It portrays a criticism of the "misgivings about modern society," which gives in under the industrial weight and capitalism (p. 70). Thus, as stated by Trout and Visser (2006), whose lines were translated by Kevra (2023), Giono is "an engaged writer for whom the consequences of the Industrial Revolution – in other words, modern civilization – are the great devils. Giono the pacifist and poet of peasants and artisans sees it as a Frankenstein that threatens the peaceful life of the individual"[4] (Kevra, 2023, p. 70; Trout & Visser, 2006, p. 39). The setting of the novella also reflects truthful historical occurrences. It is set in between the two world wars, which leads the way for mass destruction of not only cities but also the environment. This issue, in fact,

[4] The original text is from Trout and Visser's *Jean Giono*, which is in French. The English translation is provided by Susan Kevra.

echoes in the present day in the twenty-first-century, with natural disasters such as famine, drought, flood, and forest fires. The effects of climate change are traceable both in the environment and in the human behavior. As it can be inferred from the behavior patterns of the early inhabitants of the Provence region, harsh weather conditions create tension and discomfort amongst the residents. The uninhabitable atmosphere causes them to fail in their pursuit of living, which, in return, resurfaces as communally aggressive relations and individually suicidal thoughts. Scientifically, it is possible to "trace a line between the lack of water, unrelenting winds, deforestation, and the many forms of social calamity caused by climate change – famine, poverty, violence, mental illness, and suicide" (Kevra, 2023, p. 74). As Kevra infers, the connection between environmental mishaps and certain psychological disorders is not an accidental association (p. 85). In fact, 2021 study "The Environment and Suicide—Why Suicidologists Should Support Climate Change Policies" sheds light to such connection. According to the study, there is an apparent correlation between the cases of suicide attempts and the environmental disasters (Lester, 2021, p. 89).

Restoration ecocriticism necessitates that it is the duty of the field "to highlight literary texts that will support an emerging ecological citizenship dedicated to restoring degraded lands, as well as to bring awareness about the actual land healing efforts in the most hands-on way" (Özdağ, 2024, p. 126). As an example of a meta-narrative, the story of Elzéard Bouffier resurfaces across cultures, as in the case of John Barleycorn of England and Johnny Appleseed of the United States, or as Kokopelli as a part of the native southwest area of the United States (Pierson, 2011, p. 154). Roxanne O'Connell (2007), in her review of the story, brings into light the efforts concerning the restoration of the environment, which resemble to those of Bouffier (p. 24). Her first example is Abdul Karim from Kasargod, Kerala, who has made use of the same techniques that Bouffier uses. With these acts, starting in 1977, he has reforested a region in nineteen years. She also talks about the organization "Trees for the Future," which has helped enhance the land around Asia, Africa and the Americas. Starting their activities in 1988, the organization has brought together a massive number of families and planted over thirty-five million trees in more than six thousand villages within those regions. Additionally, Wangari Maathai, who is the writer of the Foreword to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *The Man Who Planted Trees*, is also mentioned in O'Connell's review. With the Green Belt Movement which she founded, Maathai has helped reforestation performances around Kenya. As a community under the roof of the organization, they have planted more than thirty million trees (O'Connell, 2007, p.

24). Such activities prove that individuals gather for a sole purpose and form a fully functional community, which help restore the environment and bring the land back to its healthy state. It is the embodiment of a biotic community, in which the dwellers are actively participating in the environmental processes. This stems from the reciprocity of humans and nature in which the two are deeply connected.

With his work, it is proven that Giono has accomplished what he has originally aimed through creating this story. His aim was to engage people in more meaningful relationships with the natural world and connect more with green life. In doing so, he aimed to help revive the land through planting trees and his desire seems to come true with these activities happening around the world (Goodrich, 2005, p. 39). A wholesome desire to revive the landscape through such acts might seem unrealistic; yet, as O'Connell (2007) proposes, "Given the real transformations happening in the world today because one person here, and another there, quietly, persistently, and patiently go about planting tree after tree, day after day, year after year, I would have to say my colleague[5] missed the point. Real, true, lasting service to ourselves, and to the earth that sustains us, is not a BIG thing" (p. 24). After all, it is also "expected of fiction that it includes lessons to be extracted in regard to the real world" (Mikkonen, 2006, p. 295). The small act of planting a tree turns out to be a great achievement since it accumulates in time; thus, resulting in the emergence of an entire forest. Karl Weick, in his article "Small Wins" in 1984, also, shows how small changes in life can lead to bigger advancements, supporting Bouffier's efforts by stating,

> A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals. Small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results. (Weick, 1984, as cited in Gartner, 1993, p. 272)

The solitary yet resourceful acts of Elzéard Bouffier in the form of planting trees heal the community and accomplish a higher good for the whole of the community. In fact, programs and projects that follow small steps and achieve a higher benefit are called as "community development," "CD" in short (Thibeault & Hébert, 2008, p. 25). University of Ottawa has produced a similar program, which is named after Giono's protagonist. The technique that is

[5] The colleague who O'Connel refers to is a companion of hers, who believes that such acts or dreams seem only as a fairy tale. By the general opinion, such acts are accepted as small steps which may not lead to a drastic change in the health of the Earth. In that, it is believed that the endeavours turn out to be futile or inconclusive. Yet, the reforestation and rehabilitation efforts all around the world prove otherwise.

employed is called as "the Elzéard method" (p. 25). This method is defined as comprising "a series of steps meant to gradually flesh out the web of relations encompassing a CD program" (p. 25). Thus, it can be inferred that small yet consistent steps help heal a region, through turning into a communal act. As O'Connell (2007) proposes, pointing out to Elzéard's motives, "His method is systematic, guided by nature, and quietly purposeful" (p. 23). In accordance, Giono starts with an epigraph that proves the same point,

> For a human character to reveal truly exceptional qualities, one must have the good fortune to be able to observe its performance over many years. If this performance is devoid of all egoism, if its guiding motive is unparalleled generosity, if it is absolutely certain that there is no thought of recompense and that, in addition, it has left its visible mark upon the earth, then there can be no mistake. (Giono, 2005, p. 3)

The cynical eye might overlook the solitary exertions of the narrated character Bouffier by "dismissing him as fictional and his achievements as the fanciful imaginings of a writer" (Kevra, 2023, p. 77). Yet, Wangari Maathai's efforts prove otherwise by highlighting the presence of "good and far-reaching effects that come from planting trees" (Kevra, 2023, p. 77). This form of engagement with the land is neither unrealistic, nor futuristic to be considered within the science-fiction genre. Rather, it is a real, hands-on movement that is achievable by common people. As Maathai explicates in her speech during her 2004 Nobel Prize acceptance, "tree planting is simple, attainable and guarantees quick, successful results within a reasonable amount time," emphasizing on the fact that they have planted over thirty million trees as a community under the roof of Green Belt movement (Maathai, 2004). As it is also highlighted by Özdağ (2024), "Land restoration is no longer a dream around the world," but rather it is proven to be achieved by numerous cultures and communities (p. 132).

Bouffier's story also resembles to that of Johnny Appleseed, who is an American legend known for his efforts of planting apple trees. By some critics, *The Man Who Planted Trees* is considered to be a story of "French Johnny Appleseed" (Comfort, 2011, p. 404). Although Johnny Appleseed's story belongs to the American myth and folklore, it is based on a real person, John Chapman (1774-1845) (Kerrigan, 2012, p. 3). As the story goes, Johnny Appleseed, from a very early age, devotes himself to planting and spreading apple trees to the newly growing Western lands. The myth evolves around the time after the American Revolution when the United States manifests toward the trans-Appalachian West (Kerrigan, 2012, p. 2). Leaving his ego aside, just like Elzéard Bouffier, Johnny Appleseed, focuses only on the sole mission of planting trees, pursuing his aim on foot without any proper clothing.

He maintains a simplistic way of living, by carrying the sole mission at heart. Appleseed, similar to Giono, also does not ask for money in exchange for his efforts. His apple trees become the aid for the families who had hardships in the West. In time, he ages, just as much as Bouffier; however, he also never stops his mission or quit his dream. As Kerrigan (2012) states, "his energy for planting trees was superhuman" (p. 2). As the legend suggests, he is beyond happiness when he spends time in nature, which is most of the time in solidarity, and sometimes with other people. Nonetheless, while wilderness is seen as a place to exploit, conquer, or exhaust by the Western minds, he can be considered as the one who enjoys being in it by taking an active part in nature (Buhle & Sciver, 2017, p. 111). The qualities of being solitary, directed by non-instrumental values, illustrate that there is parallelism between Appleseed and Bouffier's personalities and moral stance.

In addition to pursuing individual exertions, gathering as a community in the mission of preserving the land is also a crucial important point to be underlined. As stated by Özdağ (2024), "individual or collaborative community restoration projects," which work in the favor of the overall "sustainability in the local areas for community well-being" are irreplaceable efforts to be considered in terms of restoration ecocriticism (p. 126). While the act of a single person can enhance the living conditions of a region, a communal act plays much more importance in making the region a better place. It is believed that the myth of Johnny Appleseed has played an important role in initiating such communal efforts. John Muir, the Wilderness Society –which is an American land conversation organization founded by eight conservationists including Aldo Leopold in 1935– brought many local people together, who have worked for long periods in order for the preservation of wildlife. As Buhle and Sciver (2017) suggest, their efforts are, in part, have benefited from Johnny Appleseed's ideals (p. 110). Real Appleseed's attempts have promoted the community in such ways that even in the nineteenth century, his shadow could still be seen on apple marketing (p. 112).

Elzéard Bouffier's name, as a character in between fact and fiction, also has certain connotations. In English and French language, his last name, refers to a thing which is stupendous. It is suggested that it brings out "*bouffi*, *bouffe*, that is, puffed up (like a great man), puffed out (like wind, or a cloud in the sky)" (Goodrich, 2005, p. 40). Therefore, Bouffier can also be considered as a man, who, not only has a puffed up personality with an ethical stance, but also as an activist who puffs up the land. Additionally, the name Elzéard resonates as if it belongs to a wise old man or a Hebrew poet. In essence, his first name is the

latinized version of Eleazaros, which is Hebrew. It means "God hath helped" (as cited in Comfort, 2011, p. 407). The name Eleazaros is translated into English language as Lazarus, which is Lazare in French. In the New Testament, there are two different Lazaruses mentioned. One of them is the one who is poor and in bad health condition because of ulcers. He lives outside an ignorant rich man's house in terrible conditions, while the rich man lives in luxury. However, his suffering and torture gets rewarded in heaven, whereas the rich man is to suffer in hell. As stated in the Bible "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy god things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (*The New Testament for English Readers*, 1863, Luke 16:25). In this Parable, the message is that "the New Testament God is a God of the living, not the dead and who shows compassion for all living organisms" (Comfort, 2011, p. 407). Likewise, Bouffier proves to of great help for the people of the town by fixing the land and the surrounding environment for them, therefore making the land a more suitable place to live.

The second story of Lazarus is the one that tells the story of Jesus Christ's companion, Lazarus of Bethany. After he dies, Jesus brings him back to life from the land of the dead. Revolving around the theme of resurrection, *The Man Who Planted Trees* bears great resemblance to Lazarus' story, also known as Lazarus of the Miracle (Comfort, 2011, pp. 107-8). Giono himself mentions the very theme in the story when the unnamed narrator talks about the changes that occurred in the land, stating, "someone had planted a linden beside it [a pool], a linden that must have been four years old, already in full leaf, the incontestable symbol of resurrection … The war just finished had not yet allowed the full blooming of life, but Lazarus was out of the tomb" (Giono, 2005, pp. 30-3). Bouffier comes to this barren land and heals it in such a way that it is almost in the form of resurrection of the land. Similar to Jesus Christ bringing back Lazarus from death, Bouffier brings the land back from death to earn back its health. With the supporting examples from real life and biblical references, it seems that Elzéard Bouffier's acts step away from the fictionality and reflects itself on real life. The dedication and strong will of the protagonist prove that it is possible and in fact achievable to help a disturbed land return back to its balanced and functional ecosystem.

4. Conclusion

Cheryl Glotfelty states that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (1996, p. xix). Jean Giono's short work *The Man Who Planted Trees* is an embodiment of such, in

which the human is connected to the physical world and quite aware of the problems surrounding it. Even though the work is originally written and intended to be published as a fictional work, it is not around the edges of a science fiction prose accompanied by extremities or futuristic technological advancements. Rather, it extends over the boundaries of a fictional work to touch on the real life. According to Eric Heyne (1987), traditional approaches, eventually, "will have to abandon the fact/fiction distinction in the face of increasingly complex modes of telling applied to an increasing amount of information" (p. 484). Stemming from the blurry line between fact and fiction, whose contextual layout is immensely "linked to outside experience," Giono's work allows a reading which is slipped away from the fictional world on paper, and embarked on the physical real world (Lehman, 1997, p. 35). In that, it proposes examples and instances which are true to real life occurrences. Eric Heyne (2001) interprets Daniel Lehman's (1997) insertion about the nature of fact and fiction within one text. One of the tenets of carrying factuality of a fictional text is "in some sense a matter of *caring*, of what 'matters'" (Heyne, 2001, p. 330). In questioning the reality of the text, Lehman (1997) asserts that "If you ask if the story is true, and if the answer matters, you've got your answer" (p. 39). Considered within the scope of restoration ecocriticism, the work sends out a fitting and a positive message, which is also one of the ultimate purposes of the critical field – that is, accentuating the importance of "bring[ing] to the forefront the success stories of restoration to motivate communities and have them join collective efforts" since restoration ecocriticism "highlights success stories of land and species restoration to initiate new work in the local lands" (Krupnick & Knowlton, 2017, p. 336; Özdağ, 2024, p. 132).

The protagonist Elzéard Bouffier's acts that are portrayed in the story of *The Man Who Planted Trees* echo as factual experiences across cultures. The fact that Giono's work is opened with a Foreword by Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement organization in 1977 and followed by an Afterword by Andy Lipkis, the founder and President of TreePeople organization, which was founded in 1973, proves a point that this work is the embodiment of a factual example. In addition to reflecting and encouraging conservative acts and inspiring environmentally aware individuals, the work also brings out autobiographical and factual details from the author's past. By building a bridge between the past and future, Giono also constructs a connection between fiction and fact. Along with the examples from former and contemporary times, Giono showcases that Bouffier's individualistic reforestation efforts "veer away from past and present time toward the future

of newer and better generations" (Goodrich, 2005, p. 43). In a similar vein, along with the reader's inclusion within the work, it is proven that fictionality of a work can be shuddered. Heyne (2001) highlights this, by stating that "If the reader is prepared to assert an alternative version of events, to engage actively in a certain kind of dialogue, then we are dealing with something we might all be willing to call nonfiction" (p. 330). Giono's work, in this sense, arouses alternate realities in the readers' minds, as well as physically encouraging engagement with the real world in forms of ecological restoration. The "kind of dialogue," thus, emerges as in the form of active engagement with the natural world (p. 330). As Özdağ (2024) puts is "restoration ecocriticism, help communities around the world to develop a sense of stewardship and responsibility for land and its nonhuman inhabitants with engagements in hands-on restoration" (p. 126). As a work of fiction exceeding through the borders, Giono's work leaves a remark on the physical world by setting a truthful example of human engagement with the environment.

In an era of climate crisis, Giono's work arises hope against calamity. Giono's work and the representation of its fictional world on paper echo on the real world. The goal of restoring natural balance, thus, is not portrayed as a far-fetched reality. As in the case of Bouffier, it can be achieved through constant work and dedication to the final result. After all, as Özdağ (2024) points out, such works, which are "crucial for bringing back land health to once earthy harmonies," are also pivotal in terms of "trigger[ing] flagship initiatives" for restoration efforts (p. 132). Therefore, it can be said that a work, as short as *The Man Who Planted Trees*, can reflect positive repercussions through blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction. The "narrative truth" in Giono's text is found through "the presence of a certain kind of caring" (Heyne, 1991, p. 330). The "care" for the protection and restoration of the environment showcases that "a communal truth" has been found (Heyne, 1987, p. 489). Regardless of the literary genre the text belongs to, Giono's work steps further into the future and expands in the actual time. By initiating hands-on activities with nature through connecting communities with the environment and fulfilling meaningful relations with it, *The Man Who Planted Trees* brings out the "communal truth" surrounded by the "thinking communities" (Heyne, 1987, p. 489; Özdağ, 2024, p. 128).

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