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An Ecocritical Approach to Đuro Sudeta's *Mor—The Original Werewolf Legend*

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This paper outlines the main reading strategies of ecocriticism. Its main theoretical interest lies not in the pure extraction of literary motifs of Nature, but in the deconstruction of the diversity between Nature and Culture, representing Nature as the postmodern significant "Other" relating to contemporary environmental problems and thus exposing literary approaches in the past (including postmodernism) as anthropocentric. The main part of this paper focuses on the example of the application of ecocritical strategies in Đuro Sudeta's modernist and impressionistic novella *Mor*, which leads to the suggestion of reforming conventional readings in traditional literary history.

KEYWORDS: Culture vs Nature; Đuro Sudeta; ecocriticism; environment; literary impressionism

1. Introduction

In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines the new field of literary ecocriticism simply as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, xviii). This was not the first attempt to define this new theoretical position—the term ecocriticism was actually coined by William Rueckert in his work *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978 (Cohen, 2004, 14), responding to growing global environmental and ecological issues, where he defines ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Cohen, 2004, 14). Regardless of this simplified definition and apparently superficial response, ecocriticism is not merely the separation and interpretation of literary motifs connected to nature.

As a respectable interdisciplinary field and as an “increasingly heterogeneous movement” (Buell, 1996, 22), ecocriticism has made new theoretical demands, never seen before in contemporary literary criticism. Like most postmodern and poststructuralist ways of thinking, ecocriticism in its initial premises juxtaposed Nature as the significant “Other” as compared to human-centred Culture. Discussing the boundaries between the human and non-human, and including both in the concept of Environment, ecocritics quickly began to frame the environmental crisis outside the poststructuralist concept of “constructedness” through language and the consequential postmodern imperative which implies the inability to define significant scientific approaches. This theoretical issue is specifically emphasized in Kate Soper’s frequently quoted remark: “It isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer” (Soper, 1995, 151), clearly indicating the inability of defining Nature and Culture as exclusively discourse or language terms.

Furthermore, a British version of ecocriticism called “green studies” has to be taken into consideration, since it gives an additional boost to the new discipline with practical implications and real threats to the environment made by anthropocentric, post-industrial phenomena (Brozović, 2012, 30). This said, ecocriticism is a critical position which has made a significant and provocative theoretical move, because through the opposition of Nature and Culture it actually highlights the short-

comings of poststructuralism, deconstruction and postmodern discourse analysis and invokes an almost forgotten third part of a traditional linguistic sign—the real empirical referent.

In this paper, all these aspects will be taken into consideration as we approach a selected literary narrative, Đuro Sudeta's *Mor*. This novella, with its obvious dominance of literary motifs embedded in Nature and its strong ecological lessons, also elaborates the relations between Nature and Culture in a manner that corresponds to ecocritical efforts to change traditional interpretations.

2. Đuro Sudeta's *Mor* in traditional literary history

Mor—*The Original Werewolf Legend* is a canonical Croatian novella published in 1930, three years after its author, Đuro Sudeta (1903–1927), died. Sudeta's *Mor* is today part of Croatian schools' mandatory reading. Nevertheless, according to its English translators, Mirna Bičanić and Mark Harrison, an English translation of this novella was long overdue because "it stands out for readers today both for its timeless message and for its surprisingly modern appeal" (Bičanić, Harrison, 2015, loc. 27). In frameworks of traditional literary history, this novella fits into the typical modernist process of the "defabularization" of prose, a literary technique which follows a new artistic way of understanding and forming reality (Donat, 1975, 42–43; Šicel, 1978a, 113). The new literary aesthetics began to raise new artistic sensitivity at the end of the 19th century, the realistic matrix of mimetism at the turn of the century had worn out and artistic transition moved from social, political or collective themes to psychological, intimate or individual ones (Šicel, 1978b, 394–395).

At this point, the ecocritical frames of approaching modernist literary works should be underlined. The beginning of the 20th century was a period of enormous scientific and technological improvements and breakthroughs, yet the *Zeitgeist* of the period was marked by pessimism, a sense of chaos, uncertainty, and impending disaster (Šicel, 1978b, 399)—in an ecocritical way, we could say it was because Nature was radically removed from the equation. The spiritual crisis led to the

conclusion that science as a product of civil society cannot give the final answer to the meaning of life or art. Furthermore, the neoliberal way of thinking led to a new set of disasters (two World Wars, the Great Depression). In this way, art and literature developed a standpoint very different from the realistic one, that they should be a refuge and sanctuary from cruel reality. This means that for modernist literates of the *fin de siècle*, art should not be an objective imitation of reality (as realism proposed), but a subjective projection and individual sublimation of that same reality.

It is highly indicative in terms of ecocriticism that Nature is actually the only part of empirical reality that modernist literary characters in particular consider a safe sanctuary. Modernist exemplifications of the urban environment, on the other hand, usually describe hypersensitive, psychopathologically marked intellectuals that gradually deteriorate while moving and interacting through cities as part of an environment adjusted by human civilization. There are some examples of ecocritical interpretations where this urban deterioration of selected subjects is a repercussion of the absence of Nature, such as in Peter Barry's example of the ecocritical reading of E.A. Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Barry, 2009, 250).

The narrative plot of *Mor* is very simple. The title protagonist Mor is the young son of a forest steward, a humble old man who for many years faithfully served as land manager for an unnamed nobleman. This nobleman had a daughter Šu. As the story begins, Mor and Šu love each other and their strong emotional connection and harmony is suggested by their names—combined they form the Croatian word *šumor*, the characteristically soothing sound of the forest and the natural environment (their Croatian names are unchanged in the English translation of the novella). However, their love is a forbidden and unhappy one—their social differences and their parents' interests prevent them from fulfilling their relationship.

The nobleman persuades his daughter to marry Arno, a young nobleman and adventurer, also known as a gambler and crook. To separate Mor from Šu, Šu's father fires Mor's father and hires Arno's business partner as the new land manager. These two then intend to use Šu's dowry and exploit the nobleman's forest to cover Arno's gambling

debts. In the conclusion of the novella, Mor's father dies of sorrow, his son disappears in the woods, transforms into a werewolf and begins to avenge the committed injustices. When Šu's father finally discovers Arno's true intentions, it is too late: his mentally broken daughter dies of tuberculosis and Mor is living in the forest as a man-beast, waiting in vain for his beloved Šu.

3. Literary motifs of the natural environment

In this novella, the main character Mor is shown as a true child of the forest, fully joined with Nature—he talks with trees, cries for dead daffodils and mourns for the meadows. The motifs of Nature always correspond to Mor's existential condition and personal experiences of external events, such as strong feelings of emotional connection with a beloved one, and later the sorrow of forced unrequited love. When he talks about himself, Mor knows only the colours and nuances of Nature.

Croatian literary history agrees that the resonance of natural motifs and the protagonist's mood in modernist prose is usually the result of the impressionistic emphasis given to the atmosphere (Žmegač, 1993, 37; Kravar, Oraić Tolić, 1996, 117). Some researchers even connect this resonance with Emil Staiger's thesis that the production of the atmosphere *inside* and *outside* the subject is a process of indistinguishable unity (Ivezić Talan, Slavić, 2020, 135–136). But it should be emphasized that the thesis of resonance comes from the concept of interpretation, which has the subject, protagonist, or Staiger's *inside* as the starting point. What if we reverse the interpretation, and as the starting point choose the *outside*, the atmosphere, the environment, Nature? This is precisely what ecocriticism aims to do.

According to Lawrence Buell, it is necessary for Nature to become the very centre of ecocritical thinking because otherwise the cultural dominion of humankind over everything (including Nature) would be reinstated (Estok, 2005, 200). The fast decay of the natural environment, global warming, and the rapid development of cities are the results of human impact (cultural or technological), so ecological awareness has to put Nature back in the centre, without the influence of anthropocentrism.

To demonstrate how this affects critical readings of literature and how the ecocritical interpretation of literary text actually works, let us observe this section of Sudeta's *Mor*, which describes the main character's approaching the castle where Šu lives for the purpose of meeting her:

When a pool of darkness crept in closer, he climbed the tree next to her room. He sat in the canopy for a long time, but still she did not appear, nor did she come to turn on the light. From the nearby hill autumn mists began to steal in. The air was full of the scent of ripe grapes. A flock of cranes flew by and the sky was becoming clearer and more translucent. A breeze was playing in the canopy. One branch nestled itself in Mor's chest, so that it swayed with his movement; the branch rose and fell with the rhythm of his breathing. The leaves were silent, dying from sorrow. From the valley the barking of dogs could be heard; a lonely sound and furtive like fear. The stars too were in motion (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 643–647).

The traditional interpretation of this piece would probably fully correspond to the subject's passion and the stillness of Nature while Mor awaits his darling. If we ecocritically reverse the interpretation, it becomes clear that Nature and all its subtle nuances are objectively dominant in this short description. This is just one simple example of how literary motifs and descriptions of Nature in Sudeta's *Mor* work. It really is not the protagonist's emotional or psychological state that is accentuated, since it seems that Nature itself is actually setting the mood for the lovers' encounter! The whole natural environment adjusts to produce an atmosphere where the emotional response of Mor's and Šu's true love can succeed. This is so because their love itself is natural and they both embrace Nature.

According to Garner, ecocritical reading is "an analysis of all and any environmental language that explains the presence and role of the environment within the text" (Garner, 2015, 14). In his ecocritical approach to Tolkien's *Hobbit*, Garner additionally emphasizes that "the structures of outer nature [...] come directly from nature itself, not human interpretations" (Garner, 2015, 16). Our interpretation shows that humanity and Nature coexist, and it is actually in Nature's interest to es-

establish forms of communication, corresponding to those who respect and enjoy natural phenomena. This is evident not only in the selected quotation, but also in other short descriptions from Sudeta's novella, where the lovers are not physically together, yet strong feelings of affection are still present in the surrounding Nature:

I wander through the pathless fields. I stumble over logs. Scents are playing through the canopy, while my mind plays over the substance of my recollections. My chest is a wild tangle of hair. My eyes are grey and blue. They are translucent like the dandelion when the autumn comes, like the periwinkle in the spring, they are like the forest in which I am living.

She was in this spot yesterday. Amid these blackberry bushes she was collecting the berries, and the berries thought her eyes were their sisters (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 150–157).

She went down to the water's edge and stared into the depths. The water was flowing impassively, without meaning, as empty as the eye sockets in a skull. Her thoughts drifted off somewhere far away with the call of the cuckoo and the wind that blew from the forest, which she did not notice.

Was it necessary for this to happen so that she could feel what Mor meant to her? Did she not have these feelings before, did she not know what they meant? Those feelings that used to awaken her during the nights when spring was rising behind the glades, when she used to dream about locks of his hair on his bronzed head and his lips thirsty and read as coral, opening like rose buds at dawn (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 417–426).

As seen in these selected descriptions, the lovers' scenes or scenes where the lovers think of each other are rarely displayed without natural motifs, that is, without ecological references to Nature. Moreover, just before the descriptions of the lovers' meetings (usually at Šu's father's castle where she lives) the reader finds the presence of the castle briefly in one sentence or one word, without further descriptions and explanations, such as: "He hung around the castle to no avail" (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 641). In terms of the ecocritical duality of Nature and Culture and putting Nature in the centre, the absence of a more detailed description of the castle can be generally interpreted as the mere irrelevance

of human efforts in the extensive framework of Nature. Interestingly, in the same era of the modernist revival between the wars, Franz Kafka published his novel *The Castle* in 1926. In contrast to the above-described literary process in Sudeta's *Mor*, the sinister and detailed presence of the impenetrable castle as a strong mark of human civilization and the marginalization of natural motifs in Kafka's work amplifies the protagonist's futile and absurd attempts to enter it, working around the completely unnatural bureaucracy in the nearby village.

4. The passage of time

Modernist and impressionist poetics developed a special relation regarding the subject's feeling of the passage of time, which is recognized in the propensity for static motifs or for situations where the subject acts just as an observer (Žmegač, 1993, 139). As we have discussed above, these static motifs and observer situations are usually connected to Nature and natural motifs. What modernists attempt to do is to show moments of constant change in Nature (such as water reflections, leaves falling, subtle changes of colour and shadow, silent animal movements and the like) as if they are "frozen" or stopped in a selected timeframe. Traditional literary history postulates that this time effect is also a result of modernist literary emphasis and interest in the subject's point of view. In other words, it is perceived that natural motifs in impressionist texts are not mimetically displayed empirical reality—they are the subject's artistic and aesthetic construction designed through his current sensory impressions (Žmegač, 1993, 70; Kravar, Oraić Tolić, 1996, 117; Ivezić Talan, Slavić, 2020, 141), which creates an "atmosphere without time."

In our on-going attempt to take an ecocritical approach to Đuro Sudeta's *Mor* and in the ecocritical terms of Nature—Culture duality, this specific impressionist feeling of stopping one particular moment, creating a special mood around it and interpreting it as a matter of a subject's sensory point of view can be deconstructed, too. If we read the already selected passages once more, it does seem to the reader that the passage of time has been "slowed down" in narrative terms. Let us look at this selected passage from *Mor* as an example:

Waters flow, clouds pass, and days pass beneath them, coming, going. Blue shadows of the sunset steal in, pools of darkness ooze through the windows, steal in, hide and vanish. The sun vanishes, colours vanish, and day after day is extinguished and goes somewhere far away. Already ages, lives and years have passed (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 179–187).

In these few sentences, the narrator is indeed a passive observer, involved in the impressionistic experience of Nature. The literary presentations of the flowing of water, the passing of clouds, sunsets, etc., fit into the mentioned modernist ways of forming the literary motifs of Nature, in terms of moments of constant change. However, this selected section shows that these brief moments of change are actually not ephemeral—they are part of a bigger natural picture: the ongoing process, the natural totality of time, the recurrence of natural phenomena which objectively bonds ages, lives and years. Simply said, clouds have passed long before the subject's observing them, they are passing during the observance and they will pass long after the observance. This is how Nature works, and Mor (as a child of Nature) understands this process.

As the main protagonist is fully embedded in Nature, his resonance with Nature is really not a subjective artistic, aesthetic or psychological construction. In ecocritical realistic interpretation, these sentences really do represent empirical reality. Consequently, this objective natural recurrence enables subjects to feel Nature and to express that feeling, which is the key to the ecocritical reading of impressionistic literary works. Just before these selected sentences comes a chapter where a lilac branch next to Mor's cottage assumes the role of the third person narrator (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 170–185) and intersects multiple times with Mor's first person identity. The traditional interpretation of this important chapter implies that this is Mor's psychological, artistic and literary construction where he impressionistically imagines being a lilac branch. But it ends like this:

And when I come to my senses I feel regret; regret that really I am not Mor, so I lower my branches in order to spread them, and to make the shade cooler.

He likes that, and he comes out of his cottage, lies on the grass and looks up, and his eyes turn blue and clear just like the sky above. And the clouds float and fly like great white birds. And they remember me. They waken me and make me aware that I am not Mor with his black locks and a chest that is wild tangle of hair, that I am only a lilac branch, only a lilac branch (Sudeta, 2015, loc. 185).

In this brief part of the novella, we, as ecocritical readers, moving away from traditional interpretations, can actually witness several important points which have been mentioned so far. First of all, Mor is part of Nature's totality—Nature is adapting her components (such as a lilac branch) with Mor's full resonance to the bigger picture. Again, according to Maran "in order to appear and become related with nature writing, the meanings of nature need mediation by human semiotic processes" (Maran, 2007, 281). The lilac branch narrating and intersecting with Mor's identity and imagination is not Mor's artistic construction—it is again Nature "setting the mood," responding and rewarding Mor's continuous efforts to embrace her. It is as if Nature herself depicts her own narrator and relates to various sign and narrative systems designed by humans. Then, portions of the identities of Mor and the lilac branch switch places because they are part of a greater, holistic picture. It is significant that the passing of time, the presence of natural recurrences (floating clouds), is the trigger which eventually refers to the description of the true relations between the identities of Nature, Mor and the lilac branch.

5. Civilization and Nature in conflict

Although ecocriticism recognizes "grey zones" between Nature and civilization, such as city parks and gardens which represent possible examples of a successful symbiotic bonding between these two categories (Barry, 2009, 246), this literary approach emphasizes the priority of Nature and its influence. The domination of Nature over human endeavours and Culture is unquestionable—cities are situated in an originally natural environment and they simply cannot survive with-

out natural processes and the related products (for example, air production through photosynthesis, food production through bee pollination or the maintenance of optimal temperatures through the changes of the seasons). In ecocritical theoretical discussions, there are polemics in this direction—is Nature actually and literally everything, or is Nature everything minus human civilization (Jimmy, 2015, 371)?

It is not easy to come down on one side in answer to this question because civilization makes its mark in the natural environment, too. Often with disturbing and unfortunate results and not always in harmony with Nature, such as high industrial pollution, the production of waste that is slow to degrade, the high exploitation of limited natural resources, global warming, the extinction of plant and animal species, etc. In other words, an ecocritical conclusion and strong message is that a postmodern deconstruction of Nature is not only impossible, it is also irresponsible. This strong ecological lesson is imprinted in the narrative structure of Sudeta's *Mor*.

After the death of Mor's father, Arno and his business partner (appointed as a new steward), under the pretext of a project of agrarian reform and the building of sewage infrastructure, intend to exploit the woods, split the money and leave the property without completing the planned infrastructure. This form of radical and egoistical capitalism, a representation of the pursuit of pure profit in ecocritical terms, symbolizes the destabilization of natural harmony and complete destruction brought about by civilization. To maintain the illusion of working on the project, they bring in workers to engage in deforestation and in digging canals, thus creating a deep wound in the sensitive tissue of Nature. Ecocritically and objectively, neither Nature nor Culture benefit from this radical form of capitalistic behaviour: one part of Nature is devoured and consumed, perhaps beyond repair. On the other hand, the selected human community is deceived and does not prosper from the upgraded infrastructure.

Arno's selfish actions as a symbol of non-productive industrial destruction and blind capitalistic ambition result in Mor's fantastic transformation into a werewolf. Without any ambition to enter here the respective field of fantastic or horror literature and explain its nuances, it is sufficient for our purposes to point to the general conclusion that in

European folklore and literary tradition, lycanthropy is negatively perceived: it is usually related to a curse, demonic incantation, the bite of another werewolf or other forms of black magic which can be broken only with fatal results. It is a form of intrusive fantasy which, through a high level of tension, disturbs and endangers the normal life of the affected community (thus similar to the effect of zombies or vampires) and it needs to be neutralized for the sake of re-establishing the safety of the inflicted society and in order to release negative emotions (Mendlesohn, 2008, xxi-xxii; 115–116).

A close reading of Đuro Sudeta's *Mor* suggests the presence of some of these elements, but the ecocritical inversion of the traditional perception of lycanthropy can be recognized in this novella. It is true that Mor's transformation into a werewolf intrudes on the community: the near-by villagers complain about mysterious events such as slaughtered cattle, butchered dogs with their guts torn apart, poisoned wells, haystacks set on fire, etc. Naturally, fear develops and consequently a strong demand arises for the neutralization of the monster and the restoration of the social order. However, there are several important differences from the traditional European motif of the werewolf. First of all, Mor's transformation is not the result of black magic; it is the natural evolution of his intense connection with Nature induced by his great disappointment with the dominant forms of civilization and human behaviour. Nature actually fully embraces Mor as her child and transforms him into the manifestation of a noble savage. It is indicative that in this transformation Mor loses his ability to speak. The inability to use language, the *condictio sine qua non* of every human presence and development of civilization, is actually the final stage of Nature's embracement of the novella's protagonist. Furthermore, his neutralization would actually mean the neutralization of Nature itself—the ecocritical inversion of the werewolf motif is initiated as the mission of the transformed Mor's to neutralize the antagonist Arno and his radical ego-capitalistic behaviour which disrupts the order both of Nature and Culture. In other words, the fight for the re-establishment of the safety of society in traditional horror becomes the ecological fight for the re-establishment of the safety of Nature's biological order. This is the true reason behind Mor's attack on the village community and the spread of fear.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides an ecocritical reading of the Croatian classic fantastic novella *Mor*—*The Original Werewolf Legend* by Đuro Sudeta. The first part of the paper outlines some of the main strategies of ecocriticism, a relatively new literary approach to deal in a specific way with deconstructing the duality of Nature and Culture. Seeing Nature as a postmodern significant “Other,” ecocritics are actually reviving realistic approaches through environmental problems and are showing how the environment relates to various sign, artistic or language systems.

In traditional literary history, Đuro Sudeta's *Mor* is considered a classic example of an impressionistic narrative with a typical modernist figure at its centre. The traditional interpretations of this novella accentuate the psychological profile of its main protagonist, contextualize the narrative in a modernist paradigm, and fit it into *fin-de-siècle* propositions, showing how the protagonist experiences the natural environment and simultaneously produces his individual reflections of reality, such as the specific feeling of the passage of time, pretending to narrate from the point of view of a lilac branch, or generally finding individual, personal peace in correspondence with natural surroundings.

However, a closer approach and ecocritical reading of these literary motifs show a different critical stand. Placing outer Nature as the primary focus of interpretation (rather than the inner protagonist's psyche), highlighting selected parts of the novella and analysing the dynamics of literary motifs related to the natural environment, we come to the conclusion that these structures are not human interpretations, but ways in which Nature itself establishes contacts with the narrative's protagonists and adapts its elements to correspond to and help those who embrace her. This ecocritical direction of interpretation is more logical than the traditional one when it comes to *Mor*'s final fantastical transformation into a werewolf, which, through an ecocritical lens, is manifested as the ecological inversion of the classic horror motif in European folklore. Furthermore, the ecocritical approach does not deconstruct or interrupt the meaning of the literary text itself, but critically uncovers the imperfections of anthropocentric literary approaches. In so doing, it aims to reform conventional readings in traditional literary history.

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