

Sowing Seeds in the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Study of
Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* through an Eco critical view, investigates its significance in the Anthropocene in a positive way—the epoch defined by human-induced environmental changes. It describes the story of the main character named Elzéard Bouffier, a solitary shepherd who transforms an infertile landscape into a thriving forest through decades of quiet dedication. In contrast to the destructive human activities, here Anthropocene refers to Bouffier's actions, which symbolizes environmental restoration, sustainability, and the power of an individual agency in regenerating the desolate environment. This study analyses how the novella presents human intervention as both destructive and regenerative, offering a counter-narrative to the dominant themes of environmental degradation. The story challenges the human intervention on nature, which leads to focus on the readers to view the positive nature of human activities as restoring the destroying nature. By depicting a world where reforestation reverses ecological decline, Giono advocates for harmony between humans and nature rather than domination. Furthermore, in the period of climate crisis, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, often overlooked in mainstream environmental literature, serves as an allegory of hope, reflects our responsibility

towards ecological renewal, emphasizing the importance of long-term ecological stewardship. Bouffier's quiet contribution suggests that sustainable change is possible through patience, hope, persistence, and respect for nature. Thus, this novella is a valuable yet unsung contribution to Eco criticism and Anthropocene discourse.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Eco criticism, Reforestation, Human-Nature Relationship, Ecological Stewardship.

The term 'Anthropocene' was coined to express the current geological period, which denotes the environmental changes due to the heavy impact of human activities on environment. These human activities on environment, mainly on nature, result in biodiversity loss, deforestation, unbalanced ecosystem, climate changes etc. Here, literature serves as a vital role in raising environmental awareness among the readers of the younger generation, who are to save nature and natural resources for the upcoming future. There are some collections of "Unsung Literature", which convey the thoughts of some unpopular people through their own experience in their day-to-day life. One of the unsung works of Jean Giono, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, was written in 1953. This novella motivates readers to reforest barren lands.

Jean Giono's novella serves as evidence of the significant effect of an individual on recreating forests on barren landscapes. There is a slight difference in the concept of Anthropocene. Most of the critics use this term to describe human activities which are harmful to nature. Here, 'Anthropocene' refers to the human activities in a positive way. This novella provides an influential counter-narrative to the vast environmental changes linked to the Anthropocene through the character of Elzéard Bouffier. He is a modest shepherd who turns a barren valley into a flourishing forest. This novella *The Man Who Planted*

Trees focuses on filling the gaps in global narratives about hope, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

This novella was inspired by a real man, Durand Saint Amand from Vaucluse, who aimed to replant the land with 'truffled' seedlings as Zachary Nowak said in his Research paper, "The presence of these special oak saplings had a cascade effect, giving homes to woodland creatures, creating a more favourable microclimate, improving water retention, and preventing further erosion—just as in Giono's story" (75). It suggests that the bond between human beings and nature is both complex and intertwined. They are closely linked by influencing and directing each other over time.

Using eco criticism as a conceptual structure, this paper places Jean Giono's work within the wide framework of environmental literature, which finds the connection between the novella and the modern ecological movements. It argues that, while *The Man Who Planted Trees* is an unnoticed work, its subject matter is endless as well as relevant to address the important environmental challenges of our present.

"Unsung Literature" is the term that refers to the literary works that are mostly overlooked or diminished in popular discourse, despite their profound themes and creative values. For example: Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* is one of the uncelebrated works, in which people, who fail to view the positive side of Anthropocene are mentioned. Like other Environmental Classical Literature such as Wangari Maathai's The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, this novella *The Man Who Planted Trees* is not acknowledged by many people, though it contains a strong ecological and humanistic message. It is about a solitary shepherd, who dedicates his life to recreating a forest in desolate land and spends a peaceful life with nature. It emphasizes themes such as sustainability, resilience and dedication. It can bridge gaps in the world narratives and underscores the significance of environmental stewardship to acknowledge that, *The Man Who Planted Trees* is a key piece of Eco critical Literature.

Human-nature relationship is one of the most remarkable features in *The Man Who Planted Trees*. The central character - Elzéard Bouffier, devotes his entire life to cultivating a forest in a desolate and dry area of Florence. His behaviour is a sharp contrast to industrial society's corrosive inclinations, which frequently perceive nature as a resource to be used for profit. Every substance of nature has a value for the existence of human life.

Bouffier's serene, deliberate workforce provides an alternative strategy based on patient, care and regeneration. His unwavering dedication goes against the usual thinking that significant environmental changes need massive intervention. However, Giono argues that ecosystems can be restored by single acts of stewardship, no matter how tiny and invisible the power and hope of humans.

In the beginning, Bouffier works in solitude. After a decade, the planted acorn seeds grow as a plant. From the distant land, it looks like a grayish mist covers the mountain of Florence as a carpet. While the unnamed narrator makes a second visit to this barren land after the World War, these plants are at the height of his shoulder, with some birds and animals having made it as their habitat. These elements of nature help Bouffier in his process of making a dense forest.

Rewilding the wasteland is the target of some people that has gained popularity in contemporary environmental movements, which is portrayed in the novella. Green Belt Movement is one of the environmental movements founded by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, which focuses on afforestation, empowering the communities, especially for women. In this novella, there are no trees in the infertile land, no water, and no life on the land, where Bouffier wants to spend his entire life. However, Bouffier gradually restores the environment after years of devoted gardening. Wildlife returns, groundwater is restored, and soil fertility is restored because of his acts. After the World War of 1914, the narrator revisits the barren lands, but at that time it has changed into a flourished green forest as mentioned in the novella, "glimpsed in the distance a sort of grayish mist that covered the mountaintops like a carpet" (Giono 20).

This concept is relevant to modern reforestation initiatives like China's Great Green Wall and the Green Belt Movement. Bouffier's modest local project complements the larger international initiatives, reaffirming that ecological restoration is not only a political or scientific issue but also a moral and ethical obligation.

Bouffier's anonymity is one of the most striking features in *The Man Who Planted Trees*. While comparing to the individuals, who are usually praised in the environmental discourse such as scientists, NGOs, researchers, legislators and activists - Bouffier is a common man, who is mainly unknown by the society, because he hides himself in the unnoticed land, in a remote area in Florence. There he works hard to maintain the responsibilities of a human to preserve the environment. His works subtly change the landscape without pursuing any profit or fame. This silent energy raises awareness of the larger problem of unsung environmental labourers such as farmers, conservationists and indigenous groups, which are rarely highlighted in international narratives.

Jean Giono's novella serves as a literary justice, provides a voice to people whose efforts towards ecological sustainable development are often overlooked. It mirrors the notion that ecological rehabilitation frequently occurs as a starting point of making efforts by encouraging readers to consider the numerous unreported tales of environmental stewardship taking place across the world.

Thus, *The Man Who Planted Trees* explores the universal concerns of environmental degradation and renewal of emptiness, making it an essential piece of global eco-critical literature. Its main theme aligns with indigenous ecological wisdom, Eastern philosophies of harmony with nature, and contemporary sustainability movements, allowing us to get awareness of ecological stewardship.

In comparison with Giono's work, some of the eco-writers emphasize the relationship between humans and nature. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* explores indigenous ecological knowledge and explains the reciprocal relationship between humans and the land. Similarly, Rachel

Carson's *Silent Spring* critiques environmental degradation. While one combines these works together for criticism, he or she can appreciate its role in shaping Global environmental consciousness.

Some of the works such as *The Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, talks about an old man, who spends his life not mostly in solitude because nature accompanies him in his travel while catching the fish at sea. Another work, *The Small Tigers of Shergarh* by Ranjit Lal, describes the events in the lives of Shikha and Sunny who spend their time in the Shergarh Reserve, becoming friendly with tiger cubs.

By connecting with nature, one can experience comfort and peace during stressful times. It is a powerful weapon to reduce one's mental stress, and it provides solace. Nature is the best companion ever. When Bouffier loses all his family members, his only companions are his dog and sheep. Even the World Wars do not disturb him in anyways. He leads a peaceful life with the nature-filled environment. By portraying environmental restoration as an act of patience, dedication, and love, *The Man Who Planted Trees* continues to influence global discussions on sustainability, encouraging individuals and organizations to take meaningful steps toward a greener future.

Jean Giono's *The Man Who Planted Trees* is a precious literary work, which teaches the readers about the environmental stewardship. Through the story of Elzéard Bouffier, the novella offers the power of individual's action on the resilience of nature, and the importance of ecological stewardship in the Anthropocene. Climate change and environmental degradation by human beings dominate global discourse, where Giono's story serves as a beacon of hope and enlightens the dark side of the human mind. It reminds one that reforestation often begins with small, unnoticed acts of an individual's care towards nature.

As the Anthropocene unfolds, the lessons rooted in *The Man Who Planted Trees* become ever more critical. Bouffier's legacy, though fictional, mirrors real-world efforts to heal the planet—proving that

one person's dedication can indeed transform the world. Mishra and Sarangi express their views on sowing seeds of love and care on nature in young minds as, "Elzéard Bouffier, a fictional character who has been created as a role model for people to love the trees or more precisely to make them aware planting more trees... The short fiction is a powerful message to humanity that if we love and protect nature, she will nourish us and sustain us" (618).

Thus, *The Man Who Planted Trees* highlights the profound impact of unsung literature in shaping ecological awareness. Giving such works the recognition they deserve can inspire meaningful change for future generations. Sowing the seeds of awareness in young minds can make the world a better place for the future generation.

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