

# Nature and Symbolism: An Ecocritical Perspective on Rebecca

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the symbolic significance of nature in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. It analyzes the symbolism of the sea and gardens in the novel, exploring their roles in reflecting characters' psychological states and advancing the plot. The paper highlights the integration of ecocriticism and symbolism, offering a new perspective for understanding the novel's themes. It underscores that the natural environment is more than just a backdrop; it profoundly mirrors the emotions, psychological states, and socio-cultural issues of the characters.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; Natural Symbolism; *Rebecca*

## 1. Introduction

Daphne Du Maurier (1907-1989), a highly influential and iconic British female author and a member of the Royal Society of Literature, has received accolades such as the Edgar Allan Poe Lifetime Achievement Award, the National Book Award in America, and the Anthony Award for Book of the Century. Her works have been borrowed more frequently from the British Library than those of Shakespeare. *Du Maurier's* novels often blend elements of suspense, psychological intrigue, and gothic themes, deeply exploring the complexities of human nature and its interaction with societal and cultural backgrounds. Her notable works include *Rebecca*, *My Cousin Rachel*, *Jamaica Inn*, and *The Birds*. Among these, *Rebecca* has held a significant place on the international literary stage since its first publication in 1938, winning the National Book Award the same year. In 1940, the novel was adapted into an Oscar-winning film by the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock. In 2000, it was honored with the Anthony Award as the Book of the Century. In 2003, *Rebecca* topped the list in BBC's Big Read, a poll involving nearly a million participants, securing its status as a beloved literary masterpiece across centuries. The novel narrates the story of a young woman who marries the charming widower Maxim de Winter and explores themes of identity and love under the overshadowing legacy of his previous wife, Rebecca. *Du Maurier* masterfully creates an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty, making the novel a benchmark in psychological thrillers.

This paper aims to deepen the understanding of *Rebecca* through a combination of ecocriticism and symbolism. Ecocriticism integrates ecological science with literary critique, focusing on the portrayal of natural settings in literature and their relationship to characters and themes. Symbolism, on the other hand, involves a multilayered interpretation of symbolic elements within the work. In *Rebecca*, the sea and gardens are not merely backdrops but play significant roles in the narrative structure as vital symbols of psychological states and thematic developments. By analyzing these natural elements in depth, one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the novel's themes and profound meanings, exploring the complex interplay between the natural environment and character psychology and how this interplay reflects and reinforces the core themes of the novel. This analytical approach not only highlights the unique position of *Rebecca* in literary history but also provides new perspectives and theoretical references for modern literary studies.

## 2. Ecocriticism and Symbolism

Ecocriticism, a critical wave that emerged in the 1990s within the Anglo-American literary circles, positions literary critique within the expansive context of Earth's biosphere, intertwining tangible ecological issues with literary texts to examine the relationship between humans and nature<sup>[1]</sup>. Among various definitions of "ecocriticism," the one provided by Cheryll Glotfelty in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) is widely accepted and cited by ecocritics, defining it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment<sup>[2]</sup>."

Ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism guided by ecological philosophical thought<sup>[3]</sup>. Guided by ecological philosophy, ecocriticism employs modern ecological perspectives to investigate the relationships among literature, nature, society, and the human psyche. It also uses literary narrative techniques to examine ecological culture, exploring humanity's poetic existence in the world and contemplating the relationships among humans, nature, art, and criticism. This includes a reflection on the conquest and retribution between humans and nature, establishing humanistic principles for ecological art critique, and deducing the construction of new, diverse values around modern subjectivity<sup>[4]</sup>. Ecocriticism primarily focuses on the natural and spiritual ecological issues within literature, striving to depict the complex dynamics between humans and the natural world, and to grasp the interactive relationship between literature and the natural environment. From an ecological cultural perspective, ecocriticism can reinterpret traditional literary classics, uncovering hidden ecological and aesthetic meanings and re-establishing poetic and aesthetic relationships between humans and themselves, others, society, nature, and the Earth.

The use of symbolism in literature dates back to the late 19th century, serving not only as an artistic technique but also as a perspective for deeply exploring the multilayered meanings of literary works. Symbolism emphasizes the expression of profound meanings through symbols, metaphors, and implications rather than direct narration. In *Rebecca*, the application of symbolism is particularly prominent. Whether it's the mysterious atmosphere of Manderley estate or the ever-changing waves of the ocean, these are not just depictions of the story's setting but also profound reflections of the characters' inner worlds and the themes of the work. Through symbolic interpretation, one can more comprehensively understand the metaphors and deeper meanings in the novel, exploring the complex emotions and philosophical reflections within.

Despite the extensive research on *Rebecca* by scholars both domestically and internationally, covering narrative techniques, writing skills, language style, character analysis, themes of growth, gothic imagery, and feminism, much of this research has traditionally focused on literary critique methods, with less emphasis on deeper ecocritical perspectives. For example, Tianran Chen's (2013) study revealed ecological interpretations in *Rebecca*, but it largely remained at a direct interpretation of natural descriptions<sup>[5]</sup>. Studies by Yunfei Y (2013)<sup>[6]</sup> and Zhu Chen (2014)<sup>[7]</sup> from an ecofeminist perspective opened new viewpoints but still did not fully explore the deep connections between natural symbolism and character psychology or social relationships. Generally, although previous studies have provided valuable perspectives for understanding *Rebecca*, there is still room for deeper integration of ecocriticism and symbolism. The innovation of this paper lies in its attempt to combine ecocriticism and symbolism, thereby offering a more comprehensive and profound analytical framework. By meticulously exploring the symbolic significance of natural environments in *Rebecca*, this study not only reveals the multifaceted roles of natural elements in the work but also explores how these symbols interact with the characters' inner worlds and social relationships, thereby deepening the understanding of the novel's themes and emotional depth.

### 3. Symbolism and Ecocriticism in *Rebecca*

#### 3.1 *The Sea*

In *Rebecca*, the sea is not just a backdrop but a significant symbol that permeates the entire novel, revealing its rich meanings under the lens of ecocriticism. As an integral part of nature, the sea's unpredictable and boundless traits provide a profound symbolic backdrop for understanding the novel's interpersonal relationships, emotional entanglements, and thematic developments. From an ecocritical perspective, the portrayal of the sea not only reflects the power and beauty of the natural world but also mirrors human perceptions and psychological states.

Firstly, the tumultuous waves and unpredictability of the sea symbolize the uncertainty and potential threats within the novel. The sea's turbulence mirrors the protagonist's inner fears and unrest, as well as the hidden secrets and conflicts within Manderley estate. This fear and uncertainty climax in the narrative, especially in the plot revealing the truth about Rebecca's death, where the sea almost becomes a driving force in the story's progression. Secondly, the sea also carries the flow and changes of the characters' emotions. It is not only a part of nature but also an externalization of the characters' emotional and psychological states. To the protagonist, the sea sometimes appears calm and serene, and other times stormy and tumultuous, reflecting not just natural phenomena but also the fluctuations of the characters' inner worlds. Through the depiction of the sea, *Du Maurier* skillfully connects the characters' inner activities with changes in the natural world, showcasing the close connections and

interactions between humans and nature. Additionally, as part of nature, the sea under the view of ecocriticism also reflects the relationship between humans and nature. In the novel, the characters' perceptions of and attitudes towards the sea reflect their understanding of and respect for nature. The vastness and depth of the sea suggest humanity's awe and dependency on nature, while also highlighting our ignorance and vulnerability to natural forces.

In summary, the symbolic significance and the deep ecocritical meanings of the sea in *Rebecca* not only enrich the interpretation of the novel but also strengthen the complex and subtle interactions between nature and human psychology, and social relationships. By analyzing this natural symbol, one can gain deeper insights into the novel's themes and emotions, feeling the inseparable connection and interaction between humans and nature.

### **3.2 The Garden**

In *Rebecca*, the garden is not just part of Manderley estate but a significant symbolic element that carries rich psychological and emotional connotations within the novel. The design, changes, and interactions of the garden deeply reflect the psychological states of the characters, revealing complex emotional relationships and internal conflicts.

Firstly, as a man-made landscape, the garden's order and refinement symbolize the characters' control over their lives and maintenance of appearances. The estate owner's efforts to maintain the garden's perfection reflect their attention to social status and image. However, the artificial beauty of the garden contrasts sharply with nature's wildness, symbolizing the deep conflicts and struggles within the characters. This contrast is emphasized repeatedly in the narrative, indicating the tension and unrest hidden beneath the surface calm and order. Secondly, specific elements within the garden, such as flowers, paths, or ponds, all hold symbolic meanings reflecting the characters' psychological states and the emotional trajectory of the novel. For example, blooming flowers may symbolize love and vitality, while withered plants may suggest death and decay. The paths and maze-like layout of the garden symbolize the characters' confusion and their journey to find self-identity. Additionally, the garden serves as a stage for emotional exchanges and conflicts among the characters. Conversations and events that occur in the garden often externalize the characters' internal conflicts and emotional entanglements. The tranquility and secluded spaces of the garden provide opportunities for characters to express their true feelings, as well as confront their inner fears and uncertainties.

In summary, the garden in *Rebecca* is not only part of the background but a profound symbolic element. Through detailed descriptions and interpretations of the garden's symbolic meanings, one can better understand the psychological makeup of the characters, feeling the complex emotions and internal struggles among them. This analysis of the garden's symbolic significance showcases the intricate and complex relationships between people and their environment, and between their inner and outer worlds.

### **3.3 Interaction Between Natural Environment and Character Psychology**

In *Rebecca*, the interaction between the natural environment and character psychology forms a crucial part of the narrative, deepening the understanding of the characters' personalities and inner worlds, as well as enhancing the expression of the novel's themes. The natural environment in this work is more than just a backdrop; its interplay with the characters' psychological states reflects a profound exploration of the relationship between humans and nature.

Firstly, changes in the natural environment often resonate with changes in the characters' psychological states. For example, the fluctuating weather and the undulating waves of the sea in the novel are not only depictions of the natural world but also reflections of the characters' psychological fluctuations. Natural phenomena such as storms, fog, and clear weather in the novel often correspond to the emotional peaks and troughs of the characters. This symbolic portrayal makes the natural environment a critical window for understanding the characters' inner worlds. Secondly, the natural environment also serves to reflect the relationships among the characters. For instance, the garden within Manderley estate and walks on the beach are not just spatial backdrops for the characters' actions but also stages for the development and change of their relationships. In these natural settings, the interactions and dialogues between characters reveal their tensions, conflicts, and emotional entanglements. Moreover, the natural environment symbolizes the deep-seated desires and fears of the characters. In the novel, the dense forests outside the estate and the profound sea are often symbols of hidden emotions and secrets. These environmental descriptions not only add a sense of mystery to the

story but also deepen the exploration into the characters' psychological depths.

In *Rebecca*, the interaction between the natural environment and character psychology is bidirectional: on one hand, the natural environment reflects and affects the characters' psychological states; on the other hand, the characters' emotions and psychological states are also manifested in their perceptions of and interactions with the natural environment. This interaction not only enriches the understanding of the characters' personalities but also enhances the perception of the novel's themes, showing the complex and subtle connections between humans and nature, and between the inner and outer worlds. Through analysis of this interaction, one can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's emotional layers and thematic depth, appreciating the significant role of the natural environment in shaping the characters' psychological constructs.

### ***3.4 The Symbiotic Relationship Between Historical Memory and Nature***

In *Rebecca*, the natural environment serves not only as the setting for the story but also as a carrier of history and memory. The novel skillfully uses the natural environment to reflect the characters' past experiences and inner memories, showcasing the symbiotic relationship between history, memory, and nature through the interaction of ecological environments with human experiences.

Firstly, the natural environment of Manderley estate, such as the gardens, the sea, and the estate itself, carries the history and memories of the characters. Every patch of land, every building, and even every tree at the estate is closely linked to the protagonist and Rebecca's stories. These natural and man-made elements become bridges connecting the past with the present, allowing historical events to persist in reality. For instance, a corner in the garden or a view on the beach often triggers the protagonist's memories of past events, revitalizing history in her mind. Secondly, the natural environment in the novel also symbolizes the passage of time and the transformation of memory. As the seasons change and the natural landscape transforms, so do the characters' psychological states and their memories of the past. The continuity and variability of the natural environment reflect the characters' different interpretations and feelings towards their past experiences. In some key plots, changes in the natural environment seem to presage transformations in the characters' inner worlds or the reshaping of past memories. Additionally, the natural environment acts as a witness to historical events, enhancing the realism and depth of the story. The natural landscapes of the estate are not just silent backdrops but also participants and witnesses to historical events. They have witnessed every detail of Rebecca's life and also carry the emotional journey between the protagonist and the estate owner. Through the interaction between the natural environment and the characters' experiences, the novel presents a world intertwined with history and memory, emphasizing the inseparable connection between nature and human experiences.

In summary, the natural environment in *Rebecca* as a carrier of history and memory not only enhances the depth and layers of the story but also reveals the complex relationship between nature and human experiences. Through in-depth analysis of this aspect, one can more comprehensively understand the novel's sense of time, historical consciousness, and the complexity of character psychology, appreciating the unique role of the natural environment in constructing characters' memories and historical experiences.

### ***3.5 Symbolism and Ecocriticism in the Interactions Between Characters and Nature***

In *Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca*, the interaction between the characters and the natural environment, intertwined with symbolism and ecocriticism, is crucial to understanding the deeper meanings of the novel. This interplay not only reveals the psychological states and emotional experiences of the characters but also reflects the novel's profound insights into the environment and historical context.

The ocean, as a recurring natural element, is not merely a part of the setting but also symbolizes the emotional and psychological states of the characters. Changes in the ocean, from calm to turbulent, mirror the emotional fluctuations of the characters. In the novel, the ocean often appears at critical moments, such as during the revelation of the truth about Rebecca's death, where it almost acts as a force driving the plot forward, symbolizing the unknown and unpredictable fate. The garden, as another significant natural setting, reflects the characters' emotions and social relationships. Every path and flowerbed in the garden holds the history and memories of the characters. For instance, the protagonist's strolls through the garden frequently coincide with reflections on the past and contemplations of the future, turning the garden into a stage for her inner emotional life. Additionally,

the care and transformation of the garden not only reflect the estate owner's concern for appearances and social status but also expose the order and chaos of their inner worlds.

From the perspective of ecocriticism, the novel depicts the interaction between characters and the natural environment, demonstrating a deep understanding of and concern for the natural world. The natural environment is not only a backdrop for the characters' actions but also an externalization of their emotions and psychological states. By illustrating how characters perceive and interact with their surroundings, the novel reveals the intimate connections between humans and nature, as well as the impact and dependence humans have on the environment. Furthermore, the natural settings in the novel play a critical role in carrying the weight of history and memories. The estate and the ocean are not only venues for the unfolding story but also witnesses to the historical events. Through the depiction of the natural environment, the novel portrays the passage of time and the transformation of memories, deepening the understanding of the characters' experiences and psychological changes.

In summary, by thoroughly analyzing the interplay between the natural environment and character psychology in *Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca*, and how this interplay intersects with symbolism and ecocriticism, one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the novel's emotional depth and thematic content. This analysis not only reveals the complex relationship between characters and nature but also demonstrates the novel's profound insights into the environment, history, and human experience, thereby providing a richer and more multidimensional perspective for appreciating this literary work.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article, through an in-depth interpretation of the natural environment in *Rebecca*, has highlighted the critical role of natural symbols in reflecting the psychological states of characters and driving the plot forward. The ocean and the gardens are not only parts of the natural world but also symbols of the characters' emotions and inner worlds. Their depiction deepens the understanding of the characters' complex psychological and emotional experiences and also showcases the subtle interactions between the natural environment and the characters.

From an ecological criticism perspective, the natural environment in the novel reflects a deep understanding and critique of the society and culture of the time. By analyzing the interactions between characters and nature, this paper reveals the complexity and importance of the human-nature relationship. Furthermore, this paper explores the combined effect of symbolism and ecological criticism in *Rebecca*, pointing out how this integrated perspective enriches the understanding of the novel's themes and messages. The limitation of this study lies in its primary focus on the symbolic significance of the natural environment, without fully considering the impact of other cultural and historical factors. Future research could extend to a broader historical and cultural background and take into account the author's personal experiences, to achieve a more comprehensive interpretation of the work. Overall, this paper provides new perspectives for understanding *Rebecca* and also serves as a reference for studies on the role of the natural environment in literary works.

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