

# Nature as Rejuvenation in Literary Depictions of Isolation Past and Present

Investigating tandem depictions of nature and isolation in four texts spanning 1911 to present, with a strong focus on ecocritical thought.

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**Primary Texts**

Frances Hodgson Burnett, **The Secret Garden** (Penguin, 1911)  
Daphne du Maurier, **Rebecca** (Virago, 1938)  
Jean Rhys, **Wide Sargasso Sea** (Penguin, 1966)  
Sally Rooney, **Normal People** (Faber, 2018)

**Significant Literature**

Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004)  
Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999)  
Timothy Morton, *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)  
Katherine Norbury, *Women on Nature* (Unbound, 2021)  
Samantha Walton, *Everybody Needs Beauty* (Bloomsbury, 2021)



## Research Summary

This research focuses on concurrent themes of nature and isolation in 20th and 21st century literature. By addressing each text in turn, I unpack how nature is used as a device to either restore characters from situations of isolation or entrench them further in it. This research examines nature as an anthropomorphized entity, able to uniquely shape and influence a characters' social, physical and psychological state. To make sure that this research is well located within literary criticism, I refer to the contemporary critical field of ecocriticism.

### The Secret Garden

The Secret Garden presents nature as the key driver of both social and psychological rejuvenation. Mary's discovery of the eponymous secret garden leads to the improvement of her health and fitness. Equally, the garden acts a social leveller (transcending class) through which she encounters new friends; creature and human alike.

### Rebecca

In Rebecca, the narrator and her new husband Maxim du Winter are haunted by the ghost of Rebecca – his former wife. Integral to this text are the ways Rebecca and nature are aligned, an association which reflects a broader tradition

linking women and nature as an untameable "other". The natural world is embedded with reminders of Rebecca's wild spirit and exacerbates her increasingly insidious influence throughout the text. Thus, in "Rebecca", nature generates stagnation and further entrenches the protagonist's isolation rather than offering restoration.

### Wide Sargasso Sea

Antoinette and Rochester, the central relationship of this text, form an antagonistic pair whose vast contrasts alienate the other. This is reflected by the different landscapes and environments they respectively thrive in. Whilst Rochester, embodying a colonial, patriarchal order finds solace in the British landscape, Antoinette

finds it oppressive. Similarly, Rochester feels a disorientating loss of sense and order in the West Indies, Antoinette's home. The result of this central difference is that nature becomes a divisive, isolating force which engenders derealisation for both characters.

### Normal People

In Normal People, nature is used to reflect Marianne's social and psychological isolation. Marianne is unable to fully inhabit the physical spaces and landscapes she lives in, and this extends to a fundamental sense of depersonalization that transcends place. Connell, the other central character, is significantly restricted by his class. Access to nature and movement is shown as contingent upon financial status and thus isolating for those unable to afford it.

**“After each breakfast she gazed out of the window across to the huge moor, which seemed to spread out on all sides and climb up to the sky, and after she had stared for a while she realized that if she did not go out she would have to stay in and do nothing – and so she went out.”**

*The Secret Garden, p. 49*

## Ecocriticism

The main school of research that I drew on for my research was ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a relatively new discipline within literary studies: it explores ecology and nature in literature. One of the central questions asked and addressed by ecocritical theory is what actually constitutes nature. Critics such as Timothy Morton view nature as an anthropocentric term because it presupposes a difference between the human and the natural world, ignoring that humans are embedded in that very same landscape. Other facets of ecocriticism, such as those which examine the pastoral tradition, unpack how nature can be used as a gloss to disguise complex and fraught social and ecological realities. Ideas such as these proved pertinent to my research, which viewed nature as an embodied force deeply entangled in the psychosocial backgrounds of characters. Ecofeminism, a field of literary theory intersecting with ecocriticism, investigates the relationship between ecological and feminist issues. Ecofeminism also proved fruitful to my analysis, which was frequently centred around women characters navigating highly gendered landscapes.

## Conclusion

Each text offers a unique representation of the complex relationship between nature and isolation. Crucially, "nature" must not be understood as holding a single value; it does not uniformly provide "rejuvenation". Rather, nature can be employed to further ensnare a character within their alienation, or simply to reflect upon their otherness. Additionally, nature may also hold multiple values within a text. Ecocritical thought posed by critics such as Morton and Samantha Walton suggests that we should be careful when navigating the relationship between humanity and nature; there is a more intangible relationship between the two than supposed by the man / nature dichotomy. These texts show that nature is intimately woven into the fibre of characterisation and as a fluid tool able to both shape and comment upon characters' lives. Across my research report essay and blog (addressing ecocriticism and literature more generally), I have enriched my literary understanding of nature as a multifaceted concept.

