
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

When the House Breathes and the Garden Watches: Portrayals of Nature in Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Woolf

Asma Muqbil AL Shammari ¹ and Dr. Banan Hameed AlJahdali ²

¹ MA Scholar, University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

² Assistant Professor, University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Asma Muqbil AL Shammari, **E-mail:** AALSHAMMARI0069.stu@uj.edu.sa

| ABSTRACT

This study looks at how literary depictions of nature have changed over time, from emotionally intense reflections of human dread in gothic literature to descriptions of nature as self-sustaining forces in modernist writing. The study examines Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens* to show how both authors use natural elements not just as settings but also as active characters in their stories. Drawing on an ecocritical perspective, particularly Greg Garrard's, this project analyzes how narrative voice influences our perception of the role of nature in storytelling. By comparing these two distinct stories, the paper emphasizes a broader literary shift: from viewing nature as a mirror of human emotion to seeing it as an autonomous force. Ultimately, this study argues that applying an ecocritical lens to Poe's and Woolf's texts reveals a literary shift in narratives of nature.

| KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism, Edgar Allan Poe, Greg Garrard, gothic literature, modernist literature, nature representation, Virginia Woolf

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 August 2026

PUBLISHED: 09 September 2026

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2026.6.5.4

Introduction

Nature has always played a significant role in shaping literary imagination. In literature, nature is not a neutral backdrop but reflects human emotions, embodies their anxiety, and actively contributes to shaping the meaning of the text. Especially in gothic literature, nature mirrors the characters' psychological and moral disorders. As Hogle (2002) explains, nature in gothic fiction is marked by "the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life" (p. 3). For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of House of Usher*, the environment serves not merely as a setting for the story's events but also as a living reflection of the interconnectedness between the natural world and inner terror, decay, and inevitable fate.

In contrast, modernist literature gradually shifts away from representing nature as a reflection of humanity's fears and toward portraying it as an entity independent of human drama; as Bonnie Scott (2012) argues, Virginia Woolf represents nature "apart from the human mind" (p. 236). In *Kew Gardens*, nature does not speak on behalf of the characters, but rather exists alongside them, independent and freed from human emotions.

This paper explores how both Woolf and Poe use elements of nature, narrative voices, and nonhuman beings such as decaying houses, black lakes, silent flowers, and snails. These elements served not only as stylistic choices for writing but also as keys to understanding the transformation of literature's relationship with the natural world. By relying on the ecocritical framework of Greg Garrard's book *Ecocriticism* (2004), especially the concepts of apocalypse, dwelling, and non-human agency, this project seeks to analyze how these stories depict nature in the context of the eras, style, and narrative voices of both human and nonhuman perspectives. It highlights how the role of nature in literature has evolved, from the immersion of horror in gothic fiction to a stance of indifference and independence in Modernism.

Literature Review

In literature, nature is not only the setting of the story's events, but is also an element that contributes to the text's overall meaning. Consequently, several critics have explored how nature is depicted in literature. For instance, in Gothic literature, nature is often related to characters' emotions and psychological states, and reflects the atmosphere of fear, whereas in modernist literature, nature is presented as an independent entity that is not centered on humans. In this context, several studies have focused on the role of nature in shaping the literary meanings of Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Woolf's *Kew Gardens*. This section reviews several of these studies that help to illustrate the relationship between nature and literature.

In gothic works such as Poe's *The Fall of The House of Usher*, nature is an active character, related to human decay. This vision emerges in Thompson's book (1973), which examines Poe's combination of aesthetics, fear, and fate within the natural world. Thompson focuses on Poe's use of 'sublime and grotesque,' which creates a powerful atmosphere of awe and psychological terror that reinforces the sense of the Usher family's inevitable destruction (pp. 91-93), as seen, for instance, with the house's mold-covered walls and decaying architecture. Nadal (2016) extends gothic reading by analyzing how Poe's gothic style mirrors the unconscious mind and inner fear. She draws on Freud's concept of the 'uncanny,' which he defined as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 1919, p. 220), to argue that the story is shaped by uncertainty, haunting, and the return of the past. Through this perspective, elements such as the dead trees and the black tarn become silent characters that reinforce the atmosphere of fear and reflect the characters' psychological struggles.

Other studies have focused on the effects of the narrator's voice in shaping the reader's perception of terror. Hoffman (1972), for instance, shifts the focus from natural elements to the narrative voice, revealing that terror is shaped by the narrator's lens. He explains that readers do not see the natural world, such as the lake or the house, as they are; instead, "the appearance of the House, as its first glimpsing, is rendered by the narrator" (p. 307). He concludes that Poe manipulates the readers' confidence by making them depend on an unbelievable narrator and puts the readers in a permanent state of doubt whether this terror arises from the environment itself or from the narrator's personal disturbance. This demonstrates Poe's 'ingenuity' in transforming nature into a psychological entity.

In contrast to gothic literature, which uses themes of fear and collapse to reflect characters' feelings, modernist literature presents nature differently. In modernist texts, nature is no longer seen as an extension of human fate, but instead serves to examine 'relationship between human and nonhuman' (Garrard, 2004, p. 5).

Several studies have examined the representation of nature in Woolf's *Kew Garden*. For instance, Swanson (2012) introduces the shift noted above by showing how Woolf depicts natural elements as independent beings rather than mere reflections of human concerns. She explores how Woolf presents "the human characters are not the central focus but are treated similarly to the nonhuman beings" (p. 66). Furthermore, Swanson concludes that Woolf's use of a flexible narrative voice transmitted between human and nonhuman perspectives enhances the view of nature as it is. She states that Woolf "asks us to be open to the possibility that the other-than-human beings present in the same place as the human characters also have goals and problems and make decisions" (p. 67).

Jayagopalan (2020) expands this discussion by revealing how Woolf blends movement, sensory experience, and narrative perspective to present nature as a living world. She notes that Woolf "provides the snail with an elaborate mobility and a consciousness," demonstrating a shifting focus between human and nonhuman perspectives (p. 169). She shows how Woolf's use of details such as movement, sounds, and colors creates a narrative structure that gradually shifts readers' perception from a human-centered view of nature to one of nature as an entity in itself.

Mentaxaka (2023) demonstrates how Woolf employs gardens to reshape human perception and values, and suggests that "nature often facilitates psychological insights" (p. 94). She concludes that in *Kew Gardens* Woolf uses nature as a space of thinking and explore the complexity of human experience through modernist narrative experimentation.

Most previous studies have offered valuable insights into how nature is portrayed in gothic and modernist literature, and which narrative styles are used. However, few have compared Poe and Woolf through the lens of ecocriticism. By applying Garrard's ecocritical framework, I seek to reveal the shift in literature from landscapes filled with horror to independent and quiet ecosystems, using *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Kew Gardens* as examples.

Methodology

This paper uses an ecocritical approach to analyze how nature and its elements are depicted in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Woolf's *Kew Gardens*. It draws on Garrard's book *Ecocriticism* (2004), which explores how literature reflects human relationships with nature and how these texts shape readers' perceptions of the environment. This project examines the portrayals of nature in these works as not just a passive background but a living force that influences themes of fear and collapse, as well as continuity and independence. The two texts are contradictory in tone and style: Poe's story centers on fear and characters' emotional collapse, while Woolf's story is based on "sensuous experience rather than the pursuit of a linear narrative or the fate of a character," allowing elements of nature to appear as calm presences instead of symbolic tools (Swanson, 2021, p. 67).

The analysis in this paper is founded on Garrard's ecocritical concepts of apocalypse and dwelling. It also draws on Serpil Oppermann's (2016) posthuman ecocritical perspective on material agency. These concepts are used to examine nature as not

merely a setting but a participant in the narrative and maybe also a hidden protagonist. According to Buell (1995), whom Garrard (2004, p. 93) cites, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal," and this study uses this concept to illustrate how nature is associated with ending and collapse. Dwelling is the concept of how humans relate to their environments; for instance, Woolf's text shows nature existing in quiet independence, unaffected by human presence. Material agency is also employed to examine the active role of the material world such as natural elements, in shaping literary narratives; as Oppermann explains, "The principal concepts of material ecocriticism—storied matter and narrative agency—... are particularly suitable for exploring the emerging posthuman agencies" (2016, p. 30).

The methodology in this article is supported by Cheryll Glotfelty's perspective in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996): "Literature does not float above the material world... it is a cultural product, shaped by ecological context" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). This perspective allows readers to analyse ecological imagery in literary texts as a means of understanding human relationships with nature within the ecological contexts in which they were produced. Moreover, Glotfelty explains that literary texts are examined not only from a linguistic perspective but also as 'cultural artifacts' that reflect human perceptions of nature.

Similarly, Lawrence Buell aligns with this approach in his book *The Future of Environment Criticism* (2005), arguing that "the subject of a text's representation of its environmental ground matters - matters, aesthetically, conceptually, ideologically" (Buell, 2005, p. 2). For Buell, as for the other critics discussed above, literature represents nature as more than just a physical setting. Authors such as Poe and Woolf go beyond merely describing nature, but take into consideration the aesthetic, conceptual, and ideological significances of environmental representation.

Analysis

This section offers a close reading of how nature serves as an active character in both Poe's and Woolf's texts. By applying Garrard's concepts of apocalypse and dwelling, and the notion of material agency, this analysis examines how each author uses nature as more than a setting.

Apocalypse:

According to Garrard, apocalypse depicts nature as a sign of impending collapse, and relates to notions of endings. In this view, nature is not neutral, but is instead depicted as a reflection of human or cosmic disasters. Using this concept, this study examines how Poe uses elements of nature to express themes of destruction and finality.

In the opening scene of Poe's story, the narrator describes his journey to Usher's house on a gloomy day. He describes each natural element as filled with sadness, such as rotting trees, the dark atmosphere, the mysterious lake, and the windows of the house that look like "the vacant eye" (Poe, 2000, p. 6). The narrator "looked upon the scene before [him]... with an utter depression of soul" (Poe, 2000, p. 7) that characterizes his initial response to the house and its surroundings. Although he had not yet entered the house, he felt a confused sense of depression and tension, showing how the setting itself has a strong psychological influence. Thus, nature is not just the external environment but a living element that warns the narrator and the reader that a collapse is coming. However, the horror that the narrator feels comes not only from nature, but from his own perspective. When he says that he "felt a sense of insufferable gloom" (Poe, 2000, p. 6) while describing the house as dilapidated, the narrative not only depicts the scene but also shapes it psychologically. The narrator does not merely present a physical depiction of the house; rather, he reshapes it through his own consciousness and emotions. Consequently, the reader perceives the place from the beginning as a source of anxiety and mystery, even before any main event is directly shown. Therefore, the narrator's personal response serves as a tool that reinforces anticipation, creates tension, and prepares the reader for subsequent developments.

In the final scene of the story, Poe presents nature as an active force in the destruction of the House of Usher, as "the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher" (Poe, 2000, p. 21). The tarn does not merely surround the house; it ultimately swallows it, suggesting nature's participation in the final collapse. This destruction is preceded by a violent storm and the widening fissure that splits the house, which creates the impression that the natural environment itself shares the same fate as the Usher family. This gradual progression toward 'catastrophe' reflects Garrard's reminder that "the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic, and the danger is not only imminent, but already well under way" (2004, p. 95). The fall of the house into the tarn therefore symbolizes not only the extinction of the Usher lineage but also the complete erasure of the physical space associated with it. These details illustrate Garrard's concept of apocalypse: once the brothers die, the house collapses, and the lake swallows it with a terrifying silence.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, family destiny and nature are intertwined. Poe offers the idea that the house seems to be alive somehow, and that, because once the last two individuals of the family die the house is destroyed, the lake's swallowing of the house serves as an existential response to the end of the Usher family. Additionally, the narrator reinforces the idea that the characters' deaths are inextricably linked to the collapse of the house as the scene itself culminates in death. In this way, Poe shows that family, house, and nature are one entity that shares the same fate.

Nonhuman:

Garrard discusses the significance of nonhuman objects, such as plants and natural phenomena, as active participants in literary narratives rather than mere settings or symbols for human experiences. The concept of the nonhuman is a critique of Anthropocentrism that highlights the agency of these beings, which operate under their own rules and influence the unfolding of events.

Building on this concept, the longstanding relationship between humanity and nature in gothic literature presents nature as a mysterious and threatening force. Such a portrayal contrasts sharply with that in modernist literature, where nature is depicted as indifferent, continuing its calm existence regardless of human suffering or collapse. For instance, the scene in *Kew Gardens* of a snail slowly crossing the grass may seem unimportant, but it carries deep implications. Woolf directs the narrative voice toward the snail's thoughts, to suggest that nature follows its own rhythm, separately from human presence: "The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it" (Woolf, 2015, p. 9). Through this passage, Woolf highlights the consciousness of a small creature and gives it a narrative interest equivalent to humans. She does not portray the snail as a symbol or metaphor, but as a character with consciousness and decisions independent of human influence. This embodies Garrard's concept of nonhuman agency, in which non-human creatures have their own existence and effectiveness in the world according to their own time and rules. The snail was not affected by human emotions and behaved naturally, and nature in general is not subordinate to humanity but exists alongside it as an independent entity. This type of narrative invites readers to perceive the vision of nature as it is rather than how humans wish it to be.

Dwelling:

Garrard introduces the concept of dwelling to explain how individuals interact with their natural environment and the nature of their relationship with the spaces around them. Dwelling extends beyond just outdoor areas and illustrates how natural spaces, such as homes or gardens, can reflect or contradict human emotions.

For instance, in Poe's story, the Usher family's house does not appear in the usual sense as a place of comfort and safety. Instead, it looks like a living being that is dying and rejecting its inhabitants. This confirms that the gothic house is not a shelter and reinforces the narrator's feeling that something is amiss when he notes that "the physique of the grey walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn... had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence" (Poe, 2000, p. 10). In this way, the Usher family and their house embody Garrard's account of the relationship between people and the places they inhabit (2004, pp. 111-112).

On the other hand, Woolf's text features couples walking through the garden corridors, each interacting in their own different ways, exchanging ideas and conversations. However, Woolf maintains her focus on the details of nature, independently of human emotions or experiences: "thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed...white butterflies danced above" (Woolf, 2015, p. 11). The absence of interaction between humans and nature does not reduce nature to a passive background. Instead, nature exists independently, without the need for proof or explanation.

Woolf's description of the garden is an example of Garrard's concept of nature as not centred around humans but having its own material and temporal existence, in a continuous and present state. This scene portrays the garden as a shared space where human life and nature coexist. Although the characters move through the garden, the flowers continue their existence regardless of human thoughts or emotions. Their presence does not depend on human attention but instead continues beyond individual experience. Through this depiction, Woolf suggests that nature is not merely a backdrop to our story, but rather that we are part of its story.

Kew Gardens provides an example of how modernist literature can depict nature without relying on human experiences. Woolf does not seek to explain nature; instead, she gives it a narrative voice in order to reshape the relationship between humans and nature. Such a depiction moves away from traditional views of nature as subordinate to human concerns, and gives it an existence and significance of its own. This reflects a modernist interest in questioning human centrality and exploring a broader representation of the relationship between humans and the natural world. When read through the lens of ecocriticism, the scenes discussed here demonstrate how nature shifts from a source of human fear and collapse to an independent and coexisting force. This shift highlights a deeper change in how literature redefines the relationship between nature and human presence.

Conclusion

This study uses an ecocritical approach to analyze how nature is represented in two literary texts that differ in style and narrative technique: a gothic story by Poe and a modernist text by Woolf. The comparison shows that these narratives' literary forms and tones significantly influence readers' perceptions and understanding of nature within the texts. In the gothic text, nature is portrayed as dark and terrifying, strongly tied to human feelings of fear and collapse. In contrast, the modernist text depicts nature as a distant, quiet, and unaffected element, revealing that it exists independently beyond human control.

This contrast not only reflects differences in each author's respective narrative style, but also reveals a profound distinction in how each text builds the relationship between human and the natural world. Nature not only serves as a backdrop for the events of the stories, but becomes a space through which cultural and historical transformations are expressed, as well as the narrators' perceptions of their surroundings. From this perspective, this study shows that an ecocritical framework is a valuable approach to

