

## ECOLOGY – ENVIRONMENT

# How Environment Retaliates Against the Patriarchal Widower in “The Apple Tree” by Daphne du Maurier

*Ratna Asmarani*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Linguistic Department, Faculty Humanities, Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia

**Abstract.** The main purpose of the analysis on the long short story entitled “The Apple Tree” written by Daphne du Maurier is to investigate how environment retaliate against the patriarchal widower. The analysis is supported by the concepts of environment leading to setting, the concept of retaliation leading to conflict, and the concepts of symbols and seasons. Meanwhile, the research methods that support the analysis are a combination of library research method, qualitative research method, and contextual research method. The results show that the wronged environment, represented by the innocent old apple tree, is unexpectedly able to retaliate against the wrongdoing person, represented by the patriarchal widower. The retaliation is a collaborative work supported by the season, the darkness, the thick snow, and the “jagged split stump” of the old apple tree. In a subversive way, it is a kind of an eye for an eye retaliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [ratnaasmarani@lecturer.undip.ac.id](mailto:ratnaasmarani@lecturer.undip.ac.id)

## 1 Introduction

“The Apple Tree” [1] is a long short story written by Daphne du Maurier, a prolific British female writer of the twentieth century. It is about a patriarchal widower who wanted to cut an old apple tree triggered by an absurd disgust. During, while, and after the process of felling the apple tree by himself, there were environmental happenings that resulted in an unexpected end for the patriarchal widower. Based on the brief summary, this paper will analyse the responses of the environment to the attitudes and actions of the patriarchal widower. The chosen title for the paper is “How Environment Retaliates Against the Patriarchal Widower in “The Apple Tree” by Daphne du Maurier”.

To support the academic analysis, there are some relevant concepts that are going to be used, such as the concepts of environment leading to setting, the concept of retaliation leading to conflict, and the concepts of symbols and seasons. Environment is the surrounding elements where humans live, influencing and being influenced by humans (BYJU’S, n.d.) [2]. In literature, environment plays a big role in setting. Compiled together, the elements of setting are place, time, social, and psychological elements [3], while different additional elements from McNulty (n.d.) [4] are “Mood and Context”, and relevant addition from Carpenter (2012) [5] is “Climate.” Although there are five functions of setting, only two are in line with the topic of discussion; namely, setting “creates atmosphere and symbolism” [6].

The next notion borrowed for analysis is about retaliation. Although the term retaliation is often equated with revenge, Kumar in his web article [7] tried to specify that “Retaliate is used when you want to teach a lesson to someone who has done something bad to you.” Retaliation is related to the concept of conflict. Compiling the kinds of conflict in literary works, there are “conflict within a single man (e.g., desire vs. duty), a conflict between men, a conflict between man and society, between man and nature, and so on” which are in line with Holman’s opinion [8], and a different additional point from Johnson and Arp is “involved in conflict without being aware of it” [9].

The last concept borrowed to support the analysis is the concept of symbol. In fictional works, “A symbol is a setting, object, character, or event in a story that carries more than the literal meaning and therefore represents something significant to understanding the meaning of a work of literature” (“Conventional Symbols in Literature,” n.d.) [10]. There are

several symbols that are relevant for the analysis. The first is the symbol of tree. According to Ferber, a tree may symbolize a person while apple symbolizes something that “is alluring and tasty” [11]. Referring to season, winter in general symbolizes negative feelings and the end of life [12] and Aster, 2021 [13]). The relevant meaning of snow is also the end of life (“Glossary of Traditional Symbols in Western Literature,” n.d.) [14].

The analysis is supported by several research methods. The first is the library research method to find appropriate sources for the supporting concepts/theories [15]. Second, the general the analysis of the data is done using qualitative research method which is “interpretative research” [16]. Third, for the literary analysis, the contextual research method is used which combined the analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic elements to get the whole meaning of the literary work [17].

## **2 Result and Discussion**

The focus of discussion is on the retaliation of the environment to Buzz, the patriarchal widower. Starting from a brief discussion on the patriarchal Buzz, the rest of the discussion will be about the retaliation of the environment, especially that of the old apple tree.

### **2.1 The Widowed Owner**

Buzz, the recent widower, is a representation of a patriarchal figure. Reflecting on his memory on his wife, he still considers that his wife was too excessive in cleaning the house making him feel uncomfortable when he was at home [1], he still dislikes so much his wife critical comments whenever reading the morning paper [1], he still feels irritated when his wife criticized his being enjoying himself after retirement [1], he still dislikes his wife’s always dominating and planning their holiday [1] and he also still thinks his wife’s social activities as unimportant and a waste of time [1]. All these indicate his patriarchal side which prefers his own comfort without taking into consideration his wife needs and/or positive activities. Buzz also never gives any little praises to the house helper that make her finally resign [1]. Buzz’s acting like a boss in the house indicates his patriarchal mind that wants to exert power.

Buzz’s patriarchal absurdities can also be seen in his irrational dislike to the fruitless old apple tree that has been in the garden for so long. After

the death of his wife, the thinness and barrenness of the old apple tree suddenly reminds Buzz of his late wife. By likening the thin and barren old apple tree to his late wife, Buzz implicitly blames his wife for their having no child. With his patriarchal perspective Buzz decides to chop down the old apple tree, however Buzz's plan is flatly refused by the gardener who wants to give another chance to the old apple tree [1].

## **2.2 The Resilient Old Apple Tree**

The underestimated old apple tree suddenly produces a lot of surprising little buds as detected by the gardener, Willis, who excitedly informs this fact to Buzz [1]. However, Buzz is indifferent to look at the newly-emerging buds. For Buzz, the abundant buds along the branches are not interesting at all [1]. Even when the buds turn into blossoming flowers, Buzz considers the flowers are too many to the point of disgusting. He thinks that they are not like the beautiful flowers of the young apple tree growing next to the old one [1].

However, the underestimated old apple tree keeps resilient. After producing over-abundant flowers, the old apple tree bears over-abundant fruits "The tree was laden, bowed down, under her burden of fruit. They clustered, small and brown, on every branch, diminishing in size as they reached the top, so that those on the high boughs, not grown yet to full size, looked like nuts" [1]. Again, in Buzz's eyes, the fruits are not interesting in appearance not like other apples. The old apple tree's suddenly being fully alive, although surprising, indicates its efforts to refuse underestimation from the master of the house and his always comparing it to the young apple tree growing next to it.

## **2.3 The Imposing Effects of the Old Apple Tree to Buzz**

Basically, the presence of the old apple tree in the garden has bothered Buzz consciously or unconsciously. As discussed previously, Buzz does not only underestimate the old apple tree but also compares the old apple tree with the young apple tree. Not being passive anymore with all the unfairness directed to it, the old apple tree begins to exert its hidden capabilities by showing that it is not a barren tree anymore, instead it can produce an amazing number of fruits without needing any attention from the owner, Buzz.

The first act of enforcement from the old apple tree is related to Buzz's unwillingness to touch its branch which is full of emerging buds. As if being stained by Buzz's look, the old apple tree prefers to break its branch to deliberately clean itself from the power of Buzz's look which surprise Buzz and the gardener: "Nothing rotten about it, sir. Why, look at it. Broke clean off" [1]. So, it seems the old apple tree shows its power to clean itself from any inconvenience directed to it. The breaking of the branch is just the beginning of the apple tree's retaliation to Buzz. Although the logs from the apple tree is famous for having a nice smell when used as firewood, Buzz is alarmed by the unpleasant smell of the burning firewood from the apple tree [1]. The nauseating smell haunts Buzz everywhere even after Buzz removes the apple firewood from his furnace. What is strange is that it is only Buzz who smells the burning apple firewood like that [1]. In this situation, Buzz cannot help feel a little intimidated by the smell that continues to chase him. Thus, the retaliation of the old apple tree to Buzz, the patriarchal widower who always insults the old apple tree, is in some way successful.

Another way to retaliate to the patriarchal widower is through the shape, size, color, and taste of the fruits. If for others such as the gardener and his family as well as the house helper and her family, there is nothing wrong whether with the branches used as firewood or with the fruits of the old apple tree, the case is different for Buzz. The appearance of the fruits from the old apple tree is successful to make Buzz feel irritated: "Small and wizened, dullish brown in colour... The skins were leathery and rough and hard ... Filthy tasting things" [1]. For Buzz the taste of the apple fruit is unbearable, although for other people it is okay. Buzz is so miserable because he feels that the taste of the apple sticks tightly inside his mouth [1]. The retaliation of the old apple tree through its fruits to the condescending Buzz can be said to be successful to make him suffer, although this never happens to other people.

Again, the specific taste of the fruits from the old apple tree succeeds to make the scornful Buzz feel miserable. It happens when he eats the enticing fruit tart made from the apple jam in which the apples are from the old apple tree "Choking, spluttering, he spat out the contents of his spoon upon the plate" [1]. Buzz's intense dislike to the apple tree makes him become an easy target for the retaliation of the old apple tree through its fruits. However, as a scornful patriarchal figure, instead of being retrospective, Buzz tends to blame the house helper and the gardener [1].

He does not realize that only he finds the apples are unbearable and the fire from the branches of the old apple tree smell nauseating. For the others, all parts of the old apple tree are okay.

## **2.4 The Obstructing Heavy Snow**

Besides the retaliation of the old apple tree through its fruits and broken branch, the natural phenomenon also takes part in the retaliation. Finally, Buzz decides to fell the tree by himself. In order not to be known and disturbed by the house helper, Buzz lets her go home early and that day is not the gardener schedule to come. The time is perfect in Buzz's mind, although "The sky was heavy and snow had fallen in the night. More to come. But as yet nothing to worry about, nothing to hamper him" [1]. It seems that the natural phenomena that cannot be controlled by Buzz try to intimidate Buzz to cancel his plan to cut down the innocent old apple tree that has shown its being alive and productive.

When Buzz with great difficulty finally can fell the old apple tree "It began snowing" [1]. It can be interpreted that nature is crying due to Buzz's cruelty to the innocent old apple tree. On the other side, the snow falling will make Buzz's next action of delivering the logs of apple wood to the lady owner of the local pub for free will be more difficult. Actually, nature has used its power to torture the cruel Buzz. Even though the snow falling does not deter Buzz from felling the tree, nature still tries to make Buzz's brutal action not easy to carry out [1]. Subversively, the falling snow interferes Buzz's effort to chop down the trunk and branches of the fallen apple tree. In a situation that is getting darker soon due to winter season, the incessant falling snow and the coldness succeeds to make the insistent Buzz feel more and more bothered. The natural occurrences make Buzz's next work become more difficult. Every action is slower, harder, and colder.

However, once he succeeds felling the innocent old apple tree, Buzz seems to be unstoppable. He keeps doing his main purpose, chopping down the apple tree into smaller logs for firewood. He also insists on delivering immediately the firewood to the lady owner of the local pub even though he is so exhausted and dark night has fallen. Although his insistence results in deep gratefulness and admiration [1], nature still waits to take action directed at the presently satisfied Buzz. On the way home from the local pub, dark, cold, and slippery due to the thickly falling snow,

Buzz's car slips and ends in a kind of ditch covered by thick snow [1]. Nature's disagreement to Buzz's gets its chance to show its force by making Buzz walk home in the dark and freezing situation.

## **2.5 The Entrapment of the “Jagged” Stump of the Old Apple Tree**

The last retaliation act to the stubborn patriarchal Buzz is in the form of collaboration between the darkness, the snow, and the remains of the old apple tree. Exhausted but exhilarated by the thought that he has been able to get rid of the old apple tree and to get the full admiration from the people in the local pub, Buzz forgets to be careful when entering his garden to go into his house. To complete his satisfaction that day, Buzz wants to greet the young apple tree that, in Buzz perspective, has been freed from the old apple tree by him.

She was almost within his reach when he stumbled and fell, his foot twisted underneath him, caught in some obstacle hidden by the snow. He tried to move his foot but it was jammed, and he knew suddenly, by the sharpness of the pain biting his ankle, that what had trapped him was the jagged split stump of the old apple-tree he had felled that afternoon [1].

In his haste to be near his dear young apple tree, Buzz does not remember that close to his darling young apple tree there are the remnants of his brutal action. The thick snow has covers them perfectly. The hidden trap is waiting for the apple tree killer. The collaborative action of the “jagged split stump” and the thick snow is successful to ensnare one of Buzz's legs. The pain of Buzz's clamped foot represents just a small scale of the old apple tree's pain when it is brutally chopped down by Buzz.

Buzz, the victim of his own ruthless action, unsuccessfully tries to free his food from the trap: “every effort that he made only succeeded in imprisoning the foot still more firmly in the grip of the trunk” [1]. Even when he tries to grope for something to help him free his ensnared food, what he finds on the ground around him is the fallen remnants of his previous brutality. Nothing can be used to free his foot that is stuck in the gaping hole in the stump of the old apple tree. The collaborative retaliation is successful.

Buzz begins to realize his position as a helpless and hopeless victim of his own previous action: “He would have to lie there all night, held fast

in the clutch of the old apple-tree. There was no hope, no escape, until they came to find him in the morning” [1]. He is now like the old apple tree that cannot do anything to escape from the sad fate of being chopped down by the authoritarian owner. Whatever calculation of help that may rescue him, the result is very pessimistic. The earliest possible person to find him lying there in the freezing weather is the house helper, if she comes the next morning.

Meanwhile, nothing can be done by Buzz to save himself except lying alone and lonely in the dark above the pile of snow and showered with the incessant falling snow “He sank deeper, ever deeper into the snow, and when a stray piece of brushwood, cold and wet, touched his lips, it was like a hand, hesitant and timid, feeling its way towards him in the darkness” [1]. The retaliation is slow and painful. Facing death without any chance to avoid it is scary. Buzz gets the slow but sure punishment. Any moment drives him closer and closer to the end of his life in the cold and dark garden near his favorite young apple tree that cannot do anything to help him. Retaliation is always painful.

### **3 Conclusion**

The long short story entitled “The Apple Tree” written by Daphne du Maurier clearly shows that the wronged environment can retaliate to the wrongdoing person. The retaliation has a subversive nature in which the effect of retaliation is as severe as or may be more severe than the wrongdoings. The old apple tree who has finally been able to show its ability to produce abundant fruits is still scornfully underestimated by the patriarchal owner, Buzz, only because the old apple tree reminds him of his late wife to whom he remembers with a growing dislike. The intense dislike is realized in felling the old apple tree by himself and giving the logs as firewood to the lady owner of the local café to get full admiration. Supported by the winter season with its early darkness and heavy falling of snow, the retaliation takes place. The “jagged split stump” of the old apple tree which is covered by the thick snows becomes a hidden trap that successfully ensnared one of the feet of the widower ending in his hopelessly and helplessly waiting for the end of his life alone and lonely in the freezing darkness of winter. Thus, selfish brutal action of the patriarchal widower to the innocent old apple tree results in a subversive retaliation from the environment.



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