

Rebecca, The Dead Woman in the Cabin

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Abstract: The modern Classic, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, has been of interest to the readers throughout the years. The uncanny resemblances between iconic plots such as *Jane Eyre* and *Othello* further instigate this interest in the story. The plot of gothic romance with a murder and deviant psychological tenure has been able to sustain its relevance even today. In this paper, the mysterious figure of Rebecca is delved into as she is compared to the “madwoman in the attic”. Her far reaching influence from beyond the grave keep swaying the resolve and temper of the newly married de Winter couple as they attempt to find a life devoid of her presence. Though her presence becomes imbibed within Manderley, Rebecca haunts the narrator in her dreams after the decimation of the house. There are no first person accounts of what she went through or her upbringing when it comes to the dead protagonist of the novel. Rebecca is seen from a feminist perspective here where she is portrayed as the morally corrupt woman based on the suspicions of her patriarchal husband. This paper attempts to draw parallels between the events of the other works while simultaneously interpreting the work from a feminist perspective. The goal of this paper is to move away from the narrative that Rebecca is a gothic romance and explore the depth of the patriarchal notion of the society by acknowledging the unreliability of the narrators of various parts of the novel and question the representation of Rebecca as the “other woman”.

The incredibly intriguing modern classic, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, has arresting qualities embedded into its narrative style and plot. From the sunny France to the secluded Manderley, the gloom almost hovers around the edges of the plot, waiting to invade at the slightest opportunity, until it establishes its grips into the action of the main plot. The full circle of fate is complete for Daphne du Maurier’s nameless narrator by the end of the novel as it begins with a search of a place in the world and ends with similar notions. The note of alienation and deviant human nature is so intricately explored in this novel that it has inspired numerous film adaptations.

Categorizing this novel into one single genre has proved to be difficult for the critics. Even as Hitchcock’s movie adaptation paints the plot more romantically, dismissing the complex connotations of murder and intrigue, the novel has been successful in holding the readers interest throughout the years. The plot is an amalgamation of themes that consistently overlap and incidents that keep the readers engrossed throughout the length of the novel. As the gloom hangs over the nameless narrator of the novel, it chases her from Monte Carlo to Manderley to Cairo. The new Mrs de Winter of Manderley has no independent identity, she is always Mrs de Winter, but even that title of hers is more suited to the previous Mrs de Winter, Rebecca. Her dead rival threatens her position in the life of her husband and as the lady of the prestigious house, Manderley, from beyond the grave as she begins to be haunted by this unknown embodiment of grace and beauty who has been dead for over a year. The premonition of doom follows her around from the moment she steps into Manderley; far before that, during the conversations with Maxim de Winter the readers are made aware of some dark past that the mystic figure of the male protagonist does not wish to disclose, but the narrator is too engrossed with the wonders of the landscape and the man before her to take notice of the intricate speech of Maxim de Winter. From mere broken cupids to meeting the almost senile grandmother, things are easily led astray. The incidents are lined up till the seemingly restorative ball at the house which pronounces the culmination of all actions. The tone of the novel changes drastically from this night onward as it deals with the issue of Rebecca’s death directly from hereafter.

The young and inexperienced narrator is projected as a stark comparison to her absent rival, Rebecca. Everything she does is judged on the precedent Rebecca had set and inevitably, all her efforts fall short in comparison. The shadow of Rebecca follows her around the house as nobody lets her forget how competent and likable the former mistress of the house was, how wonderfully charming she was to everybody she met and how happy she kept her “Max”. From the people she meets outside to the very house she inhabits, the shadow and scent of Rebecca haunts her everywhere. The invisible presence is imbibed into the plot of the novel so intricately that Rebecca truly becomes the only protagonist of the novel as she successfully captures the attention and curiosity of the readers.

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Whereas, critics have debated if Mrs de Winter had lost her individual identity after marrying Mr de Winter or whether, the completely nameless lady's companion had gained a title and position in society, there is no doubt that Rebecca de Winter had created and maintained her own identity and, to some extent, defined the de Winter name in her own time as well as the narrator's. The engraved and embossed "R" in every corner of Manderley truly makes it appear like the new Mrs de Winter is an intruder in Rebecca's home and Rebecca's husband's life.

Obsession with the dead figure of Rebecca makes the character come alive through the plot of the novel. She is an intricate part of the lives of all who are connected to Manderley. Her lingering presence grows stronger as the narrator discovers more and more about her appearance and character from the people she newly acquaints with. Mrs Danvers' unhealthy obsession with the late mistress is almost verging on insanity. The hostility of her countenance while interacting with the new Mrs de Winter weaves the tapestry of mystery thicker around this elusive character. Keeping Rebecca's chambers frozen in time, in pristine condition to imply that Rebecca has gone out for a moment and would return shortly, is the pinnacle of her madness which stems from her inability to accept the reality. The bizarreness of her behaviour is striking to the narrator as she struggles to make sense of the situation in an unfamiliar place without any allies. Mrs Danvers' motivations become clearer by the end of the novel but the mystery still remains as to why Maxim does not order her to get rid of Rebecca's belongings, especially after coming home with his new bride. This wilful ignorance on Mr de Winter's part has made his situation resemble the Bluebeard myth. He is often critiqued as the Bluebeard figure that murdered his wife and kept the relics of the dead to remember her. This instance can also be interpreted from a patriarchal perspective where Mr de Winter refuses to become a subject of suspicion concerning the death of his dear wife and keeps the relics of Rebecca to play the mourning husband as long as possible. It is undeniable that even dead, Rebecca has a hold on the mind of Maxim. Be it the guilt of the murder or the circumstance of her death or simply the captivating character of the first wife, Maxim is trapped within the web of the charmingly perfect illusion of Rebecca. He is first introduced in Monte Carlo where he admits to have honeymooned with Rebecca. He refuses to talk about the former wife with the new one during their short period of courtship, as well as, after he takes the new Mrs de Winter to Manderley. His inability to talk about the former wife makes it apparent that he cannot disclose any detail of their life together without giving himself up. Though he professes to never have loved Rebecca, his obsession with the figure of her is apparent even after he has killed her himself. His obsession is further emphasised in his attitude towards Mrs de Winter as he keeps her from attaining "Rebecca-esque" perfection and maturity. On the matter of obsession with Rebecca, the most noteworthy is that of the narrator's. Her morbid curiosity affects her negatively from the beginning but Rebecca is inescapable for her. She finds herself taken up with this imagined figure that seems almost mythical in her perfection and unattainable grace. She is everywhere in her limited existence, from her title to her new relations, all of it has been hers before this Mrs de Winter and the awareness of that fact chases her around the house.

The constant reminder from the narrator that she was not bred for a life like this serves as a point of contrast between her and Rebecca. Educated and upper class, Rebecca's popularity and competence were bred into her, whereas, the narrator emphasises upon the difficult situation of her life and the fact that she has only begun to learn the ways of this life that happened upon her. Despite the repeated mentions, the veiled, or otherwise, hostility of the servants of the house keeps her inferior feeling alive. Mr de Winter's short courtship and abrupt proposal of marriage naturally warrants that the couple are not familiar with each other's temperament and character, in this situation, forcing the narrator into the house of his ancestors; Maxim does not do her any good. Renovating the east wing of the house to relocate his chambers there, indeed, depicts consideration on his part but not objecting to the west wing becoming a tomb for Rebecca nullifies that courtesy. The narrator's eagerness in accepting Mr de Winter's proposal only to escape her employer Mrs Van Hopper makes her a pitiful figure. The love she feels for a man twice her age after less than a month's acquaintance is questionable since the beginning and voiced by the cynical Mrs. Van Hopper. The last words of Mrs Van Hopper are echoed throughout the novel as Maxim continues to live with the "ghost of his dead wife", a ghost that begins haunting the narrator in time as well. It is curious that the narrator is not made aware of any details of the accident which cost Rebecca her life until much later in the book when she has been living in Manderley for quite some time, and that too, not courtesy her husband but of Beatrice Lacy, Crawley and Mrs. Danvers. The air of secrecy between the new couple provides little comfort to the narrator. Maxim never volunteers any information about Rebecca or regarding his feelings and annoyance at certain turn of phrases, and even questioning him does not yield any fruitful result. The information about Rebecca and the circumstances of her accident comes in bits and pieces, intensifying the mystery around the character, turning her into almost something superhuman. The scene where Mrs Danvers recounts Rebecca's daily life, preferences and the grim details of her accident is almost horrific, and the effect is eerie when she admits that she can feel Rebecca's presence in the house in her usual spots. This eeriness is carried onto the confrontation after the ball where Mrs Danvers had goaded Mrs de Winter to replicate the portrait of Caroline de Winter, from an ancestral portrait in the gallery, which was exactly what Rebecca had chosen to wear at her last fancy dress ball. This capital moment in the plot works as the exposition of the chief characters. Mrs Danvers is exposed in her intentions of ruining the second marriage of Maxim de Winter, and Maxim is revealed in the true sense as his legendary temper surfaces and later that night the shipwreck exposes his crimes. The narrator's childish jealousy in Monte Carlo when she tears the page of a poetry book with Rebecca's handwriting on it to burn it, is transformed into a defeated reverence where she simply accepts that she is not going to match up to the people's expectations, after Rebecca, maybe not even her husband's. Though this

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acceptance makes her visibly sick as she loses much of her colour and health, it is this instance of putting a stop to the self comparison to the previous dead mistress of the house is a defining moment in the narrator character development. She emerges as an independent figure that is capable of meeting the requirements of the roles that she has been cast into. Rebecca becomes a topic she tries to avoid, but at the same time, the mythical creature takes up her mind space as she keeps wandering in a space that is marked by her presence and continues to interact with people who hold her to Rebecca's standard.

It is notable that the women of the novel contribute to the narrator's increasingly insecurity in both her positions as Maxim's wife and as the lady of Manderley, with the happy exception of Beatrice who becomes the only person in the family to welcome the narrator. Even the Bishop's wife within the short span of the first visit, makes her feel inadequate and lacking in comparison the previous mistress of the house who organised parties at the house with ease and attended the guests with equal grace and politeness of manner. Mrs Danvers and Maxim's grandmother intensify this inferior feeling further with their lack of acknowledgement of the new lady of the house. In this novel, villainy becomes gendered as the bullying of the narrator by the other women, dead and alive, are emphasised upon in greater scale in comparison to the murder of Rebecca by Maxim.

Finally, when the air of mystery is stripped off the figure of Rebecca, Mrs. de Winter is faced with a horrible reality where her beloved is a murderer. Through the effect of the narrative style, brilliance of writing and story-telling, the focus of the reader is focused onto the questionable character of Rebecca which Maxim reveals as his cause for the murder. The style adopted here can be interpreted as a critique of the contemporary society that is ready to excuse even the most heinous crimes of the man at the hint of a stain in the woman's character. The narrator is relieved that Maxim never loved Rebecca, the narrator rejoices more in the fact that Rebecca is not the idealised figure of everyone's opinion that she almost does not notice the seriousness of Maxim's confession. The confession scene is extremely well crafted in its dealing with the characters. Maxim positions himself on the other side of the gun as he acts out that ill-fated night, portraying himself as the victim even as he confesses to murdering his first wife, repeating "Rebecca has won" and painting her as the perpetrator of the violence. The insanity of the whole situation and the impending doom crumbles the rosy illusion of the perfect man and couple as it brings them to the harsh truth of life and murder. The shift in the tone of the novel from here on is striking. Mrs de Winter does not doubt her own intentions of saving Maxim from Rebecca. Rebecca finally appears as a woman, a morally corrupted woman, who maintained an illusion to fool all she met.

Interesting characters like Favell, Ben and the coroner makes up the rest of the novel which keeps the readers on the edge of their seat. The mystery thickens and is explored at the same time. Curiously, the secret is revealed with a shipwreck, symbolic for the outer world invading the carefully protected world of Manderley. This microcosm is the thing that matters to both the living protagonists immensely as they keep up appearances for the sake of the people, and Maxim had come to a compromise with Rebecca suffering great personal loss to protect the honour and name of the house. In Maxim's reasoning for not divorcing Rebecca, the patriarchy that even a man in his situation is subjected to comes to light. If we consider the heritage of Manderley, passed on from father to son, he is tasked with the protection of the honour of his name and the house which symbolises its respect. Stuck in an unhappy marriage where he has to stomach other people praising his own wife while, himself knowing the reality of the situation, Maxim is also trapped within the conventions of the patriarchal society. His crime is not lessened due to this consideration, if anything, it only paints him as the flag-bearer of the age-old conventions as a modern man, he submits to the role he is expected to carry out. He chooses to murder the woman who does not conform to the norms of society and has embraced her sexuality, however conspicuous. He condemns himself to the agony of living with the guilt of murder. He chooses this perverse life devoid of joy and actual happiness over simply divorcing the woman he does not wish to remain married to. By confessing to Mrs de Winter, Maxim finds in her a willing accomplice. Mrs de Winter's notions of love force her to think of only her husband, so far so, that she does not consider her own safety in remaining married to a murderer.

The references to Jane Eyre and Othello are extremely apparent in the plot and taken further into the dark realities of the human psyche in the modern world. As the novel ends with Manderley up in flames, the image is extraordinarily similar to the scene that we see in Jane Eyre. The exile that the de Winter couple suffer is described at the beginning of the novel and now that the narration has given substance in retrospect, their satisfaction with their stagnant life in Europe is made clear to the readers. The case of dual identities of Rebecca explored in the novel gives it an air of complexity where the narrator is caught in this luminal space trying to replicate what Rebecca did while at the same time abhorring her silent presence in their life. Rebecca's character fades in the background of the trial and the subsequent new beginning of the de Winter couple. It is as if now that the "other woman" has been successfully villainised, the protagonists of the novel can go on to relish their happily ever after. This apparent happily ever after is made complex through the omission of the name of the narrator and the title of the novel. Questions regarding the safety of the narrator arise as the readers are induced to consider Maxim's temper and his paranoid behaviour since Rebecca was not pregnant, an accusation he shot her for. As a series of unreliable narrators take part in unfolding the plot, the truth of the character of Rebecca is also brought into question. Rebecca is not insane like Bertha Mason neither does she have any claim to chastity like Desdemona. Unlike Bertha Mason, she haunts the lives of her Rochester and Jane from beyond the grave and Mrs Danver burning down Manderley can be seen as her revenge by proxy. Rebecca is rebelling against the society that expects her to be a certain way by leading dual lives, keeping up appearances while living her life on her own terms. The fact that an independent woman like her had to get married to continue to live her way is a statement on the oppression of women. She

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requires a male guardian, according to social mandate. Now that she is married, she is expected to live the life of the married woman; there is no scope for her own choices. By titling the novel *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier forces the reader to ponder over the character of this absent protagonist.

Almost Gothic in setting, the house plays a prominent role in the course of the novel as the events revolve around it. The identity of the house engulfs the identity of Maxim who in turn imposes his identity upon the new Mrs. de Winter. Rebecca's rebellion against this imposition is blurred as her unfaithful character is highlighted and her cruel nature given more emphasis. Manderley becomes the embodiment of the patriarchal note of the contemporary society. As a consequence, burning it down becomes a statement on its own. The life after Manderley shows Maxim in a more relaxed light as he loses the stiffness he had acquired from having to maintain the title and the house. His initial worries expressed to the narrator in Monte Carlo that he would not have an heir to pass on Manderley to, turns into a cruel irony of fate. As Mrs Danvers proclaims, Manderley truly remains Rebecca's.

In the end the sense of liberation found in the ashes of Manderley, sets the narrator free from the growing shadow of her predecessor as she finds the quiet life in Europe with her fatherly husband fulfilling. She ends her life exactly as she began it: companion to a much older person of a prestigious name, condemned to dream of a place that was never quite became hers.

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