

Rebecca "gender archetypes" essay



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Gender Archetypes Based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier, considered as a women's novel – with all the negative connotations this might have had at time – before becoming a literary masterpiece, the film “ Rebecca” by Alfred Hitchcock is a rich document that provides interesting material on social and gender prototypes. This can be explored in different aspects; here we will be interested in gender representation throughout the image of the two main female characters and the antinomy they create from one another but also in contrast to the male personifications in the story.

The position of women in Rebecca is a difficult one, each feminine character embodies a female prototype very present in patriarchal society, in large traits the saint and the whore or the good woman and the bad one. Duality is an issue that is constantly present in this film: light and dark, blonde and brunette, good and evil, absence and presence, etc. Hitchcock has also been criticized by feminist authors for his way of representing women in his films perceived as hostile or misogynous, they are often victimized or in danger and are subject to a specific “ masculine” gaze.

Laura Mulvey develops this last argument in reference to some of Hitchcock's films, such as Marnie or Vertigo but also Rear Window. For the author Hitchcock uses an “ eroticising masculine gaze” to place the woman as an object, in Rebecca this observation is less apparent as the plot of the film does not allow this type of observation to be fully valid. Nevertheless as it has been noted in Mark Duguid's article, Hitchcock and women, that: “

Hitchcock is often thought of as a director who felt uncomfortable with, and even hostile to women.

There is plenty of evidence to support this view, in his life and in his films, but there is also evidence that he admired strong, independent women, at a time when these characteristics were often considered undesirable. " Even though the film is based on the novel by du Maurier, and the director respected the characters from the story, this previous argument can be applied to Rebecca because the female characters are both quite strong or they become so. Rebecca is independent and leads the life she wishes without the need of approval from anybody.

Mrs de Winter on the contrary is very dependant on what Maxim says or does or expects her to do, even though in the end she seems to have grown and acquired strength. These " undesired characteristics" are another proof of the patriarchal prototypes current in those years that unfortunately, even if in a lesser degree, are still valid nowadays. A negative image of women was often criticized in Hitchcock's films, in Rebecca both main female characters are negative sides of women either too liberal or too dependant on men.

Rebecca is too liberal, libertine; even though Hitchcock depicts a duality with his female characters in this film, there is no real good and bad. Poor little Mrs de Winter tends to be ridiculous when she's nervous. For Laura Mulvey this dependence on men is symptomatic of our society, men will save women of their weakness and their fault. In this film Maxim saves Mrs de Winter by marrying her, extracting her from her social class to make her

ascend in her social status. He is a paternal figure, the saviour of the child. Only by his love will Mrs de Winter live happily and fully as a woman.

This role of saviour can also be transposed to Rebecca, in a certain way Maxim saves her from the loss of her soul by killing her and ending an indecent life for a woman, for as if a man led the same type of life it would not be seen as indecent or in any way negative. If this last argument might seem off the board we can probably analyze it in a different manner: the control that the main male character acquires by killing (in the original novel) or hiding the body (in the film) empowers the position of the hero, throughout the film we are condescending of Maxim for he appears as a victim and a saviour.

The omnipresent duality in the story is clear in Sally Beauman's afterword; she notices these antagonisms: life and death, Rebecca is dead but her presence is so vivid we can almost see her, she also lives in Ms Danvers' obsession, as for the young Mrs de Winter is alive but lives in the shadow of the previous wife. Presence and absence play an important role in the story, on the one hand Rebecca's name is spoken everywhere, she haunts the house and its inhabitants but we never actually see her.

On the other hand the narrator in the novel and the character in the film has no name, or we never find out in the film, once more the only validation of her existence is as Maxim's wife. We can conclude that women's archetypes in art have been over-exploited throughout the 20th century, even women writers over-emphasised the frailty and dependence of women toward men,

and ostracised the poles of what is socially acceptable and what is despicable in women's behaviour.

Social archetypes were so strong that even du Maurier's novel was placed in a minor category as a light women's reading that proved them wrong by becoming a best seller, she demonstrated the quality of her writing even though her novel validates fully the gender archetypes of her time. Hitchcock sensitively representing the gender and social archetypes of his time, decides to use Daphne's novel with mastery and reveals her internal contradiction. Works cited.

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