

The theme of the gothic in rebecca essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



“ As I have already argued, gothic fiction need not be horrific and horror fiction need not be gothic... Daphne Du Maurier’s book *Rebecca*, which invokes both the wild wood and labyrinthine versions of the gothic and emphasises the monstrosity without once being other than a disguised novel of domestic relations itself without interest in the supernatural except for atmosphere. ’(Botting. Page 9)

Discuss Fred Botting’s view of presence that is created in *Rebecca*. ‘ Originating as one of the novel’s major forms in the late eighteenth century and marking out much of popular fiction’s imaginative theory, the gothic is the genre against which critics attempted to separate serious fiction from such popular entertainment and escapism. ’ (Clive Bloom, Introduction to *Gothic Horror: A Reader’s guide from Poe to King and Beyond*.) Blooms analysis of gothic genre states that critics had a tendency to view gothic literature, such as *Rebecca* which a nonsensical view point.

Janice Radway explains all modern gothic novels follow a certain narrative form whereby there is a heroine, a hero, male and female foils, and an evil force. Typically the novel opens with the heroine being identified, however *Rebecca* has two heroines. *Rebecca* could be seen as being almost Snow White like in form as the heroine first appears to be the ultimate woman to be adored, yet beneath the surface the heroine is actually the evil force lurking throughout the novel.

Both the narrator and *Rebecca* fulfil the archetypal role of the heroine to a degree, yet using Freud’s mirror stage analysis it is possible to indicate that the two women are in fact one woman subdivided. The opening lines of

Rebecca are now infamous, the use of heavy descriptive language that is used to describe Manderley and her grounds are written with such passion that the experience could only come from the writer herself: ' The drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done... ' (Rebecca. Page1) clearly emphasising just how much of a heavy dominating presence the house is on the narrators life.

The imagery and diction used mirrors that of Du Maurier's own reminisces of the real Manderley, Menabilly. ' The drive twisted and turned..... it had the magic quality of a place hitherto untrodden, unexplored.... The trees grew taller and the shrubs more menacing (Du Maurier's Memoirs. Page 52) Du Maurier lovingly terms the house as ' my house of secrets. My elusive Menabilly' (Page 55. Du Maurier's Cornwall) Du Maurier's own description of how the house looks again reinforces the metaphorical undertone of hidden depths; ' The windows were shuttered fast, white and barred.

Ivy covered the grey walls and threw tendrils round the windows. The house, like the world was sleeping too. ' (Page 57. Daphne Du Maurier's Cornwall).

In 1824, during restoration work done under the then owner William Rashleigh, the skeleton of a soldier was discovered in a small blocked off cell in the North-West wing of the house, emphasising Du Maurier taking inspiration from her own experiences, as Rebecca's forbidden bedroom is place in the North-West wing of Manderley.

Manderley thus exists as the site of unconscious desires couched in the guise of unconscious fears, at the centre of which stands that inviting woman Rebecca. ' (Page 105. Contemporary Women's fiction and the Fantastic).

Rebecca permeates the lives of those she has left behind; creating a house that is both good and evil at the same time, it is almost as if through keeping alive of Rebecca's memory, the house adopts her personality, after all it like her is facially patriarchal, yet like Rebecca the house hides its true depth beneath the surface.

Sally Beauman explains that ' both women reflect aspects of Du Maurier's own complex personality: ' she divided herself between them, and the splitting and doubling and mirroring devices she uses throughout the text destabilise it but give it resonance. ' (Rebecca. Page VI) Rebecca's presence throughout the novel is uncanny. Clive Bloom explains that the uncanny '... is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. (Bloom, Page 50).

Rebecca's handwriting litters Manderley creating a sense of the uncanny with the emergence of writing from beyond the grave in a text. ' At the end of each personal letter she put her signature, Rebecca, that tall sloping ' R' dwarfing its fellows. ' (Rebecca. Page 97) the narrators fear of the omnipresent Rebecca is evident before Maxim and herself are married, where she meticulously cuts out a cover page on a book of poems that Rebecca has wrote on and had given to Maxim.

Like Rebecca herself the narrator feels she has to destroy the item more than once; once by removing in from the book so neatly as if it had never existed; secondly, through ripping the page up into small pieces and finally by burning the remnants of the page.

The narrator places heavy importance on ' the letter R' (Rebecca. Page 64), the letter R has the affect of allowing Rebecca to be present in the novel, it acts as a reminder that she still exists an that the truth has not yet been uncovered: '... t has formal significance as repetition, an important element in the uncanny effect, as Freud noticed, and it is linked hermeneutically with the obsessive ideas of trace and sign, and clue which underlie the narrative, culminating in the discovery that Max has killed Rebecca. ' (Page 302. The Phantoms of Dood and Rebecca.) The description of how the letter R is written conveys a sense of Rebecca's dominance over the other characters in the text, she has the knowledge of all the secrets; she is the repressed and all knowledgeable secret that constantly threatens to be unearthed.

Rebecca's presence in Manderley is kept at a constant by Mrs Danvers's as she ensures that the west wing is ' frozen in time'(Du Maurier's Cornwall, pg 58) maintaining it, in particular Rebecca's bedroom. The narrator develops a morbid fascination with Rebecca, she is curious to know and be more like her predecessor as she believes that would help Maxim to love her. This fascination is portrayed through her horrified yet still inquisitive reaction to Mrs Danvers showing her Rebecca's bedroom; ' I was aware of a growing sense of horror, of horror turning into despair.

I touched the quilt on the bed, traced with my fingers the monogram on the nightdress case, R de W, interwoven and interlaced... The nightdress was inside the case, thin as gossamer, apricot in colour. I touched it, drew it out from the case, put it against my face. ' (Page 187. Rebecca). The narrator's desire to become Rebecca is reiterated through her yearning of ownership of

Rebecca's possessions; ' That exquisite mantelpiece, the ceiling, the carved bedstead, and the curtain hangings, even the clock on the wall and the candlesticks up on the dressing table beside me, all were things I would have loved and worshipped had they been mine. (Rebecca. Page 187)

The nameless narrators jealousy unwinds itself into the unmasking of the actual joining of the two heroines. The creation of the gothic Jekyll and Hyde character could be representational of the dark feared highly sexed side of a woman ' In a minute Rebecca herself would come back into the room, sit down before the looking-glass ... I should see her reflection in the glass and she would see me too... I went on standing there waiting for something to happen. Mrs Danvers acts as a portal like figure who Rebecca works through in order for the truth to be unearthed.

Although Mrs Danvers believed that Maxim loved Rebecca, she was fully aware of her incestuous affair with her cousin. Mrs Danvers unhealthy obsession with keeping Rebecca's presence ever predominant is clear through her explanation about the state of Rebecca's nightdress, ' I haven't washed it since she wore it for the last time. ' (Rebecca, Page 87).

In the Hitchcock adaptation of the book, Mrs Danvers is consistently placed lurking behind the narrator, yet so close to her that she is almost like a shadow, this coupled with the dress style used in the film adaptation is such that Mrs Danvers feet are hidden by a full length black skirt, creating the illusion of her floating, causing the sensation of a ghostly presence. Mrs Danvers, like Rebecca is portrayed as being highly manipulative, for she to

like Rebecca has two faces that she uses for Maxim in order to achieve what she wishes, Rebecca's continuing existence in any shape or form.

In Maxim De Winter, Du Maurier created a typical image of the gothic male; part of English heritage through his ancestry. There is an overwhelming sense of repression excluding from Maxim; he never speaks of his late wife, as if the memory of her existence needs to be repressed deep into the depths of his memory away from prying eyes; yet he quite happily lives in a house that is littered with her ownership. Rebecca's presence in Maxim's mind is portrayed through his brooding persona; he never lets his new bride see the true Maxim until he admits Rebecca's true fate.

However even then it is Rebecca who is in control and unearths the truth. The narrator describes Maxim upon their first meeting as ' Could one but rob him of him out of his English tweeds, and put him in black, with lace at his throat and wrists, he would stare down at us in our new world from a long-distant past-a past where men walked cloaked at night, and stood in the shadow of old doorways, a past of narrow stair-ways and dim dungeons, a past of whispers in the dark, of shimmering rapier blades, of silent exquisite courtesy. ' (Rebecca, Page 15).

The description is of typically gothic Victorian attire. The lurking in the shadows is almost comparable to a Jack the Ripper or Dracula character, waiting to jump out on innocent women; does this therefore mean that the narrator deems herself to be innocent, at least innocent in the ways of men at least. The key part of the narrator's description is the ' long-distant past'(Rebecca, Page 15) emphasising Maxim being completely immersed in

his past life and merely looking into his new existence without the physical Rebecca, but not actually living it.

It is evident that Maxim was controlled and dominated by Rebecca, emphasised by Rebecca's monogram being on all of Manderley's material possessions and not Maxim's monogram. Maxim deliberately chooses a submissive wife to fill Rebecca's shoes in an attempt for the gender roles to be re-aligned. His growth in masculinity is shown through his comments on the narrators attire; " I wish, I said savagely, still mindful of his laugh and throwing discretion to the wind, ' I wish I was a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls.

' You would not be in this car with me if you were,' he said; ' and stop biting those nails, they are ugly enough already. " (Rebecca. Page 40). However Maxim's strength is squashed once he returns home with his new bride by Rebecca's presence in both the house and their marriage. The narrator is consistently confined to male patriarchy by acting as her husband's commodity, through only being known by the married name that her husband bestowed upon her.

Although the audience are told that she does in fact have an unusual name, which emphasises her hidden depths and possible indication that Rebecca and she are infact disjointed versions of the same character. The narrator makes herself comparable to the unruly nature that begins to eat away at the house; ' No hand had checked their progress, and they had gone native now, rearing to monster height without bloom, black and ugly as the nameless parasites that grew beside them. ' (Gothic Horror, Page 10). The

wild unruliness of nature herself is representational of Rebecca's character permeating through the text.

The comparison between women and nature expresses the gothic fear of women who are deemed uncontrollable by male patriarchy. Rebecca also has marked characteristics that link her to the vampire. As Horner suggests Rebecca has 'facial pallor, plentiful hair and a voracious sexual appetite.' (Horner, Page 111). Rebecca could also be seen as hunting her prey like a vampire, through lurking in the shadows of Manderley and hunting not only the male character of Maxim, but the female character of the narrator, emphasising her links with polymorphous sexuality which is also linked with vampires.

Again Rebecca 'like the vampire, she has been killed more than once.' (Horner & Zlosnik, Page 111) Allan Lloyd Smith expresses that 'Freud's analysis of the uncanny offers the insight that this effect depends upon a consonance between inner and outer, conscious and unconscious, spoken and unspoken elements. It is precisely because something is not admitted that reference to it produces an effect of uncanniness. In a sense it matters less what the unspoken material is than that it be unspoken, unspeakable.' (The Phantoms of Dood and Rebecca.

Page 306) Rebecca represents the uncanny as she is something that is in the mind of all of the characters and is not easily eradicated, except through repression and denial, however like her hand writing surfacing, she too constantly re-surfaces throughout the text. As is suggested by Harriet Hawkins 'their counter images seem photo-negative reversals of each other,

or two sides of one coin' (Horner ; Zlonsik, Page 108) The burning of Manderley at the end of the text appears to surmise the whole presence that Rebecca creates, especially her presence on the narrator.

Wheatley suggests that '... on one hand it exorcise the ghost of Rebecca, but on the other hand it emphasises that the heroine will never possess Manderley or take the place of Rebecca. ' (Wheatley, Page 134). Therefore insinuating that it is only through the burning destruction of Manderley, in an almost funeral pyre like way that Rebecca can be destroyed. Overall, it can be seen that Rebecca's presence is most felt through her handwriting and this writing, as suggested by Horner ' uncannily inscribes the body's presence despite its absence through death. ' (Horner ; Zlonsik, Page 110).