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Rebecca

An Analysis of Daphen du Maurier's
Novel and of Alfred Hitchcock's
1940 Adaptation

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Rebecca is the fifth novel by English author Dame Daphne du Maurier. Published in 1938, it was a considerable commercial success, selling almost three million copies in less than thirty years and never going out of print. This overwhelming popularity, however, has not been matched by critical acclaim since *Rebecca* has always been underestimated and labelled as a Gothic Romance, as “women fiction”. In the cover of the Avon Books paperback, for instance, it is advertised as “the unsurpassed modern masterpiece of romantic suspense”. The author utterly disliked this categorisation as she described her novel as a “rather grim’, even ‘unpleasant’... study in jealousy with nothing of the ‘exquisite love story’ her publisher claimed it to be”¹.

As a matter of fact, much has been written about du Maurier’s work, but in the last decades a wide range of critics have started to analyse her body of writing and her biography from the psychoanalytic, feminist, Gothic and cultural materialist perspective. Alison Light, Nina Auerbach, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik are some

¹ M. Forster, *Daphne du Maurier: The Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller*, 1993, in A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, “*Those curious, sloping letters*”: *Reading the Writing of du Maurier’s “Rebecca”*, 1996, p. 112.

of the personalities who have offered significant insights about this English novelist's most important motifs and "have helped transform a writer pigeon-holed as romantic and parochially regional into a significant literary figure"². Consequently, *Rebecca* ceased to be considered the quintessential Cornish romantic novel and much more interesting features related to its genesis and links with the author's life have started to be taken into consideration.

Du Maurier's biography actually deeply affected her professional life and many of her characters and settings can be traced back to her own experience or to some aspects of her personality. This is also true of *Rebecca*, where elements which reflect the author's personal experience can be easily detected. A meticulous analysis of the main events of Daphne's life is therefore essential in order to understand and approach this brilliant novelist.

1.1 - BIOGRAPHY

Talent has been running through Daphne's blood since her birth as hers was a family of artists. On the one hand, her grandfather, George du Maurier, was a cartoonist for the magazine *Punch* and author of three novels, including the celebrated *Tribly* (1895): the

² H. Taylor, *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, London, Virago Press, 2007, p. XXI.

protagonist of this novel, Svengali, had such an impact on the reading public that his name is still used in common language to refer to a wicked, manipulative individual. Du Maurier's father Gerald, on the other hand, is known as a famous actor and theatre-manager. Her elder sister Angela also became a writer, while the younger one Jeanne was a painter. Furthermore, Daphne's cousins were the Llewelyn Davies boys, who inspired J.M. Barrie for the play *Peter Pan*.

Born in 1907, as a young girl Daphne bonded very closely with her father, who saw in her the continuation of the family literary talent. Aware of Gerald's strong desire for a son, du Maurier grew up wishing she had born a boy and, for this reason, created a masculine *alter ego* named Eric Avon, who embodied the idealised notion of 'man' that she had drawn from the adventure books she used to read. According to Alison Light, this attitude of both envy and adoration for the male peers was indeed quite common in the Edwardian era in which the novelist grew up.

While she worshipped her father, Daphne never got on with her mother Muriel, whom she described as "a very basic type of woman", "a Snow Queen in disguise"³. The only thing du Maurier inherited

³ D. du Maurier, *Myself When Young: The Shaping of a Writer*, 1977, in A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p. 4.

from her was “the normal thing of a woman wanting to be married”⁴. For this reason, at the age of twenty-five, Daphne married Major Frederick ‘Tommy’ ‘Boy’ Browning, ten years older than her, with whom she had three children.

The couple settled in Fowey, Cornwall, a place which Daphne was strongly attached to: she used to spend there her holidays when young and it is the place where she began writing novels. It was also in Fowey that she met her husband-to-be: “one of the du Maurier sisters had first spotted the handsome Browning sailing his boat in Fowey harbour; he had actually set out there after reading du Maurier’s first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, falling in love with [Daphne’s] graphic descriptions of the Cornish coastline”⁵.

The bond with this land is still so intense that in 1996 the Daphne du Maurier Festival of Arts and Literature was created and, since then, it has become an established part of the Fowey tourist calendar.

With their three children, du Maurier and Browning chose to fix their residence in a mansion called Menabilly, obtaining a long lease from the Rashleigh family, owners of the house, which lasted for

⁴ O. Malet (ed.), *Daphne du Maurier: Letters from Menabilly - Portrait of a Friendship*, 1993, in *Ibid.*, cit. p. 4.

⁵ C. House, “Daphne du Maurier always said her novel *Rebecca* was a study in jealousy”, *The Telegraph*, viewed July 2017.

more than twenty years. This mansion has been extremely important throughout Daphne's life. She first saw it in the 1920s when she was just a young girl and fell in love with the place. Her second daughter Flavia Leng remembers when her mother took her and her brother and sister to visit it for the first time, when they were kids: "As we peered through the broken windows she kissed the house and told us it was her favourite place"⁶.

Some critics suggest that du Maurier's love for Cornwall sprung from the desire to escape from a social conventionality that she utterly disliked because of her timid personality. This feeling of awkwardness intensified when, after the Second World War, her husband became Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth II's Comptroller and Treasurer, which involved frequent visits of the Royal Family at Menabilly. In a letter to Oriol Malet dated 1962 she writes: "Another awful thing is that we have suddenly been warned that the Queen wants to come here on July 23 – to Mena – to tea! [...] It is the Doom of all time.. [...] It has ruined my summer!"⁷.

Space and tranquillity were essential for Daphne, while she could not bear small talks and endless receptions. She preferred

⁶ G. Dehn, Growing up in the house that inspired *Rebecca*, *The Telegraph*, viewed June 2017.

⁷ O. Malet (ed.), *Letters from Menabilly*, in A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.24.

spending her time in Menabilly or Ferryside (the du Mauriers family country house) than in London enjoying the social events. Writing was the mean she used to escape from this reality, and it was so important for her that she used to follow strict daily routine: “[she] always had breakfast in bed. She’d get up about 10am and walk across the lawn to a little field where she had a garden hut. She wrote there until about one o’clock, when she’d come in for lunch and then usually take [her three children] for a walk before getting back to writing”⁸.

Nonetheless, due to Tommy’s military career, Daphne had to leave her beloved house at Fowey quite often to return to London or to travel abroad. During these international stays, she used to claim that she missed her house more than her own children. However, travelling gave her the inspiration for her stories, which she used to write once come back to Cornwall.

Some critics and biographers have argued that du Maurier used to be quite aloof and distant with her children, especially with the daughters, leaving them in the hands of nannies and housekeepers when she was writing. However, this portrait does not reflect her real personality: her son Kits describes her as “the most wonderful

⁸ G. Dehn, “Growing up in the house that inspired *Rebecca*”, *The Telegraph*, viewed June 2017.

and easy-going person, who'd join in and play cricket or football with the kids and all that. She wasn't at all aloof. But she was very fond of her privacy"⁹.

1.2 – WRITER VS WIFE

Throughout her life, du Maurier struggled to merge her two different identities: on the one hand she was Mrs Frederick Browning, the wife of a Lieutenant General and mother of three children; on the other hand, she was Daphne du Maurier, an internationally celebrated writer. She found impossible to reconcile these two completely different aspects of her life: society and her husband's traditional idea of womanhood was utterly the opposite of her own one.

For this reason, du Maurier used to describe herself as a 'half-breed': she rejected and rebelled against the idea of woman as wife and mother, but at the same time she partly accepted it. Writing, on the contrary, was the moment in which she could free her inner self, the 'boy-in-the-box' (as she used to call it) that she had locked away when she had grown up. This creative force was perceived as having sprung from a repressed masculine side: as a matter of fact, du

⁹ C. House, "Daphne du Maurier always said her novel *Rebecca* was a study in jealousy", *The Telegraph*, viewed July 2017.

Maurier considered her whole writing identity as masculine and this is the reason why she considered her role as a women writer ambiguous.

The anxiety created by this situation of ambivalence resolved in a sense of split subjectivity, which Daphne deeply explored in her novels. Therefore, alter egos and doubles became a recurrent motif in her work with *Rebecca* as the most blatant example of how the battle with her own demons was reflected in du Maurier's narratives. In the text, the author builds two female protagonists who are the opposite of one another, and assigns different aspects of her own personality to each of them: Mrs de Winter represents Daphne's shyness and social awkwardness, while Rebecca is given "her independence, her love of the sea, [...] her sexual fearlessness, and even her bisexuality"¹⁰.

1.3 - SEXUALITY

Undoubtedly, du Maurier's sexuality is extremely important when analysing her novels. It has become the object of deeper studies since the publication of Margaret Forster's *Daphne du Maurier: the Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller* in 1993. Foster's

¹⁰ S. Beaman, "Rebecca", in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, H. Taylor (ed.), cit. p.58.

assumption, based on the analysis of a number of previously unpublished letters between du Maurier and Ellen Doubleday, is that the novelist's "boy-in-the-box" represents a repressed sexual desire for women, concealed by the farce of her wedding. Also, Foster interprets the expression 'half-breed' as an instance of a hidden bisexual nature.

It has been proved, in fact, that during her life du Maurier has had a few romantic relations with women. The unconventional bohemian background in which she grew up surely influenced the young Daphne, who, before getting married, had already had several romantic liaisons with actors of her father's company, including at least one woman. She had also fell in love with her French teacher Mlle Fernande Yvonne, known as 'Ferdy'. When adult, Daphne became emotionally (but also physically) involved with two more women, the actress Gertrude Lawrence and Ellen Doubleday, the wife of her American publisher, the latter being the addressee of the letters Foster analysed.

Du Maurier was conscious of these feelings and used to call them her 'Venetian tendencies', as opposed to the 'Cairo tendencies', which were the heterosexual ones. However, she violently rejected to be categorised as a 'lesbian': "by God and by Christ if anyone should

call that sort of love by that unattractive word that begins with 'L', I'd tear their guts out!"¹¹.

This fury and her confused sexual identity can be easily understood if connected to the social and cultural background in which Daphne grew up. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik indeed explain that in the early nineteenth century the female sexual identity had become object of frequent discussion: the threat of the newly-born feminist movement and Freud's theories about love between women resolved in an increasingly more conservative and rigid categorization of gender. "The 'good' woman was presented as contented with her domestic lot as wife and mother; middle-class women in particular were expected to present role models of maternal femininity"¹². On the contrary, career women were still considered dangerous.

Choosing only one way of understanding du Maurier complex sexual identity is very difficult and it would be impossible to categorise it simplistically. She may have been a repressed lesbian, as implied by Forster However, or she may have simply had some bisexual episodes throughout of her life. What is important to

¹¹ M. Forster, *Daphne du Maurier: The Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller*, 1993, in A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.19.

¹² A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.18.

underline is that this talented novelist often felt out of role both socially and sexually, thus describing herself with words like 'half-breed' or 'disembodied spirit'. This sense of inadequacy resolved in the exploration of some traditional Gothic motifs, especially the double as representation of a split subjectivity and the ubiquity of the uncanny as expressions of anxieties concerning identity.

1.4 - THE GENESIS OF THE NOVEL

Du Maurier started planning the writing of *Rebecca* at a very difficult point of her life: her beloved father, Gerald, had died just a few years before and she was pregnant with her second child. In addition, she was accompanying her husband on a posting in Alexandria, Egypt, a place she loathed.

At the age of thirty she started writing what was to become her most famous novel but her first fifteen-thousand-word-long attempt was torn into pieces. Du Maurier described this false start as a "literary miscarriage" which is a quite interesting expression: maternity is actually a central theme in *Rebecca*, where neither of the two female protagonists are able to produce an heir for their husband. Furthermore, it is curious that du Maurier's second child, who was born during the writing process, was another daughter, but she had strongly hoped for a son.

Du Maurier's inspiration for *Rebecca* came also from her husband. Their marriage was quite stable, although there were frequent infidelities on both sides. However, what is interesting is that, for all their life together, Daphne has been quite jealous of Tommy's first fiancée, Jan Ricardo. Although this lady had died throwing herself under a train, Daphne continued to feel that her husband was attracted to Ricardo. The omnipresence of this beautiful, dark woman, whose love letters were signed with a great 'R' (like Rebecca's), can thus be considered the real "germ" of the novel.

Finally, *Rebecca* owes much also to the realm of fairy-tales (mainly to Bluebeard and Cinderella) and, above all, to Charlotte Brontë's 1847 masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. The plot of the two novels is indeed very similar; so much that many critics have argued that *Rebecca* is a mere modern version of *Jane Eyre*. Even Angela Carter dared to claim that du Maurier's novel "shamelessly reduplicates the plot of Charlotte Brontë's"¹³. As a matter of fact, the number of intertextual links between the two works is striking, but it would be

¹³ A. Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings*, Vintage Books, London, 1992, p. 163.

better to say that “*Rebecca* reflects *Jane Eyre*, but the reflection is imperfect, and deliberately so”¹⁴.

1.5 - PLOT

In her notes, du Maurier writes: “very roughly, the book will be about the influence of a first wife on a second. [...] Until wife 2 is haunted day and night... a tragedy is looming very close and crash! Bang! Something happens”¹⁵. *Rebecca* is indeed a story about jealousy, where the present is continually tormented by the past and everything is subject to the dominant presence of a house, Manderley.

The novel starts with a dream and with the famous opening sentence: “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again”. The nameless protagonist describes her oneiric experience of passing through the locked gates and progressing up the long and windy drive until she reaches the mansion. At first sight, everything seems intact, but once she comes closer, the narrator realises that she is looking at the ruins of her former house. At this point, she wakes up and confirms that Manderley has actually been destroyed. Her husband Maxim de Winter and she are living in exile in Europe, moving from hotel to hotel, in a monotonous routine made of cricket,

¹⁴ S. Beauman, “*Rebecca*”, in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, H. Taylor (ed.), cit. p.50.

¹⁵ D. du Maurier’s notes in C. House, “Daphne du Maurier always said her novel *Rebecca* was a study in jealousy”, *The Telegraph*, viewed July 2017.

afternoon tea and dull newspaper articles. For reasons which are still unclear to the reader, the couple find dullness as reassuring and safe, preferring living their marriage without passion and, possibly, without sex.

The narrator thus begins recollecting their first meeting when she was just a young girl working as a companion for a rude, despotic American lady. In the wonderful setting of Monte Carlo, the narrator meets Maxim de Winter, the famous owner of Manderley, a beautiful house that she had once saw in a postcard when she was a child. Together they start to explore the surroundings of the city, which Maxim seems to know quite well, having spent there the honeymoon with his first wife, who died in a terrible boat accident.

After only a few weeks with him, the protagonist accepts to marry Maxim, although the proposal is not romantic at all. They happily spend the first months as a married couple travelling around Europe, but once they go back to Manderley the nightmare begins. They are welcomed there by Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, a ghastly figure resembling a skeleton. In Manderley, the new Mrs de Winter clashes with the overwhelming presence of Rebecca, the first wife: although she has died more than a year before, the house is still haunted by the memory of this woman with whom everyone seems to have been in love. Thus, the shy, immature narrator starts to build

an image of Rebecca in her mind, an icon of womanhood which is everything she is not: Rebecca is beautiful, elegant and adult; she was the perfect mistress for Manderely and used to give wonderful receptions.

Things change abruptly when Rebecca's sailing boat is found and, inside it, a corpse; Rebecca is now thought to have committed suicide, since she locked herself inside the cabin. However, Maxim finally confesses the truth to his new wife: Rebecca did not drown in a boat accident, nor committed suicide, he killed her. He has hated her since the days of the honeymoon because she was perverse and diabolical (and possibly bisexual), although the others did not realise it. Rebecca had confessed to her husband being pregnant with another man, but Maxim could not accept his house being inherited by a bastard: he shot her and hide the body inside the boat, which he made sink.

Mrs de Winter is shocked by the story but it is also the first time that Maxim declares his love to her, despite months of marriage. From this moment on, husband and wife cooperate to save the former from the accusation of murder and to suppress the truth. The novel closes as it had started with a dream: the narrator dreams of becoming one with Rebecca, and her long, black hair wrap around

Maxim's neck. However, once she wakes up, the night sky is lit with a red glow: Manderley is burning, Rebecca has finally won.

CHAPTER 2 – GENRE

2.1 ROMANCE OR NOT ROMANCE?

As it has already been said, critics have always labelled *Rebecca* as ‘romantic fiction’. Basically, this genre deals with the development of a love relationship between a man and a woman. The protagonist is usually a female figure with whom the reader easily identifies and whose actions are aimed to overcome the obstacles between her and her lover so that in the end love triumphs and the fiction culminates with the traditional ‘happy ending’, essentially a monogamous, heterosexual marriage.

Rebecca, however, begins exactly where other romantic fictions end, namely with marriage. For this reason, this novel does not fit completely into the ‘romantic’ label. It is true, indeed, that the love story between the nameless protagonist and her older husband plays an important role inside the novel. Nevertheless, the assumption that *Rebecca* is ‘romance’ only works if confined in the narrator’s point of view and does not take into consideration the Gothic elements of the story.

In the last years, critics have tried to re-establish du Maurier’s novel’s identity out of the limitations of the romantic genre. Nina Auerbach, for instance, has argued that “these brutal tales are not, in

the common sense, romances. [...] Romance is inherently a soothing and tender genre that aims to reconcile women to traditional lives whose common denominator is home... Home in *Rebecca* is an *unheimlich* monstrosity whose only alternative is exile”¹⁶. Starting from Horner and Zlosnik’s brilliant analysis of the novel, studies have focused more on the Gothic elements of the novel, on the influences of traditional fairy-tales, especially “Bluebeard”, and on the similarities between du Maurier’s novel and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

Therefore, *Rebecca* has begun to be recognised as a complex novel, which escapes an easy categorisation of genre, skilfully blending elements of the Gothic tradition, the fairy-tale and the novel of development in a gloomy, intriguing story of love and murder. A further analysis of all these features is thus essential in order to fully understand du Maurier’s text and to avoid categorising it simply as a “romantic novel”.

¹⁶ N. Auerbach, *Daphne du Maurier, Haunted Heiress*, 2000, in N. J. Watson, “Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*”, in *The Popular and The Canonical: Debating Twentieth-Century Literature 1940-2000*, David Johnson (ed.), Routledge, London, 2005, p.40.

2.2 BLUEBEARD AND THE FANTASY OF PATRIARCHY

Many critics have thus focused on *Rebecca's* fairy-tale intertext, arguing that it shares several features with classic tales such as "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard". The latter is particularly relevant in this context since it has always been considered as a reference point for Female Gothic writers: indeed, it represents the typical masculine fantasy of patriarchy, of male power over wives. Along with *Rebecca*, in English literature there are various other rewritings of this tale, from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* to Margaret Atwood *Bluebeard's Eggs*.

"Bluebeard"'s story begins with the marriage of a rich aristocrat to a naïve, inexperienced young girl. The nobleman has already been married before, but all his wives have mysteriously disappeared. When he has to leave his castle, he gives the keys to his wife, who can open any door she wants except for one. The girl, being naturally inquisitive, opens the chamber where she finds the bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives, killed for having been too curious.

Rebecca's plot begins exactly like "Bluebeard"'s, with a young girl falling in love with an older, richer man and marrying him straight away: for this reason, the common features between Maxim and Bluebeard have often been emphasised. Both are noblemen and owners of a castle which hides a terrible secret. In addition, what

feminist critics have often underlined is the fact that the two characters represent a patriarchal power aimed to oppress women: they indeed try to control their wives' natural curiosity, a trait shared by all women dangerously threatening the patriarchal law. Maxim, for instance, wants to preserve his second wife as a child, to avoid that 'knowledge' of feminine sexuality which Rebecca, on the contrary, knew very well and which almost destroyed the patriarchal lineage of Manderley.

Nevertheless, Mrs de Winter's reaction after discovering her husband's terrible secret distances the novel from its fairy-tale inspiration. "Bluebeard", in fact, ends with the protagonist who is about to be killed as a punishment for having disobeyed her husband, when her brothers eventually rescue her. On the contrary, the nameless protagonist of *Rebecca* clearly does not want to be saved. When her beloved Maxim reveals his secret she is neither horrified nor disappointed, the only thing she can think about is: "He did not love Rebecca, he did not love Rebecca"¹⁷.

In this sense, Mrs de Winter voluntarily becomes 'Bluebeard's ally', helping her husband to restore and maintain the patriarchal system which Rebecca had threaten with her ambiguous attitude: the

¹⁷ D. du Maurier, *Rebecca*, Avon Books, New York, 2002, p.284. All quotations are from this edition and henceforth they will be given in parenthesis.

reader is thus meant to forgive Maxim's crime since it is Rebecca that provoked it (an aspect of the novel which has been made even more explicit in Hitchcock's filmic adaptation of the novel, where the murdering of Rebecca becomes an accident).

2.3 - THE GOTHIC LEGACY

Together with the fairy-tale intertext, in the last decades critics have focused on the Gothic elements of *Rebecca*, which has begun to be considered an instance of the early-thirties modern Gothic revival. The pioneers of this approach towards du Maurier's novels were Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik with their illuminating study *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, first published in 1998: their aim was to analyse both the writer's life and novels from a fresh point of view and "to relate du Maurier's work to generic traditions and conventions (in particular, those of Gothic fiction)"¹⁸.

'Gothic', however, is a very tricky word since it contains a number of meanings and it is used in different fields of study; in literature, it is usually applied to a group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820 whose most famous authors are Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Mary Shelley and which

¹⁸ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.2.

share a set of stock features. David Punter briefly describes Gothic fiction as “the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves”¹⁹. Gothic is the realm of supernatural elements, where terror overcomes the protagonists and readers and where the past uncannily returns upon present.

Even from this short introduction, it is clear that *Rebecca* displays a wide range of Gothic features. Firstly, Manderley represents the typical Gothic setting: a modern version of a medieval castle, isolated and labyrinthine, it is the last statement of a long-gone aristocratic past made of servants and formal dinners, which modernity threatens to cancel. The castle in Gothic fiction was meant to have the same function: the Medieval Italian scenery was used by authors to set their novel in an historical period that was completely far away from their modern seventeenth-century England. In the same way, Daphne du Maurier wanted to describe the typical English aristocratic scenario which, in the first decades of the twentieth century, had begun to disappear.

Manderley is also haunted by a ghost. The presence of the first Mrs de Winter surrounds the whole property and is kept alive by the

¹⁹ D. Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*, Longman, London, 1980, p.1.

small details of her calligraphy and by Mrs Danvers' fetishist cleaning of the master bedroom. The past uncannily returns upon the present through the ghost of the first Mrs de Winter: Rebecca is considered as a 'revenant', her own boat prophetically baptised *Je Reviens*. Finally, she also shares features with another very famous Gothic creature, the vampire: her pale complexion and black hair, along with the rapacious sexuality, remind of the stereotypes about female vampires in late nineteenth century Gothic fiction - these features, however, will be better explained in Chapter 4.

Opposite to Rebecca's vampirism is the nameless narrator's innocence: she is the embodiment of the traditional Gothic heroine. As a matter of fact, Mrs de Winters' disposition recalls the protagonists of Ann Radcliffe's novels, young sensitive orphans who, "in response to the strange noises and spectral figures that inhabit the dark world of ruins, castles and forests, [...] conjure up images of ghostly supernatural forces"²⁰. However, just like in Radcliffe's novels, in du Maurier's work the supernatural elements often have rational explanation: as Horner and Zlosnik put it, "it does not, finally, demand a suspension of disbelief. Sinister characters [...] are not 'disembodied' spirits in a paranormal sense, but flesh and blood

²⁰ F. Botting, *Gothic*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.41.

people who threaten, or have threaten, the life of the protagonist and the fabric of social order”²¹.

Lastly, as it has already been said, during her career, and particularly in *Rebecca*, du Maurier has always been fascinated by the theme of the ‘double’, which often comes along with gender and identity issues. As a matter of fact, the character of Rebecca can be seen ad an *alter ego* or *doppelgänger* of the protagonist: she represents the ‘Other’, the ‘unknown’, which is feared and desired at the same time. While the second Mrs de Winter is timid and socially awkward, ordinarily pretty, Rebecca was astonishingly beautiful and loved by everyone for her strong personality; moreover, from a sexual point of view, she had a confidence which is utterly opposite to the narrator’s naivety. As in many traditional Gothic novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), the ‘double’ allows du Maurier’s novel to be partially included in the Gothic label.

2.4 – A SHAMELESS REDUPLICATION

In her essays *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings*, published in 1992, Angela Carter states that: “One of the great bestsellers of the

²¹ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.25.

mid-twentieth century, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, shamelessly reduplicated the plot of *Jane Eyre*"²². Du Maurier's novel is undoubtedly indebted to Charlotte Brontë's 1847 masterpiece: the author actually admired the Brontës' work, so much that, along her career, she even wrote a biography of Branwell Brontë, *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë*, published in 1960. However, the similarities between du Maurier's and Brontë's novels are so striking and obvious for an attentive reader, that the intertext between them has become a common object of critical discussion.

Although *Rebecca* starts where *Jane Eyre* ends, namely with the wedding, the two plots are very similar: they both tell the story of a young woman who meets and falls in love with a mysterious, older man and moves to the haunted, prison-like mansion he owns; once there, the terrible secret which surrounds the property and involves the owner and his first wife is gradually disclosed by the heroine until eventually the house is set on fire by the protagonist's predecessor (or her agent) and completely destroyed. The two lovers are thus able to live a tranquil marital life away from the property and their previous lives. It is curious to notice that in the first draft of *Rebecca*, published in *The Rebecca Notebooks* (1981), Maxim is left

²² Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings*, Vintage Books, London, cit. p.163.

disabled by a car accident and is utterly dependent on his wife, exactly like Rochester who loses his sight attempting to save his first wife from the fire.

The two male protagonists are, as a matter of fact, very similar. They are both rich noblemen, owners of a country house and they both keep a terrible secret: they had a beautiful and brilliant first wife, whom they got rid of by illegal means because of her immorality. To soothe the pressure of their actions, the two men try to remarry with two girls who are utterly opposite to their first wives. Since they are moody and dark, many critics have focused on Maxim and Rochester's role as villain-hero, a character typical of Gothic fiction: their first aim is to restore domesticity and patriarchy inside their houses, marrying naïve, young girls and trying to keep them innocent and pure as much as they can (in *Rebecca's* case, this innocence is explicitly sexual).

Jane and the second Mrs de Winter have indeed much in common, starting from their appearance, which is heavily emphasised in both novels: their plainness, their mousy hair and, also, their humble, middle-class origins strongly diverge from Bertha's and Rebecca's long black hair and pale complexion, smartness and confidence. Moreover, the two young protagonists also play the role of narrators inside the novel, delivering the story

from their point of view. Because of all these similarities, it is an interesting fact that in the 1940s Joan Fontaine was chosen to star in the film adaptations of both novels, first as Mrs de Winter in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and then as Jane in Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* (1943).

Nonetheless, the most curious parallelism between the two novels does not concern characters but the locations, Manderley and Thornfield Hall. The two buildings are indeed very similar from a number of points of view: they function not only as setting, but also as an almost physical presence throughout the narration. Although in both cases the geographical setting remains vague (in *Rebecca* there is actually no specific mentioning of Cornwall, even though it is supposed to be set there), the mansions are described at the same time as a dream-place and a nightmare one: while "on the face of it, [they are] dream-places where fantasies, such as the poor orphan girl marrying the seductive rich landowner, can be acted out [...] they derive their spellbinding force from the suggestion of horror which they contain"²³. The triangular relationship between the house, its owner and his secret thus creates a gloomy sense of nightmare in a place which, otherwise, would have dream-like characteristics.

²³ B. Bertrandias, "Daphne du Maurier's Transformation of *Jane Eyre* in *Rebecca*", *Revue LISA*, 2006, p. 24.

Although the two novels have indeed a lot of elements in common, it would be unfair to claim that du Maurier “shamelessly reduplicated” Charlotte Brontë’s work. On the contrary, it can be argued that both novels represent a woman’s challenge to the patriarchal system which is embodied in the two mansions and which is ultimately achieved through the destruction of them. In some way, this reading recalls Virginia Woolf’s claim that women have to “kill the Angel in the House” in order to gain access to their autonomy of being²⁴. Moreover, *Rebecca*, beyond its relationship with *Jane Eyre*, definitely helps to locate du Maurier’s writing within the tradition of the “female Gothic” - a Gothic sub-genre which has a long lineage in the work of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen and Mary Shelley - thus avoiding the old classification of “romantic novels”.

²⁴ P. Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 1996, in B. Bertrandias, *Daphne du Maurier’s Transformation of “Jane Eyre” in “Rebecca”*, cit. p. 22.

CHAPTER 3 – NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Following the structuralist narrative theory, Seymour Chatman distinguishes two necessary components of a narrative: “a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated”²⁵. Entering in the realm of the latter, then, means analysing *how* a narrative is depicted, which are the techniques the author employs inside the text.

From this point of view, *Rebecca* displays some interesting features: the structure of the novel is indeed essential to understand part of the symbolic implications of the story and it also shows some points in common with traditional Gothic fiction. Moreover, du Maurier uses a first person narrator for this novel: the choice is not casual; it rather reveals important information about her personal writing style and about the relationship between *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*.

²⁵ S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse, Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1978, p.19.

3.1 – NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The novel opens with a narrative voice recalling a dream about its past: “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again” (1). The reader is then accompanied through the narrator’s oneiric experience along the drive of Manderley until it reaches the house itself, utterly in ruins. At the conclusion of Chapter 1, the scene shifts to reality and details about the narrator (who is now understood to be a woman) and her life begin to be disclosed. Although this is the starting point of the novel, it is not the chronological beginning: the whole text takes the form of a long analepsis, a flashback, the first chapters actually being the story’s epilogue.

The bulk of the narration, on the contrary, is the girl’s jealous pursuit of Rebecca and her death. The young narrator actually begins a process of slow identification with her predecessor, being at the same time attracted and terrified by her figure. The climax of the narration can be identified in the discovery of Rebecca’s boat and body, when Maxim finally confesses his crime to his new wife. All the evidence collected about Rebecca are meant to lead to this moment, when finally the character’s formation in the narrator’s (and the reader’s) mind.

For this reason, the first chapters of the text can be considered a ‘frame’ to the story itself: the ‘frame narrative’ is a quite popular

narrative device which, in this case, is used to alert “the reader to the fact that there is to be no simple or happy ending to the plot about to unfold”²⁶. This narrative technique is typical of Gothic fiction since it allows to restore a moral order undermined by the supernatural narration or to explain a mystery which otherwise would remain unsolved. Many Gothic text use ‘frame narratives’ in this sense, some of the most famous examples being *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley – the ‘frame’ here is represented by Captain Walton’s letters to his sister – and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872).

The curious situation of exile at the beginning of the novel is thus gradually explained throughout the text: the story is brought full circle once all the enigmas are solved²⁷. The circularity of the narration is also emphasised by the fact that it both opens and ends with a dream: while driving towards Manderley after having discovered the truth about Rebecca, the young narrator sees herself at the mirror, but the face staring back is not her own, “it was very pale, very lovely, framed in a cloud of dark hair” (379). Notwithstanding the symbolic implications of the narrator’s identification with Rebecca, which will be discussed in another chapter, this episode concludes the story exactly *how* and *when* it

²⁶ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.103.

²⁷ A. Light, “Returning to Manderley’ – Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class”, *Feminist Review*, 1984, p.9.

began, thus giving circularity both from a formal and a chronological point of view.

3.2 - THE NARRATOR

Rebecca's narrator is allegedly one of the most discussed topics in the novel's criticism. It is a first person narrator, namely the young protagonist voice telling the story of her marriage. First person narrators, also known as 'homodiegetic narrators', are quite common in du Maurier's body of work: other examples are *My Cousin Rachel* (1936) and *The House on the Strand* (1969) and interestingly both of them have a male protagonist and narrative voice. One of the reasons why du Maurier preferred this type of narrator lies in her power to carry the reader with her: writing in first person, "she was able to identify with her protagonist and bring all the characters vividly alive"²⁸.

Another feature that allows the author's identification with the protagonist is the internal focalization: actually, *Rebecca* is not only told by the voice of the new Mrs de Winter but also strictly from her point of view. 'Focalization' is a term used in literary theory which means "the consciousness or position through which events are

²⁸ S. Hodges, "Editing Daphne du Maurier", in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, H. Taylor (ed.), cit. p.31.

brought into focus”²⁹. In du Maurier’s novel the story is utterly focalised through the young protagonist’s eyes: for instance, the physical image of Rebecca is merely the projection of the information which the protagonist collects from the other characters, since she is never able to see either a photo or a portrait of her predecessor.

Interestingly, du Maurier’s first person narrator is very similar to that of *Jane Eyre*. In Charlotte Brontë’s novel, actually, the protagonist also functions as the narrator and focaliser. Points in common between the two protagonists have already been displayed: the fact that both of them narrate their own story as well is another example of du Maurier’s appreciation of Brontë’s masterpiece and, furthermore, allows both authors to perfectly describe the process of development and ‘knowledge’ of their heroines.

Both in *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, nevertheless, this limitation of point of view is quite problematic. Due to the fact that there is only one version of the story, the reader may doubt about the reliability of the narrator and the information it conveys. Usually known as ‘unreliable narrator’, this technique is typical of fantastic literature; indeed, for Tzvetan Todorov only homodiegetic narrators can fully guarantee the fantastic effect since they simplify the reader’s

²⁹ J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p.88.

identification with characters and, most of all, allow the necessary doubt on the reader's part which is at the genre base. Whether the narrator in du Maurier's novel should be considered unreliable or not has always been a critical point.

It is true, indeed, that the reader's only access to information about the character of Rebecca is transmitted through the narrator, whose jealousy and antipathy are not concealed. However, if the narrator is not reliable, the whole novel must be reconsidered: the truth about Rebecca, then, would not be that of Maxim, she would not be a vicious *femme fatale*, whose sexual freedom threatened Manderley's patriarchy; on the contrary, she would be Mrs Danvers's fierce and independent woman who "was above all that" (340). Moreover, from this point of view, the assumption that Rebecca taunts Maxim into murdering her is utterly challenged.

CHAPTER 4 – MAIN CHARACTERS

According to Chatman, the story not only comprehends the happenings of the plot, but also what he defines ‘the existents’, namely the characters and items of setting. In the view of some structuralists, “characters are products of the plot” whose “status is [only] functional”³⁰. However, the protagonists’ psychological characterisation is as important as their function inside the novel and they should be considered as real beings. In *Rebecca*, for instance, characters’ personality is essential to comprehend their function in the narrative.

The novel’s plot has already been discussed in Chapter 1; for this reason, the following two chapters will focus exclusively on the protagonists of du Maurier’s novel, analysing their psychological characterisation and its implications. *Rebecca* is not a novel full of characters, the protagonists of the story being only three: the homonymous first wife, the nameless young narrator and the male ‘hero’, Maxim. However, among the secondary characters, Mrs Danvers stands out because of her extremely important function.

³⁰ S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse, Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, cit. p.19.

Eventually, also Manderley, can be considered as a character, since it is physically present throughout the narration.

4.1 - REBECCA

Rebecca is allegedly the most important character in the narrative: “although [she] does not play an active role in the novel’s plot, her function as a multi-layered textual construction is immense”³¹. From this point of view, she could be compared to Count Dracula, the protagonist of Bram Stoker’s novel from 1897: while the novels are entitled after them, they are physically almost absent in the narration; Dracula is indeed “central to the opening section set in Transylvania, [but] he practically disappears after arriving in London”³².

Similarly, Rebecca is never given a voice in du Maurier’s novel and everything the reader gets to know about her is filtered through the other characters’ perception of her. From the words of Frank Crawley, Beatrice –Maxim’s sister– and all the other protagonists, the reader can indeed easily create a picture of this stunningly beautiful

³¹ M. Kőrösi, “Disembodied Spirits’ Revisiting Manderley: The Construction of Female Subjectivity in du Maurier’s *Rebecca*”, *The AnaChronisT – Journal of English and American Studies*, 2002, p.164.

³² D. Punter & G. Byron, *The Gothic*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2004, p.231.

woman, although in the novel there is no trace of either a photo or a portrait of her.

Her cloud of black hair and pale complexion create another element of comparison between du Maurier's novel and *Dracula*: indeed, Rebecca has often been compared to a vampire for her appearance and her uncontrolled sexuality. As a typical feature in late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century Gothic fiction, the female vampire represented a sexually rapacious and socially dangerous type of woman, the New Woman, in opposition to the ideal Victorian 'Angel in the house'. In the same way, Rebecca's independent sexuality is simultaneously a menace for Manderley and the patriarchal system it represents and the antithesis of the narrator's sexual naivety.

In spite of her physical absence, Rebecca is paradoxically always present in the novel: her character is kept alive by a series of symbols and objects which function as semiotic substitutes for her and which represent her strong personality. For instance, her character is always associated with the colour red, her symbolic flowers being "bloodred and luscious" rhododendrons, "great bushes of them, massed beneath the open window [of the morning-room], encroaching onto the sweep of the drive itself"(82). Likewise, the sea becomes a symbol of her independent and strong character: from the

West wing of Manderley and her bedroom it is possible to hear the sound of the waves beating against the rocks.

However, in the novel Rebecca is most importantly identified with her powerful handwriting. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik published an interesting article on this topic in 1996 titled *"Those Curious, Sloping Letters": Reading the Writing of du Maurier's "Rebecca"*, which has become a milestone in this novel's criticism. This article basically starts from the assumption that the character of Rebecca is present not only through the other characters' memory, but also through "an indelibility which continually surfaces in her signature and the 'curious, sloping letters' of her handwriting"³³.

In the novel there are indeed numerous references to Rebecca's writing, starting from Chapter 4, when the young narrator finds a book of poetry in Maxim's car and notices the dedication by his previous wife:

"Max—from Rebecca. 17 May," written in a curious slanting hand. A little blob of ink marred the white page opposite, as though the writer, in impatience, had shaken her pen to make the ink flow freely. And then as it bubbled through the nib, it came a little thick, so that the name Rebecca stood out black

³³ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *'Those curious, sloping letters': Reading the Writing of du Maurier's 'Rebecca'*, European Studies Research Institute (ESRI), Salford, 1994, cit. p. 105.

and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters.”
(33)

Although the narrator burns down this first hint of Rebecca, the “tall and sloping R” will return to haunt her repeatedly at Manderley, embroidered in a handkerchief or in the headed paper at the writing-table of the morning-room. Rebecca’s writing is everywhere and can not be erased or blotted out, it has left an indelible trace on the house and its occupants.

This handwriting tells a story of an ideal wife and the perfect hostess of a mansion like Manderley: the dominating ‘R’ represents an efficient ideal woman; the name itself, deriving from the Hebrew and meaning “join, tie, snare”, reinforces this picture of a firm and faithful wife. It is not surprising, then, that throughout the novel Rebecca’s writing is continually contrasted with the narrator’s. The latter is indeed always described as “small”, “square”, “cramped and unformed”, “without individuality, without style, uneducated even, the writing of an indifferent pupil taught in a second-rate school”(87). Rebecca is thus always representing everything the narrator is not and everything she wishes to be.

However, Horner and Zlosnik have analysed thoroughly the letters and their description in the novel, coming to the conclusion that Rebecca’s writing represents a power to name and possess

which strongly intimidates both the reader and the young narrator, but which also conceals deceptiveness: it appears to tell one story, that of a loving, perfect bride, while it actually represents an autonomy usually associated with strength and, consequently, masculinity. Indeed, in *Rebecca* writing disrupts conventional notions of gender and sexuality, since it is an activity associated with strength for women connected with power, control and visibility³⁴.

Rebecca is thus given another feature typical of masculinity, confirming the words of Mrs Danvers that “she had all the courage and spirit of a boy [...] she ought to have been a boy”(243). This character’s most important trait is indeed the “fluidity, the ability to shift between subject positions and across cultural spaces to transform herself. What Rebecca is ultimately condemned for within the text is also what makes her appealing: her transgression of the categories of class, gender and sexuality”³⁵. Finally and most importantly, Rebecca exists in the novel always as the young narrator’s double: as explained in Chapter 2.3, the *doppelgänger* is a feature typical of Gothic fiction.

³⁴ Ibid, p.110.

³⁵ J. Harbord, “Between Identification and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*”, *Feminist Review*, 1996, p.102.

4.2 – MRS DE WINTER

Mrs de Winter is the actual protagonist of the novel and, simultaneously, the narrator of the events. With Rebecca, these two female figures reflect different aspects of du Maurier's own complex personality: the girl is shy and socially awkward, while Rebecca represents Daphne's independent nature and her love for sailing. As before, the two characters are indeed the opposite of one another: whereas Rebecca is strongly connoted by her sexuality, Mrs de Winter is utterly naïve in this sense. The young narrator is associated to the East Wing of Manderley and, consequently, to the rose garden, which, for Maxim, is connected to a domesticated maternal identity and contrasts vividly with Rebecca's bloodred rhododendrons.

Moreover, although Rebecca might not have a voice inside the novel, she possesses a name which is ever-present in the form of her handwriting. The power of her name becomes even more relevant when the reader realises that the real protagonist of the novel is never given one: hints are given that it is "very lovely and unusual"(24), but the name itself is never mentioned directly. Curiously, in Hitchcock's film adaptation the girl maintains her anonymity while, in the original script, her character was given the temporary name of "Daphne".

The lack of a name is symptomatic of the girl's lack of identity: hers is indeed a situational and relative identity, always depending on

external factors like her job for Mrs Van Hopper or her marriage with Maxim; on the contrary, Rebecca is, through the narrator's eyes, the perfect example of female identity, self-making and self-authenticating. It should not surprise the reader, then, that the girl begins a process of identification with her predecessor, who impersonates everything the narrator is not: sophisticated, older and more knowing, especially from a sexual point of view.

As a matter of fact, Mrs de Winter is characterised by a sexual naivety throughout the novel: her childish knowledge of sex is what makes her feel at once attracted to and afraid of the figure of the first Mrs de Winter. Thus, the girl unconsciously starts to double Rebecca, following her routine, wearing her mackintosh and walking with her dogs. Mrs Danvers plays a crucial role in this process which will be better discussed in paragraph 4.5.

The turning point is the Manderley Ball. When Maxim suggests that his wife should dress up as Alice in Wonderland because of her childish look, Mrs de Winter eventually chooses, following Mrs Danvers' advice, to embody Mrs Caroline de Winter, a sister of her husband's great-great grandfather: she does not know, however, that Rebecca wore the same white dress during her last party at the mansion. This is the climax of the whole narration: the young girl finally brings Rebecca back to life and reduplicates her; however, instead of gaining

legitimacy, the narrator erases her identity to become a living simulacrum of Rebecca, so much that she can not even recognise herself at the mirror:

“I did not recognize the face that stared at me in the glass. The eyes were larger surely, the mouth narrower, the skin white and clear? The curls stood away from the head in a little cloud. I watched this self that was not me at all and then smiled; a new, slow smile.”(211)

The novel ends with a dream which not only gives circularity to the narration, but also represents the conclusion of the girl’s process of identification with Rebecca. It begins indeed with the narrator writing invitations at the morning-room desk; she realises, however, that the letters are not written in her small squared handwriting, rather in a “long and slanting” one. She moves then to the mirror and sees a face staring back at her: ““It was very pale, very lovely, framed in a cloud of dark hair. The eyes narrowed and smiled. The lips parted. The face in the glass stared back at me and laughed.” (379)

The girl is eventually seeing herself as Rebecca and, moreover, she is writing. This scene plays a crucial role in the narrative since it represents the moment in which the boundaries between the two identities are definitely blurred: the narrator has indeed internalised “whatever subversive and transgressive aspects she associates with

Rebecca's character"³⁶. For this reason, the dream ends with the image of Maxim brushing the narrator/Rebecca's hair and trying to strangle himself with them: "as he brushed it he wound it slowly into a thick rope. It twisted like a snake, and he took hold of it with both hands and smiled at Rebecca and put it round his neck." (379) It is Rebecca's definitive success over Maxim, having corrupted the narrator's innocence while Manderley is burning down in the background.

4.3 – MAXIM DE WINTER

Maxim de Winter is the male protagonist of the novel and, possibly, the only interesting male figure of the narration. His name first appears only at the end of Chapter 2, while before he is only referred to with a personal pronoun: when it appears, however, it is inevitably connected with Manderley. The first time the girl sees him, she is reminded of a "gentleman unknown", belonging to "a walled city of the fifteenth century, a city of narrow, cobbled streets, and thin spires, where the inhabitants wore pointed shoes and worsted hose" and whose "face was arresting, sensitive, medieval in some strange inexplicable way"(15).

³⁶ M. Kőrösi, "Disembodied Spirits' Revisiting Manderley: The Construction of Female Subjectivity in du Maurier's *Rebecca*", cit. p. 177.

For the nameless girl, Maxim's aristocratic allure is, therefore, something that belongs to a distant past made of "narrow stairways and dim dungeons, a past of whispers in the dark, of shimmering rapier blades, of silent, exquisite courtesy" (15), namely a Gothic past. Maxim might indeed be considered a typical Gothic villain, whose passions make him both fearsome and attractive at once; nevertheless, he is closer to his literary predecessor Mr Rochester in the sense that they belong "to a literary tradition which presents the patriarch as an ambivalent figure"³⁷. In Mr de Winter - and Mr Rochester too- the Gothic hero and the Gothic villain merge in a single figure: he is father and protector in the eyes of his wife, while he represents a villain when seen from Rebecca's perspective.

For some critics, Maxim's role in the narrative is to maintain the patriarchal system embodied by Manderley. For this reason, in his first appearance, Maxim's name is immediately followed by his condition of "owner of Manderley", as if his identity was strictly connected with his property. He marries Rebecca, a woman with "breeding, brains and beauty"(272), in order to find the perfect mistress for his house; nonetheless, after only five days of marriage,

³⁷ A. Llompart Pons, "Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villany and Gender in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*", *ATLANTIS - Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 2003, p.75.

Maxim discovers that his new wife is “incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency”(271), the opposite of an ideal wife.

As a matter of fact, Rebecca is incredibly good at performing a successful masquerade of domestic femininity, whereas she is in truth the antithesis of a virtuous wife: she makes a bargain with Maxim, promising him to run Manderley in a flawless way and to make it “the most famous show-place in all the country” (273). For the love of Manderley – and to avoid scandal – Maxim has to accept and Rebecca, indeed, proves to be the perfect mistress of the place. However, Rebecca make a big mistakes when she challenges the fundamental logic of the house, the logic of primogeniture:

“If I had a child, Max,’ she said, ‘neither you, nor anyone in the world, would ever prove that it was not yours. It would grow up here in Manderley, bearing your name. There would be nothing you could do. And when you died Manderley would be his. You could not prevent it. The property’s entailed. You would like an heir, wouldn’t you, for your beloved Manderley? You would enjoy it, wouldn’t you, seeing my son lying in his pram under the chestnut tree, playing leap-frog on the lawn, catching butterflies in the Happy Valley? It would give you the biggest thrill of your life, wouldn’t it, Max, to watch my son grow bigger day by day, and to know that when you died, all this would be his?”(279)

Rebecca's deviancy is thus taunting Manderley's patriarchal system and Maxim can not bear it. Moreover, with the narrator's own failure to fall pregnant, this threat is also suggesting that Maxim is impotent: not casually, his last name, de Winter, indicates a cold, sterile and unfruitful season. Accordingly, Rebecca represents an external force that challenges patriarchal order and, moreover, heterosexuality with her polymorphous, vampiric sexuality; therefore, Maxim is almost forced to kill her and eventually blames her for his crime.

Having annihilated this uncontrolled and unreproductive female sexuality, the owner of Manderley can finally think about finding another perfect wife and mistress. The decision of marrying the young narrator is indeed meaningful: Maxim is looking for someone who is utterly the opposite to Rebecca and, most importantly, who does not possess his first wife's sort of "knowledge". As Horner and Zlosnik put it, "Woman, for Maxim, is the Other necessary for the construction of the masculine self; moreover, she is an Other who has two faces: that of demon and that of angel"³⁸: Rebecca's sexual experience assigns her to the "evil side", while the narrator's childish purity makes her part of the "angels".

³⁸ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p.105

For this reason, Maxim desperately tries to keep his new wife away from *that* knowledge. This desire reflects itself in his father-like behaviour with the narrator: whenever she express the wish to become older and more sophisticated, to be “a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls”(37), Maxim pats her head just as he does with the dog’s, and comments: “It’s a pity you have to grow up”(53). This protective manner is nowhere more evident than in the Manderley Ball episode when Maxim suggests his wife that she should dress up like Alice in Wonderland.

Keeping his wife innocent, however, proves to be a useless effort and, just as soon as Maxim reveals his secret, things change abruptly: the relationship between Maxim and the narrator evolves and husband and wife eventually relate to each other as adult sexual beings, kissing passionately for the first time. Moreover, in this moment of epiphany the previous roles are reversed and it is Maxim, now, who acts like a child depending on his wife. The narrator finds a new confidence, finally feeling an adult: “I’ve grown up, Maxim, in twenty-four hours. I’ll never be a child again”(264).

In the end, unlike the original tale, it is not the young protagonist who has to be rescued, but Bluebeard himself: this is due to the fact that Maxim plays the role of protector of the values and conventions of a patriarchal masculinity which, however, is fast

disappearing at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Moreover, when the patriarchal system of Manderley is eventually annihilated, Maxim ends up losing also his identity: for this reason, at the beginning of the novel, during their forced exile, Mr de Winter and his wife have become ghostly, anonymous figures, continuously looking back to a past which is long gone:

“Sometimes old copies of the Field come my way, and I am transported from this indifferent island to the realities of an English spring. I read of chalk streams, of the mayfly, of sorrel growing in green meadows, of rooks circling above the woods as they used to do at Manderley. The smell of wet earth comes to me from those thumbed and tattered pages, the sour tang of moorland peat, the feel of soggy moss spattered white in places by a heron’s droppings.”(6)

CHAPTER 5 – SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Whereas the three protagonists of *Rebecca*, Maxim and the two Mrs de Winter, are incredibly well identified, in du Maurier's novel the secondary characters appear only occasionally and the sole function of most of them is to create in the narrator and the reader's mind an idealised image of Rebecca. Using the words of Chatman, who draws from E. M. Forster's distinction between "round" and "flat" characters, du Maurier's minor characters could be described as "flat characters", since their "behaviour [...] is highly predictable" and, therefore have "a clear direction"³⁹.

For this reason, when the reader finds the name of Beatrice or Giles or Frank Crawley on the page, it is clear that they appear just to "instruct" the narrator about the first Mrs de Winter: in a way, they all function as the umpteenth semiotic substitute of Rebecca's presence. Nonetheless, when talking about Mrs Danvers things change since she is the only secondary character who actually possesses an agent role in the narration. Moreover, although Manderley is, strictly speaking, part of the setting, some critics have argued that the mansion could be integrated in the category of "characters", in the

³⁹ S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, cit. p.132.

view of the fact that its presence is dominant in the novel. These two figures will be better analysed in the following paragraphs, with a special focus on their role inside the novel.

5.1 - MRS DANVERS

In a note to Antonia Fraser's *Rebecca's Story*, du Maurier writes that "Mrs Danvers [was] the sinister black-robed housekeeper, that I once glimpsed on the steps of somebody's house"⁴⁰. As a matter of fact, the author's imagination was spurred when she met Mrs Parker, the housekeeper of Milton Hall: this house was property of some family friends, the Fitzwilliams, who had invited du Maurier's mother and sisters for a short stay in September 1917. Milton Hall impressed itself on the young Daphne's memory so much that it became the major inspiration for *Manderley*; on the other hand, Mrs Parker's reminiscence of a "thin woman in a black dress" whose "face is scarily white"⁴¹ is embodied in the character of Mrs Danvers: "Someone advanced from the sea of faces, someone tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull's face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton's frame." (66)

⁴⁰ D. du Maurier in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, Helen Taylor (ed.), cit. p.100.

⁴¹ T. de Rosnay, *Daphne*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2016, p.41.

This description, the first which can be found in the narrative, gives the reader the idea of a sinister character, although she is also described as a highly efficient housekeeper without whom Manderley would not have survived to Rebecca's death. Mrs Danvers is, indeed, always portrayed with Gothic features, with much reference to her resemblance with a skeleton: in their first encounter, when the narrator touches the hand of the housekeeper, this one is described as "limp and heavy, deathly cold, and it lay in mine like a lifeless thing". (67)

In truth, Mrs Danvers' characterisation is representative of her liminality: because of her "skull face" and "hollow eyes", so frequently emphasised, she could be considered as a "Life-in-Death" figure or a revenant and, therefore, a character which performs in-between the border of this world and the other; moreover, in the world of a turn-of-the-century English aristocratic country house, the housekeeper was a key figure since it lived between the social spheres of the 'upstairs' and the 'downstairs', halfway between aristocrats and servants.

Mrs Danvers is, therefore, the keeper of the keys, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense: she is able to unlock every room of Manderley and, thus, she represents the guardian of the knowledge kept inside those rooms. Locks and keys are indeed quite

frequent in the narration. This is due to the fact that (sexual) knowledge is always out of reach for the young protagonist and Maxim tries in every way to put barriers in his wife path to this sort of knowledge, in order to avoid the corruption of the patriarchal system of Manderley⁴².

Exactly like Maxim, Mrs Danvers plays a key role in the narrator's quest for knowledge: whereas Mr de Winter tries to keep his new wife as much naïve as he can, Mrs Danvers, being the owner of the keys, is able to open the doors which lead to the "knowledge", ultimately represented by Rebecca, consequently acting in the opposite direction of Maxim. Indeed, it is Mrs Danvers who somehow orchestrates the identification of the narrator with her double: the narrator finds herself always compared to her predecessor and this situation almost threatens her love relationship.

On the one hand, Mrs Danvers is actually trying to sabotage Mr de Winter's new marriage: her love for Rebecca was too strong to be forgotten and she is not able to bear the intrusion of someone else in her mistress' property. On the other hand, however, Mrs Danvers tries to shape the new come into Rebecca's double, thus drawing the narrator into an identification with the late Mrs de Winter: the climax of this process is, indeed, the Manderley Costume Ball. Mrs

⁴² See Chapter 4.3.

Danvers manipulates the entire scene, subtly inducing the protagonist to dress exactly like Rebecca, and consequently acts as the destructive catalyst of the narrative:

“Then I saw that the door leading to the west wing was open wide, and that someone was standing there. It was Mrs Danvers. I shall never forget the expression on her face, loathsome, triumphant. The face of an exulting devil. She stood there, smiling at me.” (214)

Mrs Danvers can ultimately be summarised as the character whose first role is to bring Rebecca back to life or, at least, to keep her memory alive. As a matter of fact, the first Mrs de Winter’s powerful presence inside the walls of Manderley after her death is largely due to Mrs Danvers’ fetishistic preoccupation with her possessions: she is trying almost maniacally to maintain her mistress’ physical sphere of existence untouched, in order to feel less her absence. Therefore, the house is filled with the flowers Rebecca loved, her writing-table is left as it used to be organised and the routine of the house is the same as it was before the tragedy.

Nonetheless, it is in Rebecca’s bedroom that Mrs Danvers’ fetishism becomes almost sinister. When curiosity –and the housekeeper’s subtle machinations– lead the new Mrs de Winter inside the West wing, she finds herself in a beautiful bedroom,

perfectly kept and full of fresh flowers. Here, Mrs Danvers, who arrives noiselessly from behind, starts displaying Rebecca's stuff to the narrator, affirming that she has kept everything as it was before:

"That was her bed. It's a beautiful bed, isn't it? I keep the golden coverlet on it always, it was her favourite. Here is her nightdress inside the case. You've been touching it, haven't you? This was the nightdress she was wearing for the last time, before she died. Would you like to touch it again?" She took the nightdress from the case and held it before me. "Feel it, hold it," she said, "how soft and light it is, isn't it? I haven't washed it since she wore it for the last time. I put it out like this, and the dressing gown and slippers, just as I put them out for her the night she never came back, the night she was drowned." (168)

This episode has been analysed many times by critics since it is considered one of the most controversial. Following a Freudian-psychoanalytic approach, for instance, the displaying of the master bedroom could be read as the effective displaying of what Freud referred to as the "primal scene", namely the forbidden sight of parents copulating, which is the episode that initiates the Oedipal phase⁴³. More commonly, this episode has been frequently taken into consideration because of the quasi-erotic features it contains.

⁴³ N. J. Watson, "Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*", in *The Popular and the Canonical: Debating Twentieth Century Literature 1940-2000*, David Johnson (ed.), cit. p.29.

As a matter of fact, many critics have explored the possible lesbian sightings in *Rebecca*. The relationship between the housekeeper and her mistress is indeed quite curious: they have known each other for almost an entire life, Mrs Danvers being Rebecca's precious confidant to whom she apparently shared every private detail. Mrs Danvers' devotion, however, sometimes sounds a bit weird and her obsession with her mistress' stuff seems even more controversial. Moreover, the character's name itself reveals some strangeness: firstly, the housekeeper is called "Mrs", although there is no reference to a possible wedding of her; secondly, Rebecca used to address to her with the nickname "Danny", which is in itself quite androgynous.

In literary criticism, there are a number of theories about the role of this lesbian sightings in the novel, many of which take into consideration du Maurier's own confused sexual identity⁴⁴. In his screen adaptation, Alfred Hitchcock exploited these interpretations in a clever way, also strengthening them. However, it should be remembered that Mrs Danvers' relationship with her mistress is full of devotion and, therefore, it must be taken into consideration also the fact that the housekeeper is processing her grief for the loss of

⁴⁴ See, for instance, N. Hallett, "Did Mrs Danvers Warm Rebecca's Pearls? Significant Exchange and The Extension of Lesbian Space and Time in Literature", *Feminist Review*, 2003, pp. 43-48.

such an important person. This could be a reason for her obsession with objects and her difficulty in accepting a new mistress.

5.2 - MANDERLEY

Rebecca could be briefly described as the story of two women, one man and a house: when approaching the novel for its film adaptation, Hitchcock observed that among these characters, Manderley, the house, is the dominant presence. For this reason, it would be too reductive to simply confine the house inside the label of “setting”: having an important role in the narration, Manderley can be considered, with all respects, a protagonist of the novel. As a matter of fact, it might be interesting to notice that of the four characters quoted above, one is completely absent and another one is, strictly speaking, part of the setting.

Nevertheless, the important role of Manderley is established since the first line of the novel. “Manderley” is indeed the first name which appears in the narrative; moreover, only in the first chapter, it is repeated no fewer than seven times. This helps strengthening the idea of an imposing presence in the life of its inhabitants: Maxim’s own life and identity, for instance, are utterly dependent on Manderley. Therefore, the frequency of the repetition underscores

the importance which is accorded to Manderley, a name which will be repeated more than two hundred times in the text.

Exactly like it happens for Mrs Danvers, the inspiration for the house comes from du Maurier's childhood. Two are the main sources: Menabilly and Milton Hall. The former was, literally, Daphne's favourite place on Earth; she had discovered it when she was just a child and had fallen in love with it. Curiously, in *Rebecca*, the protagonist's first sight of Manderley goes back to her childhood memories of a postcard she had bought in a shop (23); this parallelisms between du Maurier's and her narrator increases the sense of love and amazement that the author felt about Menabilly.

The external aspect of Manderley, therefore, was inspired by the house that du Maurier inhabited for almost thirty years with her family. On the contrary, for the interiors, Daphne relied on the memories about her short stay at Milton Hall in 1917. The long gallery full of portraits, the majestic staircase and all the servants in uniform: all these elements will come back in the author's mind when she will start describing her Manderley:

"I can see the great stone hall, the wide doors open to the library, the Peter Lelys and the Vandykes on the walls, the exquisite staircase leading to the minstrels' gallery, and there, ranged one behind the other in the hall, overflowing to the

stone passages beyond, and to the dining room, a sea of faces, open-mouthed and curious, gazing at me as though they were the watching crowd about the block.” (66)

Along with her childhood memories, what inspired du Maurier in creating *Manderley* was, more generally, her beloved Cornwall. As a matter of fact, the text avoids being specific about geographical and time setting; however, the landscape is easily recognisable. Cornwall was du Maurier’s home and favourite getaway: she felt that the wild, ungovernable landscape would be hospitable for writing, exactly as the Yorkshire moors had been to the Brontë sisters. For this reason, many of du Maurier’s popular novels were set in Cornwall, including *Rebecca*: nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that it was mostly written when Daphne was quite far from her beloved home.

The novel’s geographical vagueness could also have been a deliberate choice of the author, who is probably trying to create a “dream” setting. As a matter of fact, *Manderley* could be considered a dream place, where there are plenty of references to fairy-tales and myths. The most eloquent one is indeed the Happy Valley: “on either side of the narrow path stood azaleas and rhododendrons, not blood-colored like the giants in the drive, but salmon, white, and gold, things of beauty and of grace, drooping their lovely, delicate heads in the soft summer rain.” (108) The narrator perceives this place as

magical, able to cast a spell on whoever crosses it, but it is also connected to the legend of Tristan and Iseult, who were discovered asleep in “the Happy Valley, a sort of paradise for lovers”⁴⁵.

On the one hand, Manderley appears as “a dream place, space wherein fantasies can be fulfilled and the object of desire achieved”⁴⁶; on the other hand, however, the house is also characterised as a nightmare place, full of secrets and inhospitable. Thus, the description of the long, twisting drive with which the narrator opens her narrative makes Manderley appear as sinister, gloomy and full of Gothic references:

“The drive was a ribbon now, a thread of its former self, with gravel surface gone, and choked with grass and moss. The trees had thrown out low branches, making an impediment to progress; the gnarled roots looked like skeleton claws. Scattered here and again among this jungle growth I would recognize shrubs that had been landmarks in our time, things of culture and grace, hydrangeas whose blue heads had been famous. No hand had checked their progress, and they had gone native now, rearing to monster height without a bloom, black and ugly as the nameless parasites that grew beside them.”(2)

⁴⁵ A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, cit. p. 101.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.102

Manderley's ruined look in this first description is connected to its role in the novel: the house indeed represents a patriarchal, aristocratic system which is being swept away at the turn of the twentieth century in England. Manderley is the personification of Maxim's role in the society which, however, will not survive long. In this respect, the choice of the name for this fictitious mansion is quite eloquent: Man-derley insists in the fact that women are automatically excluded from possessing the house and, therefore, that the social system which it represents is a patriarchal one⁴⁷.

Nonetheless, Manderley also play a second, important role in the novel: the house is itself a representation of its former mistress, Rebecca. Due to Mrs Danvers' obsession for her beloved Mrs de Winter, the mansion has maintained the same appearance which it used to have before the tragedy which has struck its inhabitants. Therefore, Manderley too has become expression of the absence/presence of Rebecca, bearing in its rooms, gardens and routine the footprints of its first mistress: "It's not only this room," she said. "It's in many rooms in the house. In the morning room, in the hall, even in the little flower room. I feel her everywhere."(172)

⁴⁷ N. J. Watson, "Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*", in *The Popular and the Canonical: Debating Twentieth Century Literature 1940-2000*, David Johnson (ed.), cit. p. 19.

CHAPTER 6 – THE NOVEL'S AFTERLIFE: SEQUELS AND ADAPTATIONS

When she started writing *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier had already published four novels: *The Loving Spirit* (1931), *I'll Never Be Young Again* (1932), *The Progress of Julius* (1933) and *Jamaica Inn* (1936). However, none of these had the same overwhelming impact as her fifth one, *Rebecca*. The first person reading it was a young editor, Norman Collins, who devoured it in two days and then passed it enthusiastically to Victor Gollancz, du Maurier's publisher. A first print run of twenty thousands copies was set straightaway, but in less than a month, the novel had already been reprinted for a second time and sold forty thousand copies⁴⁸.

The press reaction was ferocious: the *Times*, for instance, declared that "there is nothing in this book beyond the novelette" and the *Canadian Forum* labelled the heroine as "impossibly inept"⁴⁹. Despite this critical reception, according to the numbers *Rebecca* was an immediate commercial success: translations began to be published outside the UK and, by the end of the year, the American

⁴⁸ T. de Rosnay, *Daphne*, cit. p.193-194.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.195.

edition, published by Nelson Doubleday, sold two hundred thousand copies.

Like every popular novel, *Rebecca* started to become the object of adaptations as soon as its fame spread around the world. After only one year, the film rights were sold to the famous Hollywood producer David Selznick; at the same time, du Maurier was asked to adapt her own novel for the stage, while Orson Welles adapted the novel in his live CBS radio series, *The Campbell Playhouse*. *Rebecca* has continued to be read over the years and even after more than fifty years from its publication—and after du Maurier’s death—writers kept on confronting with the novel’s material: thus, Susan Hill’s *Mrs De Winter* (1993) and Sally Beauman’s *Rebecca’s Tale* (2001) represent two possible sequels to *Rebecca*.

Finally, the novel has been adapted for the screen several times, even for a couple of Bollywood films, although the most successful attempt was, of course, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 masterpiece, which will be discussed in the following chapters. For television, both BBC and Carlton Television produced a miniseries based on the novel in 1979 and 1997; more interestingly, in April 2008 the RAI aired an Italian adaptation of *Rebecca* which possessed some remarkable features.

6.1 – 1940 STAGE ADAPTATION

Only one year after the publication of *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier was asked to adapt her own novel for the stage. The author was going through a quite difficult period, the World War II having just broken out and Daphne being worried for her soldier husband; moreover, she did not have any idea for a new book and wished to enjoy a little longer the atmosphere of *Manderley*. Thus, adapting her novel for the stage proved to be a stimulating challenge.

Because of the fragile political situation, and because of the impossibility of maintaining the novel's original descriptive atmosphere, du Maurier was forced to make some changes in her own work and consequently decided, along with the director George Devine and the set designer Roger Furse, to concentrate on another important aspect of the novel, its Englishness: this decision turned out successful, since in war times the public was eager for images of a disappearing English heritage which *Manderley* and the de Winter family perfectly embodied.

For this reason, this stage adaptation was an immediate triumph: it premiered at the Queen's Theatre in March 1940, starring Owen Nares as Maxim, Celia Johnson as Mrs de Winter and Margaret Rutherford in the role of Mrs Danvers; during the 1940s, the play had 380 performances only in the West End, as well as touring

productions around the country. On a review of the representation, it can be read that “apart from an unnecessary clap of thunder [...] both production and performance were virtually flawless” with a “fresh and pointed” dialogue⁵⁰.

Notwithstanding this incredible reception, Du Maurier’s stage adaptation could arguably be considered unfaithful to her own novel: “whilst the original story was a way of representing difficult subjects such as fractured identity, dangerous sexuality, and the decline of the aristocratic house, the focus here is on its opposite: the importance of unity, stability and the defeat of threatening forces”⁵¹. Therefore, the dramatic conclusion of the novel is here substituted with a happier ending, where Maxim and his wife, having finally vanquished Mrs Danvers and Rebecca’s power, can eventually return to live in their home instead of leaving it. This more conventional conclusion was undoubtedly useful to reassure the public –and Daphne herself– who was living in a time of political instability.

6.2 – (UN)NECESSARY SEQUELS

The public’s fascination with *Rebecca* only increased with the

⁵⁰ D. Verschoyle, “*Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier at the Queen’s Theatre”, *The Spectator*, 12 April 1940.

⁵¹ R. D’Monté, “Origin and Ownership: Stage, Film and Television Adaptations of Daphne du Maurier’s ‘*Rebecca*’”, in *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*, R. Carroll (ed.), Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2009, p. 164.

time, and, thanks to the novel's ability to leave some of the narrative doors open, it inspired several explanatory revisions and spin-offs, which attempted to resolve the original text's ambiguities and, perhaps, also concluded the story with the expected romance ending. Despite the numerous requests, du Maurier never wrote a sequel to her novel, nor she liked the idea of continuing it or explaining some of her creative choices.

It is probably for this reason that the first sequel of *Rebecca* was published four years after du Maurier's death: Susan Hill's *Mrs de Winter* first appeared in 1993, explicitly advertised on its cover as "the sequel to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*". In those years, Susan Hill was a quite famous author; she was often associated with Gothic fiction because of her novel *The Woman In Black* (1983), a typical ghost story dealing with children disappearance. She was also very fond of du Maurier's work and style and, therefore, decided to attempt writing a sequel to *Rebecca*, experimenting with what would happen if the de Winters tried to go back to Manderley.

The story is set about ten years after Rebecca's death and the narration is still a first-person retrospection. Back for Beatrice's funeral, Maxim and his wife eventually settle again in England, after more than ten years in exile. Their lives, however, are still haunted by Rebecca's ghost and, consequently, by Mrs Danvers and Jack

Favell. Mrs de Winter is rendered childless by the stress, while, during a garden party, Jack threatens Maxim with an envelope full of evidence about his crime. The guilt and the remorse are, therefore, unbearable and Maxim finally commits suicide near the ruins of his beloved Manderley.

Although based on a thorough philological reading of du Maurier's work, readers were not enthusiastic about Susan Hill's novel, feeling that "the peace of Manderley [...] should never have been disturbed" and that "Susan Hill [has declined] to trust her own imagination, and just fiddles impotently with Du Maurier's grand inventions"⁵². Nevertheless, this novel was essential for the creation of *Rebecca's* second sequel, Sally Beaman's *Rebecca's Tale*, published almost ten years later in 2001 and officially approved by the du Maurier estate.

Rebecca's Tale is set twenty years after its parent novel, specifically in the summer of 1951 in Kilmarth, and begins with the same impact line: "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again". The novel's structure is divided into four sections, each of them with a different first-person narrator: the first part is told from the point of view of a septuagenarian Colonel Julyan, who has retired to a quiet

⁵² N. Walter, "Book Review: Dreaming of Manderley Again, Susan Hill's sequel to *Rebecca*", *The Independent*, 8 October 1993.

life at home and whose only wish is to see his only daughter, Ellie, married and settled. On the twentieth anniversary of Rebecca's death, however, the magistrate receives a notebook on which is written no more than "Rebecca's tale", therefore deciding to reopen the investigations on the woman's death.

Terence Gray, a young historian and one of the candidates for Ellie's hand, is the narrator of the second part of the story. This character, originally created by Beauman, is also searching for the truth about Rebecca, to whom he seems to be linked in a mysterious way. In the third section of the book, Rebecca is finally given a voice, through a journal written shortly before her death for her unborn child, in which she describes her traumatic childhood as well as the real relationship with Maxim de Winter. Eventually, the last voice of the novel is Ellie's: the story of Rebecca inspires her to reject the possibility of marrying and living a peaceful country life in order to pursue her own dreams and ambitions.

Rebecca's Tale shows some remarkable qualities which allowed it to achieve a better reception than Susan Hill's previous novel: firstly, Beauman's work not only comprehends *Rebecca*, but also du Maurier's *The Rebecca Notebook*, Hitchcock's film and Hill's *Mrs de Winter* too; thus, *Rebecca's Tale* becomes a novel which is scrupulously built by incorporating and merging all these intertext,

as if to suggest that du Maurier's story has become too popular to be tied only to the original text. For instance, Maxim's death in a mysterious car accident at Manderley was first hinted by du Maurier herself in her original epilogue and consequently re-elaborated by Hill in her novel: in *Rebecca's Tale*, this episode becomes history.

Nevertheless, Beauman carefully takes into account the possibility that her audience might not be familiar with all these previous texts and, therefore, builds up an independent novel, summarising all the events, so much that the text could be read alone. Furthermore, *Rebecca's Tale* eventually gives a voice to du Maurier's absent/present protagonist: Rebecca, then, is no longer described as a mean, vicious woman; her childhood stories of rape and abandonment give her back a sort of dignity and make her "emerge as a kind of self-willed feminist hero and a vengeful dark angel"⁵³.

Compared to Susan Hill's *Mrs de Winter*, Beauman's novel can be considered more like a revision rather than a sequel: indeed, she has often been criticised for her revisionist interpretations of the original characters, especially of Rebecca, which du Maurier herself

⁵³ "Book Review: Manderley Again", *The Telegraph*, 29 September 2001.

described as “an enigma and intended to be such”⁵⁴. Nonetheless, *Rebecca’s Tale* has been approved by the du Maurier’s family as the “companion novel to *Rebecca*”⁵⁵, because it allows Rebecca to have her own voice for the first time. Hill’s and Beauman’s novels perfectly describe the enduring popularity of du Maurier’s original text, as well as its incredible power to stimulate its audience even after such a long time.

6.3 – TV ADAPTATIONS

In the UK, *Rebecca* was adapted as a television miniseries twice, in 1979 and 1997, by the BBC and by Carlton Television. While the first one was quite faithful and conventional, the second presented some interesting features: as a matter of fact, in this adaptation Rebecca actually appears, interpreted by the actress Lucy Cohu; moreover, the director chose to add a final epilogue set ten years later which shows Mrs de Winter and Maxim, left limping and scarred by the attempt of saving Mrs Danvers from the fire, living their childless lives abroad.

In Italy the Rai, the national public broadcasting company,

⁵⁴ D. du Maurier, “An Epilogue: An Afternote by Daphne du Maurier to Antonia Fraser’s ‘Rebecca’s Story’”, in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion*, H. Taylor (ed.), p.99.

⁵⁵ “*Mrs de Winter* by Susan Hill and *Rebecca’s Tale* by Sally Beauman”, inside the *Book Recommendations* section of Daphne du Maurier’s Official Website.

adapted du Maurier's novel in 2008, producing two episodes which were aired on the 7th and 8th of April. This production provides a hint about how popular *Rebecca* is, even outside its homeland: the Italian translation of the novel was indeed one of the firsts to be published in 1940, together with the French and German ones. Moreover, the effort of adapting du Maurier's text for the Italian audience implied several features which distance this new version from the original text.

The miniseries was directed by Riccardo Milani and starred Alessio Boni as Maxim, Cristiana Capotondi as the new Mrs de Winter and Mariangela Melato as Mrs Danvers. At that time, Capotondi was an emerging actress, famous for her leading roles in teen comedies such as *Night Before the Exams* (2006, *Notte Prima degli Esami*); on the contrary, Melato was an established figure in the theatrical environment, while Alessio Boni, already a well-known actor, had already confronted himself with Laurence Olivier when playing the role of Heathcliff in the adaptation of Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

In the Rai miniseries, the story differs quite strongly from du Maurier's text, the director having chosen to insert some original scenes – for instance, a passionate quarrel between Mrs Danvers and her new mistress. Also many details were changed: the young Mrs de Winter is no longer fond of sketching, but she writes short stories for

children, being also pretty good at it.

Unlike the BBC miniseries, however, in the Italian adaptation Rebecca only appears from behind in black and white flashbacks, which is, at least, a way to maintain the mystery around her. The most significant change is the naming of the protagonist: instead of keeping her anonymity, the new Mrs de Winter was given the name Jennifer; arguably, this decision proves itself fairly unhappy since it is neither an “unusual” nor a difficultly spelled name.

Curiously, although the setting still moved between Monte Carlo and Cornwall, the whole production was filmed in Trieste: thus, Manderely is translated into Miramare Castle, a beautiful nineteenth-century chateau on the Gulf of Trieste. The choice of the location is not casual: Miramare’s proximity to the Adriatic sea creates an ideological connection with Manderley, even if the atmosphere and colours might not be the same as in Cornwall. For these reasons, it could be argued that Miramare represents in some ways the perfect Italian version of du Maurier’s mansion.

For almost eighty years after its publication, *Rebecca* has been part of the popular culture, not only in the UK, but also around the rest of the world; it has also encouraged a number of writers and filming directors – both famous or not – to provide the long-awaited

happy ending, to redeem the characters or to simply tell their own version of the story. Undoubtedly, however, *Rebecca's* popularity was largely intensified by Alfred Hitchcock's screen adaptation, which received an enormously positive reception. The next chapters will better explain the reasons behind this immense success, along with the technical features of the film.

CHAPTER 7 - HITCHCOCK'S FILM ADAPTATION

Du Maurier's *Rebecca*'s enduring fame is undoubtedly indebted to its first film adaptation which came out in 1940 with a homonymous title. Produced by David O. Selznick, who had just become famous for his *Gone With the Wind* (1939), it featured British director Alfred Hitchcock in his first Hollywood project, and the first under contract with Selznick International Pictures. The main characters were portrayed on screen by Laurence Olivier, in the role of Maxim de Winter, Joan Fontaine as the nameless narrator, and Judith Anderson as the sinister Mrs Danvers.

The film was an immense success, acclaimed both by critics and audience and earning more than two million dollars in the US. It was also nominated for eleven Academy Awards, winning Best Picture and Cinematography: the three protagonists, Fontaine, Olivier and Anderson, were all nominated for their roles, along with Hitchcock himself and the screenwriters. Its popularity over the years was such that in 1951 *Rebecca* was chosen as opening film at the first Berlin International Film Festival, the "Berlinale", and Joan Fontaine participated as special guest to the event.

The creation of this adaptation, however, was not simple: the author herself played a crucial role in the project, although she refused to personally write the screenplay. This chapter will therefore focus on the process of production of the film, analysing the delicate issue of paternity, contended between director and producer, together with the censorship problems encountered during the creation. Whether it should be considered a Hitchcock or a Selznick film, *Rebecca* (1940) is apparently the most faithful adaptation of du Maurier's novel and, for this reason, it has gained the status of "classic" in film history.

7.1 – PRODUCTION⁵⁶

When du Maurier's novel was first published in 1938, Alfred Hitchcock was still working on his adaptation of *Jamaica Inn*, while David Selznick's energies were all absorbed by the production of *Gone With the Wind*: both films came out the following year but, whereas the latter was a huge success winning ten Academy Awards, the former was quite criticised; du Maurier herself was profoundly shocked by Hitchcock's version of her historical novel, so much that

⁵⁶ Much of the information in the following paragraph is taken from Kyle Dawson Edwards' article "Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures' *Rebecca* (1940)", *Cinema Journal*, 2006, p.32-58.

she wrote to Gollancz: “Don’t go and see it, it is a wretched affair”⁵⁷. The author indeed disliked the director’s revision and complained about the lack of adherence with the original text.

In the same period, David O. Selznick was working hard to transpose Margaret Mitchell’ 1936 hugely popular novel on screen: the adaptation was going to be likewise successful, being the most expensive Hollywood film up to that year. At that time, the Selznick International Pictures (SIP) was an independent studio, lacking the distribution resources of its competitors; it had become famous during the 1930s for its on-screen adaptations of popular classics like *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936) and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1938): also Victor Fleming’s film was intended to be one of these accurate film transpositions of international bestsellers.

To alleviate Selznick’s responsibilities in case of failure, the studio decided to begin a safer and more economical production, for which was chosen the young British director Alfred Hitchcock. At first, Selznick’s project was to explore the tragedy of the *Titanic*: meanwhile, however, *Rebecca* had become quite popular in the US and the novel proved congruous with the studio’s adaptation format. Moreover, the points in common with *Gone With the Wind* were numerous, while the cast and budget were smaller.

⁵⁷ De Rosnay, T., *Daphne*, cit. p.198.

Eventually, Selznick was able to buy the rights for du Maurier's novel paying \$50,000, the same price he had paid for Mitchell's. Hitchcock immediately began to work with the project's four writers, Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison – for the screenplay – and Philip MacDonald and Micheal Hogan – for adaptation. With them, also Hitchcock's faithful wife and collaborator Alma Reville contributed on the first eighty-page long draft of the script, which was submitted to Selznick in June 1939.

The producer's response to it was a eight-page memo which offered a critical commentary on Hitchcock's "revision" of the novel. Selznick was indeed not pleased with the director's approach and believed that "the few million people who have read [*Rebecca*] and who worship it would very properly attack us violently for the descriptions which are indicated by the treatment"⁵⁸.

As a matter of fact, producer and director had different ideas about "adaptations": Hitchcock used to revise the original text almost completely, which sometimes culminated in the fact the final product could be considered a brand-new story; for example, years later, in 1963, the director came back to du Maurier to adapt one of her short stories, *The Birds*, but the film which he ultimately produced – and

⁵⁸ *Memo from David O. Selznick*, in K. D. Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature", cit. p. 34.

proved to be one of his most famous– has nothing in common with the original text, sharing only the title and concept of unexplained (and unexplainable) bird attacks.

On the contrary, Selznick had built his whole film studio's fortune around faithful transpositions of internationally famous bestsellers. In his opinion a successful film adaptation, should reproduce than interpret: not only story and structure, but also minor details are extremely important in order to replicate the sense of identification between reader and novel. Therefore,

“The only omissions from a successful work that are justified are omissions necessitated by length, censorship, or other practical considerations. Readers of a beloved book will forgive omissions if there is an obvious reason for them; but very properly they will not forgive substitutions”.⁵⁹

Selznick was always careful about the audience reception of his films and, moreover, he was conscious of what spectators looked for, which allowed him to create successful products.

The battle between director and producer continued even on casting decisions. Laurence Olivier was chosen to interpret Maxim de Winter since the role was similar to that of Heathcliff he had taken the year before. Problems arrived with women's roles: Olivier insisted that his wife, Vivien Leigh, should appear in the film, either

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.34.

as Rebecca or as the second Mrs de Winter. However, du Maurier had already asked Selznick to avoid bringing Rebecca on the screen and both producer and director agree that Leigh was too famous and beautiful for the narrator's part. Selznick's first choice was Olivia de Havilland, sister of Joan Fontaine, but she refused to test for the part. After dozens of actresses were auditioned, the debuting Fontaine eventually won the part.

7.2 – PROBLEMS OF CENSORSHIP

Problems in the production of *Rebecca* continued appearing: after having chosen the cast and established a budget of almost \$700,000 – less than a quarter of *Gone With the Wind's* – Selznick's and du Maurier's desire of a faithful adaptation was made more difficult by Joseph I. Breen, the head of the Motion Picture Association Production Code Administration (PCA). In 1934, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) had established the PCA to enforce the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, a list of moral guidelines determining what was acceptable to show in films. Each film had to be submitted to the PCA and get approved before being released.

The PCA, however, must not be confused with state censorship: as Rhona Bernstein explains, “whereas state agencies had the power

to excise sections of film and, in extreme cases, ban them altogether, the PCA [...] was engaged in ongoing negotiations with producers and studio”⁶⁰. Thus, it can be considered more like a constructive force, which helped shaping the film and also participated to the writing process; moreover, not all the objections from the PCA were to be followed strictly, as it happened in the production of *Rebecca*.

When Selznick submitted the new screenplay to the Administration, Joseph Breen wrote him a four-page letter stating that “the material [...] is definitely and specifically in violation of the Production Code”. Nonetheless, the objections made were only three: firstly, “it is a story of a murderer, who is permitted to go off ‘scot-free’”; secondly, there were too many “inferences of sex perversion”; and, lastly, there were “repeated references [...] to the alleged illicit relationship between Favell and the first Mrs de Winter, and [...] to the illegitimate child-to-be”⁶¹.

Eventually, two of these controversial points were not changed: the relationship between Rebecca and her cousin Jack remained explicit and the references to her illegitimate pregnancy were preserved; in the same way, the “inferences of sex perversion” which referred to the alleged lesbian relationship between Rebecca and her

⁶⁰ R. J. Berenstein, “Adaptation, Censorship, and Audiences of Questionable Type: Lesbian Sightings in *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Uninvited* (1944)”, *Cinema Journal*, 1998, p. 18-19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

housekeeper were not concealed, but rather made more overt in the film than in the novel, especially in the scene in which Mrs Danvers displays Rebecca's bedroom and underwear to the new Mrs de Winter.

What could not remain unchanged was the possibility of a murderer left unpunished: Breen's solution was that Rebecca's death should become a result of a fall during her confrontation with her husband, thus transforming it in an accident. At first, Selznick deplored this suggestion, considering the murdering of the wife as the core of the novel. However, he had no choice but to accept: Robert E. Sherwood's proposal of shifting Maxim's confession to the seaside cottage, and Hitchcock's camera following the absent Rebecca's movement ultimately created a scene which works perfectly well on the screen.

Nonetheless, with this change, du Maurier's hope of seeing her novel faithfully transposed vanished: although the scene is actually one of the most impressive of the film and captures brilliantly the sense of presence/absence which accompanies the character of the first Mrs de Winter throughout the narrative, this change in the plot utterly eliminates the cautionary element of the original text. As a matter of fact, Maxim, being a murderer, is never "permitted to go off 'scot-free'": he is condemned to live an exile and a dull, childless

marital life, after having lost his beloved Manderley – a completely different ending from the film’s final embrace.

7.3 – MARKETING AND DISTRIBUTION

Notwithstanding the PCA intercession, Selznick managed to produce a film which, from the story point of view, resulted quite faithful to du Maurier’s text, making only a few changes to the plot. Moreover, the producer brilliantly exploited the popularity of his *Gone With The Wind* to provide a successful promotional campaign for *Rebecca*: a survey carried out during the film’s opening weekend in April 1940 revealed that around 70 percent of viewers had chose the film because of their familiarity with Selznick’s production, while less than 10 percent claimed that the reason was Hitchcock’s direction; likewise, 60 percent of viewers declared they decided to attend because they had read or had some familiarity with du Maurier’s novel⁶².

It must be remembered that *Rebecca* premiered only four months after *Gone With the Wind*: the figures, therefore, are undoubtedly connected to the frenzy for Margaret Mitchell’s novel’s adaptation. Selznick himself exploited the points in common

⁶² “Survey of Patron of UA Theatre, San Francisco, CA, 31 March and 1 April 1940”, Selznick Collection, Folder 172 8, Harry Ransom Humanity Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin, cited by K. D. Edwards, “Brand-Name Literature”, cit. p. 44-45.

between the two texts and their relative films: both written by female authors in the 1930s, the two novels gained “a popular reputation as archetypal romantic woman’s classics” and shared some common features such as their “resonant, strong female characters, intense focus on home and family relationships and strong sense of place and roots”⁶³. Fire, from Atlanta to Manderley, is another element in common between the two texts.

Set, costumes and props from *Gone With the Wind* were recycled for the lower-budgeted *Rebecca*. The most significant connection between the two films is represented by Caroline de Winter’s dress, worn by the young narrator during the Manderley costume ball scene: as a matter of fact, the beautiful white lace dress was on loan from the prestigious wardrobe of Vivien Leigh and Olivia de Havilland. These small details on the screen allowed continuity between the two Selznick International Pictures’ films, helping also in advertising the films.

Being an independent studio, the Selznick International Pictures lacked the distributional resources of its competitors and, therefore, relied heavily on the quality of its adaptations and on the intensity of the marketing campaigns. The promotion of *Rebecca* is indeed symptomatic of this attitude: along with book tie-ups and

⁶³ H. Taylor, “*Rebecca’s Afterlife*”, *Daphne du Maurier Companion*, cit. p. 77.

new paperback editions of du Maurier's novel, the whole text was serialised in a fifty-day-full-length edition in major newspapers, so as to strengthen the popularity of the original material. At the same time, the merchandising campaign was even more impressive: a luxury furniture line and wallpaper patterns were launched, together with "Rebecca Luxury Wardrobe" and "Rebecca Makeup Kit", all products which, according to the producer, du Maurier's character would have bought.

The strong marketing, the ideal connection with the fortunate *Gone With The Wind* and the attention to faithfulness were all elements which allowed *Rebecca* to become an immense success when it was released, becoming the second-highest earning picture of the year – obviously following Victor Fleming's. Nonetheless, the final product, although perfectly enjoyable, quite distances itself from the original material from an ideological perspective, and in the whole process of creation some contributions went lost: Alfred Hitchcock's and du Maurier's voice were somehow silenced, while Selznick emerged as the real filmmaker.

CHAPTER 8 HITCHCOCK'S ADAPTATION AND CRITICAL POINTS

Since the 1940 on-screen adaptation of *Rebecca* was a huge commercial and critical success, it soon became the object of a thorough analysis by literary and film critics. This picture is indeed quite controversial, not only for what is actually showed, but rather for some mechanisms which intervened during its production. As it was pointed out in the chapter before, the making-of of this adaptation was not easy at all, with a small budget and censorship problems; eventually, the production had to reach a number of compromises, such as transforming the murder into an accident. The outcome is a picture which reflects the difficulties that appeared during its production.

The necessary changes in the plot distanced the film from the original text: however, also some of the cinematic features which were employed contributed to instil the doubt about the faithfulness of the adaptation. Moreover, although *Rebecca* (1940) has long been considered as belonging to the "women's film" genre, there are some elements which allowed critics like Alison Light and May Ann Doane to reconsider this classification. Along with the fidelity and the genre

instability, the paternity of the film has also often discussed: following Light's words, "it's not just that Hitchcock's *Rebecca* wasn't exactly Daphne du Maurier's; it wasn't entirely Hitchcock's either"⁶⁴. The disagreement between filmmaker and author, and between filmmaker and producer, resulted in a picture which is not fully Hitchcockian, although it contains some of the director's trademarks.

8.1 – A FAITHFUL ADAPTATION

When the script of *Rebecca* was submitted to the PCA, Joseph Breen insisted on the impossibility of showing on screen a murderer getting away with his crime and, therefore, Rebecca's death became accidental: Selznick's wish for a hundred percent faithful adaptation of du Maurier's text had to be revised. Nonetheless, the film diverges from the novel's narrative not only in portraying an innocent Mr de Winter, but also because two more scenes were annexed to the original plot, which are, indeed, both as fundamental as Maxim's exoneration from his crime; the film's ending is also crucial to establish its level of fidelity.

The picture begins exactly as the novel, with a voice-over quoting verbatim from du Maurier's famous monologue "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again" and a subjective camera following

⁶⁴ A. Light, "Rebecca", *Sight and Sound*, 1996, p.28.

the movements of Mrs de Winter along the drive. However, when the prologue ends, the scene shifts to the South of France with a view of a rocky cliff from where Maxim (Olivier) stares at the stormy sea. A cry interrupts his thoughts: Fontaine appears on the scene with her drawing material, sure that the stranger is going to jump from the cliff. The man reacts impolitely making the girl leave quite upset.

This scene has no correlative in du Maurier's novel, but, nonetheless, it is a reminder of the moment in which Maxim and the narrator go for a drive on the hills surrounding Monte Carlo until they reach a high precipice: this is the place where Rebecca confessed to Maxim her real nature, a few days after their wedding. Maxim feels so tormented by this memory that he almost falls into a trance and the girl grows anxious: "He had the face of one who walks in his sleep, and for a wild moment the idea came to me that perhaps he was not normal, not altogether sane"(29).

Another of Hitchcock's addition is the honeymoon home movie sequence: this scene follows the incident of the broken cupid, which also appears in the novel, where the girl accidentally knocks a porcelain cupid off the morning room's desk and hastily (and clumsily) hides its pieces in a drawer. Successively, Fontaine's character appear on the scene wearing a black, fashionable dress while Olivier asks her to join him in watching the movies made

during their honeymoon. They seem to be enjoying a perfect moment of familiarity and affection, watching themselves on a screen in a purely metacinematic situation. The idyll is broken when Mrs Danvers enters the room, bringing out all the awkwardness and inadequacy of the narrator.

The ending of the film, although faithful from the point of view of the events, perfectly encloses the elements which distance the novel from its adaptation. In du Maurier's text Mrs Danvers is said to have "gone, disappeared" (374) and there is no certainty that she was responsible for Manderley's fire: in the film, however, she is undoubtedly guilty. The last scenes show her walking over a sleeping Mrs de Winter with a candle on her hand and, later, walking around the flames, while husband and wife, finally together, hug themselves and kiss like real lovers.

Mrs Danvers thus becomes no more than a "madwoman in the attic", attempting to kill the new Mrs de Winter and destroying Manderley rather than seeing the couple living happily there (as Fontaine's character points out); the burning of Manderley is turned into a vindictive act rather than the punishment for an ominous crime, a murder. Eventually, the picture might follow the storyline, quote verbatim from the text and represent a number of images taken directly from the source, such as Mrs Van Hopper "mashing her

cigarette in a jar of cleansing cream” (35): nonetheless, because of its small changes and additions, “however faithful to du Maurier’s novel the film might be in characterisation, dialogue and scenic details, [...] it is fundamentally and radically different in narrative event and thematic implication”, failing to capture the “implications of retributive justice central to the novel”⁶⁵.

8.2 – A WOMAN’S FILM?

While discussing with François Truffaut years after *Rebecca*, Hitchcock declared “there was a whole school of feminine literature at that time”⁶⁶ to which his film was strongly related and which disturbed him during the production; he was probably conflating the concept of romance novel with a quite popular film genre which developed around the second World War years, the woman’s film. These were “pictures built from the subjective point of view of a female protagonist”⁶⁷ which aimed mainly to a female audience: Selznick was indeed very conscious about this phenomenon since he addressed the whole marketing campaign for *Rebecca* – and *Gone With the Wind* – to women.

⁶⁵ D. Boyd, “The Trouble with *Rebecca*”, in *Hitchcock at the Source: The Author as Adaptor*, R. Barton Palmer (ed.), State University of New York Press, Albany NY, 2011, p. 123.

⁶⁶ A. Light, “*Rebecca*”, cit. p. 29.

⁶⁷ E. Parrondo Coppel, “‘La mujer’ en el cine gótico: *Rebeca* (*Rebecca*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)”, *Secuencias*, , 2007, p.79. My translation.

Nonetheless, Hitchcock's film is also considered the first instance of the "female Gothic on screen", a genre which generated in Hollywood during the 1940s. These pictures used to borrow their stories from the classic Gothic novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), Mathew Lewis' *The Monk* (1798), and the Brontë sisters' *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* (1847). From these classics the films also borrowed a series of recurrent elements and narrative motifs like rough seas, wild landscapes, fire, fog, ghosts, a hunted mansion and creepy servants.⁶⁸

Eventually, *Rebecca* is also an instance of the generic subcategory of "Gothic romances", a number of pictures sharing the same narrative structure in which a woman marries an upper class man whom she fears to be a murderer. The protagonists of these films move to their husband's big house and feel dwarfed by their new social position: this feeling is often intensified by a reversal of the hierarchy of mistress and servant. Films of this genre are Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), *Gaslight* by George Cukor (1944) and *Secret Beyond the Door* by Fritz Lang (1948), the three of them showing a reversed situation, with a man marrying a richer woman; following *Rebecca's* path are *Dragonwyck* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz,

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.79-80.

1946), *Undercurrent* (Vincente Minnelli, 1946) and *Caught* (Max Ophuls, 1949).

All these classifications imply that *Rebecca* should be considered a “woman’s film”, starring a female protagonist and aimed to entertain a female audience: it is not surprising, then, that surveys of the film’s opening weekend report that three-quarters of the attendants were women⁶⁹. Nonetheless, feminist critics such as Alison Light and Mary Ann Doane do not agree with labelling *Rebecca* as a “woman’s film”; rather, they argue that, being this film genre ultimately produced by men, they fail in fully representing women’s subjectivity and hide a purely chauvinist attitude.

It is true, indeed, that *Rebecca* begins with a female voice: in the prologue, the voice-over of Fontaine’s character accompanies the viewer along the drive of Manderley, exactly as in du Maurier’s novel, and “the camera assumes the position of the ‘I’ [...] in a sustained subjective moment”⁷⁰. The problem is that this female gaze successively disappears totally from the picture. The only other moment in which a feminine ‘I’ appears in the film is during the cottage scene, when Maxim, confessing, quotes directly Rebecca’s words using the first person pronoun: interestingly, however, the

⁶⁹ K. D. Edwards, “Brand-Name Literature”, cit. p. 44.

⁷⁰ M. A. Doane, “*Caught* and *Rebecca*: the Inscription of Femininity as Absence”, in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, Sue Thornham (ed.), New York University Press, New York, 1999, p. 80.

camera, following the movements of the absent character, ends up in a close-up of Maxim's face, as if to state that the husband has ultimately appropriated and negated his dead wife's subjectivity⁷¹.

The point of view of the film is, therefore, a masculine point of view, culminating with the decision of "leaving the heroine literally behind as the men all go up to London to discover the truth about Rebecca"⁷². This change is not coherent with the original text, where the girl finally assumes a new confidence and becomes increasingly more similar to her predecessor. This adaptation eventually fails to deal with du Maurier's novel's foundation: the "female hostility toward man and marriage" was due to the fact that "at the heart of every marriage is crime"⁷³. Moreover, the film fails in representing the process of female identification and projection. For these reasons, it is not possible to easily classify *Rebecca* as a "woman's film": it is, indeed, a men's film for a female audience.

8.3 - THE TROUBLE WITH *REBECCA*

As it has already been said, the production of *Rebecca* was not at all easy because, from the very beginning, conflicts had erupted between author, filmmaker and producer: mainly, these conflicts

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷² A. Light, "Rebecca", cit. p.30.

⁷³ Ibid., p.30.

regarded textual ownership and the paternity of the film. As a matter of fact, it is not clear whether *Rebecca* should be considered a Hitchcock's or rather a Selznick's picture, considering that the producer interfered with every aspect of the making-of of the film, so much that the director eventually banned him from the set. Moreover, Hitchcock had to confront also with du Maurier's diffidence.

Firstly, it must be remembered that the director relied often on du Maurier's works during his career and even one of his most popular pictures, *The Birds* (1963), was actually an adaptation of one of the author's short stories. Moreover, he had become friends with Gerald du Maurier, Daphne's father, when working on *Lord Camber's Ladies* (1932), a drama film produced by Hitchcock starring du Maurier and Gertrude Lawrence: the filmmaker's relationship with the author was, therefore, both of love and hate.

Nonetheless, years later, during his conversations with Truffaut, Hitchcock made some impolite remarks about du Maurier's 1938 novel, stating that "it is a novelette really" and observing that "the story is old-fashioned" and "lacking in humour"⁷⁴, thus confirming *Rebecca's* hunting reputation of romantic novel. Selznick worked hard to maintain this "feminine angle" which annoyed

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.29.

Hitchcock so much and, for this reason, rejected the director's first script, which was considered "distorted and vulgarised"⁷⁵.

It is not surprising, then, that Hitchcock lately came to disown his own film, declaring to Truffaut that "it's not a Hitchcock's picture"⁷⁶. Selznick's heavy imprint can be easily detected from the very beginning of the film: the opening credits' first statement is "The Selznick Studio presents its production of Daphne du Maurier's celebrated novel", the producer's and author's names standing out clearly against the foggy background. To see Hitchcock's name on the screen, the viewer has to wait until the end of the credits, his being the last name to appear before the film actually begins. Also during the marketing campaign, *Rebecca* was advertised as "Selznick's adaptation": with these choices, Selznick definitely wanted to insist upon the importance of his role in the production of this adaptation, which he considered more influential than the director's popularity.

Nonetheless, Hitchcock's contribution should not be minimised: *Rebecca* might be an immature picture, but it provided the director with the possibility of dealing with some elements which were to become trademarks of his own production: in the words of Truffaut, it was "an important watershed in Hitchcock's career"

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.29.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.29.

which “spurred the director to devise some of his signature techniques”⁷⁷. Particularly, these key motifs are connected with the two protagonists, husband and wife, and the way they are represented on the screen.

For example, the character of Maxim can be considered an instance of a typical Hitchcockian motif, the falsely accused man, which appears in films such as *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Saboteur* (1942), *Spellbound* (1945), *To Catch a Thief* (1954) and *North by Northwest* (1959). Although Maxim’s innocence was a decision forced by the PCA remarks, this character’s exoneration proved coherent with Hitchcock’s production: as a matter of fact, in *Rebecca*, as in all the cases above, the nature of this masculine innocence is quite ambiguous. The scene in which Maxim confesses his crime to his new wife instil doubts about the supposed accident: the obvious way of staging it would have been through a flashback which, however, would have left nothing to the viewer’s fantasy. In deciding to not show the entire scene, the director left the ultimate decision to the audience.

⁷⁷ A. Austin, “Details: Hitchcock Reads *Rebecca*”, in *Empowerment Versus Oppression: Twenty First Century View of Popular Romance Novels*, Sally Goade (ed.), Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2007, p.67.

8.4 - HITCHCOCK'S WOMEN

While men in Hitchcock's films are (almost) always innocent, women, instead, are always guilty of the crime they are accused. In the case of *Rebecca*, of course, this pattern is represented by Rebecca herself, but other famous examples are Judy Barton (*Vertigo*, 1959), Mrs Paradine (*The Paradine Case*, 1947), Marnie (*Marnie*, 1964) and, most notably, Marion Crane from *Psycho* (1960). All these women are transgressive heroines which captivated the audience's sympathy but, ultimately, they must be punished for their crimes: in case of murder, they must die, and it is the man's duty to make it happen, otherwise the hero has to guide them back to patriarchal normality.

Women in Hitchcock's films can either be guilty or belonging to the category of the "woman under threat", which, in the case of *Rebecca*, is perfectly depicted by Fontaine's character. Hitchcock used to love to work with young and attractive actresses and used to tease them in order to mould them as he wished and make them appear docile and always under threat, teasing them so much that most of them utterly hated him. Fontaine, for instance, remembers that "he would constantly tell me that no one thought I was very

good except himself"⁷⁸, but she managed to overcome this attitude and eventually collaborated with the director in his next film, *Suspicion* (1940), winning also an Academy Award.

The same can not be said about Tippi Hedren, who acted as protagonist in both *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie*. The relationship between actress and filmmaker has been quite discussed and even recently Hedren has accused the director of having harassed her during the production of the two films. Hitchcock indeed developed a true obsession for this emerging actress, which culminated in episodes of violence: during the filming of the last bird attack in *The Birds*, Hedren was in a state of exhaustion and had to take a week's rest after having been injured.

Because of his obsessive relationships with actresses, violence against women in his films and a number of coarse comments in interviews, Hitchcock has, not surprisingly, earned a reputation for misogyny during his career. As a matter of fact, the filmmaker's treatment of women in films is quite controversial and it also expresses a strong anxiety about female sexuality: Hitchcock's style could indeed be defined as voyeuristic and somehow sadistic, the most famous examples of this attitude being the shower scene in *Psycho* (1960) and the rape scene in *Marnie* (1964).

⁷⁸ A. Light, "Rebecca", cit. p. 29.

Other Hitchcockian key motifs of *Rebecca* regarding technical issues will be discussed in the following Chapter. From this partial analysis, however, it can be easily said that *Rebecca's* paternity is a very tricky topic, since its production was not simple. Both filmmaker and producer were extremely important in shaping this adaptation, while du Maurier provided them with the perfect source material. Eventually, *Rebecca's* huge, enduring popularity indicates that, although there were a number of conflicts, the cooperation of such a director and such a producer permitted the creation of what is still considered a masterpiece in film history.

CHAPTER 9

CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

Although *Rebecca* was arguably Hitchcock's least favoured child, the director eventually succeeded in filling it with its own directorial identity as much as any other of his films. Selznick's intromission did not stop the filmmaker from imposing his personal view over the project and, ultimately, the work of the producer only concerned the final cut and editing of the film: Hitchcock was thus able to exploit the original Gothic elements of du Maurier's text which proved perfectly suitable with the director's style, inasmuch that later they would become recurrent elements in his films.

Hitchcock's ability in transposing novels to films and translating them into his own version of the source material is almost legendary. Borrowing the words from Brian McFarlane, "Who, indeed, ever thinks of Hitchcock as primarily an adaptor of other people's fictions?"⁸⁰: with *Rebecca*, despite all the problems during its production, the director was able to show this ability and, at the same time, to produce an apparently faithful adaptation.

⁸⁰ B. McFarlane, *Novel To Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 11.

Therefore, whereas Maxim becomes part of the “falsely accused men” category, Mrs Danvers’ creepy appearance and alleged homosexuality place her near the recurrent figure of the psychopath. Simultaneously, Rebecca’s absence/presence represents the perfect opportunity to explore the potentiality of the long shot and, together, to insert an element of suspense in the narrative. The characterisation of the protagonists thus marks the beginning of a more conscious approach, while the use of the camera eventually allows the director to infuse the film with the same Gothic atmosphere of the original text, maintaining Hitchcock’s identity clearly visible.

9.1 – FILM STRUCTURE

The structure of the film is the perfect starting point for a thorough analysis of Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*. Du Maurier’s work begins with a dream, followed by the narrator’s description of her dull marital life after the events which brought her and Maxim far from Manderley: the story is therefore told in the form of a long analepsis and, from the very beginning, there is no possibility of happy ending. The structure of the film, on the other hand, is quite operatic, with a prologue followed by three acts.

Except for the prologue, each of the other three acts is characterised by a change of location and a different generic connotation. Moreover, each section ends with an extraordinary event, namely a wedding, a shipwreck and a fire, which helps defining the borders of each portion of the film. *Rebecca* can be considered operatic also in length, being Hitchcock's second longest film (the first is 1959 *North by Northwest*): interestingly, the original film length was of 150 minutes but it was reduced to 130 after the first preview exhibition in February 1940⁸¹.

The prologue of *Rebecca* is nothing more than du Maurier's opening monologue recited word by word. After the opening credits, the voice of Joan Fontaine begins with the famous words: "Last night, I went to Manderley again". The images passing are extremely Gothic: a full moon, clouded by mist, followed by the imposing gate covered with ivy. A moody, fairy-tale-like score by Franz Waxman accompanies the voice in her description of the dream, and, when she passes the gates thanks to the "supernatural powers" of the dreamer, the camera begins to follow her along the drive until it reaches Manderley.

The dream-like, Gothic atmosphere of this prologue is followed by the first act, set in Monte Carlo, in the South of France. The whole

⁸¹ K.D. Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature", cit. p. 44.

portion of the film is firstly introduced by an original scene of Maxim staring at the rough sea⁸², and followed by the image of the luxurious Princess Hotel. This first section, indeed, gathers all the elements of the romantic comedy genre: the splendour of the location and the relatively lighter events depicted in these scenes allow Hitchcock to focus on the humorous elements of the story.

As a matter of fact, irony plays an important role in the director's style and he felt it lacking in du Maurier's original text. He therefore decided to concentrate it in the depiction of the relationship between the narrator and her employer, Mrs Van Hopper (played by Florence Bates). The exaggeration of the woman's vulgar aggressiveness is comic in itself, but the contrast with the narrator's shyness and naïveté also "provide the romantic comedy's parallel of the Gothic contrast between the narrator and Rebecca"⁸³.

This first section ends with Maxim emotionless marriage proposal and the modest wedding of the two lovers. The couple's arrival at Manderley opens the second act of the film, arguably the most faithful of the three. This portion is pure Gothic and it is dominated by the spectral presence of Mrs Danvers, together with Rebecca's absence/presence. Manderley is the perfect Gothic

⁸² This scene has been already discussed in Chapter 8.1.

⁸³ A., Austin, "Details: Hitchcock Reads *Rebecca*", cit. p. 67.

location, surrounded by a rough sea and huge in proportions and its characteristics were emphasised with the use of cinematic devices and props.

The climax of the film also marks the beginning of the third act of the story: during the Manderley costume ball, a shipwreck interrupts the party. The narrator finds her husband in the beach cottage, where he finally confesses the truth about his first wife. The inquest following the discovery of Rebecca's dead body culminates with a men's trip to London to find the truth during which a grief-stricken Mrs Danvers decides to burn down Manderley. This "third section is pure detective story"⁸⁴ and contains not only the majority of added material, but also the most important plot change, specifically Rebecca's accidental death.

9.2 – CHARACTERS PORTRAYAL

Despite this shift from a murder to an accident, the overall characterisation of Rebecca in Hitchcock's adaptation can be considered quite successful. What is strange is that Rebecca actually does never appear on the screen, but her presence is almost tangible. With this choice the director also underscores one of the original text's most important prerogatives: not only the narrator never sees

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.67.

Rebecca herself, but neither she sees a photograph or a portrait of the first Mrs de Winter, her image being only “a composite ghost conjured up by the narrator’s incessant jealous speculation”, and “fuelled by the probably untrustworthy and certainly conflicting accounts”⁸⁵ of the other characters.

Therefore, the whole film is based on the absence/presence of the eponymous character, which is visible from the very first scene of the first act: Maxim staring at the sea from a rocky cliff. Rebecca is indeed invisible for the viewer, but it is clear that she is the object of her husband gaze and hovers beyond the camera. Another remarkable example of this invisibility/visibility paradox is, obviously, the cottage scene: while Maxim is relating the events concerning Rebecca’s death, “the camera pointedly dynamizes Rebecca’s absence”, following her movements “in a lengthy tracking shot”. In this scene, Rebecca’s absence is stressed so much that the view is “made to experience it as an active force”⁸⁶.

The character of Rebecca hence acts behind the camera, in what Tania Modelski calls “the off-screen space” or “blind space”⁸⁷. Here is where the horror resides and, also, where the suspense hides.

⁸⁵ N. J. Watson, “Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*”, cit. p. 42.

⁸⁶ T. Modelski, “Rebecca”, in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Church Gibson, Pamela and Hill, John (ed.), Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p. 132.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.132.

The viewer is, indeed, terrified by what is not seen on screen, but rather lurks in the blind space, always balancing between a visual absence and a symbolic presence. Had Rebecca been portrayed as the typical Hollywood *femme fatale*, she would not have been similarly uncanny and the film would have lost its primary source of suspense.

Rebecca's presence is continually kept alive by her beloved "Danny" who, in this adaptation, is perfectly portrayed by Judith Anderson. Although the actress was far younger than her novelistic alias, the character's personality was built so well that it is impossible to think of a better cast choice. Moreover, her relatively young age –Anderson was 42 year old at that time– permitted to play upon the possible lesbian implications of the mistress and servant intimate relationship which, in du Maurier's text, were far less evident.

Compared to the novel's character, in Hitchcock's adaptation Mrs Danvers plays a "more unequivocal role as villainous double to the dead wife"⁸⁸ and, for this reason, the director decided to play on the creepy qualities of her appearance and to render her presence on the screen even more disturbing. Thus, when she materialises, her face is always lightened from below, in order to emphasise her

⁸⁸ N. J. Watson, "Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*", cit. p. 43.

countenance and her pale complexion; furthermore, she is almost never seen walking or shown in motion during the film and rather appears in the middle of a room like a ghost. Eventually, the slow gestures, the still posture and the fixed gaze make her presence totally disturbing.

Consequently, Mrs Danvers is represented as a sinister character, whose obsession with her dead mistress ultimately drives her insane. According to Robin Wood, she can be inscribed in the category of the “psychopath”, a recurrent figure in Hitchcock’s films: Danny is, as a matter of fact, the embodiment of a woman victimised within patriarchy who reacts in both a passive –descending into madness– and active way –through fire⁸⁹. Hitchcock, indeed, depicted the housekeeper both as neurotic and villainess, distancing himself from du Maurier’s novel: in his film, Mrs Danvers is literally obsessed with her dead mistress and uses her belongings as a powerful fetish.

While Anderson proved the perfect embodiment of the sinister housekeeper, when it comes to Mr and Mrs de Winter, the choice of actors results a bit unsuccessful. Both Fontaine and Olivier are indeed great performers but somehow they do not fit perfectly into du Maurier’s protagonists’ characterisation. Laurence Olivier, for

⁸⁹ R. Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films: Revisited*, cit. p. 347.

instance, was chosen mainly because of the ideological connection with his previous role, the dark and passionate Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* (1939); nonetheless, despite the attempts of making him look more sinister with the use of lights and shadows, Maxim never successfully appears as sinister and ambiguous as his literary double.

For what concerns Joan Fontaine, her young age and her anonymity were the main reasons for which she was chosen both by Hitchcock and Selznick. Obviously, the actress was far from being mousey and dull as du Maurier's heroine and, for this reason, she is only partially convincing in her role. However, Hitchcock worked hard to transpose the narrator insignificance on the screen: he altered the proportions of the set, used oversized furniture and placed the cameras in very high or low positions, so as to make Fontaine look small and ill-fitted. The narrator is, therefore, always filmed "huddled in doorways, hunched against walls, or sunk into over-stuffed and oversize chairs that leave her exposed and helpless"⁹⁰.

To exaggerate this effect, Hitchcock also exploited the natural scenery to take wide exterior shots of the estate: Fontaine appears

⁹⁰ M. di Battista, "Daphne du Maurier and Alfred Hitchcock", in *Daphne du Maurier Companion*, H. Taylor (ed.), p.327.

insignificant compared to the massive rocks of the beach and the sea, a detail against the panoramic expanse of Manderley. The house, again, dominates the protagonist despite her central role in the narrative and also produces in her a sense of bewilderment and terror. These feelings are provoked by two major characteristics of the mansion: on the one hand, exactly as it happened in the novel, Manderley represents its dead mistress and it's full of small details reminding of her.

On the other hand, "the narrator's terror in both the original and adaptation is [...] of her new husband and his aristocratic lineage"⁹¹: Manderley is indeed a place where a young, naïve, middle-class girl can not feel at ease, since it represents a world to which she does not belong. Hence, Hitchcock's decision of making Fontaine appear smaller than the surroundings perfectly encapsulates the awkwardness she is experiencing when entering in such a different environment. The scene of the girl's first arrival at Manderley brilliantly illustrates her terror: "the camera cuts between the narrator, Maxim and Manderley as the music builds to a crescendo and Fontaine's face reveals the narrator's absolute awe of both the husband and the house"⁹².

⁹¹ A. Austin, "Details: Hitchcock Reads Rebecca", cit. p.69.

⁹² Ibid., p.69.

9.3 – CAMERA MOVEMENTS

Being Hitchcock's first Hollywood film, *Rebecca* allowed him to experiment not only a number of key motifs and plot combinations, but also some cinematic devices that later would become recurrent elements of his production. Particularly, the exceptional character of Rebecca proved quite fruitful for the director: she is, indeed, continually swinging from absence to presence and precisely in transposing the liminality of this condition, the filmmaker was able to exploit all the potentiality of the camera and especially the long take and the tracking shot.

Long takes are continuous shot which last longer than typical shots (which, in the studio era, lasted approximately eight or eleven seconds). Hitchcock was very interested in the formal possibilities of this kind of shot and *Rebecca* was the ultimate testing ground. As a matter of fact, Maxim's confession scene represented the perfect opportunity to exploit this camera movement: the absence/presence of Rebecca is emphasised through the use of a long take following Maxim's words and Rebecca's supposed movement from the sofa until it reaches the floor where Rebecca fell, hitting her head against a ship's tackle.

This experimentation marks the beginning of Hitchcock's increasing interest in the possibilities of the long take: he would

exploit this movement in his films throughout the forties and this fascination will culminate in one of his most experimental pictures, *Rope* (1948), starring James Stewart. This is a limited setting film and its most notable feature is the fact that it takes place in real time: Hitchcock uses long takes lasting up to ten minutes and masks the cuts ending each shot tracking into an object, so as to make appear the film as a single continuous shot.

Rebecca also marks the beginning of Hitchcock's fascination with the point-of-view editing and the subjective camera. Nowhere in the film it is most clear than in the prologue: the camera continues tracking in as Fontaine's character progresses in her dream along the drive of Manderley, a twisted and torn path, labyrinthine and insidious. Symmetrically, the last scene reverses this movement: starting from the detail of the embroidered "R" of Rebecca's pillow, "the camera pans back to reveal flames encompassing the bed, then the room, and finally, the entire house"⁹³ as if to state the definitive destruction of Rebecca.

This final shot is crucial in the sense that it represents Hitchcock's insistence on Rebecca's handwriting, a central motif in both novel and film. The written text indeed synecdochically identifies Rebecca and her power, and it is also a constant presence

⁹³ Ibid., p.70.

between the walls of Manderley, a recurrent memento of its deceased mistress. In the film, Hitchcock uses frequent close-ups of signatures, letters and monograms to underscore and highlight Rebecca's textual trace from the very beginning –during the opening credits the title appears with a huge “R” dwarfing the other letters– until the last shot, where Rebecca's writing is eventually demonised.

Overall, *Rebecca* might not be Hitchcock's favourite work, and the presence of Selznick probably influenced some of the successful directorial decisions which were taken; it might also be very distant from du Maurier's original text, especially in its hidden moral. Nonetheless, being the director's first American successful production, it opened the way to a series of masterpieces, which eventually collaborated in establishing the myth of Alfred Hitchcock, one of the most ingenious directors of all the time. It is undeniable, then, that *Rebecca* influenced the filmmaker's following production and establishes a series of tropes which would later become pure Hitchcock style.

CHAPTER 10 CONCLUSIONS

According to the numbers, both Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca* and Hitchcock's adaptation of the following year were incredibly successful, creating a cultural phenomenon during the 1940s. Nowadays, *Rebecca* is still du Maurier's most popular novel, while the film is considered a "classic". Moreover, both of them also inspired a great number of critical analysis, especially during the Nineties and the first years of the Two-thousands after the publication of Horner and Zlosnik's *Writing, Identity and Gothic Imagination*, a real breakthrough in the study of du Maurier's production.

The reason why this novel and its adaptation are so interesting from an academic point of view might be found in their most controversial points. On the one hand, du Maurier's text has always been discredited because of its arguable association with the romantic genre; moreover, the similarities with *Jane Eyre* have frequently been the object of critical discussion. On the other hand, Hitchcock's film and its genesis are actually very interesting, especially for what concern its paternity and the role of David O. Selznick during the production. A short summary of all these

important points might, therefore, be useful before reaching the conclusions.

10.1 - THE NOVEL

According to du Maurier's words, *Rebecca* is a "study in jealousy"⁹⁶, written in a very peculiar moment of her life and partially inspired by her personal experiences: there are, indeed, a lot of elements which can be traced back to the writer's private life. As a matter of fact, du Maurier wrote *Rebecca* while she was staying in Alexandria with her husband and felt homesick. Manderley itself was built following her childhood memories of her stay at Milton Hall and of Menabilly, her Cornish home, a place she kept in her heart during her entire life. Finally, the characterisation of the two protagonists reflects different aspects of du Maurier's own personality.

Another extremely important element when analysing her works is her uncertain sexual identity: a number of critics have focused on this topic and its relationship with the text, especially after the publication of Margaret Forster's biography, *Daphne du Maurier: the Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller* (1993). Du

⁹⁶ M. Forster in A. Horner & S. Zlosnik, "Those curious, sloping letters", cit. p. 112.

Maurier's sexuality is still an open field of study and the conclusions about it mainly depend on the type of approach used. Moreover, it is often explored together with her ambivalent nature of mother and writer, a situation which created a strong feeling of anxiety in the author and resulted in a fascination with the traditional Gothic theme of doubles and alter egos.

As a matter of fact, *Rebecca* and du Maurier herself owe much to the Gothic tradition, so much that the novel is considered an instance of the modern Gothic revival of the early-thirties. The first study about these kind of influences was Horner and Zlosnik's 1998 *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, opening the doors to a new way of analysing du Maurier's texts which allowed to place her work side by side with the traditional female Gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters.

Together with the theme of the 'double', *Rebecca* displays a wide range of Gothic features: Manderley represents a modern-time Medieval castle, isolated and labyrinthine, and is haunted by the ghost of its last mistress, Rebecca; besides, not only this character is a 'revenant', but she also shares some traits with the figure of the vampire, another recurrent figure in the Gothic tradition. Eventually,

the narrator is very similar to Radcliffe's typical heroine, a young, sensitive orphan, utterly the opposite of the first Mrs de Winter.

Another element in common between *Rebecca* and the Gothic legacy is the reference to traditional fairy-tales and, particularly, to "Bluebeard", which represents the ultimate patriarchal fantasy of female oppression. The plot of du Maurier's text is indeed very similar to "Bluebeard": a young girl marries an older man who brings her to his castle, where he keeps a horrible secret. Maxim's attempt to control his new wife's natural curiosity resembles to that of Bluebeard, but, unlike the original tale, in *Rebecca* the protagonist eventually becomes an ally, helping her husband to restore and maintain the patriarchal order.

Du Maurier's novel plot is also very similar to *Jane Eyre*: the protagonists are, indeed, very similar, and so are their lovers; moreover, Rebecca's character reminds the reader of Bertha, in the sense that the two of them represent a type of femininity which is considered somehow dangerous. More interestingly, Manderley and Thornfield Hall have the same role in the narrative: their presence is indeed extremely important and almost physical. As a matter of fact, Du Maurier has often been criticised for having re-adapted Brontë's novel. However, the relationship between the two texts is just

another instance of the importance of the Gothic legacy in the writing of *Rebecca*.

Du Maurier's novel has always been considered a "romantic" novel, a "women's novel", even though the author herself disliked this categorisation. Therefore, the critical study of *Rebecca*'s Gothic elements is extremely useful in order to re-establish the novel's identity: *Rebecca* is, indeed, a complex text, where Gothic and fairy-tale influences blend together in a story of love and murder; moreover, du Maurier's own life and personality are reflected in her work, resulting in a novel full of interesting starting points for scholars.

10.2 - THE FILM

Rebecca is, undoubtedly, a popular novel and, for this reason, since its first publication in 1938, a number of adaptations and a couple of sequels have appeared. In 1939, du Maurier herself adapted it for the stage, changing just a few details in the plot. Besides, Susan Hill's *Mrs De Winter* (1993) and Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale* (2001) are two attempts of sequel for du Maurier's original text and, despite the fact that they were, arguably, unnecessary, they both represent the huge impact of *Rebecca* in both the literary and popular panorama.

Obviously, however, the most famous adaptation of du Maurier's novel is the 1940 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock and produced by David O. Selznick which received an immense positive reception, both by critics and audience. It was Hitchcock's first American picture, and his second reworking of du Maurier's material. Selznick, on the other hand, was famous for his adaptations of popular novels, especially for *Gone With The Wind*, which was released only a few months before *Rebecca*. The entire advertising campaign for du Maurier's adaptation was gender-built since the film was aimed to a female audience, but Selznick also exploited the prestige of Victor Fleming's film and the points in common between the two novels.

Nonetheless, the production of *Rebecca* was definitely not easy because of all the conflicts which erupted between the producer and the director. Selznick rejected Hitchcock's first script because it was too distant from the original text: his idea was, indeed, of a hundred percent faithful adaptation, where every detail of the original text was to be found. Hitchcock, on the contrary, wished to re-manage the contents in his way, but, eventually, he was required to follow the producer's guidelines.

Furthermore, the PCA forced the production to change some details in the script: a few details were pointed out by Joseph Breen,

but what was absolutely not possible to be shown on a film was a murderer getting away with his crime. Therefore, the decision was to change Rebecca's death circumstances and make it accidental, thus saving Maxim from his reputation. This modification of the plot, however small it may seem, actually eliminated the cautionary element of du Maurier's text that "at the heart of every marriage is a crime"⁹⁷, and, therefore, allowed a happy ending where, originally, it was impossible.

Ultimately, Hitchcock's film is not faithful at all in the sense that it does not fully represent du Maurier's scepticism about romantic love, while, rather, Selznick tried to turn it into a romantic film. As a matter of fact, *Rebecca* is considered an instance of the "woman's film", a quite popular genre during the 40s which was aimed to a female audience and starred a female protagonist: according to feminist critics, however, the picture fails to incorporate a true feminine point of view during the narration and, therefore, to fully represent a female subjectivity. For this reason, *Rebecca* can not be considered a "woman's film": likewise the novel, the adaptation does not fall within an easy genre categorisation.

Nonetheless, this "feminine angle" the producer was trying to establish created a difficult situation for Hitchcock: it is, indeed, one

⁹⁷ A. Light, "Rebecca", cit. p. 30.

of the reasons why the director eventually came to disown *Rebecca*, claiming that it was not a Hitchcock's film. As a matter of fact, the paternity of this adaptation is a quite discussed topic in the academic field: Selznick's intromission deeply influenced the picture's production and almost eclipsed the filmmaker's contribution. The film was promoted as "Selznick's adaptation" and Hitchcock's name was relegated to the end of the opening credits.

It is not surprising, then, that the director did not considered *Rebecca* as his creature. The picture, however, was extremely important in his career since it was Hitchcock's first American film, allowing him also to experiment some tropes which would later become his trademarks. The characters, for instance, represent typical recurrent figures in the director's production: Maxim can be considered a "falsely accused man", while his wife becomes part of the "women under threat" pattern; lastly, Mrs Danvers shares some features with the typical Hitchcockian psychopath. The characterisation of the protagonists marks a more conscious approach on the director's part.

In spite of being an immature picture, *Rebecca* also contains a number of technical issues which were essentials for Hitchcock's later production. The curious nature of the first Mrs De Winter allows the filmmaker to exploit the potentialities of the camera and

of the long take and to insert an element of suspense in the narrative; at the same time, the novel's prologue provided the opportunity to experiment with the point-of-view editing and the subjective camera. All these key motifs and cinematic devices can be easily found in Hitchcock's most famous films of the 50s and 60s.

10.3 – FINAL THOUGHTS

Du Maurier's *Rebecca* enduring popularity is, undoubtedly, partially indebted to Hitchcock's adaptation, which, in spite of being somehow unfaithful, had a huge commercial success, so much that it also won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Along with the positive audience reception, which can be easily detected through numbers, also critics found both novel and adaptation interesting from an academic point of view and exploited all the material in thorough analyses of the narratives.

Of course, criticism has changed over the years, but du Maurier's novel and Hitchcock's film still attract scholars from all over the world. A few months ago, for instance, the new biography of Daphne du Maurier written in France by Tatiana de Rosnay, has been translated and published in England. This new insight in the author's complex life is based mainly on du Maurier's own memoirs, together with her sister and daughter's chronicles and it perfectly represents

how this author still provides scholars with interesting material to investigate after almost thirty years from her death.

As it has already been said, Horner and Zlosnik were the pioneers of the Gothic approach to du Maurier's production, but during the 80s and 90s there was a huge interest in this author, especially from feminist critics. Rebecca has thus become a feminist heroine: no longer the villain of the situation, she is the true victim of the patriarchal power embodied by Manderley and Maxim and, therefore, deserves to be redeemed and given her dignity back again. According to this view, the novel's villain is the patriarchal power which, however, is ultimately erased with the destruction of the house.

As long as the film is concerned, on the other hand, critics have concentrate mainly on the paternity issue, while it is somehow ignored in Hitchcock's production's criticism, although it was a considerable success. This attitude may be due to the fact that the director himself discredited it and, also, to the fact that it is considered an immature picture, with just a small amount of Hitchcockian elements. Perhaps, also its genre categorisation helped to diminish its impact: it is considered, indeed, a woman's film and, therefore, not deserving a thorough analysis. Fortunately, du Maurier's scholars have frequently concentrated their studies on the

relationship between the original text and its adaptation, thus providing a great amount of material for the study of Hitchcock's picture.

Finally, this thesis was intended to investigate carefully the critical reception of *Rebecca*, both novel and film, in order to point out the most discussed topics in the academic field. Moreover, the aim was to provide a thorough personal analysis of the text and its adaptation, concentrating on the most controversial points in relation with examples taken from the narrative, and to summarise the wide range of critical approaches towards the novel and the picture's debated issues.

Although scholars have tried hard to distance du Maurier's text and Hitchcock's film from the realm of "romance", both novel and its cinematographic version are sometimes labelled as "romantic fiction". For this reason, although there is a great quantity of academic literature about these topics, further studies are needed especially as long as Hitchcock's adaptation is concerned, in order to finally eliminate this idea of romanticism which so frequently accompanies such a complex and composite novel and its cinematic adaptation.

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