

Representation of Women in Gothic Literature: Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier

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Abstract

This study examines how women are portrayed in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a work of Gothic fiction. The study looks at how the novel uses Gothic motifs to represent female characters and analyses how patriarchy and identity affect these characters and their lives. By utilising critical analysis and previously published works, the research illuminates how women are portrayed in Gothic literature and provides new insights into issues related to power relations, societal expectations, and the experiences of women. The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of women's representation in Gothic literature and its broader implications by exploring these themes.

Keywords: Gothic, women's portrayal, female experience, patriarchy, societal expectations

Introduction

Gothic literature is a captivating and influential genre that emerged in the 18th century and continues to captivate readers today. Gothic literature is a captivating and influential genre that emerged in the 18th century and continues to captivate readers today. Horace Walpole, the author of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), is credited with creating the genre and is considered the founder of the Gothic genre. "In the period dominated by Romanticism, Gothic writing began to move inside, disturbing conventional social limits and notions of interiority and individuality" (Botting 59). It explores the darker aspects of human nature, delving into themes of horror, mystery, and "provide the principal embodiments and evocations of cultural anxieties" (Botting 01). With its atmospheric settings, complex characters, and often supernatural elements, gothic literature creates a sense of unease and fascination in readers.

The representation of women in this genre has generated a great deal of discussion and critique. Gothic literature frequently depicts female characters in a way that reflects societal and cultural concerns at the time these works were produced about women's duties and expectations. Anne William states that "feminist readings of Gothic demonstrate, this approach has indeed spoken to women as readers, and has also offered women a language to speak-or rather to write" (William 16). The anxieties and fears surrounding women's vulnerability and helplessness are reflected in the different forms of physical and psychological torture that female characters frequently endure. As Fleenor states that "the Gothic is a form created by dichotomies and the subsequent tensions caused by the dialectic between the patriarchal society, the woman's role, and the contradictions and limitations inherent in both" (Fleenor 15-6). Whether supernatural or psychological in nature, they are portrayed as weak and easily overpowered by the evil forces that surround them. The gothic genre is defined by an atmosphere of tension and dread, which is enhanced by the presentation of women as defenceless victims.

Analysing the gender dynamics and patriarchy in *Rebecca* (1938) by Daphne du Maurier

Rebecca is a Gothic novel written by Daphne du Maurier and first published in 1938. It is a haunting and suspenseful tale that explores various archetypes and challenging traditional gender roles. The novel presents a diverse range of female characters, each with their own motivations, desires, and flaws. Set in a sprawling estate called Manderley on the windswept coast of Cornwall, England, the story is narrated by an unnamed young woman who serves as the novel's protagonist. The novel begins with the protagonist reminiscing about her time as a companion to an American woman in Monte Carlo. The opening line of the novel is "Last night I dreamed I went to Manderley again" (du Maurier 01).

The narrator is a woman living in a patriarchal environment where she is subject to restrictions and expectations. The narrator is shown by Du Maurier as being innocent, gullible, submissive, and eventually beneath her controlling husband. The patriarchal notion that a woman needs a man to survive and fulfill her responsibilities as a wife makes the narrator yearn for Maxim's love. The narrator's husband, Maxim de Winter, treats his wife in a domineering behavior and employs statements like "and now eat up your peaches, and don't ask me any more questions, or I shall put you in the corner" (du Maurier 243) which shows his superiority.

Merely because Maxim suggests her to "don't have to worry about the house, Mrs. Danvers does everything," (du Maurier 76) rather than trying to fit in at Manderley, the narrator decides to leave everything as they are. As she adopts the name Mrs. de Winter, she is supposed to adhere to traditional gender norms, which entail submission, passivity, and reverence to her husband, as it was typical in the culture that "women abandoned not just their father' surnames on marriage, but also their own first name" (Watson 20). These expectations from society have an impact on the struggle of the narrator with her self worth and her very own identity. As Horner and Zlosnik states that "Only a few feminist magazines celebrated the career woman; in the general media, however, much emphasis was given to the idea that a woman's proper place was in the home- and that a woman who wished for a life other than that of housewife and mother was somehow perverse" (Honer and Zlosnik 17) which It demonstrates a sense of progress for women's rights.

As feminist notes that "a supernatural force that threatens to feminise the estate and the patriarch, by challenging patriarchal order and heterosexuality" (Pons 74) as evidenced by the character of Rebecca as a challenger to the patriarchy. And this resulted in Maxim De Winter killing Rebecca. Pons elucidates that "Maxim's murder of Rebecca is predominantly motivated by Rebecca's challenging of the patriarchal rules" (Pons 74).

De Winter's first wife died as a result of his inability to assert his dominance over her, suggesting as powerful women do not have a place within a culture that values patriarchy.

Rebecca's involvement in multiple scandalous encounters and her promiscuous temperament, which broke social rules, was revealed. As Hanisch explains that "women have developed great shuffling techniques for their own survival (look pretty and giggle to get or keep a job or man) which should be used when necessary until such time as the power of unity can take its place" (Hanisch 04). The narrator and Maxim de Winter in particular suffer significant repercussions as a result of deeds and secrets of the Rebecca. The conventional notions of femininity are challenged by Rebecca's representation. By having extramarital affairs and claiming her independence, Rebecca challenges social norms.

However, as the story progresses, the narrator begins to find her voice and assert herself. By giving the narrator control over the once-powerful male character, du Maurier exhibits an inversion of power. The narrator becomes determined to uncover the truth about Rebecca's death and takes a more active role in

the narrative. As Hanisch notes that “I’ve been pressured to be strong, selfless, other-oriented, sacrificing, and in general pretty much in control of my own life” (Hanisch 04). The idea that women should accept the roles and narratives that are allocated to them passively is challenged by her curiosity and determination to learn the truth about Rebecca. Her quest for the truth and her claim to agency serve as examples of the feminist concepts of individual liberation and opposition to systems of oppression. As Hanisch explains that “it is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I’ve always been told to say” (Hanisch 04). Even when they go against Maxim's wishes, the narrator begins to voice her own thoughts and objectives. As she begins to experience, she says “my old fears, my diffidence, my shyness, my hopeless sense of inferiority, must be conquered now and thrust aside” (du Maurier 318) and she questions Maxim about his involvement with it and after that learned of Rebecca's encounter, as Maxim stated “there never was an accident. Rebecca was not drowned at all. I killed her. I shot Rebecca in the cottage in the cove” (du Maurier 321). She stands up for herself in this struggle, asking for fairness and transparency in their relationship. She exhibits her ability to take charge of herself and to stop being obedient by questioning Maxim's control. The final image of Rebecca that is depicted as “shot with crimson, like a splash of blood” (du Maurier 460). It displayed Manderley in flames. Manderley’s destruction, the “antiquated space” stands for the collapse of patriarchy, hierarchical systems, and traditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the representation of women in Gothic literature, as exemplified by Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, serves as a platform for exploring complex themes related to power dynamics, societal expectations, and the experiences of women. Through the analysis of Gothic motifs and the examination of patriarchy and identity, this study sheds light on the portrayal of female characters in the genre and provides valuable insights into the broader implications of women's representation in literature. Within this genre, the representation of women has been a subject of extensive discussion and critique. Female characters in Gothic literature often reflect the societal and cultural concerns of the time in which the works were produced. They are frequently depicted as vulnerable, helpless victims, embodying anxieties and fears surrounding women's roles and expectations.

In the case of *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier introduces a diverse range of female characters who navigate the complexities of power dynamics and gender expectations. The unnamed narrator, situated within a patriarchal society, struggles with her own identity and self-worth as she conforms to traditional gender roles. Her relationship with Maxim de Winter, her domineering husband, exemplifies the imbalances of power and control inherent in patriarchal structures. However, as the narrative unfolds, the narrator challenges the power dynamic and asserts her own agency, defying societal norms and unraveling the secrets surrounding Rebecca, Maxim's first wife. Rebecca's character serves as a catalyst for exploring the limitations and contradictions of patriarchal society. Her defiance of societal expectations, her extramarital affairs, and her assertion of independence challenge traditional notions of femininity and highlight the consequences of strong women within a patriarchal framework. The climax of the novel sees a reversal of power, with the narrator gaining control over the formerly dominant male character, reflecting themes of personal empowerment and resistance against oppressive structures.

In conclusion, the representation of women in Gothic literature, as exemplified by *Rebecca*, offers a rich terrain for examining complex themes and issues. By delving into the portrayal of female characters, the

influence of patriarchy, and the subversion of traditional gender roles, this study enhances our understanding of women's experiences in literature and sheds light on the broader socio-cultural implications of women's representation. It underscores the enduring relevance of Gothic literature as a powerful platform for exploring themes of power, identity, and societal expectations, ultimately deepening our appreciation for the diverse voices and narratives within the genre.

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