

## The Ulterior Feminism of *Rebecca*

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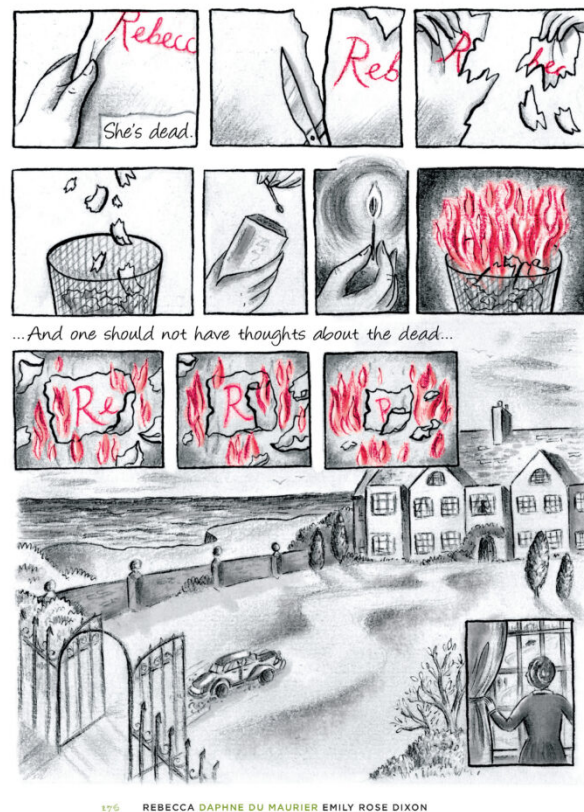
Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* is critically renowned for its infusion of Gothic macabre into the romantic, the improper sinister into the English idyll. However, when considered through a feminist lens, the novel is often neglected for its lack of Brontë-style heroines. There are no pious governesses battling buried passions roaming the wings of Manderley - in this sense, the interior turmoil of Mrs Danvers is the most akin to Jane Eyre's. Du Maurier presents us with a morally corrupt narrator in the form of the second Mrs de Winter and a shocking bigamist in Rebecca. How can we appreciate the novel in a feminist light when it is devoid of heroines? Quite simply, one could argue: the feminism of *Rebecca* lies not in the behaviours of its female characters, but in du Maurier's manipulation of the reader's perception of them.



Upon a first reading of *Rebecca*, the reader is likely to be wooed alongside du Maurier's narrator by the brooding Maxim de Winter, privately fawning over him on roads ribboning through the

exotic Monte Carlo. In the first chapters, du Maurier spoon-feeds the unsuspecting reader what is easily digestible: a classic rags-to-riches romance. We are familiar with this tale; we are comforted by its smoothly solved melodramas. We recognise Maxim staring over a cliff's edge as perhaps just a perplexing blip soon to be resolved by the resumption of his Prince Charming mask. We forgive du Maurier's narrator for her gauche youth and agonising insecurities; after all, it is only by first being established as a pauper that she can be elevated from obscurity by the master of Manderley.

However, du Maurier's narrator lacks one fundamental Cinderella characteristic, assumed in abundance by the likes of Agnes Grey and Lucy Snowe: worthiness. From the first, the second Mrs de Winter displays desperate impetuosity in the burning of Rebecca's book inscription, cowardice in concealing her courtship from Mrs Van Hopper and an insufferable persecution complex that tends to alienate the reader rather than endear. Du Maurier's narrator, before she has even become the corrupted second Mrs de Winter, is presented to us as unworthy of being saved from obscurity. The character possesses Jane Eyre's modesty, it is true, but to an excruciating extent; how can one identify a feminist in a narrator who has yet to discover her identity?



The second Mrs de Winter's accumulation of wealth and status does not promote a healthy development of her personality. The reader's empathy begins to wear thin; she now possesses the

Prince and his kingdom... why can't she transcend to assume the role of Queen? Through the narrator's consistent self-deprecating comparisons to Maxim's first "angel-wife" Rebecca, du Maurier presents the former as a rhododendron bud inverting.

If there is an overtly feminist symbol in the novel, the rhododendron is it; though the reader associates the blood-red "monster" plant with Rebecca's haunting influence almost exclusively, it is an image relevant to the second Mrs de Winter too. Du Maurier's narrator has the potential to be a feminist but refuses to bloom due to her restrictive masochism. However, her eventual germination, first stunted by her self-criticism, is satisfying to the feminist reader despite its wildly perverse petals.

The second Mrs de Winter condemns any sense of sisterhood in becoming Maxim's accomplice when he confesses to murdering Rebecca. Instead of staple Gothic horror, du Maurier's narrator feels obsessive relief: "he never loved Rebecca... never, never". She is only able to assume her identity as the real Mrs de Winter when the former has been denounced as the "devil". By refusing to acknowledge assimilation with Rebecca's fate, du Maurier's narrator seizes both self-preservation and the prize she covets: Maxim's unreserved affections. Not a typically feminist aspiration, admittedly, but it empowers the narrator - this is what counts. By presenting the second Mrs de Winter as a woman bent irrevocably on achieving her goal of becoming Maxim's Mrs de Winter, the one and only, du Maurier thus asserts her as a feminist heroine: the narrator is willing to sacrifice her innocence by becoming a murder accessory, willing to sacrifice anything single-mindedly, in order to get what she wants. The reader can now assimilate a heroine-type with this headstrong rhododendron of a woman, even though it costs the reduction of Rebecca, her fellow suffering wife of the patriarchy's ruthless propriety, to a weed.



Rebecca herself is more overtly imbued with face-value feminist ideals than her successor. Throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, du Maurier presents her through the narrator's idealisations as the Perfect Woman; she had "beauty, brains and breeding", as Maxim's grandmother claims. However, it is not Rebecca's alleged flawlessness that impresses her as a heroine upon the reader - it is the shredding of this mirage by du Maurier.

Maxim vilifies Rebecca as he recalls her promiscuity, manipulation and private humiliation of him in exchange for public success. Du Maurier morphs the feminist reader's perception of Rebecca, ironically, in her favour; we learn that she condemned cold, condescending Maxim's patriarchal pedestal by making a sham of his beloved, paternally-inherited Manderley. The reader is likely to rejoice in this discovery of a duplicitously cunning heroine who, similarly to the second Mrs de Winter, will do what she wants. Du Maurier uses Maxim as a pawn in his lambasting of Rebecca in order to secure her as a heroine that the reader can identify with; she is ultimately perceived as a flawed, multi-faceted woman rebelling against the societally-imposed fetters of her gender. As she turns to "dust" for the triumphant new Mrs de Winter, Rebecca "steps out of the shadows", out of the page, for the reader; she becomes real. Du Maurier herself behaves with feminist scruples as, by decrying the illusion of Rebecca, she tears apart the unattainable mirage of the Perfect Woman.

Of course, du Maurier's plot orchestration means that Rebecca is lethally punished for her gender-subversion; her Eyreian autonomy is drowned. However, du Maurier ensures that Rebecca remains inextricable from Maxim's conscience and, thus, inextricable from feminist resurgence; as her boat - with her body inside - is symbolically dredged from the bay, Rebecca's threat upon the patriarchy is resurrected. Maxim escapes accountability for her murder, yes, but Rebecca's self-governing torch is passed through the surface of the sea to the second Mrs de Winter, who claims it as her own and moulds it to suit her own desires. Through the latter's assumption of power, du Maurier diminishes Maxim to a mere "child" and Mrs de Winter, the first and second now interchangeable, gains control of Manderley once more.





Rebecca surpasses du Maurier's fictive medium and becomes a tangibly imperfect woman to the reader: a believable feminist. Consequently, the narrator inherits Rebecca's faculty over the novel and asserts her power within its well-thumbed pages. Both can be considered as anti-heroines due to their respective misconduct. However, in this novel's case, the term *anti-heroine* is surely analogous with *feminist*, as it is only through their misconduct that du Maurier's women achieve liberation. Du Maurier encourages the reader to peer through naiveties and delusions in order to dredge *Rebecca*'s ulterior feminism from the depths.

**Image sources:**

[Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier and Book at the Door Winner « Behind the Willows "Rebecca" < CrimeReads](#)

[Rebecca Audiobook - Daphne Du Maurier - Listening Books \(listening-books.org.uk\)](#)

[#WordWeek: Favourite First Lines | AnOther \(anothermag.com\)](#)