

CHAPTER THREE

DISCUSSION ON THEME THROUGH PORTRAYAL OF THE PROTAGONIST IN DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S *REBECCA*

In this chapter, I would like to analyse the theme of *Rebecca*, which is revealed through the portrayal of the protagonist. *Rebecca* is written by Daphne du Maurier, which deals with a woman's mental state to gain love that entails acknowledgement by her husband. Written and set in the twentieth-century England, the protagonist is Mrs. de Winter, whose first name is never revealed. As the new bride of a rich widower Maxim de Winter, Mrs. de Winter moves to Manderley, Maxim's house, in which she struggles to be acknowledged by him, especially because Maxim's late wife, Rebecca, seems to always 'overshadow' her.

After reading this novel, I find that the theme of this novel deals with a traditional woman who lives amongst the society that is starting to be progressive. She is desperate and trying so hard to be acknowledged by her husband.

However, she finally manages to get her own idea of love in the end. Mrs. de Winter's idea love is to be acknowledged by her husband, and in doing so, she has to let go one of her biggest problems: her insecurities towards Rebecca.

Based on this argument, I am of the opinion that the theme of this novel is “One’s being traditional may make one to achieve one’s idea of love that entails acknowledgement by one’s partner.”

The author portrays Mrs. de Winter as an anxious person. Anxious is defined as “feeling or showing worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome” (“anxious, def. 1”). From the beginning of the novel, Mrs. de Winter always shows her anxiety. One of her ways of showing it is by compulsively biting her nails when facing situations that make her uneasy. For instance, she is worried that Mrs. Van Hopper, her employer, will find out about her spending time with Maxim, thus she bites her nails until Maxim tells her to stop, “. . . stop biting your nails” (du Maurier 40). It also occurs when she says goodbye to Maxim because she has to leave with Mrs. Van Hopper. Mrs. de Winter feels uneasy about leaving him, and his reaction, so she bites her nails, “I sat down on the bed and began biting my nails” (55).

Her nail-biting tendency while feeling worried, nervous, or uneasy actually makes sense, since nail biting, or Compulsive Nail Biting, is one of the most common habits caused by anxiety (“Anxiety and Compulsive Nail Biting”).

Her anxiety is also shown when she sets her feet in Manderley, her new house, which can be seen in the quotation below:

I forced a smile, and did not answer him, aware now of a stab of panic, an uneasy sickness that could not be controlled. Gone was my glad excitement, vanished my happy pride. I was like a child brought to her first school, or a little untrained maid who has never left home before, seeking a situation. Any measure of self-possession I had gained hitherto, during the brief seven weeks of marriage, was like a rag now, fluttering before

the wind; it seemed to me that even the most elementary knowledge of behavior was unknown to me now; I should not know my right hand from my left, whether to stand or sit, what spoons and forks to use at dinner.

(du Maurier 68)

The quotation above proves how anxious Mrs. de Winter is upon arriving to Manderley. She states that she starts to feel panicked, uneasy, and feels as if she does not know about anything in the universe, especially because this is a completely new environment for her.

Moreover, she is aware of her lack of qualities as Maxim's wife, who is supposed to be "Someone much smarter, more sophisticated . . . a social butterfly" (116) and who ". . . seems to have been so good at everything" (135). As someone who comes from a working-class, Mrs. de Winter feels anxious when she meets the staffs in Manderley, who have served there since Rebecca was still alive, "I fumbled for the handle of the door, feeling slightly sick . . . and as I fumbled with the catch the butler came down the steps, followed by a foot man, and he opened the door for me" (71). Her reaction above shows how anxious she is at that moment.

Mrs. de Winter is worried that she does not meet Manderley's standards because she comes from a working-class family, as seen in this following quotation when she first meets Mrs. Danvers, the head maid of Manderley as well as Rebecca's former maid, ". . . I saw a little smile of scorn upon her lips, and I guessed at once she considered me ill-bred" (73). Her anxiety is obvious through her thought about Mrs. Danvers's facial gesture.

Moreover, she also feels anxious towards other people around her, the Manderley staffs, and also Maxim's sister and brother-in-law. She often thinks

that they are judging and having bad opinions about her, “Perhaps they (the staffs) were laughing about me” (87). Most importantly, she is anxious because she is completely different from Manderley’s former mistress, Rebecca, as stated by her sister-in-law, Beatrice, “you are so very different from Rebecca” (115). Needless to say, what Beatrice says does not necessarily mean negative, but Mrs. de Winter sees it as something bad, since she thinks that Beatrice expects her to be, “Someone much smarter, more sophisticated” (116).

Mrs. de Winter’s anxiety causes her to be someone who is always worried, uneasy and nervous. She tries very hard to act and speak carefully because she is afraid that she will not be accepted by everyone around her. In my opinion, Mrs. de Winter’s anxiety is caused by her desire to get her idea of love that entails acknowledgement from her husband, since she is afraid if the people in Manderley do not like her, her husband will be disappointed and sees her as unsuitable as his wife. Moreover, in the end, by achieving it, she finally stops being anxious.

Surprisingly, her being anxious is what makes Maxim like her, because he is an autocrat, “an imperious person who insists on complete obedience from others” (“autocrat, def. 1.1”). It can be seen through the way he treats and calls her. For instance, when he proposes to her, in my opinion, he actually commands rather than asks her, “. . . I’m asking you to marry me, you little fool” (du Maurier 56). He then also explains that being married to him will be no different than working for her former employer, Mrs. Van Hopper, which indicates that he will be her new master, “instead of being companion to Mrs. Van Hopper, you become mine, and your duties will be almost exactly the same” (58).

Maxim also often calls her 'lamb' and 'child', which indicates that he sees her as a weak person. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Maxim actually hates Rebecca, who, according to him, has the characteristics of a progressive woman. Thus, Mrs. de Winter's anxiousness makes her achieve her desires because it suggests her as a traditional woman, whom an autocrat such as Maxim likes.

In addition, Mrs. de Winter is portrayed as a timid person, a trait that she is fully aware of. Timid is defined as "showing lack of courage and confidence" ("timid, def. 1"). From the first part of the novel until near the end, Mrs. de Winter constantly shows the reader how timid she is. Her timidity is especially shown through her thoughts when she wants to warn Maxim about Mrs. Van Hopper's intentions with him in Côte d'Azur at Monte Carlo, before they are married, but she does not do it because she does not have the courage, "... nor did I know how I should frame my sentence" (14). Her timidity also shows when she meets Mrs. Danvers, the head housemaid of Manderley, as well as Rebecca's most loyal maid, "I felt uncomfortable, a little shy. I did not know why she must speak with such an undercurrent of resentment" (81).

In Manderley, she feels overshadowed by Rebecca, who actually has passed away, as seen in the quotation below:

Unconsciously I shivered, as though someone had opened the door behind me, and let a draught into the room. I was sitting in Rebecca's chair, I was leaning against Rebecca's cushion, and the dog had come to me and laid his head upon my knee because that has been his custom, and he remembered, in the past, she had given sugar to him there. (85)

The quotation above shows how Rebecca's shadow haunts Mrs. de Winter despite the fact that Rebecca has already passed away. She feels as if she

cannot 'win' against Rebecca, who, according to her and the people in Manderley, is the perfect mistress of Manderley, as stated by the bishop's wife, ". . . she (was) so clever . . . Yes, she was a very lovely creature. So full of life . . . she was very beautiful" (135-136) and also by Maxim's grandmother, who says that Rebecca has "breeding, brains, and beauty" (299) which indicates that Rebecca comes from a high-class family.

Therefore, she is scared that she will disappoint Maxim. Her timidity causes her not to express her concerns openly to Maxim, because she does not have the courage to do it. Thus, she confesses her feelings to Maxim's friend, Frank Crawley, as seen in the quotation below:

" . . . —sometimes I feel myself at such a disadvantage, it's all very strange to me, living here in Manderley. Not the sort of life I've been brought up to. When I go returning these calls, as I did this afternoon, I know people are looking me up and down, wondering what sort of success I'm going to make of it. I can imagine them saying, 'What on earth does Maxim see in her?' And then, Frank, I begin to wonder myself, and I begin to doubt, and I have a fearful haunting feeling that I should never have married Maxim, that we are not going to be happy. You see, I know that all the time, whenever I meet anyone new, they all thinking the same thing— How different she is to Rebecca." (143-144)

In the quotation above, Mrs. de Winter states her worries and her lack of confidence to make Maxim happy.

In addition, she meets Maxim's grandmother, who, instead of acknowledging her as Maxims' new wife, looks for Rebecca. Mrs. de Winter does not want Maxim to know about it, "The only thing that mattered to me was that

Maxim should never come to hear of it” (205). Again, she does not express her feelings to Maxim because she is not courageous enough to do so. It also proves that she is not confident, despite the fact that Maxim has already chosen to marry her. Needless to say, the fact that Maxim has already chosen to marry her is a proof that he acknowledges her. However, according to her, he has not.

Moreover, she does not have the courage to stand up against Mrs. Danvers, who purposely makes her feel that she is not suitable to be the mistress of Manderley. Mrs. Danvers intentionally always subtly mentions Rebecca and sets Mrs. de Winter into a trap to embarrass her in front of everyone at a ball, as seen in the quotation below.

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.

And then I ran from her, down the long narrow passage to my own room, tripping, stumbling over the flounces of my dress. (235)

The quotation above shows how Mrs. de Winter realises that Mrs. Danvers is the one who traps her. However, being timid, she runs away rather than confronting Mrs. Danvers; she is not courageous nor is confident enough to do it.

Mrs. de Winter is timid because she is used to being seen as someone from a lower level and an unimportant person. Her timidity does not help her to gain what she desires, but that is one of the reasons why she achieves her desires at the end, because being timid shows that she is a traditional woman, whom Maxim actually prefers.

Additionally, Mrs. de Winter is portrayed as self-conscious. Self-conscious is defined as “feeling undue awareness of oneself, one’s appearance, or one’s

actions” (“self-conscious, def. 1”). In this novel, Mrs. de Winter constantly reminds herself that she is fully aware of her upbringings. She is consciously aware that she comes from a working-class family; therefore, she knows that Maxim and herself come from two different worlds.

For instance, when Maxim asks her to marry him, she refuses by saying that she does not belong to his world, “I’m not the person of men marry . . . I don’t belong to your sort of world, for one thing” (du Maurier 56). She also states, “Of course I was inexperienced, of course I was idiotic, shy and young. I knew all that” (65). Mrs. Van Hopper, her employer, always sees her as unimportant and does not belong on the same level as her. For instance, she dismisses Mrs. de Winter when she is having coffee with Maxim, then Mrs. de Winter reflects, “It meant I was a youthful thing and unimportant, and there was no need to include me in the conversation” (14).

Therefore, when Maxim asks her to have lunch with him, she refuses because, “I knew he did not want to lunch with me. It was his form of courtesy” (23) and insists that he was just being polite. However, despite Maxim convincing her that he is not being polite, she still does not believe him. She later tells him that, “I wish I was a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls” (40), which indicates her insecurity about her age and appearance, because she is in fact younger than thirty-six and wishes that she could dress more elegantly. She asks him why he keeps being nice to her, because according to her, he only pities her, “. . . I would like to know why you ask me to come out in the car, day after day. You are being kind, that’s obvious, but why do you choose me for your charity?” (40), Maxim replies the reason why he asks her to come out with him is, “because you are not dressed in black satin, with a string

of pearls, nor are you thirty-six" (40), indicating that he likes her because she is younger than thirty-six and does not dress elegantly. Most importantly, coming from a working-class family, she is also aware of her actions and behavior, which she thinks do not meet Manderley's and Maxim's, standards, "What a slap in the eye I must be to them then" (158).

Mrs. de Winter's self-consciousness shows that she is a traditional woman, because it obliges her to be someone who meets her husband's and Manderley's standards. Also, according to her, by meeting those standards, she can finally get her own idea of love, which is acknowledgement from her husband. Her self-consciousness makes it difficult for her to do those things, however; at the same time it is actually one of the traits of a traditional woman, whom her husband likes. Thus, her being self-conscious somehow leads to her getting what she desires.

Not just anxious, timid, and self-conscious, Mrs. de Winter is a very devoted person, especially towards her husband, Maxim. Devoted is defined as "very loving or loyal" ("devoted, def. 1"). Mrs. de Winter is very devoted to her husband. Her devotion is shown throughout the novel, which clearly proves that she loves Maxim very much that she tries so hard to please him and the people around Manderley, by trying to host a ball like Rebecca does when she was alive, for instance. She does not even complain when she is drenched from the rain after driving in the car with Maxim. Seeing her condition, Maxim says, "Poor lamb, I've hustled you down here like this, and you probably ought to have bought a lot of clothes in London" (du Maurier 68), which she replies, "It doesn't matter to me, as long as you don't mind" (68).

She also states that the only thing that she desires is to be happy, to make Maxim happy, and to be happy together with him, “I wanted to be happy, to make Maxim happy, and I wanted us to be together. There was no other wish in my heart but that” (151). Her love for him is very strong that she is afraid when she does something that is not right, he will blame and leave her. For instance, when Maxim scolds her after she disobeys him, she is afraid that he would leave her, despite Maxim telling her that he is not angry with her, “Don’t be angry with me any more” (128) and “I’ve made you unhappy. It’s the same as making you angry. You’re all wounded and hurt and torn inside. I can’t bear to see you like this. I love you so much” (128).

However, at the end of the novel Maxim tells her that he loves her. This should not be too surprising because Maxim, being an autocrat, wants a wife who complies with patriarchal orders. Thus, being a devoted, traditional wife certainly makes Maxim like her.

Most importantly, her loyalty towards Maxim is shown after he surprisingly confesses to her that he kills Rebecca. He confesses that he kills Rebecca because he wants to protect Manderley, he does not want Manderley’s name to be ruined because of Rebecca’s affairs and scandals. Additionally, he also tells her that he has never loved Rebecca; he only loves her. Surprisingly, as seen in the following quotation, Mrs. de Winter’s devotion to Maxim obliges her not to leave him despite knowing that her husband is a murderer:

I did not say anything. I held his hands against my heart. I did not care about his shame. None of the things that he had told me mattered to me at all. I clung to one thing only, and repeated it to myself, over and over

again. Maxim did not love Rebecca. He had never loved her, never, never. They had never known one moment's of happiness together. (301)

The quotation above shows that the only thing Mrs. de Winter cares about is that her husband loves her, not Rebecca. Therefore, her loyalty shows when she stays with him despite knowing that her husband is a murderer. She even supports him to be free from allegations.

Moreover, her devotion shows that Mrs. de Winter is a traditional woman. It helps her to get her own idea of love: to be fully acknowledged by Maxim. After knowing the fact that Maxim does not love Rebecca, Mrs. de Winter feels relieved and fully acknowledged by him, despite the fact that her husband is a murderer. With all her love and loyalty for her husband, she helps him to go through the problem, and in the end, she finally gets what she desires. Moreover, she states, "I was not going to be nervous and shy of the servants anymore (414), indicating that she is now starting to gain self confidence. Furthermore, the quotation above also indicates that after getting acknowledgement from her husband, she will also be accepted by the people surrounding her, especially the people in Manderley.

After analysing the novel, I conclude that Mrs. de Winter is anxious, timid, self-conscious, and devoted. Interestingly, having those characteristics in some way helps her to achieve her own idea of love. Thus, the purpose of the author creating such character is to show that being a traditional woman in an era when women start to be progressive may lead her to happiness because the traditional patriarchal values remain dominant. Analysing the protagonist helps me to reveal the theme of the novel, which is "One's being traditional may make one to achieve one's idea of love that entails acknowledgement by one's partner."