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Exploring the Female Gothic in Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca

Introduction

The Female Gothic is a literary genre that reflects the struggles of women in patriarchal societies. This genre, as defined by Ellen Moers emphasizes these themes (like identity and power) through horror and the supernatural. Moreover, it investigates women's roles, desires and fears while showing how they deal with oppressive environments. A well-known work in this genre is *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier. The story revolves around a young, unnamed heroine who marries Maxim de Winter and later moves into Manderley, his luxurious estate. She finds out that Rebecca, Maxim's deceased first wife is still haunting her there. Du Maurier tackles tough issues such as female identity, male dominance and the influence of memory through gothic themes. This essay will examine how du Maurier uses gothic elements to criticize gender roles and societal norms, focusing on how gender influences the story, the role of horror and the supernatural and the novel's impact on women's literature. However, A nuanced understanding of these themes is essential to fully appreciate the depth of du Maurier's critique and work.

Gender Shapes the Writing

Daphne du Maurier's view as a woman greatly affects *Rebecca*. This novel shows the internal battles of the female narrator, emphasizing feelings of insecurity, self-doubt and vulnerability that many women and girls experience. The unnamed main character often compares herself to Rebecca, whom she sees as the perfect example of beauty. Rebecca's looks, charm and confidence are traits the narrator thinks she doesn't have. She mentions, *"I was like a child in my plain dress... I felt clumsy and stupid compared to her."*

This internal dialogue shows how women are taught to measure themselves against society's standards of beauty and success. However, although these feelings are common, they can deeply impact one's self-esteem and sense of worth. This comparison can be damaging, because it creates a cycle of doubt and insecurity. Also, the relations between the narrator and Maxim de Winter contribute to the representation of patriarchal structures. The narrator tries to gain approval from him constantly, or else she is ready to give up her individuality. For instance, she cannot freely share her opinions, or ask him something related to Rebecca due to his disapproving attitude. This dynamic shows how women especially in marriage are supposed to sit back and do nothing while they are dominated.

That the stinking b Fern narrator is never given a proper name also effectively underlines how she has become de-personalised. That the woman is left unnamed — a device characteristic of du Maurier — suggests how social forces and male domination erase woman's identity. Thus, with the help of these elements, du Maurier conveys the problem of how women can construct individuality in the context of male supremacy.

Elements of the Female Gothic

The Female Gothic adopts horror and the supernatural to address the psychological and social issues. In *Rebecca*, the spirit of Rebecca gives a suspenseful feeling and evoking fear. Despite her absence physically, Rebecca's presence overwhelms Manderley and those who live in it. Another significant character is Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper, who never forgets about Rebecca and tries to present the narrator as a 'low' woman comparing her to the 'great' Rebecca; Mrs. Danvers even calls Rebecca the genuine mistress of Manderley. The speaker will always remember and reiterate the message of being unable to replace her. The choice of setting at Manderley also contributes to the creation of the gothic genre. It's gigantic and gothic and as we spelunk through its rooms, one can't help but wonder about all the things that are hidden from plain sight. The sea in which Rebecca died is an influential aspect of the scenery. It is portrayed as being vane, uncontrollable and unpredictable, which symbolizes the secrets and passions underlying the plot. Symbolic of both threats and liberty and in relation to the image of the sea symbolic of Rebecca, her personality and the circumstances of her death. To the narrator, the sea represents some form of a threat and it depicts her situation of being overshadowed by Rebecca.

Another significant component of the Female Gothic is psychological horror, and du Maurier is unrivaled in her use of this technique. The element of horror and fear increases in the story as the narrator becomes even more conscious of Rebecca's presence around her. They experience threat of identity impairment and the mystery of the disappearance of Rebecca makes Minnie to have high level of arousal. At the same time, the elements of horror and supernatural themes are not only the entertaining and shock popping up in the novel but also the thought-carrying functions which raise questions about identity and power.

Use of Gothic Elements

Du Maurier employs gothic elements to explore such issues as female character, dominance, and self-sufficiency. Rebecca's room is presented as remaining exactly as it was at the time of the main character's death, which is why it reflects the spirit of a vindictive woman who rules over the inhabitants of Manderley. The act of crossing this threshold makes the narrator look at the world through the eyes of the main character—

such a world that has no place for her: the world of the deceased Rebecca. The room symbolizes the lingering control that Rebecca has over the situation and the narrator's inability to take control of her life and regain her autonomy in a space that still belongs to Rebecca. Another symbol that can be depicted in the novel is the sea. This is the place where Rebecca died and is forever present in the lives of the characters and the audience. The sea is portrayed as being stunning but treacherous, mirroring the duality of Rebecca's character; charming and lethal. Rebecca's sunken boat that the narrator finds frees her from the idealized image that he had pinned her in and unveils secrets of her life and death that he had not known before. This moment of realization changes the way the narrator perceives Rebecca and enables her to start regaining her individuality.

The characters also reflect the gothicism in the novel. Rebecca is depicted as a post-expressionist femme fatale, a woman who dominated those who surrounded her through sex appeal and wits. Despite she is depicted as a heroine, her sinister streak is evident through the various concealed aspects of her life and death. While the other characters remain passive and submissive throughout the film, the narrator is transformed from a feeble and submissive woman into a strong-willed character once she discovers the truth. This character development focuses on the process of the narrator's maturation and individualism.

Contribution to Women's Literature

Rebecca is one of the most valuable pieces of women's literature because the novel is boiling with questions of identity, power, and gender expectations. An element of progressive thinking regarding the roles of women is illustrated by complex, fully developed female characters. For example, Rebecca – is not the weak-willed character and the victim, but the witch who possesses power even after death. It is refreshing and realistic to watch a pro-active woman with flaws and moral grey areas, in contrast to Hollywood cliché of woman as either angel or victim.

The loss of house also represents a struggle that women in particular experience in claiming their identity. Her timid behavior at the start of the story symbolises the subjugation of women; her transformation portrays their liberation. Through this particular journey, du Maurier forces the readers to think twice of the conventions of the societal norms of the femininity.

Another factor that provides the basis for the novel's classification as a piece of feminist literature is its criticism of the marriage institution. Instead of painting the message of marriage in a beautiful hue, Rebecca shows the bitter side of the union in the form of dominance and subjugation of women, and denial of personal identity. The narrator's relationship with Maxim is not equal, not free, but based on dominance and the ability to hide something, which emphasizes the importance of women to be independent in marriage. Due to themes such as psychological horror, female rivalry, and identity it

remains unreigned and topical even nowadays.

Conclusion

All in all, I have discussed how *Rebecca* is a constitutive work of the Female Gothic; how it engages with, and employs, horror, mystery, and the supernatural; and how it probes the concerns dear to women writers of the Gothic: identity, power, and submission to the patriarchy. The work's gothic features – the appearance of Rebecca in the story, the plot setting of Manderley, and the suspense arising from the protagonist's inner conflict can be seen to portray the struggles that women undergo. In illustrating unique characteristics of females and challenging the stereotypical roles accorded females, *Rebecca* can be deemed as an adjunct to the women's literature. The story is still familiar to the modern reader and is a good example how women's words and stories never lose their significance. Finally, *Rebecca* is far beyond an example of the thriller; it is a philosophical reflection of how the main character struggles living in societies that are oriented on male standards.

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