

**Dreams, windows and gazing, clothes, night and darkness, flowers, ghosts,
property, food, ...
Motifs and symbols in the novel**

Much of the writing in *Rebecca* can be read as symbolic – from the dream of the overgrown grounds of Manderley at the beginning to the destruction of the house by fire at the close of the novel – but there are many other images in the text that run like threads throughout the narrative. Look at the suggestions below to help get you started and then continue to record more examples as you read the novel.

Dreams

The novel opens with the narrator's description of a dream of Manderley she has woken from. In the dream the garden has become hideously overgrown, 'Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers.' (chapter 1) Nature is often described as female but what do you think is particularly striking about the personification used here?

Quite a lot of the description of the dream can be seen to have sexual connotations, 'The beeches with white, naked limbs leant close to one another, their branches intermingled in a strange embrace ...' (chapter 1) and 'The rhododendrons stood fifty feet high, twisted and entwined with bracken, and they had entered into alien marriage with a host of nameless shrubs, poor, bastard things that clung about their roots as though conscious of their spurious origin.' (chapter 1) As you read the rest of the novel think about how 'proper' Maxim and the narrator always are together and the society within which they live. Both their marriage and society, however, seem to have a sordid undercurrent (Maxim's secret, Rebecca's affair and Mrs Van Hopper's interest in gossip for example) and the dream can be seen to reflect the reality of the lives the characters lead: the corruption and destruction of a way of life if these desires are allowed to go unchecked.

In chapter three the narrator describes, 'Mrs Van Hopper's voice pierced my dream like an electric bell.' (p.21)

When Maxim and the narrator go for a drive in chapter four she is disappointed to realise, 'He looked down at me without recognition, and I realised with a little stab of anxiety that he must have forgotten all about me, perhaps for some considerable time, and that he himself was so lost in the labyrinth of his own unquiet thoughts that I did not exist.' (p.33)

In chapter six When Mrs Van Hopper demands that they leave the hotel and return to USA she berates the narrator for taking too long in the bathroom, "What a time you've been. You can't afford to dream this morning, you know, there's too much to be done." (p.52)

When Maxim proposes to the narrator in chapter six she dreams of her life at Manderley, 'My mind ran riot then, figures came before me and picture after picture ... We would be in a crowd of people, and he would say, "I don't think you have met my wife." Mrs de Winter. I would be Mrs de Winter.' (p.59) Do you think it is significant that all through this dream Maxim and the narrator share a tangerine and it is Maxim's voice that breaks into her thoughts with the words, "The rest of the tangerine is sour, I shouldn't eat it." (p.59) Although only a small comment in what way might it be seen as important?

Windows and people gazing or staring

You need to do some reading of literary theory in order to develop a deeper understanding of this but the idea of the 'gaze' is common in feminist theory and can refer to the way men perceive women; the way women perceive each other; the way a woman views herself or the way a reader sees the characters. In literature looking into and out of windows is often seen as a literary reference to the gaze and can be traced through many novels. Famous 'classic' examples are *Jane Eyre* in which the young protagonist sits in front of the window reading whilst the rain beats down outside and *Hedda Gabler* in which Hedda, newly married, constantly returns to the window to stare out at an autumnal scene (itself symbolic). This gazing out of the window is often considered to reflect the way women are trapped by society, able to see the possibilities but unable to achieve them.

In *Rebecca*, the narrator initially appears to look through a window in a dream in the opening pages, 'Light came from the windows, the curtains blew softly in the night air, and there, in the library, the door would stand half open as we had left it, with my handkerchief on the table beside the bowl of autumn roses.

The room would bear witness to our presence. The little heap of library books marked ready to return, and the discarded copy of *The Times*.' (p.7) Look at this opening chapter and then explain the contrast between the rest of the dream and this image. How might you account for the differences?

In Chapter three when the narrator is shut in with Mrs Van Hopper she remembers, 'I knelt on the window-seat and looked out upon the afternoon. The sun shone brightly still, and there was a gay high wind. In half an hour we should be sitting to our bridge, the windows tightly closed, the central heating turned to the full ... I sighed, and turned away from the window. The sun was so full of promise, and the sea was whipped white with a merry wind.' (p.23) Why do you think the author creates such a contrast between the indoor and the outdoor world?

Every now and again the narrator turns the attention of the reader back to the 'present' and reminds us that her description of Manderley is all a memory she is recalling. In one of these instances in Chapter six she describes stopping at, '... a wayside inn, and going to a dark, unfamiliar room to wash my hands, the handle of the door unknown to me, the wallpaper peeling in strips, a funny little cracked mirror above the basin; for this moment, it is mine, it belongs to me. We know one another. This is the present. There is no past and no future. Here I am washing my hands, and the cracked mirror shows me to myself, suspended as it were, in time; this is me, this moment will not pass.' (p.49) This gives us a rather tawdry image of the narrator's life. Discuss why she presents this view of her present life and why Du Maurier might have included such details.

In Chapter seven when Maxim and the narrator return to Manderley after their marriage, as they pass the lodge the narrator sees, 'faces peering through the dark window of the lodge, and a child ran round from the back, staring curiously.' (p.68) Later in the same chapter when the couple pull up at the steps to the house she, '...saw through one of the mullioned windows that the hall was full of people,' (p.71) The narrator recalls that once in the house, '... 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, and I the victim with my hands behind my back.' (p.72) Why do you think these people stare at the narrator? What impression do these staring faces give? Why might the narrator feel a victim? What contrast can you see between her arrival here and her presence whilst with Mrs Van Hopper in Monte Carlo? Think about the way the staff behaved towards the narrator until Maxim accompanied her.