

### Notes to help understand the opening chapter

The reader is immediately drawn into a puzzle about the narrator's identity with the opening words of the novel, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."<sup>1</sup> The reader wonders who the 'I' belongs to.

In the dream the narrator is at first locked out of Manderley and appears to metaphorically stand at the entrance to this writing experience: if she can not enter the dream, there is no dream and subsequently no writing about it either. Dreams also have the quality of giving "neither rest nor security"<sup>2</sup> and relationship to reality is disturbed both for the narrator, who at one point confirms she is aware she is dreaming, and for the reader who finds the distinction between the 'reality' and dream described blurred from the outset by the entrance to the dream world being placed at the entrance to the novel.

The narrator says it "seemed"<sup>3</sup> she stood at the gate, so the reader is puzzled, feels uncertain, is disturbed. This is a text in which reason, rationality and logic, the 'attributes' of men in the patriarchal world are missing from the outset: the narrator has a dream and anything can happen, dreams are by their nature, irrational. The narrator has "supernatural powers"<sup>4</sup> and passes through a locked gate. Even the narrator does not fully comprehend the situation and "was puzzled and did not understand"<sup>5</sup>. In their book Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination Horner and Zlosnik write:

"the approach to the house is constantly linked with entrance into a dark world of forests such that Manderley itself comes to be associated [...] metaphorically, with entry into the unconscious."<sup>6</sup>

The narrator is, therefore, free to explore her innermost thoughts because they are all part of a dream, her subconscious, and therefore arguably, beyond her control.

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<sup>1</sup> Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, first published 1938 (London: Arrow Books, 1992), p.5

<sup>2</sup> *The Feminist Reader*, p.94

<sup>3</sup> *Rebecca*, p.5

<sup>4</sup> *Rebecca*, p.5

<sup>5</sup> *Rebecca*, p.5

<sup>6</sup> Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p.101

Manderley, the house and estate, can be viewed as a metaphor for patriarchal order, with its ordered gardens and domineering presence on the landscape, with apparent knowledge and reason (as represented by the library and newspaper) locked inside. At first the narrator is locked out of the estate, she can not overcome the patriarchal order but she discovers the lodge-keeper, the metaphorical patriarchal male, is missing, “the lodge was uninhabited”<sup>7</sup> and this allows her to gain access.

This is again the experience of the narrator, who is forever moving within the text, going forward and exploring. She “advanced”, she moved “on and on”, “I had not thought the way so long” and “I turned again”.<sup>8</sup> The narrator, because she is dreaming, is experiencing what she is and what she is not and what she can be. She confirms this opportunity of what she might do in the future, in her waking time when she says “When I thought of Manderley in my waking hours I would not be bitter”.<sup>9</sup> She is acknowledging the possibilities of what might happen rather than the certainties of the past.

In the opening to Rebecca the narrator does not comment on herself, but on the landscape around her and before her: she ‘forgets’ herself and becomes immersed in all that is before and ahead of her, “[...] the nettles were no barrier to me, a dreamer. I walked enchanted, and nothing held me back.”<sup>10</sup> Although she places herself in the centre of the text at the beginning by the use of ‘I’, she then discusses what she looks at, not what gazes at her.

The narrator, through relaying her dream to the reader, with no apparent feelings of inhibitions, is relaying her innermost thoughts and feelings of desire: nature (usually defined as female) has taken over the once ordered gardens, and in its fecund and reproductive state appears to be representative of the latent sexual desire within the narrator:

“A lilac had mated with a copper beech ... There was another plant too, some half-breed from the woods, whose seed had been scattered long ago.”<sup>11</sup>

The references to sexual acts and the way in which Nature, as a female, has fulfilled herself through the riotous garden seems to illustrate the narrator’s own sub-

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<sup>7</sup> *Rebecca*, p.5

<sup>8</sup> *Rebecca*, p.6

<sup>9</sup> *Rebecca*, p.7

<sup>10</sup> *Rebecca*, p.7

<sup>11</sup> *Rebecca*, pp.6-7

conscious desires and stands in stark contrast to the 'real' world which is "alien"<sup>12</sup> to the narrator.

In the dream the garden is a thriving chaos, disordered, overcome by Nature and her sexual drive to thrive and reproduce. The 'ordered garden that was originally at Manderley, the drive with rhododendrons, the lawns down to the sea, "the perfect symmetry of those walls"<sup>13</sup> are all representations of the patriarchal order, logic and symmetry that ruled the house and grounds previously. Horner and Zlosnik compare the garden to a despoiled Eden<sup>14</sup>, however the narrator does not seem perturbed by the change in the garden, suggesting that previously it was a male paradise, which she now sees in her dream as it should be.

The narrator imagines that she is going to look in on the masculine world of logic and reason, represented by the masculine items of property in the house such as the library books, a copy of 'The Times', the ash trays, log fire and the faithful and docile dog who is waiting for 'his master's footsteps'. However, as this is her discourse, her dream and therefore her world the house is decayed, it is a "desolate shell, soulless at last, unhaunted, with no whisper of the past about its staring walls."<sup>15</sup>

It is the woman's dream and therefore the house does not reflect back its masculine self as it would in 'real' life, the narrator is glad that 'at last' it can not haunt her with its own expectations and wishes and it is no longer 'staring' at her and only seeing its male self.

Haunting is discussed by Horner and Zlosnik, who consider an absent but omnipresent character. They refer to the opening of the text, "In which the narrator's identity is haunted by an Other."<sup>16</sup> Although the narrator is ostensibly alone with the reader there seems to be someone else lurking in the text, someone unnamed and unmentioned but always there. This line of theory is similar to Irigaray's claim, discussed by Moi, that because women have no language of their own they can only

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<sup>12</sup> *Rebecca*, p.8

<sup>13</sup> *Rebecca*, p.6

<sup>14</sup> *Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p.101

<sup>15</sup> *Rebecca*, p.7

<sup>16</sup> *Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p.99

imitate male discourse.<sup>17</sup> She goes on to claim “The feminine can thus only be read in the blank spaces left between the signs and lines of her own mimicry.”<sup>18</sup>

Rita Felski looks at the theory of marginalised women, in her book Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. She states that the beginning of a feminist self-discovery novel, “thus typically introduces a negative model, an image of female alienation.”<sup>19</sup> This is played out in the anonymous recalling of the dream. The narrator seems to have no foundation or solid point from which she speaks; she recognises both the unreality of the dream and her alienation from all around her in ‘real’ life. “In reality I lay many hundred miles away in an alien land.”<sup>20</sup>

Felski writes that in this type of narrative “This sense of remoteness from a preformed destiny which the protagonist feels helpless to alter is typically described as a splitting of inner and outer self.”<sup>21</sup> Du Maurier’s narrator appears to show this split right from the outset in first showing her conscious self, “Last night I dreamt”<sup>22</sup>, then recalling the dream in detail as if she is still within it and then at the end of the chapter showing awareness both of the dream and of the reality that lies before her. Although she has experienced the freedom of the subconscious, which she has shared with the reader, the reality is that she still lives on the margin, dominated by a man in a world in which, “we would not talk of Manderley. I would not tell my dream.”<sup>23</sup> She is free in the writing of the text but she is still silenced in the ‘real’ world beyond the subconscious nature of sleep.

Whatever the problems of these readings, Rebecca is a story which always hints at an ‘other’ in the text, hovering between the lines: the narrator, searching for a chaotic utopia in a subconscious and fantasy world in which she is free to explore without inhibitions, certainly seems to imply a woman looking for freedom outside and beyond, and yet paradoxically also within, the confines of a patriarchal order. The overgrown garden is freedom, the house is repression: in the dream and in her narration she can roam freely around both.

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<sup>17</sup> *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.140

<sup>18</sup> *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.140

<sup>19</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.129

<sup>20</sup> *Rebecca*, p.8

<sup>21</sup> *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p.130

<sup>22</sup> *Rebecca*, p.5

<sup>23</sup> *Rebecca*, p.8

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